

**BREAKING** / Finding Hope in the Slums of Brazil

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# Chicabrava Surf Camp, Nicaragua



Kait — March 15, 2016



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Do you ever have those moments when you don't recognize your life? When you can't help but wonder how the events of your world have led up to the unfamiliar second in time you suddenly find yourself experiencing?

That was me as I stood clinging to a surfboard in the Pacific Ocean just off the sunny shores of Nicaragua. I held tightly onto a monstrous long-board bracing myself for the approaching wave when one of the surf instructors yelled, "Turtle roll!" I flipped the board over my head and ducked under the water bracing the board against my forearms letting it take the brunt of the crashing wave. For a fleeting moment I thought, "How is this my life?"

Growing up in [Michigan](#), I knew nothing about surfing...Literally, nothing. It was a foreign concept to me, and I never thought it would be something I would even try, not to mention, spend a week learning to surf in Nicaragua. Then, I had a few lessons [while on a trip to California](#), and I was surprised at how well it went. My years of ballet dancing paid off, and I had great balance and quick reactions that served me well as I tried to master the pop-up. Then, when I had the opportunity to [travel](#) to Nicaragua and learn to surf at [Chicabrava](#), an all female surf camp, I was ecstatic. Here I was, a small town, mid-west girl traveling to a foreign country to attempt to learn something that I had once thought was impossible. It was one of the many things in this world I never thought I could do, but here was a surf camp meant to show women like me not only that I *could* surf but how strong I really am when pushed. Spending a week

learning to surf and connecting with other like minded women felt like a once in a lifetime opportunity, and it was *so much more* than I could have expected.

I arrived in Managua, the capital of Nicaragua, feeling a bit anxious as I stepped through immigration into a foreign country, in a part of the world where I had never traveled. Carefully, I read my instructions for the hundredth time, and when I looked up again, I saw my driver excitedly waving to get my attention. Relieved, I joined the group of women that had already arrived, and we piled into the Chicabrava truck and headed to our home for the week.

As we drove, we made introductions and shared the stories that had brought across continents and oceans eager to discover something new about ourselves. We were all so different from one another, but we each had a strong desire for adventure that attracted us to this opportunity. We all had a yearning to seek more from this life and in the same sense, we all wanted to seek more from ourselves. I thought of how interesting it was that so many different women could end up on the same journey together, and the fact that twenty years ago, opportunities like this were basically non-existent for women. An overwhelming feeling of gratitude swelled in me as the world of Nicaragua zoomed by in a blur of colorful neighborhoods, green hills rising to kiss the blue sky, and people crowded on the streets bustling through their day. I knew I had to make the most of it.

Our journey brought us to one of Chicabrava's satellite properties with a gorgeous bird's eye view of the city of San Juan del Sur. An infinity pool was nestled at the entrance of the house overlooking the hills and endless skies. It quickly invited us in for a refreshing swim and the chance to drink in the beauty of Nicaragua...along with a nice glass of wine.

As we met the staff, I was pleasantly surprised to find a group of young women from around the world that gave up lives and careers, while lucrative, were not fulfilling. Each found their way to Nicaragua through different paths, and each fell in love with the beauty, the culture, and the sense of freedom. Chicabrava became a part of their journeys, and here they were guiding other women as they embarked on a new adventure trying to define freedom within their own lives. Hearing their stories stirred something in me that I hadn't felt since my early twenties. It was a sense of hope. Hope that anything is possible, but you have to leap to get to the other side.

*Photo Credit Chicabrava*

Beyond the immensely talented and passionate staff, the woman behind the creation of Chicabrava is Ashley Blaylock, and she is nothing short of incredible. As a young law student in Texas, Ashley was inspired by her roommate's surfing skills, and she decided to give it a try. She admits that her brother always surfed, but she shied away from the sport because as a woman, she felt intimidated to enter male-dominated arenas. However, seeing another female peer surfing gave her the inspiration she needed to get out there.

While in college, Ashley continued to surf and eventually traveled to Costa Rica on a study abroad program. Before the program started, she stayed in Nicaragua with a friend for a week and surfed the local beaches. It was then that Ashley fell in love with Nicaragua, and she began to contemplate her

future there. After graduating from law school, Ashley moved to San Juan del Sur where she spent a few years selling real estate and honing her own surf skills (she is a six-time National Surf Champion and ranked 4th overall in 2007 in Central America!). There were very few female surfers in the area, and locals referred to Ashley as *chicabrava* which translates as “brave girl”. The longer she stayed, the more she wanted to give back to the community and give other women the courage to follow their dreams. Thus, the idea of a women’s surf camp began to bloom.

By 2008, Ashley opened the doors inviting women from all walks of life and all skill levels to a life changing experience meant to challenge and teach them how to find their inner strength. Chicabrava’s motto is “Empowering women one wave at a time”, and it is the essence of the resort. It is an experience that will leave you proud to be a woman and make you feel like you could move mountains.

As we talk with the instructors, they reveal that many of the women that arrive at their doorstep are in a very “fragile state.” Some come after they have gone through something life changing that they are struggling with. Some travel across the world after a significant loss in their lives that has punctured their sense of self and deflated their confidence. They come looking for something or anything that will soothe the ache in their hearts, and in the warm waters of the Pacific they discover once again that they have control over their lives.

My own surf adventure starts with a classroom review of the basics, and we are assigned our own boards lovingly given nicknames by previous users. Then, we are taken to the sandy shores of a local beach where we will cut our teeth on the waves. Most of us will be quickly baptized by the salty ocean and gritty sand when we fall face first off the board, but before we even get in the water we are given thorough instructions and a few dry runs of what will be working once in. Each instructor is aware of our backgrounds, understands our skill levels, and they have us make goals before we enter the ocean. They ask us to honestly assess our skills and make realistic, obtainable goals for each session.

I get out into the ocean feeling the powerful waves rise and fall sucking the tide back as the wave rises. Then it swells, pooling and flooding as it breaks and comes rushing towards me. I feel...small, but the instructor hollers over the water and tells me to hop on the board. I obey and climb on the board with a clumsy, self-conscious weight in my limbs. As another wave approaches, she runs over the main-points of the pop-up and tells me just to go for it. She pushes me into the wave, and I run through my checklist, but I immediately look down as I remind myself to look up. I fall in and flail in the water before bobbing back up. Grabbing my board, I shuffle towards the instructor, and we repeat this process another two times. Finally, she pushes me into a wave and I hear her behind me yell “UP!” The checklist is fluid in my brain, and I pop up on the board planting my feet and quickly gaining my balance. I feel the wave as it carries me forward, and in my brain I am screaming “*I’m doing it! I’m doing it!*” As I ride the wave into the beach, I hear the other women and instructors all screaming and cheering behind me. I beam with pride, and I can’t help but feel empowered. It is the start to a journey of self-discovery.

Each day is a totally new experience. Our skills and goals slowly evolve, and each instructor offers a new perspective and a different relationship that inspires, encourages, or totally pinpoints our weaknesses and makes us hammer them out until they are smooth and effortless. Every instructor is a talented surfer in their own right and provides firm but reassuring suggestions to help us reach our daily goals. There is

a scientific method behind our daily surf time. The staff carefully reviews all environmental elements to determine the perfect swell, and we hit the waves excited to tackle our daily goal. We have allotted time with the instructors, but at the end of each session we are allowed to try it all on our own to truly pull together everything we have learned. A week may not seem like a long time to gain surfing skills, but I was shocked at how quickly we all progressed. It felt so liberating and satisfying to be able to hit my goals.

When we aren't surfing, we are hiking, exploring, shopping, scarfing down food, and debriefing with each other at the end of the day. Chicabrava offers a wide variety of activities beyond surfing including horse back riding, zip lining, yoga, and even an afternoon massage! There is so much beauty and culture in the city of San Juan del Sur there is something new to see and do every day. At the end of the day, we find ourselves able to relate with one another on a variety of levels. The experience has broken down the divisions of age and backgrounds. We open up to one another with stories from home and share photos of family. The sense of camaraderie in such an adventure removes the need to wear any kind of mask. We see each other in our vulnerable states as we attempt to learn a very difficult sport and looking like drown rats which removes our inhibitions. It has brought us to the same playing level, and in that it has made us realize we are equals. With each passing day, with each time we get up on that board, we realize we are much stronger than we thought, and we feed off our successes, no matter how minor. It proves to be a reminder that as women we also need to hold each other up instead of tearing each other down.

As the week goes by much too quickly, the emotional effects of the trip don't really hit me until our second to last day. We had the option to surf at 6 am for a dawn patrol session. I wavered and couldn't decide if I wanted to go. When the alarm went off, and I heard my roommate get up, I decided to go. We drove to the beach, and I paddled out into the Pacific at 6 am looking out at the horizon as the waves rolled in. I could feel the satisfying soreness of the week's hard work, and out of nowhere I started to cry. The pale morning sun raining down in soft shades of pink, and I thought, *"I did it! I really did it!"* Everything culminated in this sense of relief. I had been so nervous about the trip – so concerned that I would look like a fool or that I would be a miserable failure, and here I was surfing at dawn in Nicaragua. This was *my* life! I had done it, and I knew then that I could do anything I wanted.

I must also admit, this trip came at a crucial time in my life. In the middle of moving across my home state and dealing with a difficult family situation, I felt empty. I felt like I was giving everything to everyone around me and leaving nothing for myself. I was constantly trying to keep up with life and be everything to everyone which left me exhausted and feeling like a failure when I couldn't keep up. I was losing my sense of self in the chaos of my life, and I was mistaking "busy" for "meaningful".

As women, we are constantly evolving to adapt to our roles in life, in society, and so often we forget that we are people beyond those roles. We are people with our own interests and passions. We work, care for our families, and do so much to maintain our worlds and so often we fall into the comfort of our routines. We forget what it is like to be challenged. We lose sight of our strength and determination, above all we forget about our zest for life. To challenge ourselves and constantly learn, not just learn but understand how to fail and know how to get back up, that is what life is really about. Chicabrava gave that back to me.

It was much more emotional than I had anticipated, and it felt like a major “*Aha*” moment. I kept thinking of the instructors yelling “UP!” as I felt the wave grab the board, and it was confirmation that others have faith in me. Others can see my potential, and they believe in me. Usually, it is me doing the encouraging, but it was so refreshing to have someone telling me “*You can do it!*”

Chicabrava is so much more than surfing. It is a metaphor for life. The women that will guide you through the journey have come from all over the world searching for meaning and purpose, and carrying with them an incredible passion for life. It is hard not to be inspired by them. It made me realize I need to stop letting life and others trample all over me. This is my life, and I have to make it what I want it to be.

If you are looking for a new challenge, a chance to discover yourself after a difficult time or even if you just want a unique girls getaway, [Chicabrava](#) is the place for you. Whether you have never looked at a board or if you have been surfing your whole life, Chicabrava will allow you to discover something new about yourself. It captures the true spirit of life, and you will not be the same person when you leave.

You can find more information about the surf camp at [Chicabrava.com](#) Check them out on [Facebook](#) or twitter [@chicabravasurf](#).

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Kait

Kaitlin tries to live her life according to the words of Theodore Roosevelt, “Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, and difficulty.” As a marathon runner, aspiring writer, and lover of travel, she lives each day to find the next adventure to take her out of her comfort zone. She hopes to inspire and encourage others with her words.





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I envy your great adventure. If I was single I would have done the same thing (But I am also happy as a mom with two kids). I have tried surfboarding and I was able to stand twice. Haha! That was an achievement! LOL!

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Tatanisha Pitts-Worthey

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Beautiful photos and sounds like a magnificent place to visit. I've always wanted to learn how to surf, not sure if I still can. lol!

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Marielle Altenor

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It's not easy to get out your comfort zone. I've always wanted to do something like this but I'm very much a homebody. Glad you got to enjoy this trip. Maybe one day I will be brave enough to try my surfing!

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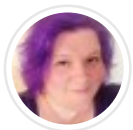
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I've never been to surf camp before, but that sounds like it would be a lot of fun! I love to travel and check out new places and this one sounds like a blast!

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What a gorgeous place to visit! It sounds like you had a wonderful time!

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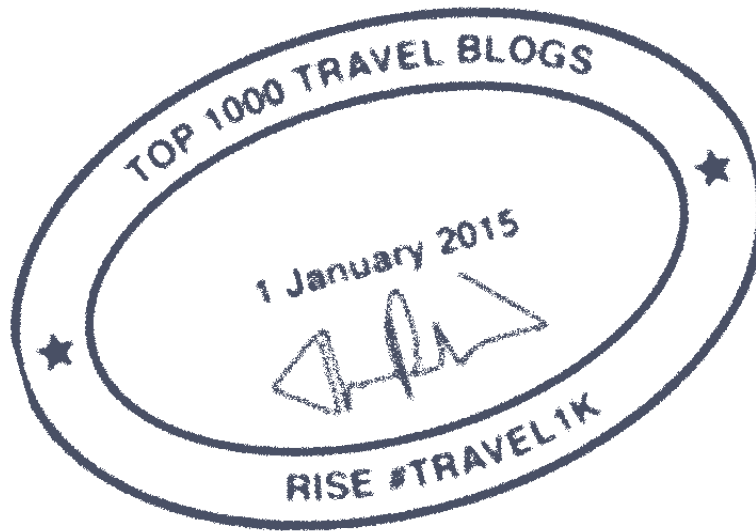
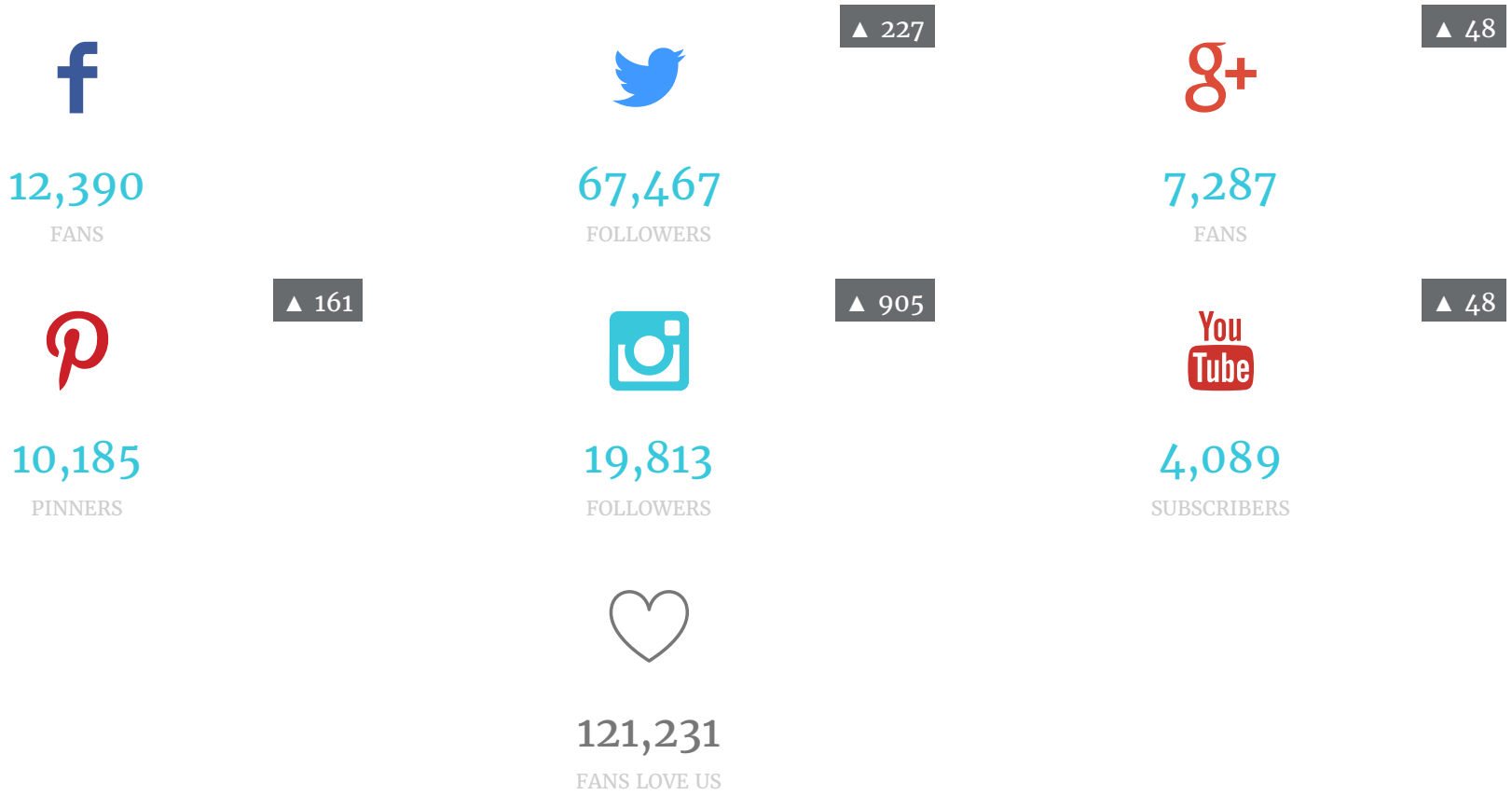
Rarely caught without a camera, [Jeana](#) is an adventurous traveler with a passion for people, cultures and food that has led her to 32 countries and counting. Recently named by Social Media Week as [one of eight](#)



people who have more social influence than some large travel brands, and also leads Rise Global's Top 1000 Travel Blogs at number 3.

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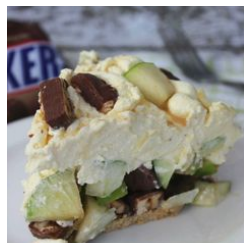





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