



For information or to book a tour:

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In this guide:

- ABOUT FIRST STEP ADVENTURE & ECO-TOURS
- TYPES OF TOURS
- WHAT TO BRING
- GETTING HERE and AWAY
- ABOUT EL CASTILLO AND THE RIO SAN JUAN
- USEFUL LINKS

ABOUT US

The First Step Adventure & Eco-Tours operates out of the town of El Castillo, on the beautiful Rio San Juan in the southern region of Nicaragua, very close to the Costa Rican border. We have something for everyone! Are you up for the challenge and adventure of a five day kayak / jungle tour? Or just a mellow afternoon drift/paddle to Bartola? Or something in between?

Kayaks (and sometimes canoes) are used on the tours, which start in El Castillo and can go as far down as San Juan del Norte where the river empties into the Atlantic Ocean. The tours explore the vast array of rainforest and jungle species found in and around the area. In this region is the Indio Maiz Biological Reserve, about 2,600 square kilometers of spectacular habitat for jungle rainforest creatures such as Howler Monkeys, Poison Dart Frogs, crocodiles, alligators, turtles, iguanas, sloths, toucans, parrots, and much more. If you're lucky, you may even spot the elusive Manatee.

The tours can accommodate up to ten people at a time. Owner / operator Miguel Su Berrios is a well-respected guide fluent in English and Spanish, and one of the only guides licensed to have tours in the Indio Maiz Biological Reserve.

You'll be traveling downstream, but expect to do some paddling, and definitely expect to get wet! Accommodations are very basic, but the adventure and the scenery combine to make an unforgettable Nicaraguan experience. Food and accommodations are included in all overnight tours.

TYPES OF TOURS

Half Day Bartola Tour - Minimum 3 people

Morning start for a mellow kayak drift/paddle down the river about 8 km to Rio Bartola into the Indio Maiz Reserve. Hike about two hours, explore the beautiful Rio Bartola, swim and have a fruit picnic before motoring back to El Castillo in the afternoon.

Full Day Sarnosa Tour - Minimum 3 people

Start in the early morning, kayak drift/paddle down to Rio Bartola about 8 km. Explore Rio Bartola in the Indio Maiz Reserve, then paddle back down to Rio San Juan. Continue on into the magic of the Rio Sarnoso rainforest, with lunch and fruit included. Enjoy the sunset over the river and jungle as the boat brings you back to El Castillo.

Three Day Rio Cruzita Tour - Minimum 3 people

A morning paddle from El Castillo brings you to Rio Bartola. In the afternoon

explore the magic of the Rio Sarnoso and surrounding jungle. Eat and live with the local culture and people of the river, listen to the jungle as you fall asleep in your hammock, wake up to river mists and the sounds of Howler Monkeys. After breakfast on your second morning, paddle back up the river a short distance into the Rio Cruzita tributary for a hike, then lunch in the jungle. Relax in the afternoon, dinner included back at camp. Evening brings you the Caiman tour where you'll see the river in a totally different light, night in the jungle. Sleep in on your third morning on the river, and arrive back by motorboat to El Castillo in time for an afternoon siesta.

Five Day Boca San Carlos Tour - Minimum 3 people

A morning paddle from El Castillo brings you to Rio Bartola. In the afternoon explore the magic of the Rio Sarnoso and surrounding jungle. Eat and live with the local culture and people of the river, listen to the jungle as you fall asleep in your hammock, wake up to river mists and the sounds of Howler Monkeys. After breakfast on your second morning, a short paddle back up the river brings you to the Rio Cruzita tributary for a hike, then lunch in the jungle. Relax in the afternoon, dinner included back at camp. Evening brings you the Caiman tour where you'll see the river in a totally different light, night in the jungle.

The next morning, continue on to Boca San Carlos. Observe Toucans, Macaws, Monkeys and more flora and fauna as you continue down the river. Stay at la casa de Jamy, a house on the river, and enjoy her wonderfully prepared local cuisine. In the morning, hike through the Boca San Carlos army checkpoint to see more Indio Maiz wildlife and jungle. Afternoon brings you to the Isla de Cocodrilo to spec out crocodiles. Later in the afternoon includes a hunt for the elusive Manatee. That evening, enjoy a special dinner of local seafood. After one last night on the river, morning brings you back up to El Castillo.

Seven day tours all the way down to San Juan Del Norte available. Or design your own custom tour! Camp in the jungle, string your hammock, test your survival skills, have breakfast on a banana leaf, fish on a stick!

BE SURE TO BRING THE FOLLOWING ITEMS

- Sunscreen, a hat and sport sunglasses.
- Basic bedding will be supplied, but you can bring your own, as well (it gets chilly in the jungle after dark).
- Toiletries, toothpaste etc.
- Mosquito repellent
- Camera and a dry-bag for it and your stuff.
- A hands-free headlamp and a spare battery
- Enough changes of clothing for your tour.
- One warmer long-sleeve shirt or light sweater.

- The best footwear is a water/kayak shoe with a heavier grip sole. Standard flip-flops are awkward to wade in, and there are underwater hazards like slippery rocks and sharp plant spines. Solid footwear is also good for around camp
- energy bars

SOME SUGGESTIONS

- Short shorts can be difficult to paddle in; it's best to have a layer between your skin and the kayak. Light, breathable, comfortable garments that roll up when you need them to are best.
- Pack light. Bring a good book to read yourself to sleep with the help of the sounds of the jungle at night.

GETTING HERE and AWAY

Here are a few helpful links on getting to and from Nicaragua:

Lonely Planet Guide for getting to and from San Carlos

<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/nicaragua/san-carlos/transport/getting-there-away>

World Travel Guide to Nicaragua

http://www.worldtravelguide.net/country/198/international_travel/Central-America/Nicaragua.html

Spirit Airlines - flights to and from Managua, Nicaragua

<http://www.spiritair.com/>

Taca Airlines - flights to and from Central America

<http://www.taca.com>

Once you're in the country, one easy mid-range way to get around is to use Paxeo, a shuttle service operating to and from Managua, Granada, San Juan Del Sur, or any major destination in Nicaragua. It's kind of in between renting a car and taking the chicken bus, especially good if time is tight. Their drivers are friendly, and the comfortable white vans are air-conditioned. Everyone in the office speaks English, so call to make a reservation.

<http://www.paxeos.com/>

Getting to El Castillo is an adventure, no matter how you choose to do it. The easiest way is to book a 45 minute flight from Managua across the lake to San Carlos with La Costeña, Nicaragua's domestic airline. From there, catch a boat down the river to El Castillo. Try to catch a fast boat; 1.5 hours as opposed to 3.

<http://www.lacostena.com.ni/index.html>

For the more intrepid traveler the overnight ferry across the lake from Granada takes about 15 hours. A suggestion would be to fly to San Carlos, visit the river, then return back to Granada on the ferry. San Carlos to Granada is usually calmer than going in the opposing direction, and you can enjoy the sunset over Ometepe this way. But be sure to book first class (upstairs) for a couple of extra bucks. You can use your hammock to sleep outside on deck - unless you enjoy watching 'Jaws' and 'Lake Placid' all night in the overly air-conditioned cabin. Someone there has a sense of humor.

Another way to get to Ometepe is the smaller ferry from San Jorge. Plan to spend at least a couple of nights. Try this progressive and interesting place: <http://www.hmerida.com/english/index>

Surfacing from Costa Rica is also a really great experience. Catch a bus to the border town of Los Chiles (make sure all your travel papers are in order) where you'll be able to enjoy a 2 hour boat ride up the Rio Frio to San Carlos and your connecting boat ride back down the Rio San Juan. It's a beautiful, relaxing ride, and there's no shortage of wildlife to look at on the way. <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/costa-rica/northern-lowlands/los-chiles>

ABOUT EL CASTILLO AND THE RIO SAN JUAN

El Castillo - the little town with a turbulent history, much like the rest of Nicaragua. Nowadays it's a pleasant, sleepy stopover (no cars!) for those possibly choosing to experience more of the natural adventure of the Rio San Juan. But you should know that this river represents Nicaraguans' nationalism and pride as a country; its beautiful people bravely survive a history which includes hundreds of years of turmoil, invasions and wars. Now, the river and Nicaragua hold a much-defined place in world political and social history.

So much of what has shaped Nicaragua into what it is today happened right here in El Castillo. Hundreds of years ago, the Spaniards who conquered the indigenous people built their protective fort deliberately and strategically very close to a stretch of rapids which would have been difficult for invading forces to access easily through to Granada and the rest of Nicaragua. All the major names in piracy attempted to pass through at one time or other...and some succeeded. Morgan, Drake, Dampier....all were here at some point. Rafaela Herrera, the 19-year-old daughter of a Spanish commander, held off the fortress from the English, and even sunk one of their warships with a well-aimed cannon. William Walker based his troops in the castle for a short time during his ill-fated coup attempt. During the gold rush Mark Twain and thousands of others cut weeks off their journey by using this route to the west; down the river lies the rusted remains of a steam ship some used for transportation during this time. And in

Boca San Carlos lies another dramatic bit of history, a half-sunk wreckage of a Contra plane shot down by Sandinistas during this most recent conflict.

War has been long over now for about two decades, and the turbulence has settled, but the people and stories still remain. It's really impossible to encapsulate such history in a few paragraphs. However, realize that the figurative (and literal!) bones of pirates, Sandinistas, Contras, along with at least part of the very identity of Nicaragua itself lie above and under the silt of the Rio San Juan. So while you're here in the region, brush up on your Spanish and talk to the locals about themselves, their past and their future. In El Castillo - as in the rest of the country - the red and black flags still fly, but the hearts and minds of the people continue to beat in time with change. To understand the country, one must also understand what has happened here in the last few hundred years. You must see and experience through a Nica's eyes; that's why it's so important to spend a bit of time off the beaten path here in Nicaragua, no matter where you're from, or where you're heading to....¡Viva Nicaragua!

LINKS

The Hotel Victoria, El Castillo

Highly recommended by us and countless other travelers who've enjoyed the beautiful and spacious rooms, friendly helpful service, and really superb food. Don't miss the local dish served up here, the huge river camarones cooked to perfection in garlic butter. Enjoy great views of the river and the castle relaxing in your hammock on the upper veranda - this is a most pleasant place.

<http://www.vianica.com/hotels/176/hotel-victoria>

The Hotel Richardson, El Castillo

Friendly and economical, the Hotel Richardson is tucked away on a quiet side street; just ask one of the friendly locals to point you the way. Each room has its own private bathroom, and the staff will assist you to make your stay in El Castillo as comfy as possible.

<http://www.vianica.com/hotels/177/hotel-richardson>

Monty's Surf Camp, Jiquilillo

What better way to unwind from your jungle adventure than to kick back on the Pacific Coast beach for a bit? Monty's Jiquilillo Surf Camp has it all! An endless supply of easy waves, 10 kms of sun and sand, beautiful clean accommodations suiting every budget, surf lessons, boards, books, delicious healthy food, and the Shark Bite Bar if you're just inclined to recline with a cool drink in the shade. Be sure to give them a call a few days before you drop by, and say hi for us to Rosarita, the pet pig!

<http://www.nicaraguasurfbeach.com/>

Hospedaje Valeria, Granada

While you're in Granada, enjoy one of the spacious and stylish rooms which surround the quaintly flowered courtyard found here. Parking, bikes, free internet, great spa services, and a central location combine with fantastic Nica hospitality make this a relaxing, worry-free place to stay.

On Calle Martirio, 25 meters north of Zoom Bar on Calle Calzada.

Call ahead a few days: (011)-505-2-454-1325 Or email:

hospedajevaleria@gmail.com

<http://www.hospedajevaleria.com.ni/index.htm>

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