

# David Cordua's Nicaragua cheat sheet

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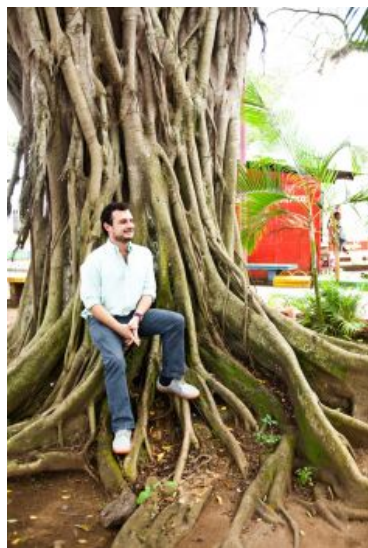


Photo By Julie Soefer

David Cordúa is the executive chef of development for Cordúa Restaurants.

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After spending the '80s in exile due to the Sandinista revolution, my grandparents, aunts, uncles and family friends returned to Nicaragua in 1991 to recover and rebuild. For my sisters and me in Houston, there was a lot of culture to catch up on in Nicaragua. In our school years, we spent most summers there. Today, I visit about once a year for some family gathering or another. In fact, I helped open a wood-burning pizza concept, Italianissimo, as a consulting chef in Managua. Here are some of my travel tips to make the most out of a visit to the beautiful Central American country:

**Try local cuisine.** The roots of our Cordúa restaurant menus are here, mainly in ingredients such as yucca, plantain, corn and a variety of cheeses often used in sweet applications. Some local favorites include gallo pinto, Nicaraguan red beans and rice eaten at almost every meal; quesillo, a fresh, mozzarella-style cheese rolled in thick corn masa, spiked with pickled onion and soaked in crème fresca; tostones, smashed fried plantains; vigorón, which is pickled cabbage, yucca and pork cracklin; and nacatamales - Central American tamales, jumbo-size with achiote marinated pork, rice and olives. Fritangas, small food stalls found throughout the country, serve most of these items.

**Get active** in Ometepe. A short boat trip from Managua, Ometepe is one of the larger volcanic islands

formed on Lake Nicaragua. It has some absolutely amazing hiking opportunities. Try canopying here, a zipline system through the rain forest tree tops.

Tour the Flor de Caña rum factory. Rum is the most important export of the country, and they just started doing tours in the fall. **Flor de Caña** is a product of the revolution. The Pellas family started barrel-aging rum when the war started, so they were the first ones to have a 20-year aged rum. It's a fantastic rum, drinks like a scotch or cognac.

**Sand board at El Cerro Negro.** Located in León, El Cerro Negro offers some of the only volcano surfing in the world - you actually ride the volcanic ash like snow. There are a few guide groups that lead excursions to scale the volcano and ride it down. You'll wish they had lifts but it's worth the hike.

**Go surfing in San Juan del Sur.** Spend a day at Chica Brava, the country's first all-girls surf camp founded by **Ashley Blaylock**, an attorney from Houston. Instructors guide students through the waves of San Juan and its remote beaches, namely Playa Remanso and Playa Maderas. The office is on the main drag of San Juan - they load you in a truck with boards and you will come back a surfer. I spent a day getting a lesson last summer from two girls from the Midwest, or somewhere that's nowhere near surfing. It was a blast. If you want to be near the action in town, stay at Hotel Alcazar, a charming boutique hotel next door to Chica Brava.

**Stay** at the Aqua Wellness Resort. This is the place dreams are made of. In the town of Tola an hour from San Juan del Sur, it's a resort with Swiss Family Robinson-style tree house rooms on a small bay. Monkeys inhabit the jungle surrounding the houses, and iridescent plankton live in the bay water at night. The rooms are connected with rope bridges. To get there, I recommend hiring a driver. It's pretty inexpensive to get one to go between towns.

**Visit Las Isletas**, a series of tiny islands made from a volcanic eruption on Lake Nicaragua near Granada. The 365 islands are meters away from each other - you can wave to someone across the water - creating a unique ecosystem. It's great for water skiing and visiting island to island. The area is home to the world's only fresh water sharks, too.

David Cordúa is the executive chef for Cordúa Restaurants in Houston. He coauthored the new cookbook "Cordúa: Foods of the Americas" (Bright Sky Press), out now.

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