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THE BLOG

Chicabrava: Empowering Women One Wave at a Time

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A few months ago, I got an email that set in course an experience that would teach me a powerful lesson on overcoming my fears. It was an invitation to attend a press trip to experience and review Chicabrava, an all women's learn to surf camp in San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua. I read the email with both the usual excitement I feel when learning about a new opportunity to travel as well as slight apprehension about what I would actually be doing on the trip: Learning to surf.

I consider myself a very adventurous person who has traveled to over 40 countries, many of these trips solo, and has pushed my body and soul to the limit by climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, trekking the Himalayas, tandem hang-gliding in New Zealand and diving in the Great Barrier Reef. But surfing? Now that is something I had never tried and quite honestly, I wasn't sure I wanted to.

What I would come to learn about this entire experience was that traveling alone to Nicaragua and actually getting up on my surfboard to catch a wave was no problem at all. The real challenge I had to overcome was my immense fear and anxiety over the ocean. It terrified me.

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Before I went to Nicaragua I had constant nightmares about being surrounded by sharks, smashed by the waves and trapped under the water left to drown. I know I was being silly about these fears but my anxiety over the ocean was real and powerful.

What was most shocking is that I grew up swimming. We had a pool at our home in Minnesota that I swam like a fish, day and night for three months every summer. I was even on a competitive swim team for five years, and I have snorkeled and scuba dived in calm reef water into my adulthood. Yet, the thought of ever going into the waves held me back. I didn't dare enter rough water for over 25 years since a frightening incident in Mexico.

When I was 18 years old on vacation in Cancun, a group of us decided to take a ride on a banana boat. The ride was exhilarating as we rode the waves, bouncing up and down on our yellow inflated raft, screaming in joy at the top of our lungs. However, when it was time to get off an enormous wave came upon us and threw us into the ocean. All I remember is being smashed at full force by water and then tumbling over and over again, backwards in terror under the water. Although the terrifying episode probably only lasted a minute, it felt like an eternity. I thought I was going to drown. I emerged in tears, coughing out salt water and swore I would never get back in the ocean waves again.

I kept my promise for decades until I received the email inviting me to attend Chicabrava, the first and best all surf retreat for women in Nicaragua. I had never even thought of learning to surf and putting my fear of the ocean aside, I decided it would be another new adventure and challenge for me to pursue. Little did I realize, this experience would be incredibly empowering and teach me an important lesson on overcoming my fear of the ocean.

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Ashley Blaylock, a Houston native who had learned to surf at 19 and fell in love with Nicaragua as a young law student, founded Chicabrava in 2008. After completing her law degree, Ashley took a leaf of faith and moved to Nicaragua where she began working in real estate and spent her free time surfing. Despite her success, she yearned for something more fulfilling that would combine her passion for surfing with empowering women. As one of the only female surfers in Nicaragua, Ashley dreamed of opening up her own surf camp that would offer unforgettable, life-changing vacation experiences for women from all over the world. Yet, the thought of opening her own business and how she would do it held her back. The death of her beloved Grandmother taught her that life is too short not to go for it, so she set aside her fears and started Chicabrava, the first all women's surf camp in Nicaragua. Almost a decade later, Chicabrava is growing strong with a full-time staff, weekly surf camps and regular programs supporting the local community to help empower Nicaraguan girls through surfing. Ashley's dream materialized.

What I learned is that women come to Chicabrava for many different reasons but the most common thread is that women are looking for a way to be empowered. Besides learning or improving their ability to surf, many women come to Chicabrava after experiencing a difficult life event such as loss of a loved one or job or getting back on their feet after a terrible divorce. Some come together with their girlfriends while others like myself simply come alone. If they are searching for challenge and empowerment, they have found the place. The mission of the camp is "empowering women one wave at a time" and this is accomplished by inspiring personal change and empowerment through surfing. I can attest that it is truly a life-changing experience.



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Catching my first wave

I stood on the beach frozen with fear. I was petrified of entering the ocean. The water looked rough and scary from where I stood. I also knew that there were jellyfish and stingrays around which was another thing that scared me. My chest felt heavy with anxiety and dread. I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to go in. I wondered why on earth I was even there. What was I thinking?

The amazingly patient Sarah, my surf instructor, encouraged me gently. She let me take my time and didn't push me to get in. I swallowed my fear, and entered with my board, Snow White, and slowly walked out into the water, swishing my feet like they had told me to do, to scare away stingrays. I was so afraid of being stung that I didn't notice the first wave coming my way. "Dive!" Sarah yelled. But it was too late. The wave struck me at powerful force, toppling me into the water and throwing Snow White into the air. "Cover your head!" I heard Sarah holler. Thankfully the board didn't hit me but I got my first mouthful of salt water.

A little shaken, I hesitated again and despite Sarah's calls to move deeper into the water. I looked around me and saw that the other women were already on their boards and felt silly that I was the only one way behind, pummeled in fear. My competitive nature took ahold of me, and I jumped on my board and paddled out deeper.

The first thing I had to learn was how to do a "turtle roll" under an approaching

wave. It terrified me but after being struck again by another powerful wave, I gave it a try. As the wave approached, I grabbed the rails of my board and flipped over letting the wave crash above my board. I panicked under the water and popped up to another round of saltwater up my nose and down my mouth. This surfing thing wasn't going too well. I realized at that point I had two options. Do another dreaded turtle roll under the wave or surf on top of it. It was time for me to overcome my fear.

I took a deep breathe, and paddled out further waiting for the right wave to come. I had practiced my "pop-ups" several times on the sandy beach but hadn't attempted it in the water. I needed the perfect green wave and finally it came. "Paddle, paddle, paddle" yelled Sarah and my arms stroked the water. Just as Sarah told me to place my hands beside my chest and pop up into a plank, I felt the powerful rush of the water coming behind me. "Up" she yelled. My heart raced with adrenalin as I attempted to get up on my first wave. My legs were too straight and I fell head first into the water. To my surprise, when I surfaced I realized that it wasn't too bad. I could do it.

Encouraged, I paddled out and tried again and this time I caught a wave. As I popped up onto my board and looked at the shore, I couldn't believe that I had actually done it. I was riding a wave! It was a phenomenal feeling of joy and exhilaration. The thrill of actually getting up and doing it was amazing. I felt like I was on top of the world.

I surfed for another hour that day, stunned by how far I'd come in such a short while. Just hours before I was terrified of even going into the ocean and now I was out there, overcoming my fears and anxiety and having a blast. I realized that stepping out of your comfort zone and trying something completely new is an empowering feeling and sometimes you need to do that in order to personally grow.

It was an important reminder to me as well that oftentimes in life the only thing holding me back is myself and that I can do anything as long as I set my mind to it.

As the week drew to a close, I felt incredibly grateful for this amazing, powerful opportunity. As promised, each and every one of us left Chicabrava feeling thrilled and empowered. We had shared rooms together, stories of our lives, words of support and encouragement, and developed a wonderful camaraderie with each other and the fantastic staff. Although we started off as strangers, we left as friends each one of us taking home a little piece of Nicaragua in our suitcase and feeling a little bit stronger.



If you go:

Chicabrava offers weekly surf camps year-round in San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua. You can stay at the surf house in town or the more luxurious Cloud Farm up in the hills. Check out their website for more information at www.chicabrava.com

Disclosure: I was invited to attend and review Chicabrava Surf Camp at no cost except airfare however all the words and opinions expressed in this article are my own.

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