

ALWAYS ORDER DESSERT

Recipes for delicious living, by Alejandra Ramos

April 1, 2016

TRAVEL DIARIES: SURFING WITH THE LADIES IN SAN JUAN DEL SUR, NICARAGUA

TRAVEL DIARIES

SURF CAMP

san juan del sur, nicaragua



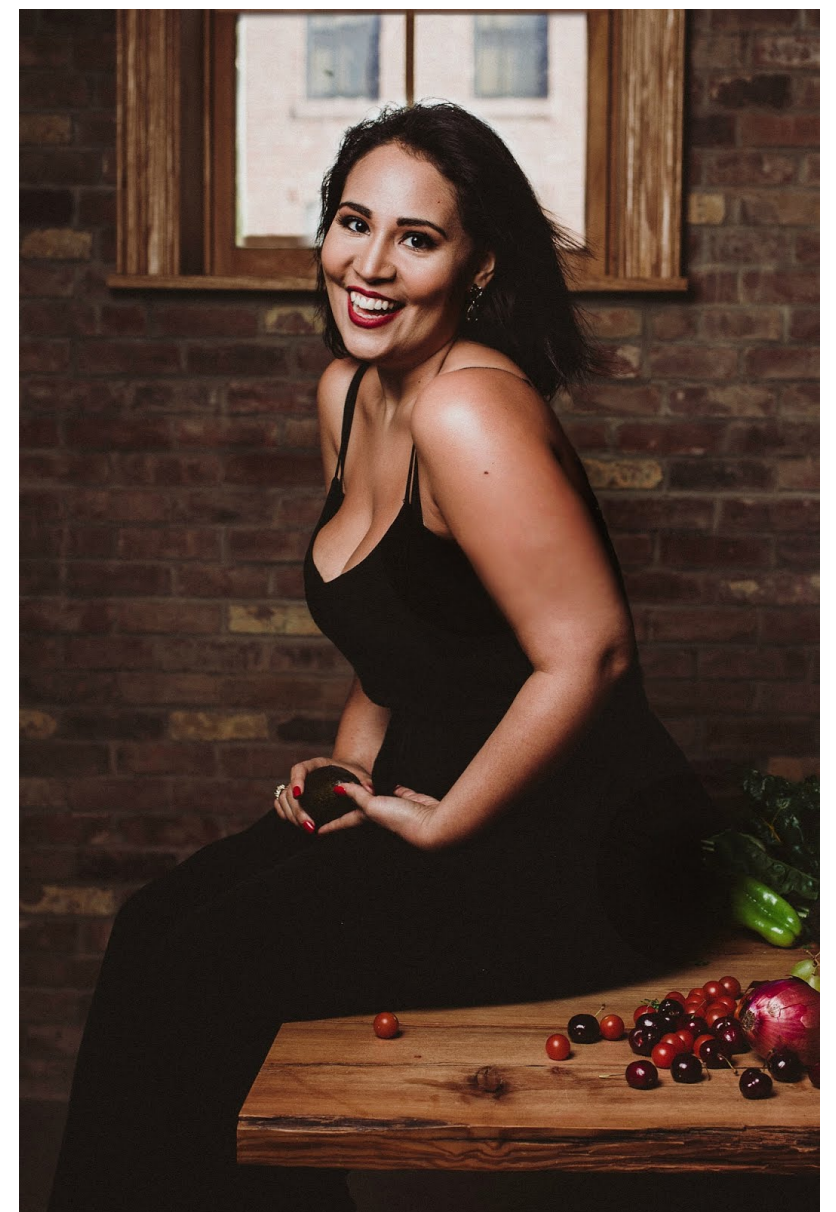
CHICABRAVA, an [all-women's surf retreat](#) in **San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua**, definitely sounded intriguing. Billed as an empowering program for women, it promised personalized in-depth surfing lessons, along with yoga and other physical activities in the company of cool women from around the country.

It sounded amazing, but also somewhat intimidating. I loved the idea, but was it right for

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What do you think of when you think of surf camp? In my head it was all super fit, tan, lithe, and blonde surfer chicks.

While me? I'm more of a "too much wine and too much cake and sleep in and skip the gym" kind of lady. I'm curvy and soft, and while I have the ability to pose and dance and strut in heels with modicum of grace, attempts at significant physical activity--say hiking or running or any kind of group exercise class--typically result in an embarrassingly uncoordinated calamity.

I mentioned it to my best friend who thoughtfully responded, "Alejandra, I don't think you would be good at that..."

I agreed, but I also couldn't stop thinking about it.



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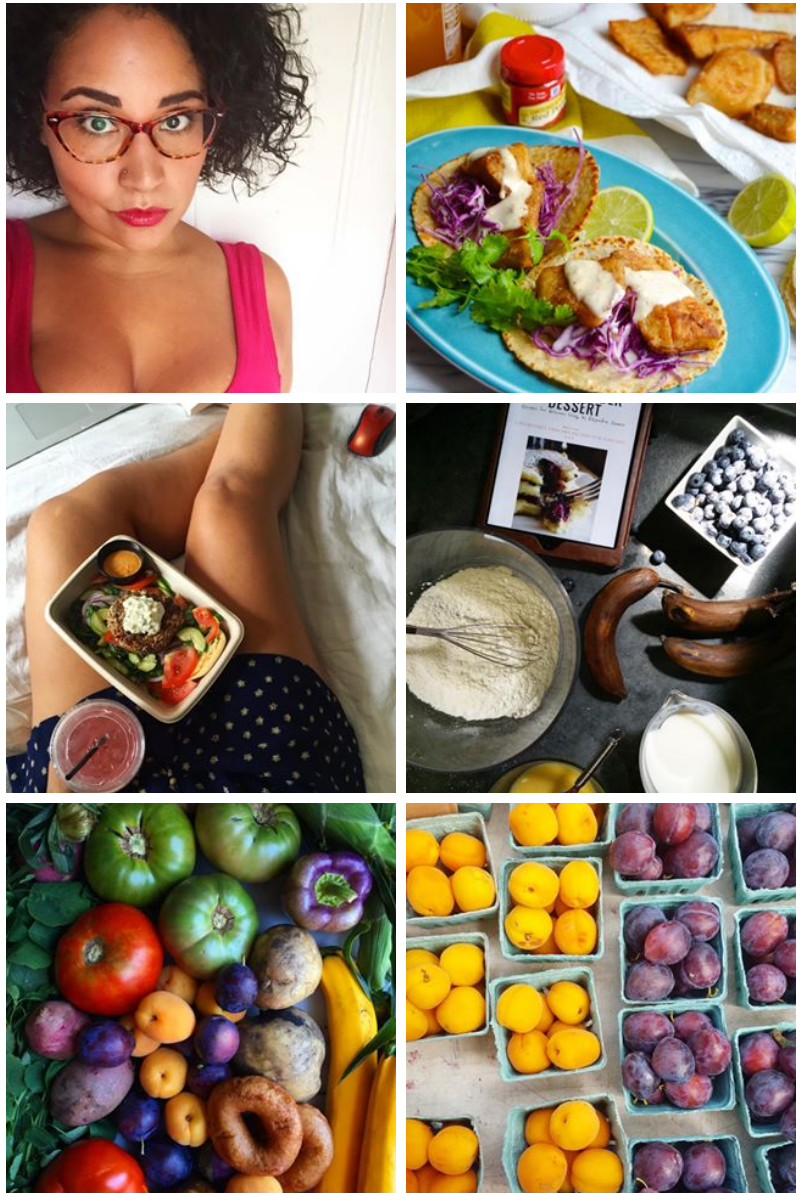


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I love the ocean and travel, and while I'd never tried surfing before, I was starting to think that this might be the best opportunity to give it a try. In the past I've found that when I do the things that both excite and terrify me in equal measure, they pay off with the best rewards.

“
Tweet: "It's the things that excite and terrify in equal measure that pay off with the best rewards" <http://bit.ly/1VXgmKo> via @alwaysalejandra ”

So I went for it. And I'm so happy I did.

A few weeks after signing up I found myself on a plane to Managua with a carry-on filled with rashguards, bikinis, bug spray, and a first-aid kit. Managua is a quick and affordable flight from just about anywhere in the US (I paid less than \$500 round-trip, and that was

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with a last-minute ticket purchase).



I met up with the rest of the group at the airport in Nicaragua, and my first glance at them put me at ease. All gorgeous, yes, but not the intimidating stereotypical Roxy surfer girls I'd been picturing. Instead there were 5 women, all different sizes and ages and fitness levels. Most had never surfed before, and everyone was equally excited and nervous. They instantly felt like my people.

That feeling of comfort is one that CHICABRAVA founder **Ashley Blaylock** had in mind when she started the all women's surf retreat. Surfing has traditionally been a very male sport, which can often be intimidating for women looking to try it out for themselves. Growing up, Ashley had thought of surfing as something her brother and his friends did, until a female friend paddled out with her and showed her just how empowering surfing in the company of other women can be.



Photo of Ashley Blaylock, courtesy of CHICABRAVA

Her programs are designed specifically for women, taking into consideration factors like the differences in the way we carry weight and develop strength in our bodies, and even

things as simple as our more specific needs regarding swimwear.

(Yes, that's a nice way of saying that your bikini top or bottom is probably going to fly off at some point.)

It was the thing that made it easier for me, and I think also what might make it easier and more confidence building for many of you.



A driver met us at the airport in a CHICABRAVA van, and we all piled in the back for a bumpy two hour trip to **San Juan del Sur**, the charming beach town on the southern Pacific coast of Nicaragua that's popular with surfers around the world for its stunning waters and laid-back vibe.

Along the way, we shared stories, laughed a ton, and stopped off in the gorgeous city of

Granada for lunch and photos (seriously--the colors!).



Our home for the week was called Cloud Farm. Chicabrava offers two options for retreaters: a no-frills, lower cost room in town at the Surf House, and a slightly pricier more "all-inclusive" experience at the Cloud Farm, a beautiful luxury home complete with pool up in the mountains. If you can manage it, go for the Cloud Farm. It's worth it (and includes meals).

This is a retreat, which means shared rooms (although I think you can pay extra if you really prefer to be alone). I was randomly assigned a room with **Breanna Wilson**, a fellow writer/blogger/influencer who has since become one of my most favorite humans in the world.



We bonded in minutes and spent our nights (and mornings and days) laughing like two kids at summer camp. I'd initially been hesitant and annoyed by the idea of sharing a room, but it honestly ended up being one of the best things about the trip. Learning to surf while living in the jungle can be an intense experience, and it's amazing to have an instant buddy to root you on, laugh with you, and help you digest the day each night.



The rooms are clean and pretty, but simple. Tile floors, little cubbies, and a twin bed per person topped with mosquito nets to keep the bugs out at night (it's the jungle, after all!). No air conditioning, but it's at the top of a mountain and the cool breezes keep the place feeling delicious all day long.

The one weird thing is the bathroom, which is located in a little alcove, but doesn't have an actual door. Um...awkward. Bre and I made it work by prearranging our shower/bathroom times, and letting go of any body shyness.

(Whatever...everybody poops!)



Surf days start early. We were up by 6AM most mornings, waking up before the sun to the screeching sounds of howler monkeys in the nearby trees. (If you've never heard a howler monkey, go to YouTube and look it up RIGHT NOW. It's the most insane thing ever.)

The strong, hot Nicaraguan coffee was always waiting for us (with a bottle of Nicaraguan rum right next to it because Nicaragua is effing awesome). I learned that altitude affects the strength of coffee, and Nicaragua's high-altitude beans are up there with some of the strongest.



Breakfast followed soon after, and was always my favorite meal of the day. The super friendly locals who took care of the house would welcome us each morning with platters of eggs, *gallo pinto* (a local rice and black beans dish), fresh fruit, plantains (yes!), local salty cheese, and fresh fruit juice.

Surfing is exhausting and you need lots of energy for it, so feel free to load up on carbs. You'll burn through them; I ate and drank a lot in the few days I was there, and still managed to get home a few pounds lighter.



Photo of the Surf House, by Michelle Norris

After breakfast, we'd pile into the van and head down to the surf house located about 15

minutes away. There we were assigned boards based on our height/weight and ability.



You'll carry it around, load it up on the truck, battle the waves with it, float around in the ocean with it when the waves disappear, get thrown off it a billion times, and have some of the most amazing successes ever on it.



Before heading out to the beach there is surf theory class, which is where you learn important things like surf etiquette (essentially the traffic rules of the ocean) and go over videos taken during the previous day's session in order to learn what and how to correct and improve.

On the first day you'll also establish goals, which may be as basic as "master the pop-up" (my goal) or as advanced as...um...I can't even think of any examples of advance goals because I'm still so basic. Sorry.

Watching these videos with your fellow ladies is hilarious and inspiring. We laughed together, applauded each other, and encouraged each other to keep going and improving.



After class, we'd all load our boards onto the truck, then drive down to the beach for our first session of the day.

The surf lessons were typically about 4 hours long with a combination of hands-on instruction and free time for those who wanted it. (Also plenty of breaks for water and snacks.)

And sometimes even tacos and cocktails...yes!



Depending on the schedule, lunch was either back at the Cloud Farm or at Surf House.

They switched it up each day, but included things like amazing ceviche with fresh chips, fish or chicken tacos, big salads, and lots of fresh vegetables.

After several hours of surfing in the hot sun, everything tasted incredible.





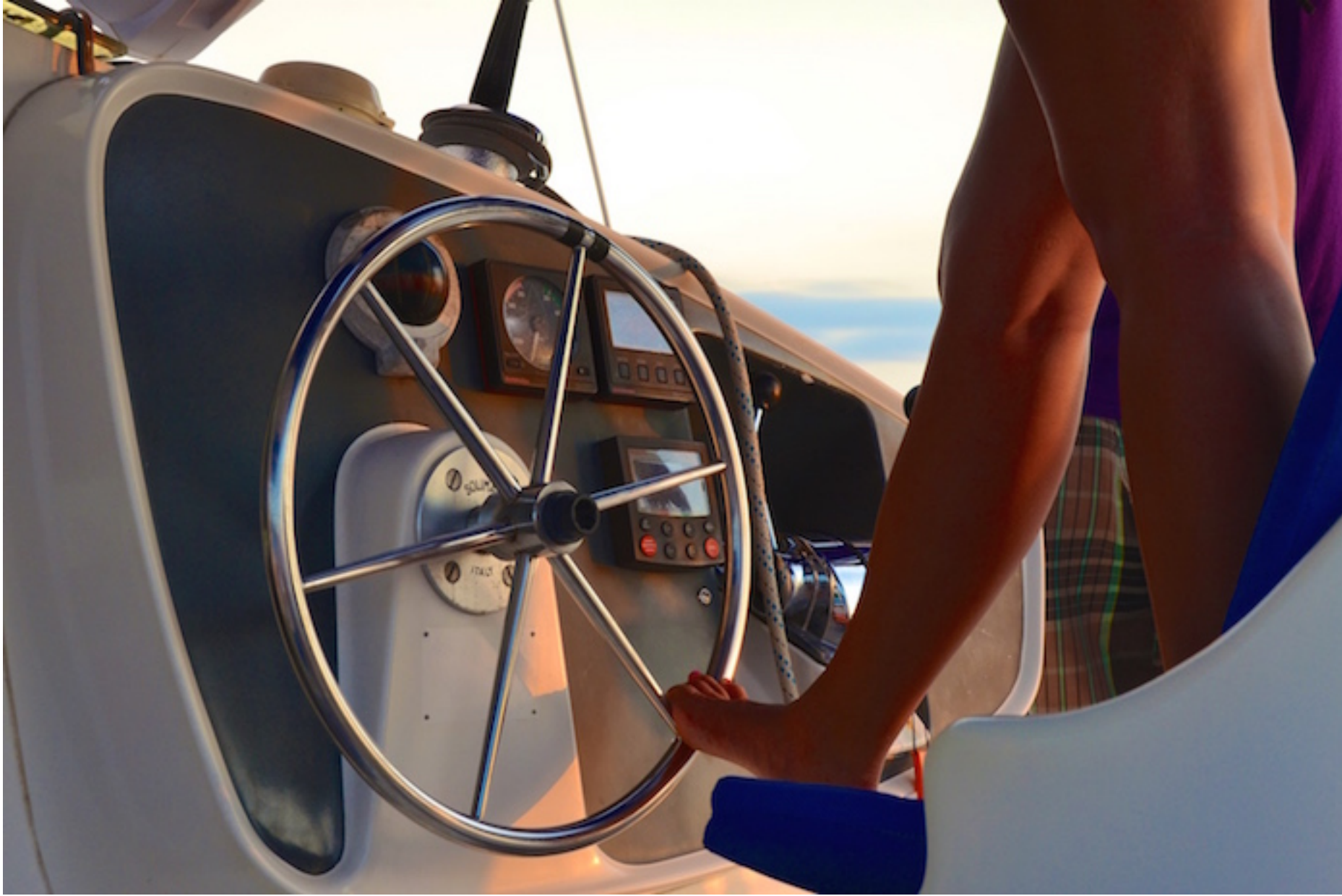
In the afternoons we had time for a variety of activities that included horseback riding through the jungle farm (we saw a sloth, you guys. A SLOTH!!!), local exploring in town, yoga classes, massage, and free time in the pool at Cloud Farm.



You'll also have the opportunity to take advantage of a few cool local excursions. One of the girls on our trip went to go see baby turtles hatch. (RIGHT?!) And a few of us went for a sail on a catamaran. That sail was honestly one of the most glorious afternoons I've ever experienced in my life.

We ate unlimited guacamole and ceviche, danced and tanned, drank cocktails and napped in the sunshine. I never wanted to get off the boat.





On the sail home we watched the sun set while dolphins swam alongside our boat, jumping up in the air and doing tricks.

It was like a scene from a movie. (I have a video of this--stay tuned for that!)





Our trip was a press trip, so it was a few days shorter than a typical retreat, but I'm itching to go back for the full experience. I'm still not much of a surfer--I'm pretty terrible, actually--but I found that I absolutely loved every second of it. You don't have to be good at something to love it, and I'll get better with more practice.



I got home from Nicaragua sunburned, covered in bruises and bug bites and prickly rashes from the surf wax, but with the biggest smile on my face ever. On the trip home from the airport, I rattled on and on to my husband about the water and the waves and the 50 thousand times I flew off my board and the rocks that scraped my feet and the crazy screaming monkeys and the sun and the heat.

My husband interrupted me and asked, "So wait...you liked all this?"

"I LOVED it!" I replied. "I may suck at it, but I think I found my sport!"

Planning your trip to CHICABRAVA women's surf retreat



Visit the [CHICABRAVA website](#) to read more details and register. If you have questions about anything, feel free to leave a comment below or email me.

Where to Stay

You'll have the option to stay at either the Surf House or Cloud Farm. Surf House is less expensive, but doesn't include food. One advantage is that it's located in the town with plenty of restaurants and bars within walking distance. I'd recommend this for ladies looking to save money or those who are already cool with a more college dorm/hostel-like experience.

If you want a slightly more sophisticated experience, Cloud Farm is your best bet. The house is gorgeous, there is a beautiful infinity pool overlooking the jungle, you'll have private bathrooms, and all meals are included.

What to Pack for a Surf Trip



The CHICABRAVA site has [a great packing list](#), but I can answer additional questions if you have them.

A few quick tips:

- The most important thing is a great swimsuit that stays on tightly, supports you, and doesn't ride up. If you've got big boobs like I do, I recommend wearing a sports bra instead of a bikini top. It will make a HUGE difference. There is no bikini on earth that can give me adequate surfing support, but a sports bra is magic. I think two-piece bikinis are also better than one-piece suits because you have more flexibility with your torso free.
- A **rashguard** is also a must; this will protect you from the sun and from the wax on your board. I got [a couple of these by Ripcurl](#) and loved them because I could easily zip in and out of them between sessions out on the water. Leggings are also great for protecting your legs (and that way you don't have to worry about bikini bottoms flying off). They sell special surf leggings, but any tight-fitting moisture-wicking workout leggings will be fine.
- Bring a jar of **coconut oil** and slather it in your hair each morning. This will protect it from the salt water and sun. You can also moisturize your skin after showers. Plus you'll smell like a piña colada all day; who wouldn't love that!?
- **Sunscreen.** Seriously you will need SO MUCH SUNSCREEN. Get the highest you can get and reapply it constantly. Get some for your lips, too. (I'm obsessed with Sun Bum.)



- Oh, and bring a hat and coverup to wear whenever you're not in the water! I'm such a sun baby and rarely ever burn, but even I was craving shade after so much time in the sun. While there I bought myself a trucker hat that I would never wear in real life, and was so thankful for it. Prepare accordingly and cover up!

How to Prep for a Surf Trip

Surfing isn't easy, but it is FUN. I'm the world's clumsiest, most un-athletic human ever, and I totally fell in love with it. You don't have to be good at it, to love it. I think that's part of the magic of the program these women have pulled together.

- To get the most out of your trip, start physically prepping for it the day you sign up. CHICABRAVA has a great list of [tips to help you prepare for a surf trip](#).
- If you have access to a pool, get some swimming and paddling lessons in. SUP will help you get comfortable with the sensation of balancing on a board on water.
- And anything you can do to strengthen your arms and your core (yoga/pilates/barre) will help. Even just daily planks and pop-ups or burpees will make a big difference.
- You do not have to be skinny with killer abs (haha...I'm definitely not), but work on your strength. It will make a world of difference.

Want more fabulous girl surf awesomeness?



Check out the posts from my fellow surf retreat girls **Kim-Marie Evans** (I love this lady-- subscribe to her blog and all her social. She's awesome!) and **Breanna J. Wilson** (my surf bestie/roomie who is an incredible travel journalist). **Lisa Haynes** is an inspiring and hilarious travel writer and portrait photographer. **Marlise Kast** is the rockstar journalist who pulled the trip together, and **Michelle Norris** is the most incredible photographer ever. Seriously.

Also, check out the **CHICABRAVA blog** for more behind-the-scenes stories about surf life in Nicaragua!

“

Tweet: "If she can do it, I can do it!" @chicabrasurf is where any woman can learn to surf: <http://bit.ly/1VX9mKo> (via @alwaysalejandra)

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Disclaimer: My stay at CHICABRAVA was free since I was there as part of a press trip, though I paid for my own airfare, gratuities, meals and drinks when not at Cloud Farm, and for the sailing excursion. I was not provided any additional compensation, and (as always!) all the opinions in this post are totally my own.

Posted by [Alejandra Ramos](#)

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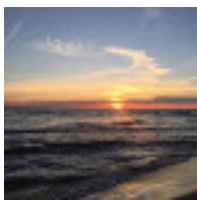
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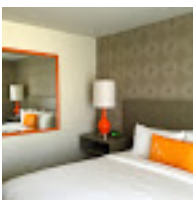
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