

Letters from Matagalpa



Harry Shier



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By Harry Shier

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The cover photo shows a hunger march of destitute landless coffee workers heading out of Matagalpa towards the capital Managua in August 2004.



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Preface to the 2022 edition

Twenty years on from my first arrival in Nicaragua, and twelve years after I first compiled this book, my main reason for creating a new edition is to update the design, which was looking tired and dated. I've redesigned the front cover, and revamped the layout. The text of the letters I have scarcely touched.

The biggest change is that I have signed off each letter with a photograph. When I was writing these letters, we were still using film cameras in Nicaragua, so these are scans of some of the prints I've kept over the years. The quality is not always great, but I think they add something to the story.

When I stopped writing in 2007, I was happy in my home in Nicaragua. I intended to spend the rest of my life there and had no thoughts of leaving; and yet I am writing this in my current home in Ireland, where I have lived for the past six years, so what happened?

When I wrote the last letter, in January 2007, María and I had just celebrated our second anniversary. My work in CESESMA continued and María also took on a role at CESESMA, designing and running our first computer skills training programme. In July 2009 our daughter Laura was born. Laura has had dual Irish and Nicaraguan nationality from birth, and the Irish Embassy in Mexico City couriered her Irish passport to her in time for her second birthday.

Then in 2012, I received an offer I could not refuse: a fully-funded PhD studentship at the Centre for Children's Rights in Queen's University Belfast (by chance, the city where I was born). We decided it would be a great opportunity for all three of us: We would move to Belfast for three years, during which time I would become a Doctor of Children's Rights, María would learn English and expand her professional horizons, and Laura would discover the Irish part of her heritage; then, when the three-years were up, we would return to Nicaragua. We rented out our house in Matagalpa, sold the jeep, and came to an understanding with CESESMA that they could expect me back in three years.

I applied myself and worked hard (availing of world-class supervision from Prof. Laura Lundy), and did indeed complete my doctorate in three years. But when the time came to pack our bags and return to Nicaragua, María and Laura were having none of it. They insisted that my first duty was to my family, and my mission now was to get a proper job in Ireland, with a salary that would let us save and plan for the future. I was outvoted, so that is what happened. We settled in Newbridge County Kildare, where María and Laura have since put down roots and we have lived here happily ever since. María re-trained and now runs her own beauty salon, Laura is soon to finish primary school, and I, though officially retired, am still working part time in participatory research, and still collaborating with CESESMA in Nicaragua (where they now have Zoom just like the rest of us). María and I have just celebrated our 17th wedding anniversary.

If you want to know more, you'll have to write to me. In the meantime, enjoy reading about what my life was like twenty years ago.

Harry Shier

Preface to the 2009 edition

When I moved to Nicaragua in 2001, although I set out with only a two-year assignment, I saw it as a complete and permanent break with my former life in England.

Whist I was happy to say goodbye to my worldly possessions (to such an extreme that the BBC sent a news-crew to interview me on the subject), I did not want to let go of my friends and family. The internet was by then well established as a means of international networking, and I discovered that both Honduras, my first stop on the journey, and later Nicaragua had functioning internet cafés in the main towns and cities.

But relying on internet cafés with their, in those days, slow, unreliable connections, I couldn't write to everyone I wanted to keep in touch with. So I adopted the timeworn practice of composing "open letters" or circulars.

As time went by, this became an established routine, and I sent out an open letter every two or three months. The first two letters were emailed from Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, where I spent March and April of 2001 attending full-time Spanish school. This was my introduction to Latin America. These letters also feature my first "Top Ten" lists, which became an established part of all the subsequent letters.

From May 2001 I have lived in Matagalpa, Nicaragua. I continued to write regularly until January 2005. I married María of the Angels in December 2004, and the penultimate letter describes our honeymoon on the Coconut River. I stopped writing regular open letters then, but two years later, in January 2007, I wrote one last letter to give the story a more satisfactory ending.

It was my brother Donald's idea to compile the letters in book form. Although we never found a publisher and eventually dropped the idea of a printed book, his efforts inspired me to complete the compilation that you are now reading. Thanks Donald.

And if reading these letters inspires you to come and visit Nicaragua, you'll find my visitor's briefing pack in Appendix VII. It even has a list of what to pack.

Harry Shier

Matagalpa, November 2009

April 2001 – Letter from Honduras

Dear friends,

I've arrived safely in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. I've been here exactly a month and so far all is going fine. I don't have access to my own computer but there are plenty of Internet cafés here, so it is easy enough (though expensive) to keep in touch by email. I am trying to reply personally to everyone who writes to me, but I'm sorry I haven't been able to send personal letters to everyone. I hope you will accept this open letter as a compromise for the time being.

First – and second – impressions of Honduras

Tegucigalpa is a city of about 800,000 people. It's in the mountainous central region ringed by hills, and has a pleasant warm climate. The sun shines every day and, although it is the dry season, we have had two showers since I've been here. The city is full of contrasts. There are some wealthy suburbs that could almost be in the USA – even shopping malls. But most of it is very poor, with huge shanty-towns climbing up the hills all around. There are no important sights or monuments, just a small colonial cathedral in the centre. You can buy just about anything you need. Local goods are cheap, but imported goods are as expensive as Europe.

At weekends I've been able to travel and see some of the countryside. Much of it is very beautiful, with pine-covered mountains, lakes and valleys, green forests and blue sea. As we are well into the dry season, much of the landscape looks brown and dried-up, but all will change when the rains start.

There are lots of small farms, growing all kinds of things; lots of cows, pigs and chickens, lots of bananas, rice, maize, sugar cane and all kinds of tropical fruits. Most of the country people are very poor, and all the big estates are foreign-owned. Honduras was the original “banana republic”, and US companies still own vast amounts of the best land where they grow bananas for export to the USA.

The people I've met have always been friendly and helpful, and I wish I could talk more with them. Hopefully in time I will be able to.

Ten things that make Honduras different from Britain and Ireland

(Apart from everyone speaking Spanish)

1. Constant sunshine (see above)
2. Delicious tropical fruit: at every meal I get melon, mango, papaya, watermelon, banana or pineapple, all of which grow in abundance. And they also make great fresh juice drinks from all the above and more.
3. Flowers everywhere: lots of trees covered with dazzling flowers all over the place.
4. Almost the entire population is “mestizo”, which means of mixed European and indigenous Central American heritage. This makes the local view of race and cultural identity very different from the UK; something I hope to understand better when I can speak the language more.
5. Guns everywhere: The whole place is full of men with guns. There are armed “vigilantes”, or watchmen, on duty outside every major office, shop, bank,

even restaurants and residential blocks. You also see men walking around with pistols stuck in the waistband of their trousers like in the movies, and goodness knows how many more are carrying guns out of sight. Many places have signs outside saying “no arms allowed, please leave your guns at the door”. And of course there are armed police everywhere too.

6. Local buses: Most of the local buses are old US school buses (the yellow ones like you see in cartoons) that have failed their MOT or become unroadworthy beyond repair. They ship them here, where they have another twenty years or so of active life, both on the urban routes and even long-distance. They are noisy and emit poisonous gases, and are nearly always packed like sardine-cans, but there are loads of them and the standard fare in town is 1.5 Lempiras, which is about 12 cents (2 Lempiras on Sundays). Long-distance routes are similarly cheap, and you could do a seven-hour journey from here to the north coast for about five Euro, but it might not be very comfortable.
7. Tortillas: You get these little maize-flour pancakes with every meal – three times a day, whether you want them or not. I haven’t managed to acquire a taste for them yet, but they just keep bringing them.
8. Occasional running water: Most of the houses in town have running water in theory, but when you turn on the tap it’s anyone’s guess whether anything is going to come out of it. People allow for this by storing water at home. About half the mornings I have to shower by pouring water over myself with a small plastic bowl.

And on the subject of showers, hot water is only found in the most luxurious of places, and you don’t really need it anyway. But in many places, including my house, there is a small dodgy-looking water-heater attached directly to the showerhead. There are wires connected to this, taped up with insulating tape, and disappearing into a hole in the wall. I had never seen such a thing before I came here, and any Irish electrician would have a fit if they saw it! But it does mean, provided the water is running, you can get a lukewarm shower on a cool morning.

9. Vultures: Known locally as “zopilotes”, these big scruffy black scavenger birds are everywhere, both in town and in the countryside, eating up scraps, or flying around looking for dead things to eat.
10. And finally: Warm blue sea, perfect for swimming in – unfortunately not near where I live, but as buses are so cheap it’s easy to go at weekends.

My life in Honduras

I live with a local family, somewhere in the middle of the social spectrum. We live about two miles from the centre of town, but it’s on a busy bus route (see above), so no trouble getting to school in the mornings. The household consists of my landlady Martha, her grown-up son Fernando, and their elderly maid Dolores. I have a comfortable room and my own tiny shower-room (see above), and they give me an excellent meal of typical local food at 7.00, morning and evening every day (which makes life very easy because whenever it’s 7 o’clock, whether morning or evening, it’s always time to eat!). I eat lots of rice, tortillas, beans, lots of fruit and vegetables, eggs, and some meat and chicken.

I go to language school Monday to Friday. I have one-to-one classes all morning, with Brenda from 8.00-10.00, then with Marta from 10.00-12.00. This is hard work with lots of grammar and irregular verbs to learn and stuff, but also a growing amount of conversation, reading the local newspapers etc. as my ability increases. There are only about a dozen students in the school, and at present everyone is getting this kind of individual tuition.

I generally have lunch in one of the local cafés, and in the afternoons I have a customised programme of activities to help me practise the language. For example, I've had guided tours of a local primary school, hospital, architecture school and food-market, meetings and discussions with local academics and educationalists, and on Tuesday I had to give a talk myself, in Spanish, about my home country. When there's nothing on in the afternoons I can work with tapes as well.

I stay home most weekday evenings, but have been out a few times. Wednesday night, for example, several of us from the school went to a bar near the university to watch Honduras play the USA at football on a giant outdoor screen. I made myself a small Honduran flag out of an old plastic bag, a stick and some sellotape, hoping this would prevent people from mistaking me for a united-statesian*. Honduras were the better team but USA won. Despite the gloom and misery that this caused, there was lots of music and dancing afterwards. In fact there is a lot of dancing here in general; it is almost a requirement, so some of my colleagues from the school are trying to lure me to dance classes. They have salsa and merengue etc. and also some typically Honduran dances such as the Punta Garífuna (see below).

Most weekends I try to get away from the city and explore some of the countryside or go to the beach. Although there are lots of cheap buses, there is no central bus station and no such thing as a bus timetable. Buses leave for different destinations from different places around the city at unpredictable hours, and it is quite a challenge to find your bus in the first place.

St Patrick's Day in Honduras

The best fun I've had so far was the St Patrick's Day party on the beach, so, to finish with, a bit about St Patrick's Day in Honduras. All the Irish development workers agreed to meet up in Tela, which is a small town on the Caribbean coast, on the Friday night. There were about thirty of us altogether, about half Irish and the rest friends and colleagues from other countries. On the Saturday, St Patrick's Day, we drove in a convoy of 4WD vehicles to a tiny village called Miami, which is right

* It is hard to know how to refer to people from the United States. The common term "American" is considered inaccurate and offensive here, since America is a vast continent, and all native peoples from Patagonia to Alaska rightly consider themselves to be Americans. "Norteamericano" (North-American) is widely used here, but is also misleading as Canadians and Mexicans are also North Americans. In Spanish the correct term is "Estadounidense"; literally "United-statesian", but in everyday speech the common term is "gringo". I have chosen to translate "Estadounidense" literally, as some people find "gringo" offensive. While we're on the subject, it is interesting to note that in the Spanish-speaking world, América is one single continent, not two as it is in the English-speaking world. The continent of América includes North America, South America, Central America and the Caribbean. Therefore it is considered very ignorant to refer to Nicaragua as part of South America.

on the beach, at the end of a bumpy sand track about 15 miles from the town. There is no other way to get there (except by boat I suppose).

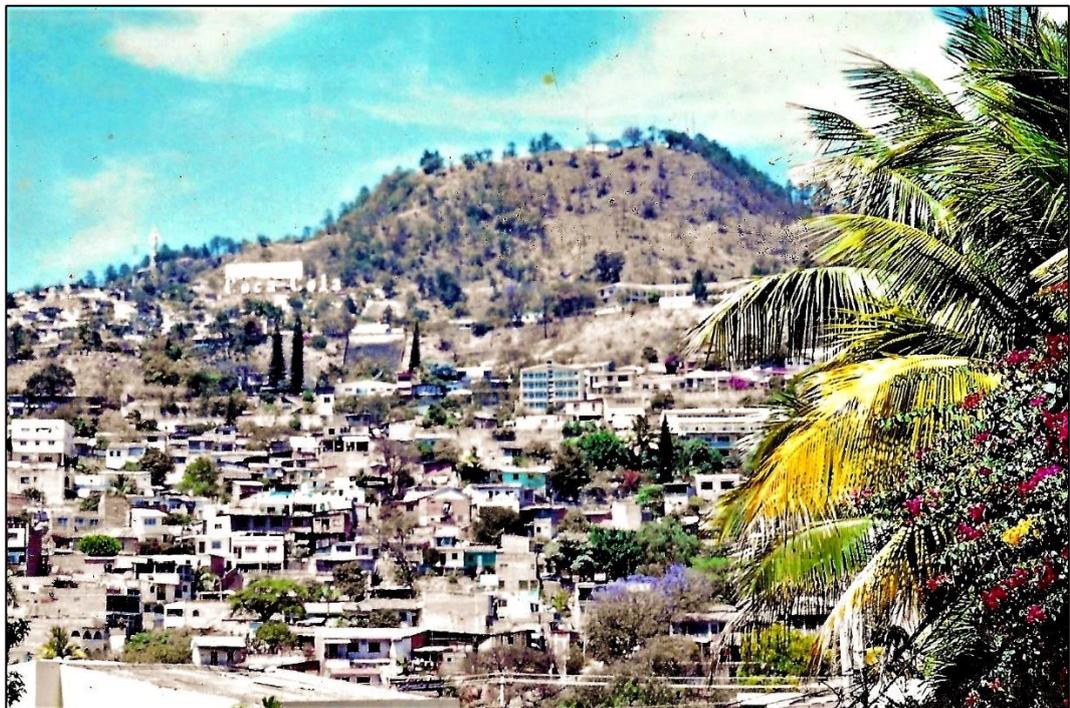
There are no facilities of any kind: no bar, no hotel, no café, no nothing. Just miles of perfect golden sand, lapped by warm clear blue water and fringed with coconut palms, plus a few dozen traditional dwellings made of wooden frames covered with palm leaves.

Miami is a village of the Garífuna people, who are a minority community with an interesting history. Originally from Africa, they escaped from slavery and set up their own community in the mountainous interior on the island of St Vincent. They posed a threat to British rule on the island, so the British authorities rounded them all up, put them in boats and dumped them on a small island off the coast of Honduras. From there the Garífuna moved to the mainland, where they arrived just over 200 years ago. They now live in twenty small villages scattered all along the coast, where they have retained their own language and culture, and a distinctive tradition of music and dance.

The Garífuna are very welcoming to visitors, and make some money cooking fresh-caught fish over a wood fire, which they serve up under a coconut-leaf canopy right by the beach. So as well as swimming in the warm blue water and lazing on the golden sands, or lying in a hammock in the shade drinking cool beers (which we had brought with us), we all enjoyed a wonderful traditional meal of fresh fish and fried plantain.

When the sun set we headed back to town, where we discovered that the Irish development agencies had managed to import five cases of Draught Guinness, i.e. 120 cans, so the party continued into the night – in fact *all* night for some people! It was the best St Patrick's Day I can remember, and a fitting point to end this letter.

I look forward to hearing your news! Best wishes from Harry



Tegucigalpa, capital of Honduras

May 2001 – Goodbye to Honduras, or “Nicaragua here I come”

Dear friends,

Today I am packing my bags, and tomorrow morning I will be on the bus to Managua, Nicaragua, to start the next phase of the adventure. So I thought this would be as good a time as any to write and update everybody. Again, sorry it's a circular, but this way I can send more news to more people.

I had my last Spanish class yesterday, and I have to admit there's no way I can speak enough Spanish to pass for a training consultant in a Spanish-speaking country. But I have a plan, which is to insist I need at least three months to look, listen and learn before I can be expected to respond to any questions.

Life has continued much as it was when I last wrote: classes every morning, visits and talks most afternoons, sightseeing trips at weekends. So before I try to sum up my happy memories of Honduras, and following on from my last letter, here are ...

Ten more things that make Honduras different from Britain and Ireland:

1. Chili sauce: We have salt and pepper here. But whilst the salt is pretty much the same as at home, pepper comes in a little red bottle, always on the table, morning, noon and night.
2. Crisps: And while we're on food, if you buy a packet of crisps here, they're more likely to be made from bananas or plantains than from potatoes – and very tasty they are too.
3. Only two seasons: Last Thursday, 3 May, was the “Day of the Cross”, which traditionally marks the change from “summer” to “winter”. “Summer” is the hot dry season which lasts from October to April, and “winter” is the equally hot rainy season from May to September. So, although we are in the northern hemisphere, the seasons are the opposite to what they are in Europe.
4. When it rains it pours: And on the subject of weather, the rain actually started a day early, on Wednesday afternoon. And what rain! It's like Hollywood rain – you know; the fake rain they use in movies because real rain isn't heavy enough to show up on camera. Well I bet you this rain is! But then, it's not cold, so it's not unpleasant to get wet, and you know the sun will be out and everything will soon be dry again. It's easy to see how this rain washes away the soil from farmlands, especially on hillsides, and therefore why deforestation is such a desperate problem here, compared to Europe. For example, Ireland has been almost completely deforested for about a thousand years, but most of the soil is still there!
5. Rum: The national drink. I'm not that fond of rum, but there's plenty of it, and it's cheap, and mixes with just about anything (which is more than can be said for Irish whiskey).
6. Butterflies: Any time you go for a walk in the country, you are sure to see hundreds of beautiful butterflies of every colour you can imagine.

7. Taxis: Getting taxis is so easy. You can roll out of a nightclub at four o'clock in the morning, and within minutes you will be picked up by a local taxi and delivered safely home across the city for a fare of about €2.50 (that's here in the capital; in other towns they are much cheaper). If they included availability of taxis in the UN Index of Development, then I'm sure Honduras would come out as one of the most highly developed countries in the world.
8. Music: This may seem a bit obvious, but hearing Latin music everywhere you go gives life a different flavour. You do hear a certain amount of bad Unitedstatesian rock, and even the odd Robbie Williams or Abba track, but mostly it's pure Latin.
9. Machetes: I wrote about Honduran gun culture in my last letter. But when I was in the countryside I also noticed that every man who didn't have a gun seemed to be equipped instead with a vicious-looking machete. It appears to function as a symbol of manhood. I realise they have a legitimate use in agriculture, but I can't see the need to carry them around in the street all the time, take them out to bars etc. And then some men get drunk and use them on their wives and girlfriends. Machismo is certainly alive and well in Honduras.
10. Musical instruments grow on trees. There are beautiful trees here with bright orange-red flowers, which produce great big seedpods up to half a metre long. These dry out and fall off the trees, making excellent shakers. So no need for beans in yogurt pots etc here!

Now I've got into the habit of writing top ten lists, I might as well carry on the same way, so, to end my final report from Honduras, here are ...

My Top Ten Happy Memories

(In no particular order)

1. St Patrick's Day on Miami Beach (that's Miami Beach, Honduras, not Miami Beach Florida): I wrote about this in my last letter, so I won't go over it again, except to say that as a memory to treasure it would be hard to beat.
2. Semana Santa (Holy Week): This is the biggest holiday of the year here. For many people it is their only holiday, and almost the whole country goes off for a long weekend, either to visit relatives or, if they can afford it, to go to the beach. I'd been warned about trying to travel anywhere without advance booking and didn't know what to do. Then Dona Marta, my landlady, invited me and two other APSO colleagues to spend the weekend with her family.

The grandparents live in a lovely little house in a pine forest up in the mountains, just outside a picturesque colonial mining town called Valle de Angeles. And during the holidays all their friends and relations go up there to visit them. There were aunts, uncles, cousins, wives, husbands, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, friends and neighbours coming and going all weekend. There was constant cooking, and constant drinking of beer, rum punch etc. On Friday we went into the town to watch the traditional Good Friday procession, with effigies of Jesus and various other key players carried through the streets to the local church.

I'm not a very family-oriented person, but I enjoyed being a guest in this big extended happy family gathering. I thought, when I'm 85 and a great-

grandparent, I wouldn't mind not being rich, famous or successful, if I was surrounded by a family like this!

3. **Transporting Maize in Copan:** A few weeks ago I asked for a day off school so I could go to see the world famous ruins of Copan. This great Mayan city, which flourished in the 7th to 9th centuries AD (i.e. 600 years before Columbus!), is right at the far end of the country, near the Guatemalan border, and takes two buses and about 8 hours to get to from here. Luckily another APSO colleague, Aidan, lives right there and offered to put me up for the weekend. The ruins were spectacular as expected, but what I'll remember most was a chance to see a different side of life in Honduras. On the Saturday afternoon, after a morning of museum-visiting and ancient culture, we ended up helping some of the Maya-Chorti campesinos bring home their maize crop from the fields. These indigenous people are the direct descendants of the ancient Maya who built the great city now in ruins just outside the present-day town. It was a shock to experience directly the poverty in which these people are living. But still when we had unloaded the first truckload of maize they insisted we join them for a meal of chicken soup and maize-flour tortillas. All over the world it seems to be the poorest people who are the first to offer hospitality, and the most generous in sharing what little they have. Unfortunately we overloaded the pick-up and it broke down on the second trip!
4. **Dance class:** Yes, I have been going to Latin dance classes in the afternoons after school. Special thanks to Hervé and Heike for twisting my arm and persuading me to go. We don't dance with partners like in European salsa classes; it's more like an aerobic workout with the emphasis on loosening up those rigid northern hips. The dance teacher (there are three of them, and they are all young men in alarmingly tight shorts) stands at the front and the rest of us try to copy what he does, in front of big mirrors, just to make us feel really self-conscious. But it's good exercise, good music, and a great way to loosen up after a tough day wrestling with irregular familiar imperatives. And I'm sure it's having some beneficial effect (see next happy memory).
5. **Practising what I learnt in dance class in the nightclubs of Tegucigalpa, La Ceiba, Tela etc.:** Anyone who knows me from England knows I was never much of a one for clubbing, but if you were here you'd understand. The music is infectious, the people are friendly, the beer is cheap, the nights are warm, and it's easy to get a taxi home afterwards. And there's not a lot else to do in the evenings. Also, I've got a feeling Matagalpa may not have the same variety of nightlife there is here, so I feel I should enjoy it while I can.
6. **Tobacco Road:** This is a bar in the town centre just behind the cathedral, run by a Unitedstatesian expat called Tom. It has a lovely patio with palm trees and is a quiet oasis to go for a cool beer on a hot afternoon in the city. But I particularly remember one afternoon a couple of weeks ago. Apart from our group of four the place was empty. Then Tom the barkeeper said "Sorry I have to go out for a while. Here's the key. Don't let anyone else in, and remember to write down how many beers you drink while I'm away."
7. **Swimming in the Rio Cangrejal:** One Saturday afternoon, when I was visiting some Irish colleagues in La Ceiba on the north coast, a group of about ten of us went up into the rainforest to a beautiful secret swimming place in the river gorge, hidden deep in the forest. The water was crystal-clear and unpolluted,

deep enough to dive off the rocks, and just the right temperature. There were little zebra-striped fish, and a splashing waterfall. It was one of those wonderful places that isn't in the guidebooks, but people who know how to find it pass the information on.

8. Fresh banana milkshakes: I don't have much to say about these, except that they are delicious.
9. When Honduras scored against the USA in the World Cup qualifier: I mentioned in my last letter that we went out to see the match on an outdoor giant screen in a bar up near the university. Honduras lost the match, but what will stay in my memory is the excitement and energy in the crowd when their team scored. I can only guess what it would have been like had the team actually won. They drew against Jamaica the following month, and again the atmosphere when they scored their one and only goal had to be experienced at first hand.
10. The friendship and support of other APSO workers, and other Irish development workers generally. Sometimes it's fun to find your own way around and fend for yourself. But I could never have seen so much, done so much, met so many great people and had such a good time without the friendship, support and hospitality of the other workers I have met, both here in Tegucigalpa and on my travels. So, if any of you are reading this, a massive thank-you. As a relative newcomer, there is no way I will ever repay the kindness and help I have received. But hopefully, in years to come, when I eventually master the language and get to know my way around Nicaragua, I'll be in the position of being able to help newly arrived workers who are just as lost and confused as I was when I first arrived. And so the cycle will continue.

And that's about it. Soon, it will be time for the real work to begin. Also soon I will have an address of my own in Matagalpa, and the next time I write one of these letters, it will be to invite all my friends to come and visit me there.

With best wishes from Harry.



Bringing home the maize crop, Copán, Honduras; This is where we over-loaded the truck and it broke down on the return journey.

July 2001 – Letter from Matagalpa

Dear Friends,

I've been here just over a month now, and I've finally found the time to do another open letter home.

Welcome to Matagalpa

The town of Matagalpa itself is not particularly pretty, though it has a fine colonial-style cathedral and two pleasant town squares. But it is surrounded by green hills in a beautiful mountain landscape. I particularly like the climate, which is considered cool (fresco) by the locals, but is still pleasantly warm by my standards. However, only the main roads are paved and the rest are dirt, which means there is a lot of dust in the dry season and a lot of mud in the wet season, which we are now well into.

We have two supermarkets, a two-screen cinema, two bus stations, branches of several different universities, lots of banks, a hospital, a cultural centre, cheap hotels and cafés in abundance, several internet cafes and, I'm told, four discos – though I haven't been to any of these yet. Above all the people are warm and friendly.

After several weeks of fruitless searching, I have finally found my dream house, on a hillside overlooking the town centre, large, modern and in good condition (which is a real find in this town). I move in (subject to contract) on 1 August, and everyone is welcome to come and stay – once I have some furniture.

Meanwhile, out in the countryside

I am constantly moved by the beauty of the landscape; green hills and valleys, partly forested, partly farmed, with high mountains in all directions. And it is so green! I have to say that, at this time of year, it is even greener than Ireland, if that were possible. But I bet it won't be so green by the end of the dry season next April! At the moment my work takes me out into the countryside quite a bit, and, as we drive along the winding mountain roads or bumpy dirt tracks, I gaze out of the window of the jeep or the bus, lost in wonderment at these beautiful green hills, and I feel so glad to be here.

But, as I travel around the countryside, I've been a bit taken aback by the poor living conditions of the country people. The average family home would be seen as a rather shoddy garden shed in Ireland, with wooden plank walls, tin roof, mud floor and a toilet hut out the back somewhere. But what amazes me is how even the poorest people always do their best to look as clean and smart as possible. They always have freshly washed jeans and a well-ironed shirt or top, and when you see their living conditions you have to ask yourself just how they manage it.

A lot of second-hand clothing finds its way here from the USA, which is a great boon to the country people, but also leads to some bizarre sights (bizarre from my point of view, that is). For example, the other day I saw a grey-haired campesino granny sporting a 'Rage against the Machine' T-shirt, and last week a young pre-school worker turned up for one of our pre-school self-esteem workshops in an impossibly glamorous electric-blue crushed-velvet evening dress, that would turn heads in a London club, but passes without comment in the Nicaraguan countryside.

Just as I was typing that last bit, and I am not making this up, a tiny blue-green hummingbird flew into the office through the open window, where it had been feeding on the bright red flowers of the tree outside. It flew around my head for about twenty seconds, looking a bit lost, then eventually got its bearings and headed back out through the window.

This sort of thing is an everyday occurrence because the office of CESESMA where I work was relocated just before I got here, and we are now in the middle of a forest about five miles out of town. Looking out of the window of the upstairs office where I'm sitting right now, as well as hummingbirds in brilliant shades of red and turquoise, I can see little green lizards and big yellow butterflies, and, if I were to lean out of the window, I could reach out and pick a fresh papaya off the tree for lunch! The downside of this is lots of mosquitoes and other creepy crawlies. Luckily I brought plenty of repellent with me. Also, to be fair, it does rain a lot at this time of year.

Working at CESESMA

I've been here at my new job just over a month now, and I'm still finding my feet. My Spanish is still too hopeless to do anything useful, so I have been mostly going along to sit in on different workshops and meetings. On Friday, for example, I was at a workshop for primary teachers on organic farming.

Other CESESMA activities I've been to have included workshops for pre-school workers on promoting self-esteem in young children, workshops on children's rights for primary age children, a workshop on setting up an organic kitchen garden, for teenagers who have been identified as young community leaders in their villages and will pass on the learning to other community members, a workshop on the dangers of pesticides and alternative pest control for primary school children, and finally CESESMA's school of traditional Nicaraguan dance, which meets in the auditorium here in the forest every Thursday.

We are also starting work on a big new project as part of a national programme to eradicate the worst forms of child labour on the coffee plantations here. It will be a pilot project to make key interventions in education, health and nutrition on several of the big estates and see what methods have the best results in reducing the use of child labour.

The team here are very able and very committed. They already know all the basics of participatory learning and community education. But I am starting to see how, once I master the language, I may be able to help them develop their communication skills and structure the work more effectively. My first real project is to carry out a one-to-one interview (in Spanish, of course) with each member of the team, to find out more about their backgrounds, previous experience, likes and dislikes in their work, training needs and aspirations. The interviews are going OK, but presenting a final report in Spanish for discussion by the whole team is going to be a bit daunting.

At home in Matagalpa

As for my current living conditions, until I can move into my wonderful new house I'm sharing with a young US Peace Corps guy called Jason. The house is really basic. There's one tap, but the water only comes on for an hour or so one day a week (two if we're lucky). It came on Sunday morning, so I leapt out of bed and

attempted to clean the whole house before it was cut off again. Unfortunately I failed, so now I have no water left in the storage barrel for the next few days!

Flushing toilets are virtually unknown here, and showering involves pouring cold water over yourself with a plastic bowl, but I already got used to that in Honduras. Matagalpa is famous for its water shortage problem, yet ironically it is really wet here, especially at this time of year. The problem is that the public water-main system is in a state of chronic failure, and the authorities don't have any money to fix things. However, with the benefit of foreign aid, we are promised that a new water main and pumping system will be installed by the end of next year.

The struggle with Spanish

Although I'm trying hard, my slow progress with Spanish is really frustrating me. I can now read and write fairly well, and say what I want to say if people are patient and tolerant of my mistakes (which they invariably are). But I can't understand half of what people say to me, or join in everyday conversations. Part of the problem is that the dialect here is very different from that in Tegucigalpa, where I learnt Spanish. Coming to work here I felt like I was starting all over again. I suppose the equivalent for a Spanish speaker would be spending two months learning English in a school in Edinburgh, then going to work in the Yorkshire Dales.

One of the advantages of sharing a house with Jason this past month has been that he has lots of local friends, who often call round for a chat or to sing and play guitar in the evenings. And this provides plenty of opportunity to practise everyday Nicaraguan Spanish.

I have also been learning to play Scrabble in Spanish with new friends Círculos and Yolidia. It is a bit different from the English version because, as well as all the usual letters, there are tiles with 'Ñ', 'RR' and 'LL', all of which are considered as separate letters in the Spanish alphabet. And also, because every Spanish verb has up to twenty different conjugated forms, you have to know your grammar as well as your vocabulary. I haven't won a game yet, but I have come second!

Harry versus the volcano

A couple of weekends ago, some Irish friends, Dominic and Geraldine, took me to see one of Nicaragua's famous live volcanoes – something I've never seen before. You can drive right up to the rim of the volcano and look down into the crater, and smell the sulphurous smoke billowing up from the depths below. On certain days, when the wind blows the smoke away, you can see the glow of red-hot lava at the bottom, but we couldn't see it the day we visited. At the entrance we were given safety instructions including the following: "If the volcano starts throwing out rocks, we suggest you shelter in your car until it stops". Luckily the volcano was in a good mood that day.

Where the streets have no name

And finally, my letter wouldn't be complete without a Top Ten list. I've already written about my home town of Matagalpa, but I must say that the capital city, Managua, where I've also spent several frustrating days, is one of the weirdest places I've ever visited. So here, to finish with are my ...

Top Ten weird things about Managua

(And I must stress that they are weird when seen from my cultural perspective, and probably don't seem at all weird to the locals)

1. The streets have no names:

Yes this was the place featured in the famous U2 song of the same name. And it is a city of nearly two million people, so you can imagine how confusing it is to find your way around, specially if your Spanish is poor.

2. The address system:

Because the streets have no names, addresses have to be given by referring to some well-known landmark and explaining how to get to your target destination from there. For example, the address of the ASPO office is, "From Mansion Teodolinda, one block south and half a block down". To make matters more confusing, North, East and West are never mentioned, only South. North is "Towards the lake", East is "arriba" (upwards), meaning not "uphill" but "towards the sunrise", and similarly West is "abajo" (downwards). And if that wasn't bad enough, many of the landmarks referred to were destroyed by an earthquake in 1972, or changed use during the 1979 revolution. I had to go to the Secretariat of External Cooperation in the other day, and the address I was given was, "Where Luis Somoza's mansion used to be". Luis Somoza was the son of the reviled dictator overthrown in 1979, and his former mansion now houses various government offices.

3. A city with no heart

The old city of Managua was built on one of the world's most active seismic faults, and the whole lot was destroyed in a massive earthquake in 1972. Recognising that the resulting piles of rubble were sitting on a major fault-line, the authorities rightly realised that there wasn't much point in putting it all back up again, so they just left it as it was. Wandering around the empty blocks of wasteland where the pulsating heart of the city used to be is a strange and moving experience, especially if you have seen old photographs of how the city used to look and how full of life it was. Various property developers have tried in recent years to promote their new shopping malls and office complexes as "the new heart of Managua", but it hasn't really worked, so the city is left with lots of suburbs and no centre. You can imagine how this compounds the difficulties for the new visitor struggling with the address system.

4. The dead lake

The old city of Managua stood on the shores of what was once a vast, beautiful and productive lake, Lake Managua, or Xolotlan, as it was known to those who originally lived by its shores. But over the years the lake filled up with raw sewage and industrial residues, including toxic heavy metals, until eventually all traces of life disappeared, and it became the world's biggest stinking cesspool. It can still look quite breathtaking in the sunset, but you wouldn't want to get too near it. There has been talk of cleaning it up, as it certainly doesn't do a lot for the tourist industry in its present condition. However, while the sewage will eventually decompose, the heavy metal residues will remain to poison the water for thousands of years unless some new technology can be found to remove them.

5. The Old Cathedral

Dark and spooky, alone by the lake shore stands the old cathedral of Managua, the only old building to survive the 1972 earthquake. Its roof has fallen in and you can see great cracks in its walls and pillars, but still it stands there, empty and forsaken, surrounded by wasteland, as a silent monument to what use to be.

6. The New Cathedral

The new Cathedral, well away from the fault-line in one of the supposed “new hearts of Managua”, is almost as bizarre! It’s a modernist concrete block, with a concrete tower and a roof that looks like a tray of giant eggs. I must admit I haven’t been inside, and I’m told it is quite amazing from the inside. I’ll let you know next time!

7. Monument to the disappeared

On a hillside overlooking the city, by a deep ravine, is a strange modern monument; just a curved concrete pillar with a wreath on it. A friend explained that this is a monument to the memory of those who disappeared at the hands of the death squads in the final years of the Somoza dictatorship. With increasing desperation, as his hold on power grew weaker and the Sandinista rebels grew stronger, Somoza sent these gangs out at night to round up anyone and everyone he thought was against him, torture them for information, then take them up to this hillside, shoot them and throw their bodies into the ravine. When young men and women went missing at night, the dawn would find their distraught families searching this ravine, perhaps hoping their loved ones had escaped to join the rebels in the countryside, but all too often finding their mangled bodies in the undergrowth.

8. Tiscapa

There is a volcano right in the middle of the city. It is called Tiscapa and is, hopefully, pretty much extinct. The huge crater now has a lake in the bottom, and there is a restaurant on the edge where you can sit and look down into it as you eat (which apparently has good live bands and dancing at weekends). Although the volcano doesn’t have much of a cone, there is a giant sculpture in the form of a two-dimensional silhouette of Agosto Sandino (he who inspired the liberation movement that bears his name) standing on the rim of the crater, which is a useful landmark for the lost traveller (see 1, 2 and 3 above).

9. The pushy prostitutes

One evening, looking for something to eat, I unknowingly walked down a street where prostitutes wait to look for clients. I guess you can find places like this in practically every city in the world, but what took me by surprise was how insistent they were, grabbing me and holding on to me like I was a catch that wasn’t going to be let go without a struggle. I did manage to prise myself free, and made a mental note to avoid that area in future when out on my own after dark. A friend later informed me that many of the prostitutes working in that particular spot are transvestites.

10. The Shannon Bar

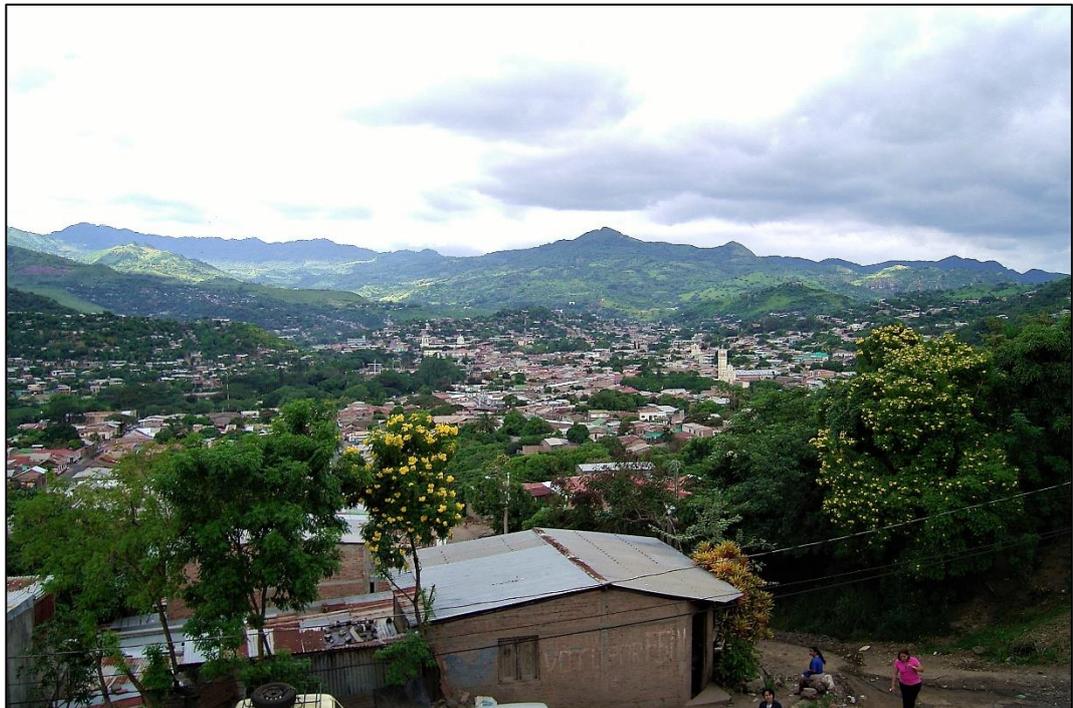
Managua’s one and only Irish bar is the centre of social life for us Irish development workers on our visits to the big city. It’s run by an ex APSO cooperante from Cork called Paul (or Miguel to his Nica friends), and is the starting and/or finishing point

for many a great night out on the town. The Irish bar itself is not weird (although the canned Guinness may have outlived its shelf-life), but the story of how it got its name is interesting. Apparently during the Sandinista years, when Nicaragua was blockaded by the USA and its allies, there was much economic and cultural exchange with the USSR, and many young Sandinistas were flown to Moscow for training or solidarity missions. In those days all the Aeroflot flights from Nicaragua to Moscow used to stop and refuel at Shannon Airport in the south of Ireland, as a result of which “Shannon” is the one Irish name that Nicaraguans (at least those of a Sandinista persuasion) instantly recognise. In fact many of them, never having heard of Dublin, still believe that Shannon is the capital of Ireland.

And that’s all for now. For next time I’m busy researching a “Top Ten fun things to do in Matagalpa on a Saturday night”, but I still have a way to go on the research.

Keep on writing. I love to hear from you. And it’s much easier and cheaper for me to keep in touch now I’m established here at the CESESMA office. It still seems incredible to me that even here in the rainforest friends and family all over the world are only a mouse-click away.

Till next time, all the best from Harry.



The city of Matagalpa, looking down from my (new) house.

August 2001 – Another letter from Matagalpa

Dear friends,

A month since my last letter, and already so much to tell you!

My new house – at last!

My main news is that I've finally moved house. I moved on 1st August and my new house is just wonderful. It's huge, and stands on a hillside, and I have a big balcony with a beautiful view over the town to the mountains beyond. It's a great feeling to wake up every morning and look out of my bedroom window at the early morning sun waking up the sleepy town below. And just as good to sit on the balcony with a cold beer after work watching it go down again.

But, wouldn't you know it, there are still carpenters working away in my kitchen. Apparently the landlady, Doña Delia, checked the roof last week and found half the timbers eaten by termites. So the whole kitchen/dining room ceiling is being replaced as I write. Still, I suppose it's better to get it done now and put up with the mess for a few days, rather than have the roof fall on top of me in a few months' time.

It's also a bit of a steep climb up the three blocks from the town square. The paved road only goes one block then you have to scramble up a dirt track for two more blocks to reach the house. But, of course, the exercise will help me keep fit.

So, everyone is hereby invited to come and visit me at the earliest opportunity. I have plenty of space and two spare bedrooms (no beds yet, but I'm sure I can arrange something given a bit of advance notice). And here's the address: Barrio Apante, de Iglesia San José, 3½ cuerdas al sur, Matagalpa. In English: Apante District, from St Joseph's Church, 3½ blocks south, Matagalpa

But note, this address only works if you're coming on foot. The direct road up from the square doesn't take vehicles. If you intend to come by car, the best bet is from Parque Darío (the southern of the two town squares) take the paved street to the south, and go up the hill about half a mile to the end of the paved section, then double back to your left and follow the dirt road back down about five blocks. Mine is the massive two-storey house, painted green in front, with the big balcony above, on your left if you're walking up the hill, on the right if you're driving down.

If you are reading this in Europe or beyond, I am unlikely to be phoning you, for financial reasons, but there's no reason why you shouldn't phone me if you can afford it. But remember the time difference; we're seven hours behind Britain and Ireland. I don't have an answering machine, so at least if I'm not in it won't cost you.

The coffee crisis

On a serious note, I don't imagine news of Nicaragua's coffee crisis has made the European papers, but here in Matagalpa, the heart of Nicaragua's coffee zone, things are pretty bad. The world price of coffee has slumped, which means that, despite the almost universal exploitation of child labour, the producers can't cover their costs. Many say they can't even afford to harvest the current crop and have no choice but to abandon it. This means they are laying off hundreds of poor landless

labourers who depend entirely on casual work on the coffee plantations for their families' survival. As a result, hundreds of destitute men, women and children are on the roads, heading for the major towns like Matagalpa in search of food. On the way to work each morning I pass dozens of families camped under plastic sheeting by the roadside. And if this year's coffee crop is lost, there'll be no money to plant, tend and harvest next year's either, so the crisis is set to deepen.

This shows the craziness of a system that makes poor communities like this completely dependent on a single cash crop they can't eat. The land is concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy, often absent, landowners, leaving the survival of children and families at the whim of wealthy international coffee brokers.

The local NGOs working in the area met last week to discuss the crisis, and we agreed that it is not our role to provide emergency food supplies. That is the government's responsibility and they must be made to face it. However, we agreed that we should make resources and support available to the local people to help them organise collective action and demand support from central and local government.

All in all, this crisis, together with our work against child labour, has made me view my morning cup of coffee in a very different light. A cup of coffee is something I'll never take for granted again. Ironically though, the coffee we drink here, surrounded by thousands of acres of coffee plantations, is not that good. All the good coffee is exported, and you'll get a better cup of coffee in your local Starbucks than any you'll find in Nicaragua.

Harry's Caribbean Adventure

Changing to a happier subject, the most exciting thing that's happened since I last wrote – even more than my new house – is my trip to the Caribbean coast. Unlike Honduras, where the Caribbean coast is just a bus-ride away, in Nicaragua going to the coast is a major expedition taking at least two days' travel each way, and feels like visiting a different country. So when my friends Círculos and Yolidia told me they were planning to go for a week with a group of friends and asked me if I wanted to join them, it seemed like an offer I couldn't refuse.

Before we set off I asked Círculos if there was anything I should bring with me. Apart from a torch, he said the most important thing was to buy a large plastic sack (a "quintalero") big enough to put my rucksack in, as there was a high risk of our luggage getting wet. It turned out to be excellent advice.

We left Matagalpa at seven o'clock on a Sunday morning three weekends ago. There were seven of us aged from ten to fifty-something in a borrowed pick-up truck. We drove about nine hours, with just one brief stop for breakfast; first south through the mountains on a good highway, then east through cattle country, where we passed herds of cows with real cowboys on horseback, with big hats just like in the movies. Here the gravel road started to deteriorate, and for the last four hours it had so many potholes that we couldn't make more than fifteen miles an hour, and even at that speed we were being shaken to pieces in the back of the truck. We saw hardly any other traffic on this stretch of road.

Eventually around four in the afternoon we reached El Rama, a remote inland river port, which is significant only because this is where the road ends, and any further progress must be by water. The slow boat down the river to Bluefields is a leisurely journey taking five hours or more, but it only goes three or four times a week, and

when we got to the pier it had already left. So instead we hired a panga, which is basically a large speedboat that does the journey in two hours.

At this point Círculos advised us to put our luggage into our plastic sacks. From then on we were a colourful group, because each one of us had a different coloured sack. Mine was orange, the others were blue, green, yellow, red and pink.

The river is called “Rio Escondido” – the hidden river. It winds for mile after mile through thick forest, with an occasional little wooden house on stilts on the riverbank, but mostly no sign of human life. I’m sure the forest was full of interesting wildlife, but the boat made such a noise that it all kept well out of the way. Towards the end of the journey the sky clouded over, the wind got up, the water got choppy and suddenly we were in a tropical rainstorm. The rain stung our faces and soaked our clothes, and the boatman helpfully produced a big black plastic sheet and told us to hold it over our heads to keep the rain off, so I couldn’t see much of the last part of the journey. It was getting dark when we finally reached the sea and arrived at the little port of Bluefields, the capital of the coastal region, where we found a cheap, but rather smelly hotel to spend our first night.

I guess Bluefields might have a certain ramshackle charm, seen through the bottom of a large glass of rum on a sunny afternoon. But under leaden skies and pouring rain in the middle of the hurricane season, it just seemed run-down, dirty and depressing. The central area, which is the only part I got a chance to see, has lost a lot of its African Caribbean feel, and is now very mixed, with many Latino people who have come from the Pacific side. These days you are just as likely to hear Spanish spoken as Creole. It was also disappointing to learn that there are no blue fields in Bluefields, as the town was named after a 17th Century Dutch pirate called Blewfeldt.

So it was with little regret that we found ourselves back at the harbour at seven the next morning, with our luggage once again tightly sealed in our gaudy plastic sacks, looking forward to the next leg of the journey. A panga was due to leave for Laguna de Perlas, our next destination another two hours up the coast.

Laguna de Perlas (Pearl Lagoon) is about 50 km long and 20 km wide, protected from the open sea by Mangrove swamps, and providing good fishing for the small communities that live around its shores. The village of Laguna de Perlas is the main centre for the area, and here the culture is still completely African Caribbean. Although there has been some mixing with the indigenous people over the centuries, the people are recognisably African Caribbean, their ancestors having been brought by the British, who controlled this part of the coast in slavery days. They refer to their language as Creole, and to me it sounded quite similar to Jamaican Patois. Like Patois it uses a lot of English vocabulary, but has a different grammatical structure that reflects the people’s African roots. The young children and the old people speak only Creole, but the older children and younger adults also speak Spanish and English, which they learn in school.

Laguna de Perlas gets occasional tourists, and has a couple of comfortable guesthouses, and a few bars and restaurants. There are no beaches to speak of, but the water in the Lagoon is unpolluted, safe, shallow and warm, and great for bathing. Strangely it is fresh water for part of the year and salt water for part of the year. At this time of year it is fresh water, as it is raining so much in the interior and all the rivers are constantly filling it up, so the local people catch lots of river fish.

In the summer (November to April) when it doesn't rain so much, salt water comes in from the sea, and with it come sea fish.

As well as fish, the local people catch lobsters and shrimps. The best ones are packed in ice and shipped out from a processing plant on one of the nearby islands, but the smaller ones are eaten by the locals. I think it's the only place I've ever been to where fresh lobster is everyday food. Besides fishing, they keep cattle, pigs and chickens, and grow pineapples and other tropical fruit. They also breed horses, which are the only form of land transport. The community has one jeep, which operates a shuttle service up and down the length of the village, but there is no other motor vehicle, and therefore no roads.

We didn't get a chance to hear any local music, but people here listen to a mixture of reggae, soca and country and western, including a country'n'western/reggae hybrid I hadn't come across before – basically sentimental cowboy songs with a reggae beat!

After three nights in Laguna de Perlas, where it rained most of the time, but with bright sun coming out between the rainstorms, Círculos decided it was time to move on again. So we packed our cases into our plastic sacks and headed down to the harbour to wait for the twice-weekly panga to Orinoco, another two hours away across the lagoon.

This was the roughest and wettest journey of all. The trip took us across the widest part of the lagoon where the little boat bounced up and down in the waves, shaking us up even worse than the potholes on the road to El Rama. The wind blew gallons of spray into the boat and we were all soaked through (and once again thankful for our plastic sacks).

But the trip was worth it. Orinoco is one of the few Garífuna communities in Nicaragua. I've written about the Garífuna people in my previous letters home, so I won't go into it again. Almost all the Garífuna live further north in Honduras, but a few small groups moved south and settled here in Pearl Lagoon. Here in Nicaragua, they have mixed with the Creole people over the years, and Garífuna culture, which in Honduras is strong and vibrant, has largely disappeared. I was told there are only 15 elderly people left in the village who are 100% Garífuna and have spoken Garífuna all their lives. However, this is the seventh anniversary of the start of their campaign to rescue the Garífuna culture in Nicaragua. They have set up a cultural centre in an old wooden building in the centre of the village, and have started to make traditional Garífuna drums again.

There are no roads and no vehicles in Orinoco. Electric light comes occasionally, and the rest of the time people use oil lamps or candles (or go to bed early). As everywhere in rural Nicaragua, they cook on wood fires. One thing I would have found hard to get used to is that there is no fridge in the whole community, and therefore no cold beer. Even the Coca-Cola is warm. But, on the other hand, if you are in need of refreshment on a hot day, for the same price as a bottle of warm coke you can get a whole fresh pineapple, the juiciest you've ever tasted.

Rebecca, a friend of Círculos and also the community nurse, has started the village's only guesthouse, and she also serves up wonderful fresh fish dinners in her back kitchen. Círculos and Yolidia turned out to be worse Scrabble addicts than I had realised, and had brought their Scrabble set with them all the way from Matagalpa. Which turned out to be a good plan, as there's not a lot of action in Orinoco after

dark. Maybe you can picture the strange sight of a mixed group of Irish, Unitedstatesians, Nicaraguans and Creoles playing Spanish Scrabble by candlelight on the verandah of a little wooden guesthouse, surrounded by sleeping cattle, in a remote village by a tropical lagoon.

Wandering around the community of Orinoco, what struck me most was the children playing everywhere. It is the exact opposite of the world of restriction and regulation we have created in Britain (and increasingly in Ireland too). There are no motor vehicles, and virtually no strangers, thus removing the two main parental fears that interfere with children's right to play. There are hardly any fences or boundaries, so from their earliest days children play amongst farm animals, which graze freely throughout the village. They also play freely in the waters of the lagoon and the many rivers all around. They play baseball, basketball, hopscotch and marbles (girls too). They ride horses. They sail the lagoon in dugout canoes, and go fishing for crabs and shrimps. They don't drown, they don't get allergies, they don't seem to meet with any of the potential disasters that pose such a threat to European children.

Of course life is not all play. They also help their parents in the house or on the land, and, especially the girls, look after younger brothers and sisters. And, in case you're wondering, they also go to school. Like nearly every community in Nicaragua, Orinoco has a primary school, and most children go to it, as education is considered very important. But if they want to go to secondary school they have to make the trip across the lagoon to Laguna de Perlas or Bluefields a couple of times a week.

I realise that Orinoco isn't paradise, and I know the people face many problems and suffer a great deal of poverty and deprivation. But yet they have created the ideal play environment for their children, which, in terms of meeting children's fundamental development needs, is miles ahead of anything we have achieved in Europe. Which is an interesting point to reflect upon...*

After two nights in Orinoco it was time to set off on the long journey home, which involved repeating in reverse order the various stages of the outward journey, and yet more soakings and bouncing up and down over land and water.

Based on this experience, my advice to travellers would be (a) if you've got at least a week to spare, and don't mind roughing it, you should definitely make a trip to the Caribbean coast, but (b) don't go in hurricane season (July-September), or if you have to (c) take a big plastic sack.

Meanwhile at CESESMA

As for my work, the trip to the coast has left me with a lot to catch up on. The office is particularly busy right now as we have two major new projects getting underway. One is the "Progressive eradication of the worst forms child labour on the coffee plantations" project, which I mentioned before, and the other is the "Escuelita Comunitaria" ("The little community school"). This is a weekend school that meets every Friday and Saturday in the auditorium here in the forest, aimed at young people aged 12-18 from the surrounding rural areas, who have reached fourth grade

* This experience later inspired a conference presentation and then an article "*Pearl Lagoon, a Playworker's Dream*", which you can see here:

https://www.harryshier.net/docs/Shier-Pearl_Lagoon.pdf

but dropped out of school without completing their primary education, and who have been identified as young leaders or “promotores/promotoras” in their communities. Over a year they will cover all the work needed to get their certificate of primary education, and they will also learn practical stuff like organic vegetable growing, nutrition, community health and hygiene, and explore issues such as children’s rights, gender equality, identity and self-esteem, and community leadership.

It’s a very impressive project on paper, but a nightmare to organise, because as well as the curriculum and programme of activities, we also have to organise transport for the young people from their remote rural communities, overnight accommodation, and catering. And as there are no phones in the rural communities, all messages and information have to go via personal visits and community meetings. We’ve just completed the first weekend session, and it seems to have gone really well. I feel this is the first time I have been able to make a real contribution to the work since I got here, as I have been able to feed in useful ideas in the planning process.

And finally...

The CESESMA Spanish Phrase-Book

My top ten most useful phrases for a CESESMA cooperante

- 1 ¿Hay café?: *Is there any coffee?*
- 2 ¡Maldita sea! La computadora se pegó (otra vez): *Dammit, the computer’s crashed (again).*
- 3 Vamos a necesitar un montón de papelógrafos, marcadores y maskinteip: *We’re going to need a load of big flip-chart sheets, felt-tips and masking tape.*
- 4 Ahorita vamos a realizar otra dinámica: *Now we’re going to play another game.*
- 5 ¡Qué camino tan feo!: *What an awful road!*
- 6 ¿Cuándo vamos a tener el refrigerio?: *When are we going to have a refreshment break?*
- 7 Se fue la luz (otra vez): *The lights have gone out (again).*
- 8 La camioneta se rompió (otra vez): *The pick-up broke down (again).*
- 9 ¿Vas a Matagalpa? Puedo pedir un ‘ride’?: *Are you going to Matagalpa? Can I hitch a lift?*
- 10 Ya hay almuerzo: *Lunch is ready.*

And that’s all for now.

As always, I look forward to hearing from you.

With best wishes from Harry



Garifuna children at play in Orinoco, Laguna de Perlas.

October 2001 – Letter from Matagalpa no. 3

Dear friends,

Hello again from Nicaragua.

I haven't been on any exciting expeditions since I last wrote, but rather taking time to get settled here in my new home. So rather than more traveller's tales, this is just to let you know that I am well and happy, making friends and gradually finding a new life for myself in these extraordinary surroundings.

Sorry you missed my birthday party!

My birthday party was great. More than seventy people came altogether, including all the neighbours, men, women and children, and everyone had a good time. On the downside, I spent a lot of the time worrying if everything was OK, and the drink ran out before midnight – mainly because the five lads who turned up to run the disco (four surplus to requirements) drank as much as everyone else put together. And only the rich foreigners can afford to bring drink with them. Everyone else just relies on the host to provide never-ending supplies. Still, it was a great night – sorry you couldn't make it (and a special mention to Dominic, Geraldine, Eanna, Bebhinn, Neville, and Zoila and family who did make it).

And so, to the first of this month's "Top Tens":

My Top Ten Dos and Don'ts for hosting a Nicaraguan fiesta

1. Find the cheapest rum wholesaler in town and get in as much rum as you can afford. Then get about five times as much coke. Everybody drinks rum and coke and it works out much cheaper than beer.
2. Try to talk your local friends into doing the food for you (and a huge thank-you to Diana and Namidia, who let themselves be talked into it, and without whom I couldn't have coped).
3. By all means invite the neighbours, but be aware that each person you invite will bring their whole family of 7 or 8 people with them, and it can quickly bump up the numbers.
4. If you're hiring a mobile disco, make sure you have an understanding with the muchachos who run it that all their low-life alcoholic friends are definitely not invited.
5. At the same time, get them to promise not to play Britney Spears. With a whole continent of sensuous Latin dance music to choose from, you'd wonder why they'd want to, but they do!
6. If you want to serve Guinness, it has to be ordered in advance and collected from the Irish Bar in Managua. It is shockingly expensive, so hide it and/or keep it under lock and key till you have the chance to share it with those who might appreciate it.
7. Ensure there is always a "barman" on duty, i.e. arrange a rota with your trusted friends. On no account let people help themselves to the rum!
8. Just before the party starts, go down to the 24-hour petrol station on the highway, buy all the ice-cubes you can carry, and bring them back in a taxi.

9. If people bring presents, don't open them. People don't have much money to spend, and the contents of the beautifully wrapped parcel may be rather weird. Open them later in private, where you can decide what on earth to do with them.
10. Get in a supply of bacon, eggs, cornflakes etc. for a good Irish breakfast the next morning.
11. (Bonus item) If you have followed all the above instructions correctly – enjoy the fiesta!

Life in Chateau Harry

When I last wrote I had just moved house, but was surrounded by builders' mess. Now the work is all finished and the house is looking wonderful, the reason being that I now have an "empleada" (which means "employee" or housemaid). Her name is Magalys, and she comes from 7.00 till 12.00 Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, keeps the house beautifully clean and washes and irons all my clothes. In fact she is a bit over-enthusiastic and likes to line up all the knives and forks in the cutlery drawer, arrange all the food in the fridge, and iron and fold all my underpants. She's 19 years old, and on Saturdays she studies accountancy at the adult education institute. Her mum, Doña Coco, is the empleada of my landlady, so I feel I can trust her, which is important, as she has keys to the house and lots of temptation while I'm out at work.

I started out paying Magalys 75 Córdoba a week, which was about €4.50, and very generous at local rates. But I still felt bad about paying her so little, so when we had her "end of probation appraisal" after a month (I must have internalised UK voluntary sector employment practices), I upped her pay to 90 Córdoba a week, i.e. €5.50.

It is obvious that my standard of living is far above that of most local people. I have the biggest house in the street, live in it alone, with my servant doing all the work, and look down from my gorgeous balcony on whole families living in tiny houses a fraction of the size – and this is far from a poor neighbourhood. Some of the time I feel uncomfortable about this, and other times I tell myself I should just adapt to the local conditions. It also seems strange that I can't afford a television, which would be a sign of extreme poverty in Ireland, yet I can live in this big house and have a servant.

Meanwhile, out in the forest

Out in the forest the work of CESESMA continues, and I am at last feeling I have a real part to play. Yesterday, Monday, I led my first workshop, all by myself, all in Spanish, on the topic of "teamwork", with all the rest of the CESESMA team participating; 16 people, including Doña Catalina, the cook. Doña Cati was really pleased as she'd never been asked to join in a workshop before, as she is usually too busy making the lunch. They decided to send out for lunch this time so for once she would have the chance to participate.

The workshop wasn't brilliant, but I feel a huge sense of achievement in having done it. And the evaluations weren't bad. People wanted more time for reflection and discussion, but the problem is I have barely enough confidence in Spanish to run games and activities, let alone facilitate a serious discussion. So next time I will

co-tutor with a Spanish-speaker: I can lead the activities and they can facilitate the discussion afterwards.

Top Ten no. 2

This month's second Top Ten is the result of another work project I have done here. As part of our "Escuelita Comunitaria" (Little Community School) project, I carried out a participative research study involving 66 young people aged 12-17 from the rural communities around here. We used the same participatory method I developed at PLAY.TRAIN in England to find out all the things that they felt were lacking in their communities, and then put these in order of priority. I did this partly because I was interested to know the results, partly so my colleagues could see how the method works, but mainly to help the young people themselves think about the possibilities for transformation in their communities, and their own potential role as future community leaders.

But before I announce the results, I want to relate something that happened while we were working on the project in one of the village schools; one of those incidents that reminds you Nicaragua is not Ireland.

The young people were doing a group exercise, sitting around tables in the little village classroom. Suddenly one group let out a huge simultaneous shriek and all leapt back from the table. A little red and black snake had dropped from the roof above and landed right in the middle of the table. Erick, one of my colleagues, picked up a large spade (we were planning to do practical work in the organic vegetable plot that afternoon and had come prepared), and battered the poor snake over the head till it was thoroughly dead. He then disposed of the corpse, calm returned to the group, and work continued as normal.

I asked Erick what harm a little snake like that would do if it bit you (I'm sure it was no more than 18 inches long). "If it bit you", he said, "you would die!" And so here are the results of our survey:

The ten most important changes that young people want to see in their communities

In order of priority:

1. Safe drinking water.
2. A secondary school.
3. A decent health centre.
4. More jobs and employment.
5. A good road.
6. Electric light.
7. Development projects in the community.
8. More latrines (outside organic toilets).
9. Support from the District Council.
10. Cleaning up the community.

Abandoned by APSO

And one final piece of news: A few weeks ago I had a letter to say the APSO overseas placement programme which I am part of is being closed down. The APSO board in Dublin has decided this approach to development work is no longer valid, and are going to develop new forms of international cooperation instead. This means the programme will have finished and all the support systems closed down before I get to the end of my contract, and I will not have a chance to extend it after my May 2003 finishing date. Also I will be the last APSO Development Worker to come to Nicaragua. After me there won't be any more – at least, not on this programme.

But who knows what the future holds? Till next time, remember I want to hear all your news too, so keep on writing to me, wherever you are.

With best wishes from Harry



CESESMA's office in La Praga near San Ramón. My workspace is just inside the top right window, but note the windows have no glass so wildlife comes in and out freely. (In 2003, CESESMA moved to new offices in the town of San Ramón).

November 2001 – Letter from Matagalpa no. 4

Dear Friends,

Another six weeks gone by already. And nearly nine months since I left England. Where has all the time gone?

So, what's new? Well, I haven't even been out of Matagalpa these past six weeks, apart from occasional trips into the surrounding countryside in the course of my work. I'm becoming really settled and far too comfortable in the luxurious Chateau Harry. But I'm sure I can think of some news to tell you.

The Elections

Since I last wrote the elections have come and gone. They must have had at least a mention in the Irish papers? A Nicaraguan election campaign is an extraordinary experience, with the whole country increasingly cranked up, hyped up and wound up for months beforehand; totally different from the staid British or Irish style of electioneering. There are no legal limits to election advertising, so the entire country was plastered over with posters and banners, every available wall, rock and tree was painted with garish colours and unbelievable promises. Every radio station was awash with irritating, but horribly catchy election jingles. The newspapers carried one full-page spread after another where the candidates blatantly assassinated each other's characters while making ridiculous promises that they would never be able to fulfill in a million years.

As the election day (4 November) drew nearer, there were huge rallies in the parks and town squares, and endless cavalcades of vehicles with flags waving and horns blaring winding their way through the streets almost every day.

The presidential campaign was very much a two-horse race, between Enrique Bolaños for the Liberals and Daniel Ortega for the Sandinistas. The liberals, who have governed the country for the past ten years, are right wing free-marketeters, who have brought nothing but poverty, corruption and destitution to this country since they've been in power. The present government, under Arnoldo Alemán, is reckoned to be one of the most corrupt, if not the most corrupt in Latin America. You'd wonder why anyone would go out and vote for more of the same, but of course, the liberals have the backing of the wealthy and privileged classes, as well as the CIA, and so are well placed to manipulate the media, playing on people's memories of the war and fear of change.

And the Frente (i.e. the Sandinistas), on the other hand, are a complete mess. They've done a Tony Blair; that is, they have abandoned their old revolutionary ideals, and turned the much-loved Frente Sandinista into a strange new creature called the "Convergencia Nacional", or National Convergence – meaning a broad alliance that anyone can join because it doesn't really stand for anything except getting Ortega back into power. To emphasise this change, they have replaced the red and black of the Sandinista flag with new campaign colours of pink and yellow!

But perhaps their worst mistake was asking the people to vote for a presidential candidate who is widely believed to be a child sex abuser. Ortega's stepdaughter, Zoilamérica Narvaez, has disclosed a history of sexual abuse by her stepfather from the age of, I think, 12. Ortega, as a former president, has claimed immunity from

prosecution, and so has never been made to answer the charges against him. “Innocent until proven guilty” is a good legal principle, but in a system where the powerful can avoid the law altogether like this, it is not going to lead to justice – certainly not justice for Zoilamérica.

And despite all this, the Frente only lost by a margin of a few percent, which maybe says something about attitudes to gender and sex abuse in this machismo-ridden country. I’m glad I didn’t have to vote for either side. But the people have voted, and this result means we’re in for five more years of the same right-wing policies: privatization, public expenditure cuts, corruption, exploitation of children, the rich getting richer, the poor getting poorer, debt and dependency.

The only positive aspect of the whole thing was that, despite universal predictions of riots and street violence, election day itself was a model of peaceful, purposeful participation. No campaigning of any kind is allowed for three days before the vote, and all sale of alcohol is also forbidden for 24 hours before and after polling. On the day there were long lines of people queuing patiently and peacefully at the polling stations to exercise what limited democratic rights they have. The Frente admitted defeat maturely, and gradually things are getting back to whatever passes for normal here.

And, unlike the USA, the person who gets most votes gets to be president, so maybe we can teach the gringos a thing or two about democracy as well!

My new job

I’m still here at CESESMA, out in the forest with the snakes and mosquitoes, but, since I last wrote, my job has changed. I had my six-monthly monitoring meeting recently, and we all agreed that what CESESMA needs right now is not a training consultant, as they are already a team of highly-skilled and effective community educators, but some serious work on impact evaluation and strategic planning. Like many community organisations in Europe, we don’t know what direction we want to go in when our present short-term project funding runs out. Sound familiar to anyone?

So, as of a fortnight ago, I am no longer the “Trainer of Trainers”, but the “Evaluation and Strategic Planning Consultant”. This is a bit more of a challenge for me, because, whilst I do have experience in this field, I don’t feel quite such an expert as I do on the training side. However, the important thing is that I can now do the work that I know the organisation really needs, and also I can work with the team here on developing new creative ways to involve rural children and young people in both the evaluation and the strategic planning processes.

We are still at an early stage, and most of this week I have been planning focus groups, and drafting “methodological evaluation instruments” in Spanish, which is a good way to make your brain ache.

And I won’t be giving up training altogether. I will continue to run occasional workshops and help my colleagues with resource development etc as a secondary role. Last week, for example, we ran a terrific games workshop where I was able to share lots of my favourite games from the UK, my colleagues taught me some of their favourites, and then together we invented some great new ones.

While on the subject of my work, I wrote a short article recently for “Rapport”, the journal of the Community and Youth Workers’ Union in the UK, about the work

we are doing here with young people. I'll add the text at the end of this letter, as it will give you a good idea of how we work, and save me writing it all out again.*

New tenant at Chateau Harry

Yes, it's true. I'm no longer all alone in my big house. I now have a companion to share it with. This happened quite by accident, as I never planned to seek a house-mate. She just turned up one night, in the middle of the night, and asked if she could stay! I'd better explain.

Her name is Felicity, she's a student at Sussex University in Brighton, England, and is here in Matagalpa to work for a year at the Grupo Venancia women's centre as part of VSO's student volunteer scheme. I met her at the women's centre a couple of days after she arrived and we got on well from the start.

In her first few weeks she had trouble finding a place to live, and also got quite ill, and not surprisingly felt stressed, lonely and homesick. And that's how come, one night, she decided she just couldn't stay any longer in the empty house she was temporarily minding, so she got in a taxi and came round to my house and asked if she could sleep in my spare room for a couple of days.

So she stayed and gradually got better and carried on looking for a place to live. However eventually, after several weeks of this, I said to her that I couldn't see the point, because she would never find anywhere half as nice as my house that she could afford, and I had lots of spare room, and we already knew that we got on well as friends, so why didn't she just stay – take over my spare room and contribute to the rent and expenses. And so it was agreed.

But, don't worry, there's still lots of room for guests. I've upgraded the previously unused third bedroom into a new guest suite, complete with en-suite bathroom. So everyone is still more than welcome to come and stay at Chateau Harry. It's worth the trip just to watch the glorious sunsets from the balcony.

And just to be sure that I haven't given anyone a false impression, I must point out that, whilst Felicity and I are good friends, this is a house-sharing arrangement, not a romance.

Halloween at Chateau Harry

I had a fancy-dress party on Halloween night. Just a small do for a few local friends, not a big affair like my birthday, but still good fun. I don't think I've mentioned it before, but since arriving in Matagalpa I've acquired a kind of fan-club of young female Mormons (yes, I know it sounds bizarre, but Matagalpa is like that), and the Halloween party was their idea. People here think of Halloween as some kind of new-fangled US import, but I explained to anyone who would listen that Halloween is an old Irish festival, which I always celebrated as a child, that has only recently been taken over by the gringos and repackaged for worldwide export.

Using a vast amount of black plastic sheeting, we turned my house for the evening into "El Castillo de las Almas Perdidas" (The Castle of Lost Souls). We made a special cocktail with the juice of pitahayas, the fruit of a giant cactus that grows on the water tank in my back yard, and produces a rich purple-red juice like blood. There was an alcohol-free version for the Mormons labelled "Sangre de Sapo"

* This article can be seen in Appendix I.

(Toad's blood) and another version with a bottle of rum added, labelled "Sangre de Murciélago – extra fuerte" (Bat's blood – extra strong), for the rest of us.

"Harry's School of English"

Last Saturday was the inaugural session of "Harry's School of English". My colleagues have been asking me to teach them English since I got here, so eventually I agreed to hold an English class in my huge empty living room every Saturday afternoon. I have no experience of teaching English, but it seems quite easy. Like any other training I do, I am trying to make it active, participative and fun, with lots of games and songs. I had nine students the first week, and there will probably be more next time.

The challenge of non-sexist Spanish

(Please feel free to skip this section if you have no interest whatsoever in gender and linguistics).

I've mentioned my ongoing struggle with the Spanish language in several previous letters. I'm certainly improving as the months go by, but as I have to write more technical materials there are always new challenges ahead, such as the challenge of trying to write non-sexist Spanish.

The problem is that everything in Spanish has to be either masculine or feminine and many words have two separate forms. Articles and adjectives also all have to be the correct gender. In traditional Spanish, you always use the male version when you want to refer to people in general, so for example "los hijos" means "the sons", but in traditional Spanish it also means "the sons and daughters", whereas "las hijas" only means "the daughters".

Now that we are trying to draw attention to gender inequality and promote equal treatment for girls and women, this is obviously problematic, so we try to write a new form of Spanish that includes male and female equally. And this leads to all kinds of complications.

For example, if you want to say, "All the British children are clever", in non-sexist Spanish, you'd have to say something like: "Todos y todas los niños y las niñas británicos/británicas son listos/listas" – Literally: "All(m) and all(f) the(m) boys and the(f) girls British(m)/British(f) are clever(m)/clever(f)".

In writing you can abbreviate this as: "Todos/as los/las niños/as británicos/as son listos/as", but you can't easily say this out loud. And one gender, in this case the masculine, still has to come first, thus apparently giving it precedence over the other.

A clever solution, often found in more politically progressive publications, is to use the @ symbol, because it can be seen either as an O with an A in the middle or as an A surrounded by an O, whichever you prefer. So the sentence above becomes:

"Tod@s l@s niñ@s británic@s son list@s" – Which looks fine in writing, but is impossible to say.

Anyway, I think that's enough linguistics for today, but I hope it gives you an idea of some of the problems I have to cope with at work.

APSO – An apology

My colleague Chuck at APSO HQ in Dublin has pointed out, quite rightly, that the headline “Abandoned by APSO” in my last letter was something of an exaggeration. It is true that the two-year Development Worker programme I am on is closing, as is APSO’s office in Nicaragua. The regional office in Honduras is being scaled down, and from January 2003 onwards I will be the only Irish APSO Development Worker left in Nicaragua. However, APSO has made a firm commitment to continue to support me and pay my living allowance up to the end of my present contract in April 2003.

It also needs to be said that the Board’s decision to end the current programme is probably a wise one, as I am convinced there are better ways to make use of Irish taxpayers’ money in supporting global development. We are still awaiting news of what new programmes are going to replace it, but I am sure there will be positive changes and relevant new approaches for the new century.

And Finally, This Month’s Top Ten

I promised this one some time ago, but haven’t been able to finish the research before now. So, finally, here are my

Top Ten Fun Things To Do in Matagalpa on a Saturday Night

1. Centro Cultural De Guanuca

Grupo Venancia, the women’s centre where Felicity works, is also Matagalpa’s centre for alternative culture. There’s a cultural event every Saturday night, with a mixture of different styles of music, theatre and dance, for both adults and children. As well as local artistes, singers and performance groups come from all over Nicaragua. There’s always something interesting going on, and it’s always free. The events are usually held outside in a beautiful patio/courtyard, and there’s a good cheap café-bar for beer and local food. It tends to attract the leftist-feminist-intellectual element of Matagalpino society, rather than the masses of the working class, and it also tends to be where we trendy international development workers meet and socialise. The Spanish contingent are in the majority, but I’ve also met Dutch, French, Belgians, Unitedstatesians, and two other English people besides Felicity. I haven’t yet met an Irish person in Matagalpa.

2. El Rancho Escondido

I know of four places to go dancing in Matagalpa on a Saturday Night, and Rancho Escondido (the Hidden Ranch) is my favourite. They have live bands sometimes, but usually just the disco. They play the whole gamut of Latin dance music, and also some reggae, hip-hop and unitedstatesian classic disco. The décor is kind of rustic Nicaraguan, semi-open air with palm-leaf canopies and so on. The atmosphere is relaxed and fun; you can dance without any pressure to show off your fancy salsa moves, but if you want to show off on the dance floor, nobody is stopping you (and if you’ve met my friend Rhina, you’ll know exactly what I mean). And it’s only ten minutes’ walk from my house, which is an added bonus.

3. La Posada

My second favourite dancing place, La Posada, is even nearer to my house. It is also a good local restaurant and has more of a family atmosphere, with people of

all ages and conditions, probably because, unlike Rancho Escondido, it's free to get in.

Matagalpa's top disco, Luz de Luna (Moonlight), is about three miles out of town on the highway and so attracts the well-off people who have private transport. I've never been there, but I'm told it's good, if you like your disco a bit more up-market.

To complete the foursome there's Equinoccio (Equinox), which I went to once by mistake. It's where the teenagers go, and is like a bad high-school disco; probably best avoided by anyone over twenty.

Matagalpa also has several "night-clubs", but a night-club here is something completely different from a discoteca. A discoteca is where you go to dance. A night-club is a men-only strip-club/brothel. I have never been to any of them, so you won't find any of Matagalpa's night-clubs amongst this month's top ten recommendations!

4. Noches Matagalpinas (Matagalpan Nights)

You can also dance in the street. The last weekend of every month they have a big street party on Saturday and Sunday night in Parque Darío, just three blocks from my house. They put up a stage in the middle of the street, and have live local bands and entertainment, mixed with music to dance to. The local restaurants and bars set up in the street, and thousands of people of all ages come down to enjoy the party atmosphere. Unfortunately sometimes the local pandillas (street-gangs) come down too, and I once narrowly avoided getting caught up in a major gang-fight, but this is rare, and normally you can just relax and have a good time.

5. Cine Margot

You could always go to the pictures. Cine Margot is modern and fairly comfortable, with two screens, and costs about €1.30 to get in. They show mostly popular Hollywood movies in the original English with Spanish subtitles, with occasional Mexican and other Spanish-language films too. Bridget Jones' Diary is showing this week.

The old cinema in the high street, Cine Perla, has been converted into a porn cinema. I haven't been to it, so I can't offer any recommendation.

6. Vy-Pay Bar

If you just want a quiet drink, or need a good place to meet friends, my favourite local bar is Vy-Pay. It is also in Parque Darío, five minutes' walk straight down the hill from my house. The nearest bar to my house, "Tuani Men" (which I've been told translates as something like "Cool Dudes") is only two minutes down the hill, but it's a bit rough, so I prefer to walk the two extra blocks to Vy-Pay.

7. Pirañas Bar

Pool is a major recreation for the male half of the Matagalpa population. There are dozens of pool halls, large and small, all over town. However, pool halls in Nicaragua are strictly a male preserve, and no woman who values her reputation would be seen dead in one. Pirañas Bar is the only place in Matagalpa where women can play pool, and even here it's only the more self-confident (or foreign) women who play.

8. La Vita e Bella

“La Vita e Bella” is Matagalpa’s Italian Restaurant. Hidden away in a little alley with no sign, it nevertheless does great business, spreading its reputation by word of mouth. Like the Centro Cultural de Guanuca (see above) it tends to be where we international development workers go to eat out. There are good home-made pastas and pizzas, lots of vegetarian dishes, good wine and good Italian puddings – all virtually unheard-of elsewhere in Matagalpa. I went last week with a visiting Irish friend, and I strongly recommend you sample their “Chocolate Salami”, next time you’re in Matagalpa.

9. Fiestas

Nicas love house parties, and you don’t have to live here long before you’ll find yourself getting invites on a regular basis (specially if you live with Felicity). It’s cheap entertainment because you just have to buy rum and coke and provide some music and some ice (and there’s a detailed guide to how to throw your own Nicaraguan fiesta in my previous letter).

10. Chateau Harry

And finally, if you don’t feel like going out, why not just come round to our place for a game of Scrabble? On our panoramic balcony we serve the best Margaritas in Nicaragua, great vegetarian food made with fresh local produce, delicious ice-creams and export-quality coffee. Sunset is at 5.15 every afternoon.

I hope the above has whetted your appetite to experience Matagalpa at first hand. But if you can’t come and visit, I hope at least you’ll write back with your news. It’s always great to hear from you.

So, till next time, Best wishes from Harry



Sandinista election rally in Matagalpa.

January 2002 – Letter from Matagalpa no. 5

Dear Friends,

¡Feliz año nuevo! Happy New Year!

So I'm starting a new year as a resident of Matagalpa, Nicaragua! A year ago I was on my APSO training course in Dublin, and Matagalpa was just a dot on a map. In the past twelve months not just my country of residence, but almost everything about my life has changed; my house, my job, the language I speak, the food I eat, the colleagues I work with and the friends I socialise with, the beer I drink, the music I dance to. I'm used to warm weather and cold showers, looking out for monkeys in the trees and snakes in the grass, houses with no numbers and streets with no names, getting up at 6.30 am to watch the rising sun light up the mountains along the valley of the Rio Grande.

Christmas in Nicaragua Part One: Our Christmas Party

"Does the man do nothing but have parties?", I hear you ask, as you read yet another letter from Matagalpa telling you what a great party you missed. And for those who know me from my previous life in Birmingham, it must seem very strange, as I don't think I had a single party in the previous twelve years, yet I've had three since I moved into Chateau Harry in August.

But I do have the biggest house of anyone I know in Matagalpa, so I feel it is almost an obligation to share my good fortune with my friends and colleagues. Also, since we use the balcony as our main living space, the huge empty living room downstairs would serve no purpose at all if we didn't have parties.

The Christmas party was Felicity's idea to begin with. We wanted to have an Irish/English Christmas theme, and do something special as our joint Christmas present to all the wonderful friends and colleagues who had befriended and supported us in our time in Nicaragua.

You can't get holly, mistletoe, mince-pies, snow etc. here, so instead I decorated the house with festoons of two-dimensional holly which I made using potato prints, like in primary school. I made mistletoe out of green cardboard and white plastic beads. Felicity made traditional mince pies (just like our mums used to do) and during the party I went round with a hypodermic syringe injecting each one with Nicaraguan Rum (just like my dad used to do, except he used Bushmills, not rum). We made traditional stuffing and blackberry jelly sandwiches (no cranberries here) and mulled wine, all of which must have seemed bizarre to our Nicaraguan friends.

We also had communal singing of carols and Christmas songs in English, using an overhead projector to project the words up on the wall so all the non English-speakers could sing along. "The Twelve Days of Christmas" went down particularly well. And finally, as neither of us is religious, we invented our own Christmas ritual where everyone wrote their Christmas wish for the world's children on little slips of paper which we put in a pitcher, then people read them out loud, and we put each wish around a candle and lit the candle, ending up with rows and rows of beautiful white candles (a bit like a Catholic Church!), each one representing a Christmas wish for the children of the world in 2002. It was very moving. And would certainly

have been banned by the fire officer in the UK! In fact with the heat of so many candles we did almost set the house on fire.

The general verdict was that the party was a great success, and worth all the effort. So, once again, I'm sorry you weren't able to make it.

One consequence of all this unaccustomed party-giving is that my APSO colleagues have put me in charge of organising this year's St. Patrick's Day party. It will be a special occasion since, as you'll have read in my last letter, the current APSO programme is closing down at the end of this year, so this will be the last ever St Patrick's Day for the Irish cooperantes in Nicaragua ("cooperante", which means co-operator, is the word used here to refer to us foreigners working within local organisations). By St Patrick's Day 2003 I will be the only one left. So for this year I'm thinking tentatively in terms of a big Irish hooley on a beautiful tropical beach. You will assuredly be hearing more of this soon.

Christmas in Nicaragua Part Two: Christmas in Paradise

Although Semana Santa (Easter week) has traditionally been the biggest religious festival here, the northern commercialised Christmas seems to have caught on in a big way. Starting in late November, the shops are full of fake Christmas trees, fairy lights and plastic Santa Clauses. Just like Ireland or Britain, people spend every penny they can muster on (a) exchanging Christmas presents and (b) getting drunk. Offices, CESESMA included, close down for three weeks or more, and those that can afford to, go away on holiday.

The big difference, of course, is that it is warm and sunny, and the beach is beckoning. So, for want of a better plan, Felicity and I set off for the beach.

We made for San Juan del Sur, a ramshackle fishing-village-cum-beach-resort on the Pacific coast near the Costa Rican border, set on a beautiful sandy bay surrounded by green hills. On Christmas Eve in Ricardo's Bar we met up with a trio of Californian surf dudes, who invited us to come with them up the coast the next day to a more remote and beautiful surf beach for a day of sun and surf.

So we spent Christmas day in paradise, swimming in the crystal-clear warm blue water, lying in the sun on perfect golden sand, surfing fine Pacific waves, and ending up with a beach-side barbecue. There's an "Eco-lodge" by the beach – basically an environmentally-friendly small hotel – and we decided to leave San Juan and stay there instead. So the day after Boxing day we packed our bags and hired a surfboard. Then Byron from the local surf shop gave us a ride up the coast in his little boat, and dropped us on the beach, with our rucksacks and surf-board, right in front of the eco-lodge.

We had three lovely relaxing days on the beach, then decided to move on to Ometepe to meet up with some friends from Matagalpa for New Year. Ometepe is a beautiful green island consisting of two giant volcanoes rising side by side from the deep, dark waters of Lake Nicaragua (and, for trivia fans, the largest island in the world surrounded by fresh water). We were a group of nine altogether, the others all Nicaraguan. We celebrated the New Year together on the beach, and swam in the lake at midnight. On New Year's Day we went walking around the island.

The next day all the others set off back to Matagalpa, but I had two more days of holiday, so I headed back to the seaside on my own. When I got there I found the Eco Lodge closed for the week, but luckily I found another tiny bed and breakfast

a bit further along the beach, where I could stay in extremely basic accommodation for \$1 per night. I met a friendly Spanish family who shared their food with me, as there was nothing else to eat (except what you could catch). Then on Friday I set off back to Matagalpa. I had to walk the first four kilometres to get to a bus route, as there was no other way out.

The whole holiday was wonderful, right up to the last minute, when my rucksack was stolen out of the back of the bus on the way back to Matagalpa (I know I should have been watching it, but I'd hurt my back a few days before and, after carrying the damned thing four kilometres, was feeling too stiff and sore to move). I've lost loads of stuff, including half my clothes, my camera, my filofax and my identity papers.

But I'm coming to terms with the loss. After all, it's just stuff. As Socrates said when he went to the market, "What a lot of things there are that I don't need". And luckily my passport and credit card are safe.

But I have lost all my personal contact details. I'll have to start a new address book from scratch, so next time you write to me, please can you include your address, phone number and email.

"A day in the life"

Whenever I write home I tend to write about what has happened recently that has been interesting or unusual. I think this is understandable, as the last thing I want to do is bore you. But I must be giving a false impression of my life here – all travel, parties and nights out on the town. So as a counterbalance, I want to give you an idea of a normal working day, to give a more accurate picture of what my life here is really like ...

The alarm goes off at 6.15 am and I usually manage to crawl out from under the mosquito net by 6.30, just as the rising sun is touching the tops of the mountains opposite. Whichever of us is up first puts the coffee on. I shave and have a cold shower, then a hot coffee, dress and get my things together and try to be more or less ready when the CESESMA pick-up pulls up outside and hoots its horn at around 7.15.

Out of our work team of fourteen, there are six of us who live in the town, so the two drivers, Alex and Moises, take turns to go round and pick us all up each morning. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, Magalys usually arrives just as I'm leaving, but she is so super-efficient I never need to give her instructions. I know when I get home everything will be sparkling clean, and all my clothes neatly ironed and folded.

Felicity gets up about the same time as me, but she doesn't have to go to work early, so she has time to practise yoga, or linger on the balcony over a cup of coffee and a cigarette before she has to face the rigours of the day.

I travel to work perched precariously on the back of the pick-up. I'm one of the first to be collected, so we tour round the different barrios until we have everyone, then head off into the hills towards the office. If there's a workshop or meeting on, we go via the market to buy food, and we may pick up more and more people as we go, ending up with a dozen or more in the back of the pick-up.

We get to the office around 8.00, and the first thing I do is switch on the computer and check for emails. It's always a good start to the day if (a) I'm able to get a connection, and (b) someone has sent me an email.

Once at the office, there's no set routine and every day is different. Sometimes there are meetings to attend, courses or workshops to help with, sometimes we'll be setting off into the more remote countryside for a workshop or meeting in a village community or on one of the coffee plantations, other times I'll be fighting my colleagues for access to a computer so I can get on with my work in the office.

One great thing about working at CESESMA, though, is lunch. Doña Catalina cooks a typical Nicaraguan lunch every day; sometimes, if there's a workshop on, for forty or more, other times just for the few of us who are working in the office. There are always tortillas (maize-flour pancakes), rice and beans, and generally some meat or chicken and local vegetables. Some of these, such as plantains and avocados, are familiar in the UK, but there are others such as chayotes and pipianes which I had never come across before, but are now part of my regular diet. Doña Cati is an excellent cook. She loves cooking and always rises to the challenge of making a good meal out of whatever ingredients are to hand.

Getting back to town at the end of the day can be a bit more of a hassle. The driver on duty leaves when the last person is ready to go, but some of my colleagues are workaholics and will happily work on after nightfall till 7.00 pm or later. Having started at 8.00 in the morning, and thinking in Spanish the whole time, I'm usually too tired to do anything useful by about 5.00 pm, so if I want to get home I have to go and wait for a bus to pass on the road outside. When other vehicles go past I stick my thumb out and occasionally get a ride back to town in the back of a pick-up or a banana lorry. From the bus station it's a half-hour walk (but only a 40 cent taxi-ride) back home, so I'm usually home between 6.00 and 7.00 pm.

Felicity gets home about the same time, so we'll sit on the balcony with either a cold beer or a cup of tea as the mood takes us, talking about how our days have been, before we start to think about what to do for dinner.

So there you have it, a typical "day in the life" of an Irish cooperante at CESESMA in Matagalpa.

Work Update

This week has been mostly catching up, writing reports, and planning the work for the next few months. But the three weeks before the Christmas break were the busiest since I started.

The impact evaluation project I am coordinating involves 22 focus groups, 65 individual interviews plus scores of questionnaires. My colleagues programmed 17 of the 22 focus-group meetings in the two weeks leading up to Christmas, and by the end of it I was definitely feeling the strain. We work in dozens of scattered village communities, in four different rural areas throughout the province of Matagalpa, almost all up in the mountains and reached by steep, winding dirt roads (if you're lucky). The impact evaluation project involves consultations with all sectors of these communities, so we've run separate focus groups with children, adolescents, parents and community leaders in each area (and also groups for girls only, so they can express their views outside the traditional male-dominated discourse of these communities). Most of the meetings were held in village schools, as these are usually a good central point for each community.

This meant that each morning we had to leave home at around 6.30 am, and spend an hour or more in the back of the pick-up, bumping along the twisting dirt roads, up and down mountains, through rivers and forests, gathering up children from the various little communities we passed on the way, just to reach the venue for the day's work. Then while we set up the venue, the pick-up had to spend another hour or so collecting more children from even more remote locations in the mountains before we could finally start the workshop. Then when we finished we had to do the whole process in reverse in order to get home.

The focus of each workshop is on processes of change. We start by talking about butterflies and caterpillars, and comparing the biologically-predetermined process of change that they go through with the kinds of self-motivated conscious growth and change that we experience as human beings. We encourage people to talk about how they personally have changed, how their families and their communities have changed in recent years. Then, once we can see what changes have taken place, we start to talk about what has caused the changes. Finally we focus on the role that our own organisation CESESMA has played in helping to achieve and sustain these changes. (The butterfly-caterpillar thing was my own idea, by the way, and I'm quite proud of it, as it shows I am already tuning in to the Nicaraguan style of learning, drawing on the natural world that the country people already know to find metaphors for new concepts).

We have four more meetings to complete in the next two weeks, then we start the individual interviews, through which we are attempting to deepen our understanding of these processes of change within individuals and communities. When all this is done, the team will form working groups to compile and analyse all the data, and finally we have to bring it all together in a final report.

Participating in these workshops has been both inspiring and depressing. It has been inspiring to hear the young people talk about what they have learnt through their involvement with CESESMA, how they have grown in confidence and awareness, and the initiatives they now feel able to take to help develop their communities. It was depressing to hear some of the older community leaders tell us, sadly, that despite all the work CESESMA has been doing with the young people, things are getting worse, not better. Poverty, unemployment, drought, poor harvests and food shortages are all increasing year by year, and as a result so are depression, drunkenness, violence and family breakdown.

So, when people use the term "developing country" to refer to places like Nicaragua, it's hard to know whether to laugh or cry. It may be developing quite nicely for the foreign speculators, sex-tourists and sweatshop-owners in Managua, but for the country folk of Matagalpa, the idea of "development" has a hollow ring.

We can only hope that, by enabling the young people to develop their confidence and leadership skills, we can help forge a new generation of community leaders that is better prepared to tackle these problems than the present one.

And so to this month's Top Ten ...

To end this first letter of 2002, I want to go back to the theme I started with – how much my life has changed in the past twelve months. So here, not in any particular order, are my:

Top Ten Things I've Learnt to Live Without

1. Television

This has been one of the best things that's happened to me. Without a television I have more time for real living, and real people. And there's plenty of both in Matagalpa. I haven't missed the television for one minute.

2. Draught Guinness

There are three kinds of locally-brewed beer in Nicaragua. Victoria, Toña and Premium, all made by the same national beer company and all very similar lager-style brews. Every Saturday morning I fill a big bag with empty bottles and, on the way to the market, call in at Don José's off-license to pick up the week's supply of full ones. A bottle of Victoria costs 50 cents, provided you have an empty bottle to exchange for it. If you put it in the freezer for a couple of hours before you open it, so it's just above freezing point, it tastes fine.

Cans of Draught Guinness are available via the Shannon Bar in Managua, but they cost nearly four dollars each, so are best kept for St Patrick's Day and other special occasions. Real Draught Guinness doesn't exist in Nicaragua

3. Hot water

I suppose if I've got to go to work at 7.15 in the morning, a cold shower is as good a way as any to wake myself up. In Managua and other lowland parts the water is never actually cold anyway, but up here in the mountains it can be quite a shock to the system first thing in the morning.

4. Irish sausages

The only sausages here are frankfurter/hot-dog type sausages; and bacon, whilst it does exist, resembles the unpleasant fatty bits you would cut off a decent Irish rasher. Foodwise, a big plate of sausages and mash is what I'm most looking forward to when I visit Europe later in the year.

5. A car

Sometimes I think it would be nice to have my own vehicle and go exploring at weekends. A car, however, would be no use at all – I'm thinking in terms of a rugged four-wheel-drive jeep thing. Cars, in Nicaragua, are only for city-folk (or taxi-drivers).

On the other hand, the thought of driving in Nicaragua terrifies me. The roads are dreadful and generally full of animals and children playing. Drunk-driving is endemic, and, whilst seatbelts are fitted to vehicles, I've no idea why, as no-one ever uses them. Also armed police stop and fine motorists – especially foreign ones – more or less at random as a way to supplement their inadequate salaries. So, for the time being, I am content to use the cheap and efficient bus network (but will be keeping a closer eye on my valuables in future).

6. Proper roads

In Nicaragua only the main towns and cities are connected by surfaced roads (the main exception being the country properties of government ministers and their families, which, however remote they are, always seem to have excellent roads leading right to the gate). And in towns such as Matagalpa only a few central streets

are paved, the rest are dirt or gravel. Some of the paved roads might as well not be, they are so uneven and full of potholes. Some enterprising children have spotted this as a business opportunity, and become freelance road-menders. They fill the potholes with earth then stop passing cars to ask for payment for their efforts. Sometimes they stretch a rope across the road so you have no choice but to stop. The first time I saw this, when I was very new and innocent of the ways of Central America, I asked my companions, “Why do the children have to mend the roads? Why doesn’t the government do it?”. They just laughed at me, and said what a lot I had to learn.

7. A mobile phone

The very last thing I did before I left England last February, as I walked to the boarding-gate at Gatwick airport, was disable my mobile phone and drop it in a waste-paper bin (having just phoned Cellnet to tell them I couldn’t pay the bill). I guess it was a symbolic gesture.

Managua is a bit like England six or seven years ago: a mobile phone is a status symbol which costs a fortune to use, and you see trendy rich young people ostentatiously using them to look cool. Here in the north there is very limited network coverage, so the only reason to have a mobile phone is to show off. It is still unusual even to have a private land-line phone in your home, and I am lucky that my house came with one already installed. In the countryside there are no phones at all, and in our work, as I’ve said before, almost all communication is by word of mouth. Country people also use the local radio as a way of sending messages to one another. There’s a two-hour programme every evening where, in between records, they read out messages from people trying to contact friends or family – births, deaths, family gatherings, illnesses, financial problems, unexpected mishaps. For example, “Enrique Gonzalez Lopez of La Corona, your father has been arrested for being drunk and disorderly. Can you go to the Police Station in San Ramón and bail him out – and bring some food and clean trousers”.

8. A washing machine

Life without a washing machine is no hardship at all, as I have Magalys to wash and iron my clothes, and as a result they are cleaner and smarter than they ever were in England.

9. A sewage system that can accommodate toilet paper

In Nicaragua you dare not put toilet paper into the toilet. If you do the system will block up, your house will fill with sewage, and you’ll wish you’d listened to the friends who told you, “Do not put toilet paper down the toilet”. I’ve not had this happen to me personally, but friends have described it to me, and it’s not pretty.

At first, the idea of putting your used toilet paper in a little bin by the toilet seems very peculiar, but it’s just cultural conditioning – most of the world doesn’t use toilet paper at all – and you eventually get used to it. We have a discreet pedal-bin in our bathroom, and it goes out with the rest of the rubbish three times a week.

You’re probably now saying to yourself, “I really didn’t need to know that”, but what the hell, I’m trying to give an accurate and rounded picture of everyday life in Nicaragua ...

10. Speaking English

I rarely speak English these days. None of my work colleagues speaks English, and most of my friends here are Nicaraguan, or at least Spanish-speaking. My APSO colleagues are scattered around the country and we only meet from time to time.

My house-mate Felicity is English, but, as we are both determined to speak Spanish, we have established a strict house rule that English is not to be used in the house except (a) in serious emergencies or (b) in times of severe emotional stress.

This doesn't mean I can speak Spanish fluently, and, especially in the countryside, I still have difficulty understanding the local dialect. But the struggle goes on. I worked out the other day that I know 74 different ways to say "you were" in Spanish (I'll spare you the list – you can write and ask if you're interested). In order to speak fluently you have to choose the right one every time without stopping to think. A tall order, as far as I'm concerned.

And that's about it for this letter. Don't forget, I've lost my address book, so when you write back to me with all your news, if you haven't already, don't forget to include your address and phone number.

Till next time,

Best wishes from Harry.



Playa Maderas.

March 2002 – Letter from Matagalpa no. 6

Dear Friends,

Sorry it's been so long since my last letter. The pace of my life seems to be accelerating and the spare time I used to have for correspondence just seems to have disappeared.

So, what's new in Matagalpa?

We're into the last month of the dry season, and the city of Matagalpa is hot, dry and dusty. Higher up in the mountains, where I work, it's still quite green, but most of Nicaragua is brown and parched and desperate for rain. It's also the season of water shortages. At home the water has been off for over a week and both our storage tanks are empty. If it doesn't come tomorrow we will have to go and fetch water in buckets like they do in the countryside.

But there's good news as well. Thanks to a small grant from APSO, I now have my own little desk and computer in the office. This has made a huge difference to my work, as I can now manage my time and get on with things, rather than having to negotiate with my colleagues or wait in frustration for access to a computer.

My work is going well, and it helps a lot that my Spanish is getting better: not only can I now run workshops with titles such as "The Conceptual and Methodological Foundations for Strategic Planning", but I can sing the whole of "The Mountains of Mourne" in Spanish.

We are moving towards the final stages of our big impact evaluation project, and I feel motivated and inspired by the enormous amount of effort and commitment that my colleagues, the whole team, are putting into it. It means more work for me as project co-ordinator, but it also means we are all learning so much from each other, and the end result, being a team effort, will belong to everyone and so be more valued and influential – more of this in this month's Top Ten below.

The Coffee Harvest

Since I last wrote, the coffee harvest has come and gone. For a month or more the schools have been practically empty as whole families go up to the plantations to pick coffee all day every day. It is monotonous, grinding work, picking the little red berries hour after hour after hour.

Children start picking alongside their parents at age four or five, but of course child labour is technically illegal here, so they are not registered as independent pickers until they reach twelve or thirteen. Then they can start to fill their own sacks, to be weighed and paid at the end of the day. One advantage of having tiny children picking coffee is that they can pick the lowest branches of the coffee bushes, thus saving their parents' backs from the torture of constant bending.

I went up to one of the plantations in February with a group of Irish journalists who were here on a fact-finding mission. We arrived at lunch-time when the crowds of men, women and children who had been picking since dawn had gathered by the roadside to wait for the tractor to come with their lunch of rice, beans and tortilla. On the better-run plantations the owners abide by this tradition of providing lunch for the workers during the harvest, but I was told that in many places they have abandoned this to cut costs, and so many of the child pickers will not eat all day.

On all but the small handful of organic plantations, the coffee bushes are regularly sprayed with toxic pesticides and fungicides, adding the risk of skin diseases, allergies and cancer to the burden already borne by these young workers.

It was hard to get the young coffee-pickers or their parents to talk openly to journalists about the reality of their work. To speak out against these conditions could lose them their job, and then how would they survive? For this reason it is also impossible to get reliable statistics about the numbers and ages of child workers on the plantations, and when we talk about 100,000 or more at harvest time, it is only an educated guess.

Thanks to this seasonal income, the flood of desperate families leaving the countryside to beg in the towns and cities, which was a marked feature of life here a few months ago, has temporarily dried up. For a few months, indeed, the flood has reversed, as families head for the plantations and the chance to earn a few extra pesos during the harvest.

It's a grim cycle, however. The harvest is now over, leaving most of the labour force facing more long months of idleness and destitution. Here at CESESMA our work in the plantations will continue, supporting the young "promotores" and "promotoras" with their network of organic vegetable plots, integrating the children back into school where schools exist and, where schools don't exist, negotiating with the plantation managers to set up at least some kind of temporary classroom.

My knowledge of the coffee harvest is mostly second-hand. Felicity on the other hand, went up into the mountains and picked coffee herself. I found her account of the experience powerful and moving and, with her permission, I am attaching it to this email. I hope you will read it.

I also hope that, if you are not already drinking a recognised brand of "fair-trade" coffee, you will think about doing so.

*[Felicity's article about her experience with the child coffee-pickers is
Appendix II]*

St Patrick's Day

As regular readers will know, no letter from Matagalpa would be complete without an account of another great party you missed (and several sudden changes of topic).

We didn't do anything special for St Valentine's Day, as 14 February this year happened to coincide with the 140th anniversary of Matagalpa being elevated to cityhood in 1862, and the City Council laid on the biggest street party ever. They set up a stage at each end of the High Street and a third right in the middle, and had three of Nicaragua's top bands vying with each other to attract the largest crowds. It seemed like the entire population was dancing in the streets.

St Patrick's Day, on the other hand, is lamentably ignored by the population of Nicaragua, so it fell to us Irish cooperantes to arrange our own fiesta. As I mentioned in my last letter, my APSO colleagues put me in charge of organising it, so I arranged for us all to meet up at Bahía Majagual, the tropical beach paradise where Felicity and I spent Christmas. In all we were nine Irish people, including children, plus another fifteen or so friends and family of different nationalities. We decorated the beach-bar with green, white and orange balloons and Shamrock festoons brought specially from Ireland, and bought a crate of Guinness from the Irish bar in Managua. When the sun had set, the Bahía Majagual people laid on a

terrific all-you-can-eat barbecue, the centerpiece of which was an enormous fish, big enough for thirty people or more to share, and, of course, piles of potatoes.

The big surprise was that our Chilean colleague, Eduardo, brought with him not just his family, but his Andean folk band as well. So we had a great night of Irish-Andean cultural interchange. I sang some songs and played my tin whistle, then my colleague Dominic sang some songs (and unlike me, he can actually sing) and, as the evening wore on and more drink was consumed, everyone joined in. Between the live sessions we had hot Latin music for dancing (interspersed with bits of U2), and everyone had a great time. We closed the proceedings at 3.30 am with Dominic and I singing “The Town I loved so Well”, perhaps not completely in tune, but with great emotional conviction.

Luckily we had the whole of Sunday on the beach to recover before having to head back to real life.

Dance Class

Meanwhile, back in Matagalpa, my efforts to reinvent myself as a suave and sophisticated dancefloor stylist continue painfully slowly. The main problem, I believe, is that in Ireland we have a venerable thousand-year tradition of dancing without moving our hips. In fact keeping your entire body rigid seems to be the central skill of Irish dancing. Latin dancing, on the other hand, is the exact opposite, with the hips apparently disconnected from the rest of the body and moving all over the place in a world of their own. Can you see my problem?

I have, however, had a stroke of good fortune in this regard, in that I am privileged to number among my friends here Rhina, the finest dancer in Matagalpa. She has taken pity on my plight and is now giving me personal Latin dance classes on Tuesdays after work. I can't claim to have made much progress; after all it's bound to take time to shake off a thousand years of hip-rigidity. But I intend to persevere, and I appreciate having such an inspiring teacher. I'll let you know how it goes.

Second-hand Harry

In my last letter I mentioned that most of my possessions, including almost all my non-work clothes, had been stolen out of the back of a bus on my way home from my Christmas holiday. An unexpected consequence of this is that, by necessity, I have discovered the delights of Matagalpa's second-hand clothes shops. There are dozens of these little shops dotted all over town, selling nearly-new top quality clothes from the USA, many with sought-after designer labels, at remarkably low prices.

I refilled my empty wardrobe in no time, but the trouble was I started to become addicted. I've bought ten shirts since Christmas, for €2.00-3.00 each, including three silk and two linen, not to mention several pairs of trousers and a handy silk jacket for those occasional cool evenings. I keep having to go out and buy more coat-hangers. It was also taking me longer and longer to get home from work, because of the temptation of all the second-hand clothes shops lining the route from the bus station to my house.

However, I seem to have got over the worst of it and haven't bought a new shirt for the past two weeks. I can usually force myself to walk past the shops without crossing the threshold (although a lot of the staff recognise me and greet me as I pass by). And at least now I'm never stuck for a flashy shirt to go dancing in.

Incidentes Críticos (Critical Incidents)

And so to this month's Top Ten...

I have decided this time to let the young people of rural Matagalpa have the last word. As part of the Impact Evaluation study I've been coordinating at CESESMA, my colleagues recorded over forty interviews with children and young people, parents and community leaders from the mountain communities where we work. Rather than using a traditional question-and-answer format, we asked the interviewees to tell us stories about incidents in their lives that had led to personal growth or change, and then to reflect on these "critical incidents".

At the heart of our work is the training and development of "Promotores/as Adolescentes", or young leaders; young people aged 12-18 who, with our support and guidance, are taking a lead in popular education and community development in their own communities.

So, here to end this letter, are my translations of ten extracts from the transcriptions of these interviews, not quite at random, but pretty representative. I think they say more about the work we're doing here than my words ever could.

"I've learned lots of things that have helped me relate to people better. It's given me a feeling of importance because I'm doing the work with the children and organising activities. My first experience was when a community leader invited me to a meeting with children and parents and I went and was chosen to be facilitator for the vegetable garden. The children supported me so I agreed and it worked out well, and I learned how to run workshops with the children.

I didn't even used to go out of the house before. At first I was very nervous when I started to go out, but I soon got over it and started to relate to other people more. Something that helped me change was the workshops on vegetable growing and the importance of looking after the environment.

Another thing is that people think you can only learn from adults, but it isn't true; we can also learn from people the same age as ourselves or younger, because adults don't know everything, and it's valuable to share our experiences with others, and that others can learn from us."

María Elena Rizo, 15

"What's helped me to change is that since I started to get organised with CESESMA I've been working with the children in my community. When I wasn't organised I didn't know anything about the Children's Rights Code; now I know all about it. One time they invited me to a workshop they were doing here, and the young people elected me to be the facilitator for the community."

Grissel Blandón, 14

"One afternoon Profe Donald came with Dannys and said they were looking for two more facilitators, and they asked if Angélica and me would like to be facilitators. We said yes, and the next week we met with Dannys and she helped us to run the workshop. I had to facilitate a group of young people for the first time. This helped me to learn things I didn't know before, and I've changed my ways. It also helped me to change the classes: I know the importance of being organised, and now I have more confidence and I can talk to the parents more easily. Another thing is that the parents and teachers take account of us more, and this makes me feel well supported by the parents and the other young people."

Felix Blandino, 13

"I've learnt many new things in my life. Before, I used to see physical abuse as normal; for example a man hitting a woman, a mum or dad hitting a child for breaking a glass: this kind of thing I saw as something normal. But now I've come to see that this isn't normal. I've learned that children have the right not to be mistreated... I also understand that by studying you can make something of your life, and that older people can learn from young people.

Another thing that helped me change was community theatre. When you do a play you have to give a message to the audience, for example that education and training can help the people get out of poverty. Cesesma has helped me learn loads of things."

Jauxel Ocampo, 13

"I remember the first time we organised a group of children at the school in La Pita and I taught them traditional dance. I didn't think I'd be able to do it and I felt nervous. I was anxious because the teachers said the children would never learn it. But after a week of classes the children were starting to dance really well. This made me feel I'd achieved something worthwhile, and I realised that what I was doing was important for them, and that I could expand my own knowledge and teach them other things such as the environment. Now I'm part of a committee where we're working for disabled children and this makes me feel I'm playing a useful part in society."

Amparo Valle, 17

"Another good thing was making the vegetable plots. We all helped to clear the ground, put up a fence, make the beds and sow the seeds – all the different things you have to do. I didn't know then that it was bad to use chemical insecticides like Gramoxone, but now when I'm older I'm not going to use them".

Javier Antonio Murguía, 12

"For me, something that really helped was when I went to the first workshop which was on values and rights, and I was able to express myself. I have a right to life, to know who I am, and nobody has a right to take from me what I have... The way I pass this on to other children is that when the teachers at CESESMA teach me things, I teach it to the children according to how they've taught me. I love teaching the children and for me this is very important."

Eva Luz Salgado, 14

"For us, who has helped us change is CESESMA. By taking us to workshops we've learned to grow vegetables with organic compost using cow manure and ash. I'm doing it now with some friends. We've learned a lot in the school and in CESESMA. They brought us chickens so we can breed them and other families can benefit."

Mayra Alonso Martínez, 12

"I didn't used to study. I worked with my father on his smallholding. When CESESMA came there was a meeting with all the young people and we decided to join a crochet class. This has been a real achievement because we've learned to do it, and now we've developed what we've learned by running workshops with other children in the community. I have a group of ten students now."

Mercedes del Socorro Cano, 16

"Before, I spent six years without studying; I wasn't interested in learning. But when I began to work with the children I got motivated and started studying again. I felt the need because I felt I wanted to do things properly, and the work I was trying to do I couldn't do that easily. So I started studying again to give an example to the other young people the same as me who didn't want to study. And this is an achievement because now in this community there are young people studying who, like me, weren't studying before. Then they saw me studying and they said, 'Let's go to Saturday school this year. Let's all sign up together'..."

This year I'm doing a census of all the preschool children, because the parents came to me and asked me to support them. They wanted to set up a preschool group. I had a meeting with them and we talked about how important it is for children to start learning when they're little."

Dannys Ocampo, 18

And that's all for now. Don't forget to read Felicity's article, and don't forget to write and tell me all your news.

Till next time,

Best wishes from Harry



Harvesting coffee, Santa Martha Plantation, Yasica Sur.



Sorting the red and green berries, Los Placeres coffee plantation.

May 2002 – Irish Night in Matagalpa

INVITATION

Guanuca Cultural Centre and Half Moon Café are pleased to invite you to a night of Irish Nicaraguan cultural exchange. Featuring, among others, Nicaragua's top Irish folk duo (well, to be honest, we don't think there are any others) Harry Shier and Dominic Cogan, presenting a varied mixture of traditional and not-so-traditional Irish music sung in English, Irish and Spanish – or if all else fails, played on the tin whistle.

(Note for those who were at the St Patrick's Day party: This will be the rehearsed version, with at least 50% of the right guitar chords, and mostly in tune – we hope).

Date: Saturday 18 May 2002. Starts at 8.00 pm.

Admission free.

Cold beer, wine, Flor de Caña rum and good traditional food at reasonable prices.

Directions: From the Church of Guadalupe, 1½ blocks south, Matagalpa.

Hope you can make it. We look forward to seeing you.

All the best from Harry



Centro Cultural de Guanuca

August 2002 – Letter from Matagalpa no. 7

Dear Friends,

At last some more news from Matagalpa. I'm sorry it's been so long. The various reasons for the long gap between letters are not worth recounting. The main one, though, was my mid-assignment trip to Europe, about which more later.

Talking of Europe, a friend suggested that my remarks about it in a recent e-mail (the one telling everyone I was back in Matagalpa after my trip to Europe) might have seemed unduly forceful. And, having looked at it again, I see what he meant. So, to put the record straight, when I said I never want to return to Europe, what I actually meant to say was that I don't want to return to live there. I didn't mean to imply that I hold the whole of Europe and its inhabitants in such odium that I never want to set foot there again. In fact, very much to the contrary, my family and friends in Britain and Ireland mean the world to me. So, since it seems I cannot persuade you all to come and see me here, I guess I will be back in Europe before too long, I hope with more time for everyone.

But for now, I'm back where I regard as home, my lovely house in Matagalpa. And my goodness, how it rains here. Although the sun is shining as I write and there are pretty yellow butterflies flitting back and forth outside the window, we have had ten days of leaden clouds and frequent downpours. I haven't heard of any major disasters here in Matagalpa, but last week a slum neighbourhood in Managua was washed away in a flood.

The heavy rain, combined with the lack of paved streets and the never-ending roadworks, means the whole town is full of mud (the countryside is full of mud as well, but I feel that's more to be expected as part of the natural way of things). The mud would be a small price to pay if this meant that water came out of the taps, but no such luck. We still regularly run out of water, as sometimes it only comes once a week.

This can't be due to a lack of water, so I put it down to the interminable work on the town's long-awaited new water system. We have to collect rainwater off the roof, and filter all our drinking water through a clay filter, but we always get by one way or another.

All change at Chateau Harry

Today, 1st August, I celebrate a whole year in Chateau Harry, and with the completion of the year, the wheel has turned full circle.

I started out on my own, with no intention of sharing my home, but last October Felicity turned up, and has been here ever since. And then in April Patrick turned up. Pat is from Boyle, Co Roscommon and, like me, one of the last surviving APSO Development Workers in Central America. He quickly developed a strong affinity with Rhina my dance teacher, and asked if he too could move into my house.

However, he found the guest suite too dark and stuffy, so he curtained off one end of our huge empty living-room-cum-dance-studio to create his own cosy private apartment, where he has been living happily ever since (thus instantly doubling the

size of Matagalpa's Irish community). And so, with the three of us, our friends, friends of friends, and their friends, the house changed from an oasis of serenity to a happening hub of Matagalpa life.

But next week Felicity will finally be leaving. Her year's VSO placement is up, and though she'd like to stay longer, there's no way to fund a longer stay. I'm sure it will be a tearful farewell as we've been great friends and shared many adventures. In fact I hope it will be less of an "Último adios" and more of an "Hasta la vista", as I think Felicity will be back in Nicaragua before too long.

And now Pat has decided it's time he had his own place here in Matagalpa, so he too will soon be moving out, but not so far away, just across town.

So, in just a few days, I'll be alone again in my big house on the hill, as I was a year ago, but with incredible memories of all the ups and downs of the year in between (and a lot more ups than downs). How I feel about it, I'll tell you next time.

The hardest part will be breaking the news to Doña Coco that I'm cutting her wages as there will only be half as much work. Doña Coco, who I don't think I've mentioned before, is our new housekeeper-laundryperson, mother of the sorely-missed Magalys, who left earlier in the year to devote herself to her studies, and sent her mother along in her place, thinking we wouldn't notice.

Escape from exploitation

I suppose I should say something about my work. I find it by turns highly rewarding and intensely frustrating. It's rewarding when I know we're making progress, and that I'm contributing useful ideas, processes and insights that are helping my colleagues learn and grow.

It's frustrating when the progress seems so slow. Sometimes this is due to external factors, such as having no electricity in the office for five days, as happened last week. But mostly it's due to the way the team works. A favourite word here, which has no English equivalent, is "profundizar", meaning "to delve deeply into a subject". But when my workmates say, "We need to 'profundizar'", what they really mean is, "We want to spend another two days discussing this before we'll be willing to make a decision and move on to something else".

Although the strategic planning project takes up most of my time, I much prefer my training and development work, which luckily I still get involved in from time to time, helping my colleagues plan creative training events and develop new learning activities.

A couple of months ago I took on a different kind of task, when I volunteered to go up to one of the coffee plantations in the mountains, to interview and photograph a young woman called Arlen who runs the pre-school playgroup there. Save the Children wanted to do a magazine article on "success stories" of the work against child exploitation in Nicaragua, and asked us if we knew of one. We thought of Arlen, as she had been a child coffee picker most of her life, but with our support had gone back into education and now, instead of picking coffee, she was running a pre-school playgroup during the week and studying at weekends.

The day I interviewed her, in the tiny cabin on the plantation where she lives during the week, was the day before her seventeenth birthday. I taped the interview and later transcribed and edited it, and sure enough it subsequently appeared in the magazine, and also on the internet. Not only that, but there was an English version on the web as

well. It gave me an ironic thrill to think that, after all my struggles with the language, somebody else can now be bothered to translate work that I've done in Spanish back into English for public consumption.

I was moved by Arlen's story, and I will add the text to the end of this letter and I hope you will enjoy it. It explains a lot of my motivation for doing what I do here.

Foundation for Musical Piracy

Another aspect of my work that I could never have predicted is that I am running a music piracy operation from the office in my spare time. It is called the "Foundation for Musical Piracy for Young Rural Musicians of Matagalpa", and is, of course, completely illegal. Basically, what I do is make illegal pirate copies of CDs to order, sell them at a small profit, and use the earnings to buy instruments for local young musicians who could not otherwise afford them.

The birth of the Foundation was unpremeditated. When my new computer arrived, it contained both a CD writer and a DVD player. A colleague asked me, "So does that mean you can make copies of CDs, then?"

"I don't know", I said, "Let's find out". So we did, and we found it was really easy.

People started asking me if I would copy CDs for them. Here in Nicaragua, the humble cassette is still the commonest format for recorded music, but the CD is gaining ground fast. Original CDs cost the same as in Ireland or the UK, which puts them beyond the reach of all but the wealthy elite. They are rarely seen outside the fancy record shops in the malls of Managua. Pirate CDs, on the other hand, cost a quarter as much, and are available from street vendors and market stalls everywhere.

Thus I would guess that over 95% of the CDs in circulation in Nicaragua are pirate copies. This doesn't make what I do any more acceptable to the US trade authorities; I'm just giving you a bit of background information. I admit that I am ripping off the profits of the Sony Corporation and all the rest of them but, the way I see it, I am providing a tiny channel for the transfer of resources from the wealthy in the music business to those who have nothing. So far we've made over \$120; enough for two guitars (and if anyone in the APSO office is reading this, you never read it, OK?)*.

Festival of Sexual and Reproductive Health

I've said it before, but Nicaragua is full of surprises. The day before I left for Ireland, I was asked to sing at a Festival of Sexual and Reproductive Health in the town square. The idea appealed to me.

The slogan of the campaign is "Juntos decidimos cuando" ("Together we decide when"). Nicaragua has an astronomical rate of teenage pregnancy, and effective sex education is desperately needed (as are affordable condoms, and a radical change of attitude on the part of the Catholic Church). But at least we aren't embarrassed to get up on stage and be open and direct about it, publicly celebrating the right to say, "No", "Not till I feel ready", or "Not without a condom, amigo", with a fun afternoon of song and dance.

* When the Foundation for Musical Piracy finally closed in 2006, it had made over \$500, which bought two guitars, three small sound-systems for dance groups, dance costumes and various accessories, all of which the young people could not otherwise have had.

Dominic, the other half of “Nicaragua’s leading Irish folk duo”, wasn’t available, so I did it with a Nicaraguan singer friend, María de los Angeles. María has a dual personality: off-stage she is a timid, self-effacing teenager who hardly ever speaks; on-stage she is a glamorous, polished song-stylist. I think I may have to give up singing and just be her accompanist in future.

I tried to think of old Irish folk-songs on the theme of sexual health, but in the end we decided to stick with what we already knew: my Spanish version of “The Mountains of Mourne”, María’s solo show-stealer “Tonto” (which means “Stupid” in Spanish, and has nothing to do with the Lone Ranger), and finally our version of “Something Stupid”, in the original English, with me as Frank Sinatra and María as Nancy. And all this in front of a big crowd of increasingly bemused Nicaraguan teenagers on a Friday afternoon in the town square!

My European Top Ten

Since I last wrote, I’ve spent four weeks in Europe: just over a week in Ireland followed by three weeks in England, so here are my “Top Ten Reflections on a Visit to Europe after a Year’s Absence”.

1. God how I miss Nicaragua

I was wishing I was back in Nicaragua only three hours after leaving. My first stop was Houston, where I had a three hour wait for my next plane. I found my way to an airport bar to pass the time with a cold beer. As I ordered my beer the bar’s sound system started playing a song called “Pégame tu Vicio”. This is a just a catchy commercial dance tune and it isn’t even Nicaraguan, but who was it who said that famous quote about the power of cheap music? Within ten seconds I had tears in my eyes and a lump in my throat, from thinking about the Nicaragua I was leaving behind. I won’t even try to explain it.

2. Plastic bags

Ireland especially seemed clean and shiny and litter-free compared to Nicaragua. The towns and cities of Nicaragua are drowning under a sea of discarded plastic. My theory about this is that there has been a technological change – the advent of plastic packaging – which requires a corresponding social change – habits of responsible use of plastic – which has not yet happened.

For example, ten years ago, if you bought a snack from a street vendor it would have been wrapped in a banana leaf. If, after eating your food you threw the banana leaf out of the window of the bus, no harm was done, as the banana leaf was a natural product of the environment and would soon recycle itself. Now your snack is in a plastic bag, but, if you’re a typical Nicaraguan, you still throw the wrapping out of the window of the bus, where it remains for the next fifty years (unless a wild animal eats it and chokes to death). So, well done the Irish Government in bringing in the new plastic bag levy (and well done all those who campaigned for it for years before). Maybe they could send a delegation to Nicaragua to help do the same here?

3. Trains

I found everything in England impossibly expensive, but worst of all were the trains. And the worst thing about the trains is the infuriating ticket-pricing system. In Nicaragua you just get on a bus and buy a ticket. An express bus costs a little more

than a slow bus, but even the express is only 30 Córdobas, about €2.20, from here to Managua – about the same distance as Dublin to Belfast or London to Coventry.

In England they advertise reasonably-priced fares, but you can never actually buy one. Then there's a whole raft of different fares depending on how many days in advance you buy your ticket, until finally, on the day of travel, you realise it would have been cheaper to fly.

4. You can't go around kissing everyone

In Nicaragua you kiss (once, on the cheek) everyone you meet and everyone you are introduced to. Or, to be more precise, men kiss women, women kiss men, women kiss other women, but men give other men a firm manly handshake and say "mucho gusto". In Britain and Ireland, whilst this kind of kissing is becoming popular, especially amongst younger middle-class people absorbing European influences, it is definitely not the social norm. I had to watch myself all the time to avoid the social gaffe of inappropriate kissing.

5. Sausages, baltis, fish and chips

I couldn't get enough of them! Which is lucky really, because they were the only foods I could afford in England.

6. God, it's cold

I have had the privilege of spending a whole year of my life without once feeling cold. And not only that, but never having to think, "Will I need to bring a coat?", "Where did I leave my woolly socks?", "Why isn't the central heating working?" etc. Spending a weekend at the English seaside in the middle of the so-called summer brought home to me just what a difference this makes to the quality of my life. "Quality of life" is a very personal concept but, for me, not being cold is definitely a part of it, along with sunsets, home-made margaritas and going dancing on Saturday night.

7. That's rock'n'roll

On my last night in England my brother and I went to see my son Joe's band, the Lost Eleven, playing live in a basement below an Irish pub in Birmingham. The band was great and I recommend you go to see them if you get the chance (but be prepared to stand out like a shredded wheat in a fruit salad if you're over 25). The highlight of the evening was one of those typically self-destructive rock'n'roll moments when the lead singer publicly sacked the drummer in the middle of the set. I thought Joe might be upset at this, but his only comment was, "I was ready for a change anyway". I take this as a sign of maturity and resilience.

8. They can't dance!

Another night my brother Donald took me to a trendy dance club on the sea-front in Brighton. I have got used to calling such places "discotecas", and I had to remind myself that nobody in England has used the word "disco" for the past twenty years. Most of the time I just stood there thinking, "They can't dance. How awful! None of them has a clue". Of course I realise this is pure prejudice, as they probably liked the way they were dancing and would have thought our kind of Latin dancing equally pathetic. Still, it was another of those moments that made me glad that I live here and not there.

9. Phones

Two things struck me about phones. One was that while I've been away ordinary house phones have evolved to look like mobile phones. When I left, mobile phones looked completely different from the phones people had in their houses. Now I can't tell the difference.

The other was when I spent a day in Manchester working with a group of children aged 9 to 12. Several of them had mobile phones so I casually inquired how many had them. Every hand in the room went up. I was the only person there without a mobile phone. Mobile phones (called "celulares") are gaining ground rapidly in Nicaragua, but it will be interesting to see how long it takes before the children here have their own.

10. Big Brother

England was in the middle of its third bout of "Big Brother" mania when I arrived. I shamefully admit that before I left I got hooked on the first Big Brother – the one that was nearly won by an Irish Lesbian singing nun. But this time I found myself thinking, "Everyday life in Chateau Harry is far more interesting than anything that happens in the Big Brother house. The people are more interesting (and better looking), the story-lines are more dramatic, and there's no need for telephone voting. Why would I want to be watching these people's tedious lives when I'm so busy living my own?"

And that's all for now. Looking forward to hearing all your news.

Till next time,

Best wishes from Harry

*From **Angel de la Guarda** (Magazine published by Save the Children in Nicaragua), issue 51, July 2002*

"I thought I'd never get out of the fields": The testimony of Arlen Ochoa Alemán, Kindergarten Teacher, La Cumplida, Nicaragua

I was born in the Matagalpa hospital on June 7, 1985, so I'm almost 17. I live in Las Delicias, a community of the Yasica Sur in the municipality of San Ramón.

I've been working on the coffee plantation since I was very small. On the farm we used to fertilize coffee or prune coffee bushes. At harvest time, I'd go pick beans with my mom and sister, now deceased.

We'd work from 6 a.m. till 5 p.m., all season long. We'd leave the house when it was still dark out, going to the "El Renacer de San Miguel" hacienda, and it took us almost two hours to walk there. On the last pick of the coffee bushes (when all the



remaining beans are picked independently if they are ripe) we'd leave the farm even later, because we'd have to sort the green and red beans.

We quit school to help my mother work in the fields because she couldn't make enough to feed us alone. A 5-gallon container full of coffee beans brought in five córdobas, and sometimes she'd pick five in a day. They'd pay every fortnight. When I worked with my sister we'd get 15 córdobas a day.

By the time I was eight, I was already picking alone. I thought it was OK work, and I liked to help my mom keep up the home. But it was bad because we were little and those 12 hour days were bad for our health. I think that's how my sister got sick and died. When it was raining we had to walk almost two hours to the estate, and work all wet and uncomfortable. And the food they gave us was terrible.

The hardest thing about it was that they were always yelling at us, saying we didn't know how to do anything, that we were worthless. That was depressing and affected our self-esteem. The same thing happened sometimes at home, with my mom yelling at me and hitting me for things I didn't do. I remember I felt so bad at times when she wouldn't believe me I wanted to run away.

Study Opportunities

My first memories of school are not too pleasant. I was six years old when I entered first grade and I didn't know anybody. My sisters were already in higher grades, so I was sad at first, but gradually made friends. I didn't get to know any males because at home I'd been told to only mix with the girls, because boys were very foolish.

From first to fourth grade I was at the Los Placeres primary school in Yasica Sur. Then I had to drop out because my mother didn't have enough money to buy school supplies.

Things got better when I started to work with the CESESMA project as they helped me through fifth and sixth grade. My mom requested help from Guadalupe (Lupita), one of their case workers, and she managed to secure some support from CESESMA so I could get notebooks and pencils. That's how I was able to register anew.

When my sister died I was about to drop out completely. I was totally depressed because we were inseparable, but I got it together and when I decided to return to classes they'd already been in session for three months.

Guadalupe spoke to the teachers so they'd accept me, but I had to go to school in La Lima. I had to walk 10 km. every day because in Las Delicias there was no sixth grade.

Community Work

With support from CESESMA, we organized a group of boys and girls in the community to reflect on our rights. We also got into dance, crafts and other community service projects, and that's how I began to socialize and interact with other people. I also worked with parents, inviting them to meetings. They paid attention and now I know they support me, and that I mean something to them, my community and to my family.

I have learned about many issues which I've shared with my mother. She no longer scolds or hits me. On the contrary, now we sit down and chat like two friends. She always gives me advice, and I think it's usually pretty good.

New Stage in Life

I discovered my vocation as a teacher in the year 2000, when I was picking coffee and a girl asked me to help her teach pre-school kids for three months. I did it because I'd worked with children on farms and in workshops, so I have a lot of self-confidence.

When I accepted that job as teacher I felt my life change.

I'm currently working as a preschool teacher at the La Cumplida hacienda, so I live outside my community. I've learned so many things, like working with children, coordinating with parents, even dance techniques to teach my students!

I teach 25 kids on the kindergarten level, sharing all the knowledge I've accumulated with CESESMA on such topics like gardening, health, environment and children's rights as found in the Labor Code.

This whole process has been so important for me, and I feel like I've established a solid base of communication with both the kids and parents. When I do my lesson plans it's easier after studying with CESESMA, and I can use things like dynamic games, which they really like.

In my community and where I teach, they pay attention to what I do. With my salary I've been able to help my mother settle her debts, because no one from my home was working except my brother, but he only brought in enough to pay for food.

I think I'll continue with my studies and be able to make more money. I believe I can do it with the help of my family, putting my shoulder to the load, and always sharing what I learn each day.

Personal Satisfaction

When I see other kids still working in the coffee fields, I remember how I had it. One suffers physically and psychologically in that work, because mothers hit the kids and insult them if they don't want to go. What's more, there are dangerous animals in the plantations.

Children suffer psychologically too, because they get this idea they're loafers, disobedient and inconsiderate. This leaves a scar inside. It happened to me, and I know a lot of these kids don't value themselves for what they really are. For these reasons I think it's one of the worst forms of child labor.

The past has been left behind. Now I feel satisfied and happy. There was a time in my life when I thought I'd never get out of the fields, but I was wrong.

My life has changed greatly. I always work, but now in something I really like. I enjoy working and sharing what I've learned with children.

Arlen was interviewed by Harry Shier, June 2002

October 2002 – Letter from Matagalpa no. 8

Dear Friends,

I can't believe how quickly the months are racing by. But at least, as October gives way to November and then December, I know the weather is going to stay warm and sunny – it will just stop raining for six months – and I won't have to endure long cold winter nights, just warm breezes and bright starry skies. The setting sun will move along the valley to the left, and then, after the winter solstice, move slowly back to the right again, never setting earlier than five o'clock, or later than six o'clock.

So, what's new in Matagalpa?

Return of the Plantones

The main news here has been the return of the “plantones”. These are the roadside encampments set up by unemployed, desperate landless families who have no work on the coffee plantations and no alternative except to starve. There were lots of these camps this time last year, trying to get the government to take action and protect employment in the coffee industry. But, being a neo-liberal free-market government, this was the last thing on the government's agenda. The people lived on hand-outs from various international agencies and church groups until harvest time came round in November, then they all disappeared back into the mountains to pick coffee for four months. But once the harvest was over the same cycle repeated itself. The government has done nothing to deal with the roots of the problem and so again this year we have seen thousands of people, including many clearly malnourished children, huddled under plastic sheets along the roadsides.

The deaths of a dozen children from avoidable malnutrition-related causes, followed by direct action by the protesters closing off main highways, created a media storm that forced the government to respond with a series of palliative measures such as emergency employment on road works (where I see a chilling parallel with the Irish famine over 150 years ago; around the west of Ireland you can still see the remains of roads and bridges ordered as “relief works” by a staunchly liberal British government that refused to deal with the roots of the problem, for fear of disrupting the free market economy). As a result most of the families have gone home to await the harvest and for the time being the situation is calm.

Coffee under the sun

Now there is a new menace stalking the coffee plantations, which, if you buy coffee, you need to know about. This is the threat of “café bajo sol” – coffee under the sun.

Traditionally, Nicaraguan coffee is high quality Arabica coffee, which grows best on high mountain slopes under the shade of tall trees (I had been living here for a month before I realised that the dense forests that covered the mountains all around were actually coffee plantations, with the coffee bushes hidden away amongst the trees). The canopy of trees overhead maintains just the right degree of humidity to bring the coffee berries to ripe perfection. But it also makes cultivating and harvesting the coffee tricky and pushes up the costs.

Now, in order to cut production costs, farmers are being encouraged to experiment with new strains of coffee that thrive in full sunlight. The coffee is not such high

quality, but it can be cultivated and harvested mechanically, producing larger quantities at lower cost. It also requires the destruction of the forests.

Without the forests, the land doesn't retain water and dries up, the surface erodes away and the nutrients in the soil are washed away with it. The coffee requires more and more chemical fertilizers, all contributing to drought, environmental contamination and global warming. At the moment, Nicaragua's traditional shade-grown coffee is the only thing saving these forests from destruction. Where coffee is not grown, the trees are felled for timber, firewood or to create arable land for beans and maize. As the trees go, the rivers get lower every year, and the droughts longer and harder. Without the forests there's no water, and without water, there's no life.

A new international campaign has started to make coffee-drinkers aware of this, and to label coffee grown under shade so people can insist on buying it. You may see the new symbol (alongside the fair trade symbol and/or organic symbol) on your chosen packet of coffee. If you insist on drinking shade-grown coffee, you are not only getting a better quality of coffee, you are actively contributing to saving forests in parts of the world where they are desperately needed.

Life at CESESMA

My work is still going well, and I'm enjoying it more and more. We've just finished another phase of consultation with children and young people about our new strategic plan, so I've been out at consultation meetings in the countryside. The meetings have gone really well, and it's been great for me on a personal level too, because for the first time I have felt I can communicate with the young people like a normal person, without the language barrier making me feel like a complete outsider. It's the same in work with adults: A couple of weeks ago some of us went to a two-day national conference on commercial sexual exploitation of children and young people. I was able to act as a group facilitator, state my opinions etc without feeling nervous and tongue-tied for fear of making mistakes like I used to before.

I also felt pleased because I participated in planning the event, and insisted that young people should be able to participate and express their own ideas. This led to a whole series of consultations in different parts of the country, after which a group of young people from different organisations, including CESESMA, came together to discuss the results and prepare a presentation for the conference. They did it as a sociodrama, depicting the effects of violence on the lives of children and young people, and showing how easy it is for victims of domestic violence to end up abused and sexually exploited. I thought it was a brilliant piece of work, and the group have been invited back to do another input at the follow-up event in November. I don't want to take all the credit, but if I hadn't put my hand up at the planning meeting and said I felt it was important that we hear the voices of the young people themselves, none of this would have happened.

The Agricultural Fair

The last week of September was our big agricultural fair in Matagalpa. As far as I can see, calling it an agricultural fair is little more than a pretext for nine continuous nights of open-air dance party. There are fairground rides and sideshows, a rodeo and bull-riding contest, and punch-ups between drunken cowboys, but mainly it's just eat, drink and dance, night after night, starting on a Saturday, continuing all through the next week and ending up the following Sunday night. Most of the best dance-bands in the

country come and play live at the fairground, a different band each night of the week. I went on six of the nine nights, and had a great time.

My only disappointment was that my friend Rhina wasn't asked to dance this year. It seems that with the escalating cost of bringing in the bands – a Nicaraguan dance band consisting of twelve or thirteen people – there was no money left for interval entertainment.

Speaking of Rhina, I finally got round to getting my first pair of reading glasses last week. I took Rhina to the Opticians to help me choose them, as I thought a feminine opinion could be useful in such matters, but then I broke them the very same day. I wonder if it was an accident, or sabotage on the part of my subconscious, refusing to accept the obvious process of ageing?

This Month's Top Ten: Matagalpa City of Changes

There have been some surprises in Matagalpa in the past weeks, and this got me thinking what a lot has changed here in the past year. So here, in no particular order, are my top ten things that have changed in the past twelve months.

1. Traffic lights

Yesterday we celebrated the switching on of the first traffic lights in Matagalpa. The usual system at a crossroads seems to be that whoever hoots their horn loudest has right of way, but this will have to change now the lights have arrived. They will also provide a host of new business opportunities for Matagalpa's street children. The capital, Managua, is famous for the "Niños de los Semáforos" – the Traffic Light Children – who squeegee windscreens, sell plastic bags of iced water, chewing gum, newspapers, peanuts etc., developing chronic respiratory problems and running the constant risk of getting run over every time the lights change. I'm sure it will be only a matter of days before Matagalpa has its own Traffic Light Children. Maybe, if I'm quick off the mark, I can be the first to get a funding application in to Save the Children for an alternative education project for them.

2. Cine Margot

Even more of a surprise has been the sudden closure of the town's cinema. One day they're showing a subtitled "Austin Powers in Goldmember" and the next they're emptying the whole place – seats, projector, popcorn machine, the lot. Although my cooperante friends seem shocked and saddened at the news, it doesn't really bother me, as I seldom have time to go to the cinema. Anyway, the Grupo Venancia women's centre still has a regular feminist film night every Friday. There's no popcorn, but there's cheap beer, and the films are a lot more interesting.

3. Cine Perla

While we're on cinemas, I should also mention that the local porn cinema, Cine Perla, has recently been converted into a pool hall, which I suppose is an improvement of sorts. Not that Matagalpa needs another pool hall; we must have over a hundred already, from big places with a dozen or so tables in the town centre, to tiny places with a single scruffy table in a mud-floored shack in the outer barrios – and all of them a totally male preserve. In that respect I suppose Cine Perla hasn't changed much after all.

4. Rincón Paraiso

The town's top disco on the highway outside the town, formally known as "Luz de Luna" (Moonlight) is under new management and is now called "El Rincón Paraiso" – Paradise Corner – and is even more up-market than before. I still prefer dancing at the Rancho Escondido, but sometimes they have live bands at Rincón Paraiso and then it's worth the taxi fare.

On Friday night I coughed up the 70 Córdoba (€ 4.00) entrance fee to see the great Luis Enrique Mejía Godoy in concert. Luis Enrique and his brother Carlos were the legendary troubadours who, throughout the 70s and 80s, provided the soundtrack to the Nicaraguan revolution: Think of him as the Christy Moore of Nicaragua. He's still a powerful singer, by turns moving, inspiring, romantic, hilarious.

The week before, by coincidence, my friend Natalí lent me her battered old songbook from the times of the revolution, a treasure trove with the words of all the great "rebel songs" of Nicaragua (another interesting comparison with Irish culture). I photocopied the lot so now I can start to learn some of them myself, and I'll soon be able to sing Irish and Nicaraguan rebel songs side by side!

5. Karaoke

At the other end of the live music spectrum, Matagalpa also now has its first Karaoke bar. I've walked past it many times but have never been tempted. It's always bathed in an eerie blue light that makes the people inside look like zombies. More evidence of progress and modernisation I suppose.

6. The High Street

Whilst the coffee crisis deepens, the country people starve and the cinema goes bankrupt, it seems there is still plenty of money in Matagalpa. It is a classic case of the rich getting richer as the poor get poorer. Two new chain-stores selling domestic appliances and luxury furniture have opened in the High Street in the past few months; goods which only a tiny fraction of the population can afford. Every new shop that opens puts up a huge illuminated sign, aiming to outshine all the previous signs, and to keep up with the competition the neighbouring shops replace their old signs with bigger brighter new ones. There seem to be no controls. Looking down at the town from my balcony at night, the high street is ablaze like a miniature Las Vegas. But I know that there are still tiny malnourished barefoot children begging for pennies outside those bright shiny shops.

7. Cancha del Brigadista

In September we had the inauguration of a new "cancha polideportiva" (a covered multi-sports pitch) that has replaced the old basketball court in the town centre. It's called the "Cancha del Brigadista" in memory of the thousands of young Nicaraguans who volunteered for the great National Literacy Crusade in 1980, just after the Sandinista revolution, and reduced Nicaragua's illiteracy rate from 40% to around 9% in six months. The opening ceremony was also a celebration of the 22nd anniversary of the crusade. One of my Nicaraguan colleagues Florita, who must now be in her mid 40s, came to work in her original brigadista's uniform, which she had first put on 22 years ago when she set off into the countryside as a young brigadista to teach her fellow Nicaraguans to read and write. I don't know exactly why, but when I saw the pride with which she wore that simple grey smock with the badge of the Literacy Brigades on the chest, which she had so carefully treasured for 22 years, I broke down in tears.

Now, after twelve years of liberal governments starving the education system of funds, the statistics show the illiteracy rate climbing steadily back up towards where it was before the crusade. Which to my mind really is something to cry about.

8. The Festival of Maize

Also in September Matagalpa had its first “Festival of Maize”, which was basically another excuse for a big street party; this time a two-day festival celebrating all the wonderful things you can make with maize (with the notable exception of Kellogg’s Corn-flakes). These festivals are celebrated every year in the rural communities, where the tradition goes all the way back to Mayan and prehistoric times. Maize has a huge cultural significance in the rural community here, as life really depends on it. But up to now we have not had a maize festival in sophisticated cosmopolitan Matagalpa (where the supermarkets actually do sell cornflakes!). Although I’m not a big fan of maize products in general, I enjoyed the cultural side, and apart from the rain the festival was good fun. They say it’s going to be an annual event from now on.

9. Storm drains

Talking of rain, they’re installing storm drains in my street. The street is made of dirt and runs up a steep hill, and when we have our frequent tropical rainstorms it turns into a river; the dirt turns to mud and the torrents of water gouge deep ravines down the middle of the street. Only the toughest of four-wheel-drive vehicles make it up our street in the wet.

So, with money collected from the local community, the council and foreign aid, they are putting in storm drains. The work has been going on for months. First they dug a huge trench across the front of our house, cutting us off from the street and making getting in and out a serious challenge, especially in wet weather. Eventually they lined the trench with concrete to form the drainage channel, which thankfully is fairly narrow and easy to hop over on your way in and out. The system doesn’t work yet, because they haven’t put in the channels further up the hill, so most of the water still comes cascading down the middle of the street. But in theory when it’s all finished, the rainwater will go into the channels. The street will still be made of dirt – the money doesn’t stretch to surfacing it – but with any luck it will be more stable and durable dirt.

10. The Maize God of Barrio Apante

I’ve had my first visitor from Ireland. My friend Jackie came all the way from Dublin, and managed to combine a great holiday with her research into the effects of the Fair Trade campaign on the small coffee producers of Matagalpa.

The highlight of her visit, for me, was a trip to the Island of Ometepe where we climbed one of the giant volcanoes; a five kilometre climb through exquisitely beautiful tropical cloud-forest, and swam in the eerie fog-shrouded lagoon in the summit crater, 1300 metres above the surface of Lake Nicaragua.

Before she left, Jackie painted a mural on the end wall of my balcony, depicting the ancient Nicaraguan maize god seated in splendour against a background of volcanoes, lakes and coffee plantations. It has totally changed the feel of the balcony, and to complete the effect I’ve brought up plants in pots from the patio out the back. It was already a splendid balcony, but it’s even better now. Thanks Jackie.

At Jackie’s instigation, I wrote an account of my life here in Nicaragua, which was published as part of a series of “volunteers’ stories” in Volunteering Ireland’s booklet

“Socialclimbers”. My brief was to be provocative, and I’ve tried to express some of the contradictions that I experience in my life here.

Although I do my best to give an impression of my life, I think Nicaragua really needs to be experienced first hand, live and direct. As anticipated in my last letter, my two housemates have moved out and I’m living on my own again, so there’s plenty of room for visitors.

I won’t be here for Christmas or New Year though. I’m off to see my friends Circles and Yolidia who live on a beach just outside Havana, Cuba. I’ll be away from 16 December to 4 January, and I must say I’m excited at the prospect although it’s nearly two months away.

Don’t forget to write back and tell me your news. Keeping contact with friends and family is important to me.

Till next time,

Best wishes from Harry

Harry’s article, “A volunteer’s story”, is Appendix III



Plantón, or encampment, of destitute unemployed landless coffee workers near Matagalpa

November 2002 – Shock news from Matagalpa

13 November: Urgent e-mail from Managua

Dear Friends,

You may have heard the shock news from Matagalpa already, but if not, here it is...

The Friday before last, 1st November, I was attacked and beaten up by a street gang on my way home late at night. I was robbed and left for dead by the side of the road a few blocks down from my house, where – according to the national newspapers – I was found at dawn next morning lying in a pool of blood, barely alive. I was rushed to the local hospital and from there transferred to a top private hospital in Managua. I have no memory of any of these events, until I woke up in the hospital under heavy medication two days later.

I suppose that's the bad news. The slightly better news is that after a week in hospital on a drip, and extensive tests, I am making at least a partial recovery. I came out of hospital on Saturday, and am being looked after by good friends here in Managua until I feel ready to go back to Matagalpa. The whole right side of my face is paralysed and I'm totally deaf in the right ear. But my two fearsome black eyes have almost disappeared, my hair has started to grow again, and my consultant neurosurgeon took the stitches out of my various head wounds this afternoon.

My jaw is working almost normally so I can eat proper food again too (but I can't play the tin whistle, because all the air comes out the paralysed side of my mouth so I can't manage the high notes). I'm having physiotherapy every day to try and get the paralysed facial muscles working again; no results yet, but it could take a while.

The police in Matagalpa arrested some suspects, but because I have no memory of the attack and can't identify anyone, they may have to let them out. My friends and colleagues in Matagalpa are worried for my long-term safety and everyone tells me I'm going to have to move to a safer part of town. This is the saddest part for me because I've been so happy there for nearly a year and a half. If you've read my recent letters you'll know how much I love Matagalpa and how lovely my house is. Anyway, I may have to accept the advice and look for another house – more news of that in time.

The best news of all is the great joy I feel to realise how many wonderful caring friends, colleagues, workmates and neighbours I have in my life here in Nicaragua. Everybody has been incredible, and with everyone's help I'll get over this and be back to normal in no time. And that's about it for now. I'll be off work for maybe a month, so the best way to get in touch with me will probably be my old hotmail address. Also the medical insurance company in Ireland says I might have to go back to Dublin for a European high-tech check-up, so I might be turning up there in a few weeks' time.

Right, I'd better get some sleep now. It's been a bad business, but I'm making a good recovery. I'll send more news when I have some.

Meanwhile, best wishes from Harry.

25 November: Update from Harry

Dear friends,

This is just a quick message to let you know how things are going. I'm now at last back in Matagalpa, but only for a week or so. I will be flown out in a few days and taken to England for further treatment and recuperation. I do not know when I will be able to return to Nicaragua.

My dream of Christmas on the beach in Cuba has disappeared completely. Physically I am feeling much better, walking better and able to go out accompanied, though still unsteady on my feet. But there is little improvement to my facial paralysis and deafness in one ear.

What has helped me most is being able to return home to Matagalpa, if only for a short time, and receiving the love and support of my many friends here, and also the many messages of love, support and solidarity I've received from friends and family around the world.

I'm sorry I'm not able to send personal replies at present. It's still a challenge to go out and send emails, but I'll write back personally as soon as I'm able to. For the time being I'm still in my own house, but because of concerns about my health and security, colleagues are staying with me every night, I'm not allowed out on my own and not allowed out on foot after dark (which is a problem as my house is notoriously difficult to reach by car). In a few days I will have to close up my house for good, as it is considered too dangerous for me to continue to live there in the long-run. I have to find a storage place for all my furniture and household goods. I will stay with friends temporarily until my departure date. When I get back to Matagalpa I will have to start over again and find a new place to live in a safer district.

When I reach England I will stay with my brother Donald in Brighton till I am well enough to return to Nicaragua. I hope I can survive the cold. I'll write again when I have more news. *

Till soon,

Best wishes from Harry

* My five months' convalescence in England is a story in itself, which you can read in Appendix IV

May 2003 – Letter from Matagalpa no. 9: Home at last!

Dear friends,

Yes, I'm back; back in Matagalpa. And so happy to be back, where I now regard as my home.

It's pouring with rain outside the office window. The winter rains started the day I got back, but these thunderous downpours stand no chance of dampening my high spirits. I say "Winter rains", but I should explain that, Nicaragua being about ten degrees north of the equator, it is, geographically speaking, the beginning of summer. But because it rains, we call it winter. And, similarly, in the winter – November to April – because it doesn't rain at all, we call it summer. The rain, or absence of rain, is the only way to tell the seasons apart in Nicaragua. Both seasons are warm and sunny, and night and day are more or less the same length all year round.

But enough of meteorology. I arrived back on Tuesday night of last week. My colleagues had driven down to the airport to fetch me and we got back to Matagalpa around one in the morning. There's comradeship for you!

I've already found a flat, and moved in on Saturday afternoon. It's nothing like the luxurious Chateau Harry, which I sadly had to say goodbye to in December. It's a simple one-bedroom flat in the centre of town, just behind the cathedral, where I feel safe and secure for now. And as soon as I have a few minutes to draw breath I'm going to start the search for my own house. Yes, I'm going to buy my own place and settle here long-term.

House-hunting in Nicaragua is slightly different from Britain or Ireland. You can't just go to an estate agent and ask to be shown round suitable properties. You might catch sight of a "House for sale" sign chalked on a wall or sellotaped in a window, but mostly you have to ask around. You tell everyone that you're looking for a house, and they tell you they know where there's one for sale, and give you complicated directions on how to find it (being as there are no street names or numbers anywhere in Nicaragua).

I expect to be able to buy a nice house for around €20,000 pounds (and I realise that if you're currently struggling to get a foot on the housing ladder anywhere in Western Europe, this information will probably make you cry, so I'm sorry if I've upset you).

Doña Coco, my former housekeeper/laundryperson, was at my door first thing on Sunday morning, the day after I moved in, to arrange to come back and work for me again. She's found another job while I've been away, but wants to hand in her notice there and start back with me next week. The money won't be much, as it's only a small flat, but I expect she'll come with me again when I move to my own place in a few months.

I've got all my stuff back out of storage from my friend María's house, and almost everything is OK. Except that a load of termites invaded a big box of kitchen paraphernalia and have eaten absolutely everything made of wood: rolling pin, chopping board, wooden spoons and all. María's dad said he hoped I wouldn't mind that while I was away they'd used my fridge to make ice-lollies to sell to the local kids. He was at pains to explain that a fridge is like a car: you have to run it to keep the motor in good condition. I said I was delighted they'd been able to benefit. After all, they'd done me a huge favour looking after all my stuff for five months.

The truly marvellous thing about being back, though, has been catching up with the many friends and colleagues I've missed so much while I've been away. Everyone seems so pleased to see me and I feel I've had a real Nicaraguan welcome home. I went right back to work the day after I arrived. We had a two-day workshop on participatory rural community education methods. And of course at lunchtimes there's Doña Catalina's amazing home cooking to look forward to. Funds are short at the moment, so today's lunch was just rice, beans, sour cream and boiled plantain; poor people's food, yet it tasted so delicious.

My status in the team has changed. When I left here in December, I was an official Irish-Government-sponsored Development Worker – the last of a dying breed – all expenses paid by the long-suffering Irish taxpayer. Now my APSO assignment has finished and I am just an ordinary member of the CESESMA team. I just get a local salary, and I don't get rent, insurance, air-fares or anything else paid for any more. It remains to be seen how this will affect my life-style, but I am happy that it's the life I chose and the life I want to live. All I'm concerned about now is that my Spanish has got so rusty (Spanish is like a fridge: you have to use it regularly to keep it in good order), but I'm sure it will all come back in a few weeks.

My next important task will be applying for permanent residency. My APSO visa runs out in June and from then on, as far as officialdom is concerned, I'll be just another tourist. This is a nuisance as it means you have to leave the country and come back in again as a new tourist every three months. Applying for residency means a lot of tedious paperwork and trips to the Immigration Department (and/or bribes to officials). Friends have been giving me helpful tips to speed things up. One, which had already occurred to me, is to marry a Nicaraguan. Another clever wheeze suggested by a friend is to find a local woman who has a baby that the father refuses to recognise (of whom there are plenty), and arrange for her to declare you the father of her child. You then have a guaranteed Nicaraguan child so are entitled to stay here forever. And instead of spending your money on bribes to corrupt officials, you give it to the child's mother, who almost certainly has greater need of it – and everyone's happy. This doesn't really sound like my kind of scheme, though, so I think I'll just try my luck at the Immigration Office and see how I get on. As long as I have a job and money in the bank, and can prove I'm not being sought by any of the world's police forces, there's no reason why they should turn me down.

A brief word about my CESESMA appeal. The fund now stands at \$5,300, with at least another \$1,000 promised. The Great Charity Auction, for those of you who missed it, was a great success, partly due to my being interviewed a few days before on the BBC regional TV news: "And finally ... The local man who is so determined to help the child workers of Nicaragua escape from poverty and exploitation that he's selling everything he owns to raise money so he can return to Nicaragua...". We made over 900 pounds on the day, most of it from the auction and a few hundred more from donations. And it didn't cost me a penny to empty my house on moving day. The money has all arrived safely in my bank account here in Matagalpa ("Just resting in my account" – as Father Ted would say), waiting to be transferred to CESESMA's bank. By a quirk of the Nicaraguan banking system we have to do this in cash to save bank charges.

Even though CESESMA's bank is only two blocks up the street from my bank, the idea of walking around town with all that cash makes me nervous, so I'll get some of my colleagues to come and help. \$5,300 buys a lot more here in Nicaragua than it

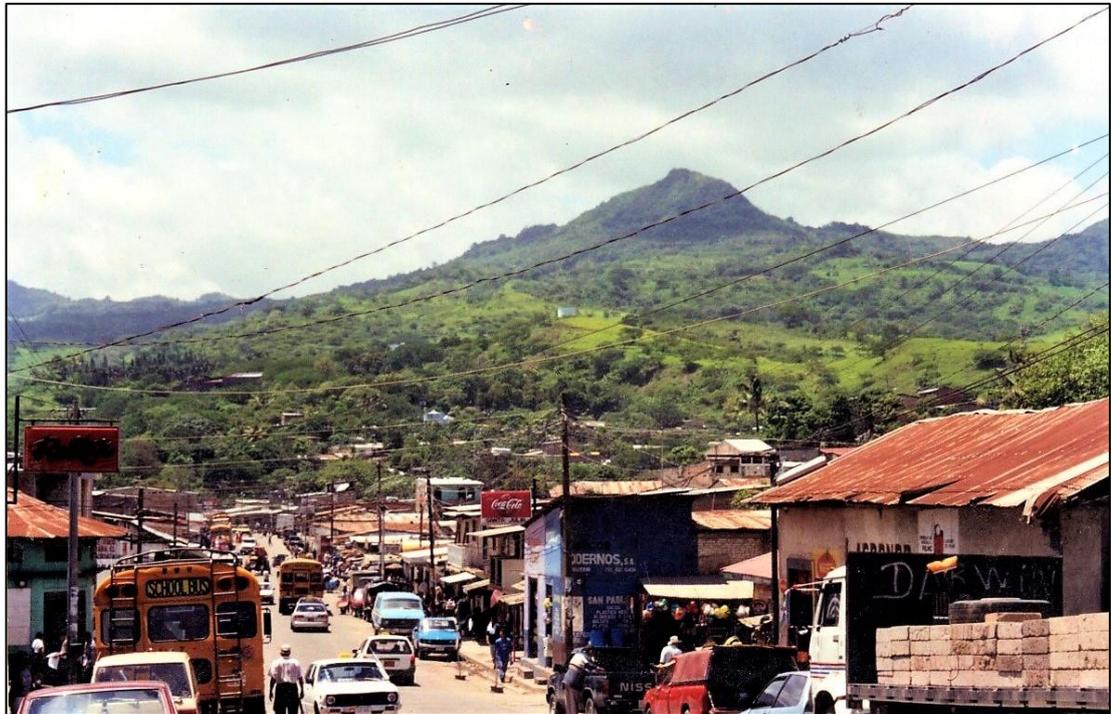
would in Britain or Ireland – about five times as much, I estimate. So my colleagues are delighted with these extra resources, and have asked me to pass on their thanks for all your contributions.

Finally, I feel I should have included a “Top Ten” in this letter. I set out to compile a list of my “Top Ten Reasons to be Cheerful on being back in Nicaragua”, but my first draft ended up just a long list of women’s names. I decided this didn’t fit with the image I’m trying to project here (or maybe it just confirms what you all think already!) so I abandoned it for now and will try again next time. I don’t want to delay in sending this off and letting everyone know I’m back.

So, to remind you, the communication system is the same as before. I’ll aim to send regular open letters every three months or so to anyone who expresses an interest. But if you want to know what’s really going on in Matagalpa, you have to write back and tell me all your news and gossip in exchange!

Till soon,

All the best from Harry



Barrio Guanuca, the central market district of Matagalpa

Aug 2003 – Letter from Matagalpa no. 10

Dear Friends,

Three months on, another year older, and here I am in the office on a Sunday morning to bring you more news from Matagalpa.

My new house

The main personal news is my new house: a small two-bedroom house in the centre of town, which I bought three weeks ago for €5,500. It needs a lot of work – in fact, it needs knocking down and re-building – but my colleague Vicente, CESESMA's building expert, is organising it all for me, at a total cost of €2,500, making the total outlay around €8,000.

One of the best things about my house is the address: De la Casa Cuna Carlos Fonseca 30 varas al norte, which in English is "From the cradle-house (i.e. birthplace) of Carlos Fonseca, 30 sticks to the north". Carlos Fonseca was the leader of the Sandinista Revolution, so I will have an address with impeccable revolutionary street-cred (the "vara" or stick, by the way, is the local unit of measurement, and is about 33 inches).

Buying a house here in Nicaragua is an extraordinary experience for anyone used to house-buying UK-style. The seller, whose name is Mayela, accepted my offer on a Thursday morning. The next morning I called round at her house and together we went to see the lawyer, Don Paco, who, for a fee of about €20, sat down at his typewriter and, in less than an hour, had ready a contract and a new title deed. While he was typing it, I went to the bank, drew out \$6,000 in cash, and, with it safely tucked inside my trousers, went back to Don Paco's office, where we signed the contract. I handed over the cash, Mayela handed me the keys and Don Paco handed me my title deed: A little over 24 hours from offer to completion!

The following Monday I agreed a deal with Don Vicente the builder to knock down and re-build the house, including constructing a new balcony on the front, for a total of 35,000 Córdobas (€2,500 as mentioned above). I handed over half the cash in advance, so he could buy the materials, and his lads started work the next day. I think it will be a couple of months before I can move in, but that's nothing by European standards. When they've finished, all that will remain of the original house will be the front door. There's no architect involved, no planning permission, no building regulations and no design on paper – apart from a rough sketch I made to show Vicente how I want the balcony to look. The men just work according to traditional know-how – although, in a very un-traditional way, everything is held together with reinforced concrete these days to protect against earthquakes, hurricanes etc.

The wait is not too bad, as I've got my flat fairly organised at last, having acquired a rack to hang all my clothes on, and had a local carpenter knock me up a kitchen unit. Water comes only rarely, and often in the middle of the night, so I have to fetch it up in buckets from the communal tap in the courtyard (or collect it as it streams off the tin roof during the regular tropical downpours). It's amazing how you get used to this. If my flat were in the UK, it would be on the front of the local paper as a shocking example of the atrocious living conditions of the poor and needy (especially the foul smell that sometimes comes up from the drains). But here, everybody regards it as very spacious and comfortable. Even so, I'm looking forward to moving into my own house.

Becoming a Nicaraguan resident

As for my residency application, the red tape proved to be just as irritating as I expected. For example, I had to take my birth certificate to the British Embassy to have it authenticated, then I had to take it to the Nicaraguan government's consular office to have the authentication authenticated (i.e. to confirm that the person who signed the previous authentication really was the British Vice-Consul), and finally I had to pay a fortune to a specialist legal expert to have my Spanish translation of the same certificate officially typed out and legally validated.

I also had to go to the national Police Headquarters and have my fingerprints taken, to get a certificate confirming that I'm not a wanted criminal! Finally, after five visits to Managua and payment of many official fees (but no bribes), my documents were agreed to be in order and I was allowed to hand in my application. I have to go back on 30th September, and all being well I'll receive my Nicaraguan Cédula, or resident's identity card. Unfortunately, this will only be valid for one year, as I still don't have a Nicaraguan wife. However, after three years of temporary residence, I can apply for permanent residence, whether I have a wife or not!

Although the bureaucracy can be annoying, I'm not complaining, because I realise it's a damn sight easier than getting permanent resident status in the UK – as any asylum-seeker stuck in a British detention centre will tell you.

News from CESESMA

Turning to work, all is going well. I have promised regular news about CESESMA to our growing group of friends and supporters in Ireland and the UK. So, what I plan to do is put together a regular CESESMA newsletter in English, which I will email to all who are interested. I also have a couple of local computing students working on plans for a CESESMA website, so in a few months you will be able to read the news from CESESMA (in English) and even see photos, on the world-wide web.

So, with this plan in mind, for today I'll keep the work news brief.

At long last we finished the strategic plan. It seemed to take ages, but, looking at the team's evaluation, it was well worth the effort doing the whole thing collectively, as they have all got a lot out of the participatory process, and there's a real commitment to making it happen that you don't get with the typical UK NGO strategic plan, in my experience. The mission, vision, values, objectives and strategies are very impressive, and eventually I hope to have an English version on the website, so you'll be able to see for yourself.

Now we're planning a series of community meetings to take the new Strategic Plan back to the young people who had such a key input in the early stages. The idea is to create a child-friendly cartoon version as a series of wall posters.

Visit to El Salvador

El Salvador is a tiny country about the size of Wales lying a day's journey to the north of here. In early July I travelled up by bus for a long weekend, partly to get to know a neighbouring Central American country, but mainly to visit the amazing community music project, Music for Hope, run by a friend from England, Katherine Rogers. Katherine started the project some years ago in a rural community called Nueva Esperanza ("New Hope").

The community of Nueva Esperanza has been built up from nothing by refugees who returned home to El Salvador ten years ago, after spending most of the civil war years in refugee camps here in Nicaragua or other neighbouring countries. The energy, spirit and solidarity that these people have shown in creating such a community out of nothing is inspiring. And so too is the music project. It started with a single youth group in Nueva Esperanza, and now involves groups in five communities, with some very talented young people playing an extraordinary range of different styles of music.

Equally impressive is the effort that Katherine puts into the project, spending most of the year on fund-raising and solidarity work in England, with no institutional backing, then returning to El Salvador each year to keep the project moving forward.

El Salvador itself is not that different from Nicaragua, although slightly less poor. There are minor cultural differences in food, drink, dialect etc. The first thing I noticed was that most of the houses still have their original clay tiled roofs, whereas Nicaragua has almost entirely gone over to corrugated iron – shame! El Salvador is also completely dollarised. Their local currency, the Colón, has almost disappeared and the dollar rules supreme.

I wasn't impressed by the capital, San Salvador, which is crowded, dirty and dangerous, and in no way a prime tourist destination. But, I loved the countryside, and above all the friendliness and the warm welcome received from the people of Nueva Esperanza.

The Hunger March

Back in Nicaragua, the big news has been the hunger march. Once again this year, starting in June, desperate unemployed coffee-worker families have appeared in ever-greater numbers camped out under plastic sheets on roadside verges throughout the district. This is the third year running I have witnessed the same thing. The government makes empty promises but does nothing to help, and the people survive on charitable handouts or begging until harvest time comes around in November, when they can once again find a few months' work on the coffee plantations.

This year, however, has been different. About five thousand people, men, women and children, gathered at a road junction about a mile from this office, where they organised themselves and set out to march to the capital, 85 miles away, to demand that the government intervene to help resolve the crisis. The next day they reached the town of Matagalpa, where they held a well-supported demonstration. Then they carried on towards Managua. When they reached the main Pan-American Highway they set up camp again, and this time the government sent a team to negotiate. The government has agreed a new programme of emergency relief, but, more important, they have agreed to redistribute land to the destitute families.

Each family will only get a small amount, but it will enable them to grow some food, and so help them to sustain their families from one coffee harvest to the next.

By heading off the march before it reached the capital the government has skillfully avoided a public relations crisis. It remains to be seen if it will do any better at fulfilling its commitment than in previous years.

Nicaragua, 51st State of the Union

A bizarre news story of recent weeks has been the dispatch of a contingent of Nicaraguan troops to Iraq. Considering Nicaragua's extreme poverty, and the fact that the northern mountains, all the way from here to the Honduran border, are still full of

landmines from the Contra war, it seems scarcely credible that the government considers it a priority to send troops to support the US war effort in Iraq.

The abject servility of the Bolaños government towards the USA is sickening. A couple of weeks ago the US declared that, in their opinion, the Nicaraguan armed forces have too many weapons, and we shouldn't have SAM-7 missiles (which might fall into the hands of terrorists). The government promptly agreed to destroy them. I'm all in favour of arms reduction, but I feel our government has somehow failed to notice the comic irony of the United States telling Nicaragua it has too many weapons!

And so to this month's Top Ten:

Return to Matagalpa: Ten things that are different the second time around...

1. The Irish community is dwindling by the month

With the APSO Development Worker programme now dead and buried, those of us still here are a small and select band. Lucy, who works for Trócaire, will be leaving in September, which will leave just Paul and Patrick and me, all of us planning to stay on one way or another, and of course Miguel, who runs the Irish Bar, is a permanent fixture. I've heard rumours of other Irish folk resident in Nicaragua, but I haven't come across any, so can't confirm if they really exist or are just legends.

I can't help worrying that this is going to have a bad effect on our St Patrick's Night parties. In order to keep the flag flying, however, I am continuing with my personal project of translating Irish folk-songs into Spanish. Having started last year with "Las Montañas de Mourne", I now have a very singable version of "Los Campos de Athenry", and my latest effort, "Señora McGrath (dijo el Sargento)". Although they tell of times past in Ireland, all of these songs deal with themes that are very much alive for present-day Nicaraguans: emigration, the fight against poverty and imperialism, and the reality of war respectively.

2. Social circle now almost completely Nica

A big change I have noticed is that these days I have very few foreign friends left in Matagalpa. I know of no Irish person here, and only one British person. I know an assortment of other foreigners: Dutch, Spanish, Italian, United Statesian, Belizean, but, unlike last year, all my closest friends are Nicaraguan. It's the same at work. The CESESMA team boasts 19 Nicaraguans, one Swiss, one Irish (me) and one US Peace Corps volunteer.

3. No safety net

Another thing that's disappeared completely is my APSO "safety net". Last year, if anything went wrong, there was a well-resourced, heavily-insured international organisation ready to come to the rescue (even if things didn't always work out quite the way I would have wished). Now that's all gone. Nor is there any state security blanket like in the UK or Ireland. If you get ill you receive whatever treatment you can pay for. If you find yourself unemployed you have a choice of beg, steal or starve. For most Nicaraguans, the social security system is the family; they are the only ones you can turn to in times of trouble.

I know I can rely on my family should the need arise, but they are a long way away and it wouldn't be easy. One of the great things about working for CESESMA, however, is the amazing solidarity that exists within the team. We even talk about

CESESMA being like a family (which would make me the granddad – perish the thought!). It is certainly true that my workmates went to enormous lengths to look after me when I was at death’s door last year, and I know we would all do the same for any team member in difficulty.

4. No more big house on the hill

In practical terms, I’d say the biggest change has been having to leave behind my lovely big house on the hill. This was inevitable for several reasons: For one thing, the Irish taxpayer is no longer disposed to pay my rent. For another, it was too dangerous. The house wasn’t in a bad neighbourhood, but it was on a very steep hill, and almost impossible to reach by car. This meant that instead of doing the sensible thing and getting a taxi home late at night, I used to end up walking home at all hours, often alone and occasionally slightly the worse for Flor de Caña.

This was surely a contributing factor to my being attacked and nearly battered to death last year. So, all things considered, it was time to say goodbye to Chateau Harry, and seek a more humble lifestyle elsewhere. My new house is about a quarter of the size, and, being in the town centre, I should never again be caught wandering alone through dodgy hillside barrios late at night.

5. No house in England to go back to either

I no longer have a “home” elsewhere in the world – neither in Ireland, my original home, nor in England, my long-time adopted home. If I can’t make it in Nicaragua I have nowhere else to go. As I embark on my 50th year on this earth, all the above gives me plenty to reflect on.

6. The previous President is in prison

Two years ago he was running the country; now Arnaldo Alemán is locked up in prison charged with corruption, fraud and money-laundering on a vast scale. That’s how it goes in Central America! It’s been a strange business in many ways. Under Nicaraguan law, ex-presidents are immune from prosecution for anything they’ve done while in office; a law designed with good intentions to prevent malicious acts of vengeance by political opponents every time power changes hands.

So, when people realised the extent of Alemán’s criminal activities, the government had to change the law to strip him of this immunity. They then put him under house arrest in his luxury mansion, while gathering the evidence to convict him. However, the police force complained bitterly about this, as it was costing them a fortune to keep Alemán in the luxury to which he had grown accustomed. In a surprise move last week, a judge ruled that prison was the best place for him. As of last Tuesday, our ex-President, one of the biggest crooks in Latin America, is safely behind bars.

I guess it’s good that Arnaldo will be brought to book for his wrongdoing, but it’s also a shrewd move by the current president, Enrique Bolaños. He belongs to the same “Liberal” party as Alemán, but it is now split down the middle into pro-Arnaldo and anti-Arnaldo factions. If Bolaños can pin the blame for all the country’s ills of the crimes of the evil Doctor Arnaldo, he can distract public attention while his government carries on with the same disastrous policies and the same rampant corruption as his predecessor.

7. Networked computers

It was a surprise to get back and find a local network installed and functioning in the CESESMA office; the more so, considering that the office has no glass in the windows

and the kitchen is just a lean-to of wooden planks added on the back. This is increasingly the way of things in Nicaragua: we have the latest in information technology, while we lack the most basic of home comforts.

8. Mobile phone takeover

On the subject of information technology, all of a sudden the mobile phone industry has reached critical mass in Nicaragua. I went dancing at the Rancho Escondido last night, and it seemed like half the people on the dance floor were either clutching mobile phones or had them stuffed in their back pockets.

Land-line phones are still few and far between, and mobile phone technology has simply leapfrogged over the old technology without waiting. As network coverage increases, rural areas that have never known a normal telephone are being opened up to the mobile revolution. If you want to make easy money in Nicaragua today, I'd say selling mobile phones to local teenagers is the business to be in.

9. Nicaragua's seat-belt law

While I was away, the government passed a seat-belt law. For a short while, this led to the sight of drivers and passengers with baffled expressions struggling to figure out these strange contraptions that had been hanging behind their seats unnoticed for years. Now it seems that, like most other Nicaraguan laws, this one too has been quickly forgotten, with the seat-belt only being called into use as a handy aid for passing through police check-points.

10. Price of CDs collapsing

The street price of pirate CDs, which was about 100 Córdobas (€6.00) eighteen months ago, has been dropping steadily, and is now down to 35 Córdobas (€2.00). This is great news for us unscrupulous collectors of illegal Latin dance CDs, but it looks like it will finally put paid to the activities of the "Foundation for Musical Piracy", my little fund-raising sideline to buy and repair instruments for local kids. Still, with the few hundred dollars raised so far, we have been able to help a number of talented young people involved in traditional music and dance around here.

And that's all for now. Look out for a CESESMA newsletter coming soon. And don't forget to write. Best wishes from Harry



My house in Matagalpa (with my jeep outside)

December 2003 – Letter from Matagalpa no. 11

Dear Friends,

It's almost four months since my last open letter. Sorry for the delay, but life just gets so hectic sometimes! I hope you received the pilot CESESMA newsletter I sent in November, so it's not as if I've been completely silent.

So what's new in Matagalpa? Well, I'm now, at last, a Nicaraguan resident. I finally received my "Cédula", or resident's identity card, at the end of October. I felt so proud, and for days went round showing it off to people.

But what difference does it make, being a resident? Well, first of all I now have a Nicaraguan driving license, as a resident is not supposed to drive on a foreign one. I also have a Nicaraguan credit card from my Nicaraguan bank, which they wouldn't give me before, and I don't have to leave the country every three months to acquire a new tourist visa. Best of all is when people in hotels, banks, police checks etc. ask to see my passport and I proudly say, "Here's my cédula. I don't have to carry a passport any more!" (To avoid any confusion, I haven't changed my nationality. I'm still Irish – in fact, more Irish than ever! I've just changed my country of residence).

The one downside I have come across is that resident aliens are not allowed to leave the country without permission. This is a hangover from the stringencies of the revolution, and though there is no need for it, it is still in place. It's just a formality these days, but it means a trip to Immigration in Managua and a fee of \$5.00 for an exit visa any time I want to leave the country.

My House

The rebuilding of my house, which I trailed last time, has become a huge headache. After a promising start, it turns out that my trusted compañero Don Vicente has swindled me out of several hundred dollars through inflated quotes, "leakage" of materials, failure to pay the builders their due wages, substituting inferior materials and pocketing the difference. I guess the temptation of all that money was too much for him.

The last straw was when he stole the front gate, sold it, and tried to charge me for an expensive replacement. This was just too blatant and I finally realised what was going on – better late than never. I have dispensed with Vicente's services and recovered part of the money and most of the missing materials. I'm sure I've still lost a fair amount, as I have no proof of the true extent of his thievery. I trusted him and didn't keep a proper eye on things.

The problem now is how to continue with the work? The walls are up, the roof is on, the balcony is built, but I still lack a first floor, staircase, bedroom walls, rewiring and repainting. Andrés, the foreman, is willing to continue the work, and seems reliable, but it means I will now have to manage and supervise everything myself, which, even for a Nicaraguan resident like me, is quite a challenge. The whole thing could drag on for several more months. You're still invited to the house-warming party, but don't hold your breath.

Harry's New School of English

I've started teaching English again. This time it's a small private study group, by invitation only, that meets in my house every Wednesday evening after work. I have six students: three work colleagues and three friends, and we've had eight classes so far.

I have told them that if they make a commitment to come every week for a year (and do homework), I will take on the challenge of having them able to read, write and speak English by the end of the year. I don't have a TEFL qualification, but with twenty years' experience working with adult learners, and a good grounding in English grammar, it seems easy enough.

I just need to break the habit of speaking to them in Spanish all the time. A highlight of each class is learning a song in English: listening to it on the CD, translating it, practising the pronunciation, and then singing it together. They get to choose the songs, so in the first few weeks we've been working on Whitney Houston's "I will always love you", and Frank and Nancy Sinatra's "Something Stupid". Last night, for an end-of-term treat, we attempted some Christmas songs, including "Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer"!

Nicaragua hits the headlines

I see that Nicaragua has hit the world's headlines this week, with the twenty-year prison sentence handed out to ex-president and mega-crook Arnoldo Alemán for fraud, misappropriation of public funds and money-laundering on a mammoth scale. This marks the culmination of a serious political crisis we have weathered in the past few weeks.

It's all too complicated to recount here, but basically, in an attempt to retain political control of the judicial system, our other legendary ex-president and celebrity child sex-abuser Daniel Ortega did a deal with Alemán's Liberal Party to fix the judge and get Arnoldo out of jail, in exchange for squashing a legislative measure that would have finally wrested the supposedly independent judiciary from the vice-like grip of the Sandinista bosses.

The judge in the case, Juana Méndez, immediately had Arnoldo removed from prison and sent home "for health reasons". This caused such a massive public outcry that Ortega, the supreme political survivor, did a sudden U-turn and declared that "freedom for Arnoldo is not negotiable". Judge Méndez then did an equally mind-boggling U-turn, and on Sunday morning, in the middle of a major religious festival, handed out her surprise twenty-year sentence.

This is just the bare bones of the story. There was also the shock release of Arnoldo's equally corrupt henchman Byron Jerez, on the grounds that he was "only obeying orders" and had helped the police with their enquiries, not to mention the incredible claim of President Bolaños that, although he was Arnoldo's Vice-President the whole time, he "didn't see anything and didn't know anything about it". There was, of course, the usual blatant interference by the US government (which can be taken as a constant here), with threats to kick us out of the Highly-Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC) which offers a desperately needed 80% reduction of our external debt.

The whole lurid story has all the hallmarks of the worst stereotype of "Banana Republic" oligarchy. The saddest part, for me, is how the leadership of our beloved Frente Sandinista – Ortega and his clique – have been corrupted by power and the

struggle to hold on to it by whatever means, and have cut themselves off completely from their grass-roots support; the thousands of working-class Nicaraguans, urban and rural, who are still struggling for justice and equality, but are continually betrayed by their traditional leadership.

I hope that with this latest display of power-crazed ego, the people will finally grow sick of Ortega's scheming, and will demand a new leadership to bring the Frente back to its people.

However, Ortega's stranglehold and personality cult are so strong that it's been impossible for a new young leadership to come up through the ranks. Maybe now things will change.

By the way, here's something else that's different for me the second time around: When I was an official APSO Development Worker sponsored by the Irish Government, I wasn't allowed to express any political opinions. Now I can say what I like!

And Ireland hits the headlines in Nicaragua

In the same week that political drama in Nicaragua hit the world's headlines, Ireland, for the first time in my experience, has been making headlines in Nicaragua. Why? Because an Irish woman has won Miss World! This is no surprise, because Nicaragua loves beauty contests. We have hundreds of them and we take them very seriously. Female beauty is greatly appreciated here; cultivated by women and coveted by men. Every public event must have its "Queen", which provides endless opportunities for young women to parade on stage in outlandish outfits and answer stupid questions about their pride in Nicaragua and their hopes for world peace.

Universities even award scholarships on the basis of beauty contests. Friends of mine who are far from empty-headed have entered them for this very reason, with varying degrees of success. Sadly, Rosanna Davison has made more headlines here than Mary Robinson ever did!

Fireworks

Nicaraguans also love fireworks. From early December through Purísima to Christmas and New Year, fireworks are going off all over the place day and night. The first year I was here, I thought the revolution was starting all over again, but I soon got used to it. You could shoot someone dead in the street and no-one would notice, because they'd assume it was just another firework.

Yesterday I was coming out of the supermarket and there was a guy standing in the street with a pile of rockets and a lighted stick. I watched with disbelief as he picked up the rockets one by one and, holding them in his hand, lit the touch paper. As the rocket ignited, it shot straight out of his hand into the air, where it exploded in the usual way. He calmly picked up the next rocket and repeated the process. It didn't seem to do him any harm, and most people paid no attention.

At the main junction by the market there is a roadside firework market with a dozen or so temporary stalls lining the main road. Rockets, bangers, jumping jacks and other dubious-looking explosive devices are piled in heaps by the roadside with no safety measures or control of any kind. A spark from a cigarette or car exhaust could set off the whole lot. In fact, I think I shall go and take a photo of this phenomenon, because no-one in Europe would believe it possible.

Is Harry mad?

Having read all the above, you may be wondering, “Why on earth does Harry want to live in such a place? The whole country is obviously a complete shambles”.

The things that attract me to Nicaragua are subtle and intangible, and it’s often hard to find the words to put them across on paper. But if you’ve been a regular reader of these ramblings for the past couple of years, you’ll have a fair idea of why I feel more fulfilled and more alive here than in Europe.

It’s the warmth – of people and climate, the beauty, the rum, the music, the dance, the romance. It’s the heroic struggles of the child workers to defend their rights, to preserve their culture, and to pull themselves and their communities out of poverty against all the odds. It’s the unshakeable commitment of my workmates to this same struggle, and the privilege of having my own small part to play in it.

It’s the powerful, heartfelt work of the youth theatre groups, and the sweet harmonies – belying a harsher reality – of the children’s music group. It’s the colours of the sunset, the towering volcanoes, the mist on the mountains at dawn. It’s the tiny jewelled hummingbirds outside my office window as I type these lines. It’s the monkeys in the trees, the butterflies in the meadows by day, and the twinkling fireflies at nightfall. It’s riding from town to town balanced on top of a truckload of green bananas. It’s stumbling upon perfect golden beaches with warm blue waves and only diving pelicans to keep me company. It’s the deep crimson juice of the pitahaya cactus. It’s the sheer craziness of it all!

And, to be fair, it’s a lot of personal stuff that I’m not going to share in an open letter – but you can always write and ask if you’re interested!

As an afterword, I return to one of my favourite quotations, which comes from Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen: “In all life there is risk, and when one is more alive there is more risk”.

My Christmas Top Ten: Ten Nicaraguan Paradoxes

1. Nicaraguan oranges aren’t orange.

They’re a blotchy mixture of green and yellow. The flavour is as good as any in the world, and my trusty cast-iron orange squeezer is one of my prized possessions. However, we can’t sell them to the supermarkets of the world, because they don’t look right on the shelf next to all the waxy Jaffas and Outspans, and because they’re full of pips. They’d never make it into Fortress Europe.

2. Nicaraguan lemons aren’t lemons either.

While we’re on the subject of fruit, the large yellow European lemon is unknown here. What we call “limones”, and squeeze into our rum’n’coke, are what you call “limes”. And a “lima” is what you file your nails with (or if spelt with a capital ‘L’, the capital of Peru).

3. Nicaraguan “free education” isn’t free.

The Constitution of Nicaragua gives every Nicaraguan child the right to free primary education. However, the government keeps the schools starved of resources, so the teachers can’t manage. A primary teacher earns \$90 (about €75) a month, and may teach a class of sixty or more children in three or four different grades. They can’t charge for classes, so to keep the schools running they charge for everything else, such

as cleaning the school, or marking your end-of-year exams without which you can't start the next grade. This is why the campaign for free education is an important part of our work here.

4. Nicaraguan “justice” isn't just.

Having described the Arnolde circus, I rest my case. The judiciary is highly politicised along party-political lines, and favours the rich, the influential, and those with friends amongst the Sandinista power-brokers. If you're wealthy and well-connected you've nothing to fear. If you're poor, just pray you don't end up in Judge Méndez' court.

5. Nicaraguan washing-up liquid isn't liquid.

It comes as a tub of solid fluorescent-green paste. It seems to clean the dishes OK, but god knows what it does to the environment.

6. Nicaraguan sovereignty isn't sovereign.

We might as well be the 51st state of the Union, given the abject servility of president Bolaños to his gringo lords and masters. I've previously written about the sending of Nica troops to Iraq, and the so-called “Free Trade” treaty that will lead to dumping of subsidised US produce, and bankruptcy for Nicaraguan small farmers. Colin Powell himself dropped in a few weeks ago, to insist that Nicaragua reduce its defensive armaments to a level the USA approves of. They interfere in internal politics, they manipulate elections, and they are the main force behind the International Monetary Fund, that now controls the Nicaraguan economy, and is forcing the selling off of most of the country's key assets to foreign profiteers.

7. Nicaraguan summer is in the winter and:

8. Nicaraguan winter is in the summer.

I've explained this before: As it's hot all the time, the only way to tell the seasons apart is that it rains heavily in the summer (May to October), and it doesn't rain at all in the winter (November to April) . For this reason we call the summer “winter” and the winter “summer”.

9. Nicaraguan years have 13 months.

This really threw me the first time I had to work on a project budget. All the salaries were calculated at 13 months' wages per year. Confused, I asked the administrator, “Surely this is wrong? I know we have a relaxed attitude to time here, but I don't see how there can be more months in a year in Nicaragua than there are in the rest of the world.” It turns out that everyone here gets thirteen months' salary every year, with the thirteenth month's paycheck coming as a Christmas bonus or “aguinaldo”. I've just received mine, and very useful it is too!

10. Nicaraguan sparrows aren't sparrows.

Hummingbirds are so common here that they are colloquially known as “gorrión” – sparrow. So when a Nicaraguan talks of a sparrow, they are probably referring to a hummingbird. The proper word for hummingbird, by the way, is “colibrí”, which is one of my favourite Spanish words, along with “mariposa” (butterfly) and “trabajaba” (I used to work).

And finally ...

I gave in to progress! I have a mobile phone. I got so fed up waiting for approval of my application for a phone line, that I suggested to the young woman at the phone company that I might be better off with a mobile, and she gave me one, free, there and then. No wonder young Nicaraguans prefer mobiles, when it's so tedious and complicated to get a landline, and so easy and cheap to get a mobile.*

In a couple of days I'll be packing my bags and off to Cuba for Christmas and New Year. You may remember I was all set to go last year when my plans were so brutally interrupted. This time, nothing will stop me. I leave on Wednesday 19th December and will be back home on 9th January. I won't be able to access my regular email during this time, but I may be able to check my hotmail, should you need to contact me in emergency.

Wishing you a joyful Christmas and New Year.

Till soon, Harry

PS. Attached is a digital Christmas card from Nicaragua (*below*). It depicts my favourite Nicaraguan surf-beach on a busy holiday week-end. The purpose, apart from wishing you a very merry Christmas, is to make you jealous, and encourage you to pack your toothbrush and dancing shoes, and come and visit me in 2004.

See you soon, H.



* There is, of course, a reason for this. The Nicaraguan national phone company, Enitel, has been privatised, but there is a statutory regulator, Telcor, which maintains price controls, and so prevents the privatised Enitel from excessive profiteering. However, there is no such control over mobile phone charges, giving "market forces" a free ride. No wonder they want us all to switch to mobiles.

Feb 2004 – House-warming

INVITACIÓN

Se solicita su presencia en la fiesta de inauguración de la casa de Harry, el día domingo 29 de febrero, 2004, desde las 4.00 de la tarde hasta el amanecer.

Dirección: De Casa Cuna Carlos Fonseca, 30 varas al norte, Matagalpa (pequeña casa blanca, de dos pisos, con balcón arriba).

Celular: 852 5444 (o por la oficina de CESESMA: 612 5842).

Aviso: Prohibido traer regalos de cualquier índole (si usted siente la necesidad de traer algo, solo comida o bebida para compartir).

INVITATION

Your presence is requested at Harry's house-warming party, on Sunday 29th February 2004, from 4.00 pm until dawn.

Address: From the Cradle-house of Carlos Fonseca, 30 sticks north, Matagalpa (small white two-storey house, with a balcony above).

Mobile: 00 505 852 5444 (or via the CESESMA office: 00 505 612 5842)

Note: Presents of any kind are prohibited (if you feel the need to bring something, only food or drink to share).

Note 2: The Casa Cuna, as it is known, is one block east of Parque Darío, the main park at the southern end of the town centre. It's about 10 minutes' walk or a 30c taxi-ride from the main bus station. Any local will be happy to direct you.

Hope you can make it. H

March 2004 – Letter from Matagalpa no. 12

Dear Friends,

News from Matagalpa? More like reflections on Cuba this time. As I mentioned when I wrote in December, I spent three weeks in Cuba over the Christmas and New Year Holiday. This was the dream holiday that I had bought and paid for the previous year, when, instead of the plane to Havana, hot salsa and golden beaches, I found myself in a hospital bed in Managua, and then a bitterly cold and wintry Brighton.

In Cuba I stayed with my friends Círculos and Yolidia, who moved there from Matagalpa a couple of years ago. They live in a quiet residential zone about ten miles from the centre of Havana, and just ten minutes' walk from a gorgeous palm-fringed Caribbean beach.

The experience gave me a lot to reflect upon, some of which I would like to share while the experience is still fresh. As well as thinking about Cuba and socialism, it made me think about myself, so I hope you'll forgive me (or just skip it) if it seems self-indulgent.

Revolution in the air

The truth about Cuba is very different to what the capitalist media would have you believe (i.e. that the Cuban revolution only survives thanks to the iron grip of a geriatric dictator, and the people are waiting to welcome a gringo takeover with open arms the minute he croaks). I got the impression that about 95% of the Cuban people are ready to fight to defend their revolution against any foreign threat, and it's not surprising when you compare Cuban society with "liberal" capitalist Nicaragua. I couldn't find a street child to shine my shoes anywhere in Havana: they're all in school. Education is completely and genuinely free from pre-school up to doctorate level – with fifteen pupils to a class (compared to 50 or more here in Nicaragua) and a computer in every primary classroom.

Culturally it's astonishing as well. Everywhere you look there's art, music, dance, theatre, cinema, poetry, literature. There are wonderful musicians everywhere, all on government salaries. "Buena Vista Social Club" has done wonders for the tourist industry – and for the musicians!

There are cinemas everywhere too; great big old-fashioned ones, showing seasons of interesting films from all over the world for a ticket price of 2 Pesos, which is about 8c. The Cuban health service is all it's cracked up to be too. I had a neurological examination while I was there, to get another opinion on my hearing problem. The consultant neurologist did various tests but, in the end, confirmed the opinion of the British specialists. He explained that the reason they won't operate is that it's much too risky to open up someone's skull if it's not a life-or-death situation. It's too easy to do more damage once you're in there. However, he did recommend a new drug, which he says will increase the (small) possibility that the damaged nerves may one day heal of their own accord. Being a tourist, this cost me \$25, but if I was a Cuban, it would all have been free.

I was taken unawares by the style and grandeur of Old Havana. I hadn't realised what a wealthy city it was in colonial times; all built on the backs of enslaved Africans, of course, and subsequently maintained in grand style by US-sponsored gambling, booze,

gangsterism and prostitution – until Fidel and Che arrived, that is. I've seen nothing like it in Central America. It reminded me more of an old Spanish city, like Barcelona or Cadiz. Much of it is in a bad way now, but, with the tourist boom, the government now has the funds, and a strong incentive, to undertake massive restoration works. Some parts have been tastefully restored to their old colonial splendour, but there's a lot more to do.

Of course Cuba is not paradise. Public transport is appalling: ridiculously cheap, but insufficient to meet the demand. Queuing for buses has developed its own social etiquette to make sure everyone gets on in the correct order. The biggest problem, however, seems to be food production, and it's made worse by dollarisation, causing divisions in society between those who have access to dollars and those who don't. You can buy anything you want in dollar supermarkets, but this is beyond the reach of most Cubans.

The food available in the local market for local currency is very limited. Unlike Nicaragua, nobody goes hungry, because everybody gets a fixed ration of basic foodstuffs at subsidised prices, children get free milk every day etc. However, if you want to vary your diet, this means buying food on the open market, which is a challenge on a basic Cuban salary.

So, would you go and live there?

Comparing the organised, humane, educated and cultured (albeit often inefficient) Cuban society with the unjust chaos that is “liberal” capitalist Nicaragua gave me food for thought. Cuba represents many of the things I am working for in Nicaragua: quality education, children's rights, social justice, a society that recognises the central role of culture and creativity in human development. Indeed, these are things I have worked for one way or another all my adult life.

So, would I choose to move from Nicaragua to Cuba, like my friends Círculos and Yolidia have done? No, I wouldn't. I prefer crazy disorganised Nicaragua, with all its poverty, violence, exploitation and inequality, to secure, orderly, equitable Cuba. “But why?” I ask myself. “Surely a real socialist would prefer to live in a real socialist utopia, rather than a diseased capitalist disaster-area like Nicaragua”.

I've thought a lot about this question, and I think the answer is I'm too set in my ways. For 27 years I've worked to open up possibilities of building a different kind of society. I don't have the arrogance to say I wanted to change the world, but I've wanted the world to change, and I've wanted to be involved when it happened!

“Revolution” for me means the struggle to turn things upside down; a fundamental and radical change in society. Everywhere I've ever been before, that's what “Revolution” means. In Cuba, however, “Revolution” means just the opposite. It means striving to keep things the way they are; defending what we've got. It means working to improve administrative and productive efficiency, but beyond that, avoiding all social change.

And that's why I will stay in Nicaragua, and won't be moving to Cuba. I will carry on working with local people struggling to change the system and build a better world, because that's what I'm used to. Working to defend and maintain the system, which is what good revolutionaries do in Cuba, would be an alien world to me. To put it another way, being “anti-establishment” is so deeply ingrained, I just wouldn't know how to be pro-establishment.

The strange case of Ernie Lynch (a.k.a. Che Guevara)

The case of Che Guevara comes to mind (as it always does in Cuba!). I'm not going to compare myself with Che (for one thing, he was a warrior, and I'm a campaigner for non-violence), but in this respect his example is pertinent: After playing a blinder as Fidel's right-hand man in the Cuban revolution, he became a national hero and was given all kinds of top government jobs, even being made head of the National Bank. However, he quickly got bored with life in post-revolution Cuba. As soon as he heard that the Bolivian peasants were thinking of organising their own revolution, he couldn't wait to pack his bags and be off to Bolivia to start all over again.

When asked, in a 1969 interview, why his son was like this, Che's father, Ernesto Guevara Lynch made the following observation: "The first thing to note is that in my son's veins flowed the blood of the Irish rebels. Che inherited some of the features of our restless ancestors. There was something in his nature which drew him to distant wandering, dangerous adventures and new ideas".

(Historical note: In case anyone out there didn't know, Che's granny, Anna Isabel Lynch, was from County Galway).

I'd welcome your comments. And that's all I have to say about Cuba – except, of course for my Cuban Top Ten:

The Cuban People's Top Ten Musical Compositions of the Twentieth Century

(According to a recent survey)

1. "Yolanda" by Pablo Milanés
2. "Guantanamera" by Joséíto Fernández
3. "Unicornio" by Silvio Rodríguez
4. "Dos Gardenias" by Isolina Carrillo
5. "Lágrimas Negras" by Miguel Matamoros
6. "Longina" by Manuel Corona
7. "Nosotros" by Pedro Junco jr.
8. "El Manisero" by Moisés Simons
9. "La Gloria eres Tú" by José Antonio Méndez
10. "La Engañadora" by Enrique Jorrín

The news from Matagalpa will follow soon. Although you should already have received an invitation to my house-warming party, from which you will have deduced that I am in my new house at last. Yes, I'm a genuine Nicaraguan owner-occupier! Till soon,

Harry



Children in old Havana.

May 2004 Letter from Matagalpa no. 13

Dear Friends,

Next week is the third anniversary of my arrival in Matagalpa on 28th May 2001, so as good a time as any to update you on how life is going here.

My House

I'm now very settled and happy in my new house, the difficulties with the re-building well behind me. I suppose I should try to describe it. It's a narrow two-storey town house squashed between two others. In fact it used to be part of one of the neighbouring houses until a strapped-for-cash owner sold it off a few years ago. Now that I have rebuilt it there is very little left of the old house – just some parts of the original walls. It is built mainly of concrete blocks within a framework of reinforced concrete beams, which hopefully make it reasonably earthquake and hurricane-resistant. The whole house is painted white inside and out.

The floor is ceramic tile downstairs and bare natural wood upstairs. The roof is standard Nicaraguan corrugated iron (or “zinc” as it's called here). You enter through a big wooden double door right off the street, and the whole downstairs is one long thin open space, apart from a tiny bathroom in the far corner. I have divided this space with curtains to make a living-room area and a dining / kitchen area. A steep exposed staircase leads to the landing which is currently empty but zoned as office-space. Off this there is a small spare bedroom at the back and my bedroom at the front. My bedroom opens on to the balcony and a view over the roofs of the houses in front to the mountains beyond. I'm planning to add lots of plants to the balcony to make up for the lack of a garden or patio.

What else can I tell you about my house? It's a nice quiet street, middle class by Matagalpa standards, and just one block from Parque Darío, the southernmost of the two town squares, so I'm just five minutes from the High Street. The little house where Comandante Carlos Fonseca was born, now a museum, stands on the corner a few yards south. There's a communal night-watchman service, to which I contribute 50 Córdobas a fortnight (about €3.00), so I don't have to worry about break-ins. I have running water almost all the time, thanks to Matagalpa's new German-financed water system, and electricity with only occasional power cuts. I even have a home phone. Doña Coco, my long-serving house-keeper laundryperson still comes three mornings a week and keeps the place spotless, and my shirts neatly ironed.

Since I moved in in mid-February the house has had quite an effect on my lifestyle. I'm more of a stay-at-home, and have even become quite house-proud. For example I went all the way to Masaya on the bus (a town a hundred miles away famous as the arts and crafts capital of Nicaragua) just to buy some hand-woven curtain material and a traditional street-trader's basket to turn into a lamp-shade. And very nice it looks too! The balcony, with its elegant stained-glass wall-lamps and informal low-level seating (i.e. blue cotton covered foam mattresses) is my main living space, just as it was in the sadly-missed Chateau Harry of times-gone-by.

I no longer feel the urge to go out partying at every opportunity. Most evenings I stay at home; cook, read, listen to music, play the guitar, or friends come round to chat, sing and drink a few cold beers, the odd glass of rum, or maybe a Margarita.

Being contented in my new house is one cause of this change, but another, more profound, is the long-term effect of the injuries I suffered eighteen months ago; in particular, the permanent deafness in one ear. I can no longer maintain a conversation in a noisy setting, or anywhere where there is loud background music – and that means nearly everywhere in urban Nicaragua.

I can go to a discoteca to dance, but there's no point trying to meet or talk to anyone off the dance-floor. What I find particularly frustrating is that when I can't make out what people are saying, they usually assume it's because I'm a sad foreigner who can't speak Spanish. I want to shout at them, "I can understand you perfectly well. I'm just a little deaf. Can you shout louder?" At home on my balcony I can control the volume of the music.

Traveller's Tales: To Río San Juan in a truckload of gravel

Last month was Semana Santa, the national Easter break, and I had the whole week off. I set out alone to discover the Río San Juan, the beautiful wide river that links Lake Nicaragua to the Caribbean, and also marks the border with Costa Rica, deep in the inaccessible forests of the distant south. The story of my journey typifies the ups and downs of travel in rural Nicaragua.

I didn't have the fare for the tiny aeroplane that does the short hop from Managua every other day, so first I headed for Granada, where there's a boat that does the 16-hour overnight trip the length of Lake Nicaragua to the little river-port of San Carlos twice a week. When I got to the jetty, there was a notice chalked up to say that, it being Semana Santa, there would be no boat till the following Monday. I spent the night in Granada and headed back to the capital. I went to the bus station where I was told that, it being Semana Santa, there was no bus to San Carlos till Saturday.

There was, however, a bus that could take me about half way. The bus inspector suggested I take that and "try my luck" – so I did. Four hours later the bus dropped me at a deserted road junction in the middle of nowhere. I waited about an hour and a half but there was not one vehicle going my way. It was half past three and I was still six hours from San Carlos. Eventually a lorry stopped and picked me up. I travelled six hours over a rough dirt road in the back of a lorry full of gravel, and arrived in San Carlos at 10.30 that night.

Bright and early the next morning I went down to the quay to find a boat that would take me down the river. I should have known better. "It's Semana Santa", they told me, "No boats today!" But then I had the good fortune to run into Don Yaro.

Yaro, who claims to be descended from a French Count on his father's side, was head of the Sandinista army in Río San Juan during the war. After the war he left the army and bought a plot of land on the river-bank in the middle of nowhere about three hours' boat-ride down the river. Being a veterinarian by training, he started a business breeding exotic reptiles and exporting them to Europe. I was astonished to hear that there are people in Germany who will pay \$50 for a Nicaraguan tree frog. The business is licensed and inspected. The animals are bred for export and no rare species are taken from the wild.

Yaro made a lot of money from his snakes, frogs and lizards (and a side-line in giant tarantulas, he told me). He also got a lot of visitors. Eventually a friend said to him, "Yaro, you need to open a guest-house here. If you don't do something, you won't have room to sleep in your own house". So he did.

Yaro took me and another stranded traveller down the river in his little motor-boat to his guest-house “Sábalos Lodge”. It was amazing – a tropical riverside paradise, built of local wood and bamboo, roofed with palm leaves. He has solar panels to power the freezer, and is experimenting with a home-made hydro-electric generator using the mighty river current to light the guest-rooms. Your lunch is swimming in a nearby fish-pond. I spent a whole day lying in a hammock watching the river flow.

The next day a boat passed and I finally made it to my destination, the little riverside settlement of El Castillo de la Concepción. This lovely little town is dominated by a forbidding seventeenth century castle built by the Spanish to stop British buccaneers (such as the legendary Henry Morgan of Captain Morgan Rum fame) sailing up the river and sacking the wealthy colonial city of Granada on far shore of Lake Nicaragua. There’s a little museum in the castle with bloodcurdling tales of piracy and pillage on the Spanish Main. El Castillo would be a wonderful tourist attraction if it weren’t so damned hard to get to. You feel a sense of achievement at having finally made it.

I would like to have continued down the river another day’s journey to the Caribbean, but my time had run out and I had to get back to Matagalpa. The journey back proved just as fraught – though not quite as long-drawn-out. The one scheduled boat left at 5.30 am, half an hour ahead of schedule, leaving me and four other travellers stranded on the quayside. I was ready to put my head in my hands and cry, but my fellow travellers had a better idea. At great expense we chartered a fast motorboat and set off in pursuit. A couple of hours later we caught up with the river-bus in mid river, and thus finally made it back to San Carlos. From there my new friends offered me a lift to the San Benito junction on the main highway, where I was just in time to catch a bus, which in turn got me to Sébaco just in time for the last bus to Matagalpa. And I made it to work on time on Monday morning!

Politics

Writing about Nicaraguan politics is depressing. If you’re not interested in Latin American politics, I suggest you don’t even bother to read this bit.

The country is sinking into a swamp of political machination, in-fighting and corruption. The Arnoldo case has split the governing right-wing pro-US liberals into two parties: the Arnoldistas, die-hard supporters of ex-president and convicted felon Arnoldo Alemán, and the Bolañistas, supporters of President Bolaños.

The Arnoldistas have only one policy objective: get The Leader out of jail, and no scruples about how they do it. Judges have been attacked and threatened, as Arnoldo’s sycophants present increasingly brazen demands for amnesties, pardons and ridiculous law reforms.

One of these was a claim that, under Nicaraguan law, only drug traffickers can be charged with money-laundering, and since Arnoldo wasn’t a drug-trafficker (at least not to public knowledge) his multi-million Panamanian money-laundering wasn’t a crime! The latest is a proposal to make a new law that all criminal ex-presidents have to be placed under house arrest and not put in prison (so even his supporters now admit he’s a crook).

President Bolaños appears weak, ineffective, and more than ever in love with his Gringo overlords. When he was asked to comment on the shocking revelations of US atrocities against Iraqi prisoners, he said he thought it was disgusting that such photographs should be printed in Nicaraguan newspapers. He didn’t have a word of criticism for the perpetrators of the outrage or their masters.

And the Sandinistas? Same as ever, I'm afraid. Daniel Ortega and his in-group, always looking for the political advantage, make a dirty deal with the Arnoldistas one week, and with the Bolañistas the next. They too only have one political objective: get back into power, whatever it takes.

With the three main parties throwing their weight about in public and conniving behind the scenes, the National Assembly (Dail/Parliament) is paralysed. No one has a majority, and no new law can even get discussed unless it's the result of an under-the-table stitch-up between two of the party leaderships. The Deputies have been drawing huge salaries to do nothing for the past three months.

With so-called "liberal democracy" such a total failure, we desperately need another revolution. The last one was a great success, but sadly its US-engineered aftermath caused so much pain and suffering that no-one is keen to start the process all over again. If only Daniel could be persuaded to graciously accept a well-earned early retirement, so the Frente could regenerate itself from the grass-roots up.

The Plantones: Fourth time around

Every year I find myself writing the same shameful story. The plantones are back: the roadside encampments of destitute and desperate landless coffee workers and their families, who appear at the main road junctions round here a couple of months after the end of the coffee harvest every year. This is the fourth time I have watched these camps mushroom along the roadside on my daily journey to work. But this year they have started to arrive earlier, and there are more of them.

Last year they organised and set off on a march to the capital. Government representatives met them half way and made a deal to provide temporary employment on public works (echoes of the Irish potato famine), and distribute land to the worst-affected families. Of course the government reneged on the deal. Who would have expected otherwise?

So, twelve months later here we are again. Once again the people have organised themselves and set off on a march to Managua. Once again government representatives have persuaded them to stop in their tracks in expectation of a new deal – or at least the fulfillment of the old deal. About 5,000 people have now been camped out for several weeks in a huge makeshift black plastic township along the roadside about 20 miles the far side of Matagalpa. "Negotiations" over land reform continue. Will the people allow themselves to be conned again by smooth-talking government officials? Will their leaders betray them again? Will all sides seek to manipulate the people's suffering for political advantage as usual? Will I be writing the same story for a fifth time in May 2005? I don't know.

Work

All is going well at CESESMA. Now that the strategic planning phase is out of the way, the main focus of my work has changed again. I'm back to being a training specialist, which is what I prefer.

A couple of months ago we got confirmation of three years' financial support from Ireland Aid for our Organisational Strengthening programme, so I have my work cut out for the next three years; first, developing and strengthening the team; second, developing and strengthening the organisational structure, and third, working to improve our long-term financial sustainability. The programme also includes funding for a new office building, so we should be moving later in the year. Whilst it will be

great to have an adequate office-base for a change, it will be impossible to find a more beautiful and tranquil spot than our present forest location. The team development side involves a full programme of in-house training and also wonderful opportunities for my colleagues to undertake university studies at the Irish taxpayer's expense. We have seven people taking degree courses on Saturdays (sociology, rural development, social work, accountancy etc), and the rest are on technical diploma courses (agronomy, woodwork, health promotion).

As part of this massive effort of self-improvement, six of us have just started a professional graphic design course. We are learning Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator and Quark Express, the idea being that we will subsequently use these skills in the production of high-quality training resources, which we will market throughout Latin America as part of our sustainability programme. The downside is that the course takes place in Managua on Sunday mornings. This involves getting up before dawn and heading off to Managua in the back of the pick-up at 6.30 every Sunday morning for six months. This not only robs me of my peaceful Sunday mornings, but also ruins my Saturday night. Even worse it means I won't have a free week-end to go to the beach until September. Maybe it's a good thing that I have become more of a stay-at-home.

Another exciting development is that I have taken on joint responsibility for redesigning the training course for the promotores/as – the young activists aged 12-18 who are the real backbone of CESESMA's work. Not only redesigning, but piloting the new course, and hopefully, over the next three years, turning it into a manual that will gain acceptance at regional (i.e. Central American) level.

I have had less success with the second issue of the CESESMA Newsletter, which I am sure you are eagerly awaiting. The team decided, quite rightly, that we should produce it in Spanish first, and then translate it into English. This makes it more of a joint effort, and a much slower process. Hopefully it will be with you soon.

The Jeep

I've bought a jeep; a 1983 Mark I Toyota Land-Cruiser. It looks like a large tin box on wheels, but it's very tough, goes up mountains, and keeps going for ever; Japan's cheap and cheerful answer to the trusty British Land Rover. It used to belong to a Dutch development worker here in Matagalpa, and is in excellent condition for its age. A classic, in my opinion. I was planning to use it over the next year to get to know more of my adopted country – and go to the beach at weekends. But now that I have computer class on Sundays I don't have any weekends free to go anywhere, so it sits outside my house feeling frustrated.

This Month's Top Ten

As a new driver here in Nicaragua, I've had to learn quickly the basic survival skills. On the basis of very limited experience, I'm pleased to offer you ...

The Top Ten Things It Pays To Avoid When Driving In Nicaragua

1. Potholes.

The few surfaced roads might as well not be, they are so full of potholes. Trying to weave around the potholes is an art in itself. It doesn't pay to go too fast.

2. Mudholes

The unsurfaced roads, which is most of them, are even worse. In the wet season (which is now) they turn to mud, and where water collects it gets churned up and you are in

deep squelchy mud up to your axles. This is one of the reasons why you really need a four-wheel drive (or a horse) in these parts.

3. Dust-storms

In the dry season, the mud turns back to dust again, and every passing vehicle raises great clouds which leave you coughing and spluttering and unable to see where you are going.

4. Landslides

There are two sorts of landslides. One is where the road itself falls away, and most of it ends up in a valley a hundred feet below. Sometimes there's enough road left to get through, sometimes there isn't. The other kind is where part of the mountain above falls down and lands on the road, partially or completely blocking it. Again, sometimes you can get through, sometimes you can't.

5. Street children

This is a major hazard in the capital. At every junction there are a dozen or so, selling cigarettes, chewing gum, iced water, coconuts, stolen mobile phones etc. They run in and out of the traffic, and it's a tribute to their speed and agility that they aren't run over every day.

6. Pigs, cows and other assorted livestock

Ireland is full of pigs, but when was the last time you saw one wandering in the great outdoors? I don't think I've seen a pig out and about on its own since my childhood. In Nicaragua, however, pigs, cows, goats, chickens and horses all wander about at will, and are a constant hazard to road users. If you do have the misfortune to run one over, it's amazing how quickly the vultures arrive!

7. Horse traffic

The horse is still widely used as personal transport in rural parts. Some remote country towns resemble Hollywood's version of the Wild West (i.e. full of horses and guns). And with the sorry state of the roads, a horse will often be a better bet than a motor car. In fact, you could say that my rugged four-wheel-drive jeep is just a half-baked attempt to persuade a motor vehicle to do what a horse does naturally.

8. Drunks asleep in the road

It can't be denied that Nicaragua has an alcohol problem. And Nicaraguan drunks tend to lie down and pass out wherever they happen to be when the effects of the drink overcome them – often in the road. As a passing motorist, it's hard to tell a sleeping drunk from a dead body, and local wisdom has it that you never stop to assist, as you are putting yourself at risk, and in neither case will it do any good.

9. Bandits

This one is no joke. The brother of one of my friends, 20 year-old Eliezer Cruz, was travelling with a friend in a remote northern district late last year. The two lads hitched a ride in a passing pick-up truck. There wasn't much room in the cabin so Eliezer opted to ride in the back. In an isolated wooded area, a gang of armed bandits waylaid the truck with intent to rob the occupants. Instead of getting out of the truck as ordered, the driver stepped on the gas and made a run for it. The bandits fired off some shots after them, and one of these hit Eliezer in the chest and killed him instantly. His travelling companions didn't realise he was hit till they made it safely to the next town and discovered his body in the back of the truck. Judging by the stories in the newspapers, this kind of thing is a regular occurrence in some parts of northern Nicaragua.

10. The Police

The Police set up roadblocks here and there and inspect passing vehicles. They inevitably find some infraction of the law – maybe a faulty tail-light, or you haven't got your regulation red triangles handy – which means you can either pay an unauthorised roadside fine (a.k.a. bribe), or have your license confiscated and go through a bureaucratic hell to get it back again.

I wonder if buying the Jeep was such a good idea after all?

Surprise Visit

Late news flash: It looks like I will be spending six weeks in Ireland and Great Britain from mid-September through October this year. This is because my team-mates have decided that I should represent CESESMA at the third “Positively Global” meeting which is to be held in Durban, South Africa from 13-17 September. I argued that it would be more appropriate that a Nicaraguan colleague should represent CESESMA, but they were not to be convinced. The journey will be Matagalpa – Managua – Miami – London – Paris – Johannesburg – Durban, and back. We can only send one person, and none of my Nica colleagues want the stress of the journey, as they are not used to long-distance travel and none of them speak English. I have to admit that they persuaded me without too much difficulty.

I will arrive back in England on Tuesday 21st September. I plan to spend three weeks in Great Britain and three weeks in Ireland, dividing this time between awareness-raising and fund-raising work for CESESMA, and catching up with family and friends on both sides of the Irish Sea. As I don't have a home in either country any more, I'll be in need of offers of hospitality, so you may be hearing from me again in the next couple of months!

Till next time, don't forget to write.

Best wishes from Harry



Río San Juan

October 2004 – Letter from Matagalpa no. 14: Reflections on a trip to South Africa

Dear Friends,

I have just returned from a journey to South Africa, where I represented CESESMA at a partners' meeting of the Positively Global project in Durban.

I found South Africa, or at least the tiny part of it I saw, socially, politically, culturally and geographically fascinating, but I don't want to write another travelogue, just to share with you a few reflections on what I experienced there.

Our hosts, Labby and Nisha, were middle-class Indian academics. They provided the most splendid and generous hospitality imaginable. So, if you are reading this, Labby and Nisha, once again many thanks. They were determined to counter any preconceived ideas their guests might have about poor underdeveloped Africa, so they went to the opposite extreme, taking us to the grandest shopping malls and smartest restaurants in town. Even the boat trip round the harbour turned out to be a luxury cruise. So when, on my last weekend, I managed to make contact with a Zulu community activist and get myself invited into a black shanty-town (or "squatter camp" as they call them), the contrast was shocking. It wasn't the poverty itself that appalled me. This was no worse than I see every day in the poor barrios of Matagalpa. It was seeing this deprivation in such close proximity to the wealthy white suburbs that was so outrageous. In South Africa the gulf between rich and poor is more clearly marked out in racial terms than it is in Nicaragua.

This experience has left me wondering what is the best way forward for a divided country like South Africa. Successive ANC governments have opted for a gradual, reformist approach. There have been extensive programmes of affirmative action, equal opportunities, employment generation, investment in black enterprises and gradual improvement of living conditions in poor communities. What there hasn't been, however, is any radical redistribution of wealth and resources, expropriation of white-owned lands and businesses etc. And so, after ten years of democracy, it was the lingering stink of apartheid that struck me more than the bright light of justice and equality: a new version of apartheid, no longer enforced by law, but fed by old habits and attitudes that will take generations to change.

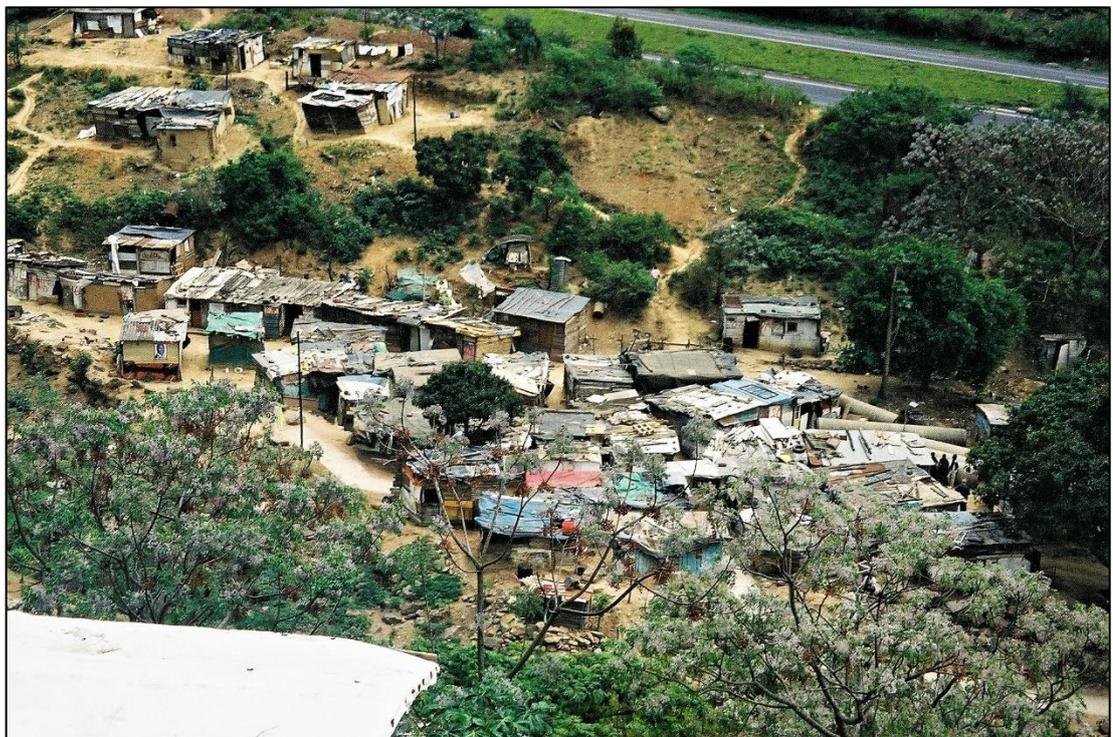
Is this the best way forward? I can't say. However in neighbouring Zimbabwe the ZANU-PF government of Robert Mugabe has chosen a different road, with more radical redistribution programmes and a tougher attitude to the former white masters. By all accounts, however, the country is in a worse mess than ever. So maybe, despite the frustrations, the slower and steadier approach of the ANC is all for the best.

I guess "equal opportunities" has never been a simple matter of taking from the haves and giving to the have-nots. It has more to do with challenging racism, and so creating conditions in which people can learn and develop, and realise their true potential free from prejudice and discrimination. After "The long walk to freedom", maybe it's an even longer road to justice and equality.

And I didn't see a single elephant!



Two sides of South Africa: The Durban sea-front



Two sides of South Africa: An informal settlement in Durban.

November 2004: Wedding Invitation

INVITATION

María and Harry have the pleasure of inviting you to our
wedding

Date: Wednesday 29th December 2004

Place: CECAP, Barrio Las Marías, Matagalpa, Nicaragua

Time: 6.00 p.m.

We look forward to your company.

RSVP to this e-mail address.

Dear Friends,

We realise it's short notice to plan a Christmas holiday in Nicaragua, and when you take account of the cost – about €900.00 return ticket – we will be perfectly understanding if you can't make it. In fact, to be honest, I if I were you, and was thinking of a holiday in Nicaragua, I'd leave it till after the honeymoon, when we'll have time to be good hosts and make you really welcome. But if you're up for it, we look forward to seeing you!

And I really will make an effort to write a proper letter soon. Obviously, given the above bombshell, there's a lot of news to tell you!

By the way, the wonderful CESESMA web-site is finally finished, and should be on-line in a week or so. It is an impressive achievement with over a hundred pages and three hundred photos. It is fully bilingual with instant switching from Spanish to English and back again on every page. I'll be in touch to announce the launch very soon.

Till soon,

Best wishes from Harry



December 2004: Website launch

Dear friends,

This is to let you know that the long-awaited CESESMA website is now up and operational for a pre-launch trial. It is fully bi-lingual with instant switching from Spanish to English and back again on every page, so no need to worry if your Spanish is a bit rusty!

Please visit us at: www.cesesma.org and send me your comments and constructive criticism. Although we have checked it carefully, there are sure to be lots of errors and a hundred and one ways we can improve it, so do let us know. CESESMA is now closed for Christmas and New Year. I will be at home in Matagalpa till 29th December, on which date, as you probably already know, I am getting married. From then until 10th January, María and I will be honeymooning deep in the Nicaraguan rainforests along the Río Coco, and therefore uncontactable. Back to work, all being well, on Tuesday 11th January.

See you at the wedding – or perhaps not! Either way, I wish you a very merry Christmas, and a fun-filled New Year, and hope you will keep in touch in 2005, and maybe even pay us a visit!

Till soon, Harry

January 2005 – Letter from Matagalpa no. 15

Dear Friends,

A letter is long overdue I know. It's been six months or more since I've written at any length. And what a lot I have to tell you!

The big news is that I am, since the 29th December, happily married. And I mean it: really, truly, deeply, joyously happily married to a sensitive, intelligent, beautiful, talented, strong, caring, capable, kind-hearted woman, who loves me very much, and who I love equally much in return.

María and I have known each other almost as long as I have been in Nicaragua, which is 3½ years now, so it is not a sudden infatuation or flash-in-the pan. She is a local girl; a voluntary worker for CARE International here in Matagalpa by day, and student of computer systems engineering by night.

We sing and play guitar together, and it was through this shared interest that we became close friends over the years. For a long time we never entertained thoughts of romance, partly because María is a strict Mormon and our lifestyles were so different, and partly because of the substantial age gap, which went against my European ideas of how these things are supposed to be.

After being in mutual denial for quite some time, we eventually had to face the fact that we were in love, because it was becoming so obvious to everyone that we could hardly keep on denying it. So we started going out together officially in July, and also started thinking about getting married. My recent overseas trip imposed a seven-week separation, which we made use of to give ourselves space for reflection. I also took the opportunity to talk it over with several close friends and family members, the majority of whom were fully in favour. But above all, it helped me to be sure of my own heart.

So when I returned to Matagalpa at the end of October we fixed a date – and the rest is history!

We had a civil wedding (it seemed safest, with María being a Mormon and me an irredeemable atheist), followed by a big dance party. A tricky decision was what to do about the bar. As a compromise we were teetotal till nine o'clock, and then broke out the rum. About 150 people came: María's large extended family, friends, workmates and university colleagues, plus my friends and workmates. María wore a classic white wedding dress with a long train, veil and lace gloves. I wore a suit that I hadn't had on for over three years (but a new white shirt and tie).

My brother Donald came over from England at huge expense – thanks Donald – and was the sole representative of the English-speaking world. This fact itself says something about the life I now lead here in Nicaragua.

María and I are now living together in perfect wedded bliss, and having a huge fitted wardrobe hand-crafted in our bedroom, to replace the simple clothes-rail and plastic vegetable rack that have sufficed to hold my clothes up till now.

Honeymoon on the Coconut River

When we decided to get married, of course we started to discuss the honeymoon (in Spanish, "luna de miel" – moon of honey).

I remember saying, “I’ve never been to Guatemala; I’d like to go there, or maybe Costa Rica, or the Dominican Republic”. And María replying, “But Harry, I don’t know this country. I’ve hardly been anywhere”. “You’re so right”, I said, “I’ve travelled around a bit, but I still don’t know the half of Nicaragua”. And so our minds were made up.

Looking at the map, it was clear that the most remote and least travelled part of Nicaragua was the far north-east; the lands of the indigenous Miskito and Mayangna people in the forests along the Río Coco (Coconut River), which for most of its length also forms the border with Honduras.

It is an area accessible only by river, with no roads and absolutely no tourist facilities, just isolated indigenous villages scattered along the river banks. There is no electric light, no running water, no shops, restaurants or hotels, no land transport, no employment and very limited contact with the outside world. Knowledgeable friends said to us, “Are you sure about this? It’s very interesting, but it’s not the sort of place for a honeymoon. It’s not exactly romantic you know”.

María and I would have to say they couldn’t have been more wrong. It was the most romantic thing you could imagine. I guess romance is where you find it.

To get there we set out from Matagalpa at 6.30 a.m. on a six-hour bus journey north through the mountains over tortuous dirt tracks to the little town of San José de Bocay. There we climbed onto an elderly lorry to continue another three hours northwards to the village of Ayapal. Arriving there on New Year’s Eve, we joined the locals in the traditional Burning of the Old Year and seeing in the new, and had to wait out New Year’s Day, before we were able to set out in a dug-out canoe down the Bocay River. Two days later, we arrived at the meeting of the waters where the Bocay flows into the Río Coco.

Most people who live along the Río Coco are subsistence farmers, as there is no access to markets to sell produce, and therefore no money to buy anything. The indigenous areas are officially self-governing, but in practice this just gives the central government a free hand to abandon them to their fate. Although one passes faded sign-boards left behind by various aid projects over the years, there is little sign of any development activity. All the more credit, therefore, to the one foreigner we encountered on our journey: a US businessman who had personally donated a petrol-driven saw-mill to one isolated community, so the local people, especially homeless single mothers, could saw boards and build themselves decent homes.

Although we found people who could speak Spanish in the communities we visited, most speak only Mayangna or Miskito. The people we met tended to be reserved at first, but if you show a friendly disposition, and a bit of patience, they open up and are happy to talk.

Travelling down-river in traditional dugout canoes, some with outboard motors and some propelled by wooden poles, it took us eight days to reach our goal of Waspam, the one place you could call a “town” on the Río Coco. Each day, as dusk fell, we moored at a riverside village for the night. We had to ask the local leaders if there was somewhere we could sleep, and in every case there was somewhere, albeit very basic. Mostly we had to sleep on wooden floors. We also had to ask if anyone could give us food, and again they always offered us something: generally rice, beans, plantain and eggs. Our hosts were often reluctant to ask for money, but a small donation was always acceptable in return for food and lodging.

As we journeyed along the river by day, we saw tortoises, turtles and iguanas, lots of tropical birds, storks, herons, eagles, kingfishers etc., and a couple of huge crocodiles. There are no monkeys along the riverbank at this time of year. There are various species of deer, big cats and wild pigs in the forest, but they generally keep away from humans and we didn't see any.

The river itself is mostly wide, smooth and placid, but there are many rapids along the way. To pass the smaller ones, you sit in the boat, hold tight and try and keep your balance, while your local boatmen skillfully navigate the boat through the white water. At the larger rapids, you have to get out of the boat and make your way on foot. The boatmen know every submerged rock and dangerous undercurrent, and cautiously manoeuvre the boat through the safest route, to where they'll pick you up again at the foot of the rapids.

Our biggest problem was the waiting. It was beyond our budget to charter a boat for our journey, so each day we had to ask around if there might be a boat going our way, and negotiate the cost of a ride with the boatmen. Once we sat by the river a whole day, hoping for the sound of a passing outboard which never came, but at least we got all our clothes washed and dried.

After eight days of this, the little Miskito town of Waspam, with its basic shops and hotels, electric light and paved streets, seemed like a grand metropolis. And our return to Managua, in a 12-seater Cessna, took just 80 minutes.

Overall verdict: Highly recommended, but only for those who like roughing it. Probably not for every honeymoon couple!

And so, I'm happy to offer you:

My Top Ten Travel Tips for a trip down the Coconut River:

1. If you aren't up for roughing it, don't go.
2. Learn to set aside your instinctive mistrust of men wielding two-foot razor-sharp machetes. Far from an offensive weapon, this is a basic all-purpose work-tool in these parts.
3. Take a reliable flashlight and a packet of candles.
4. Take spare batteries for your flashlight.
5. Take a hammock. You will rarely find a bed to sleep in.
6. Before you go, steal little sachets of salt, pepper, ketchup, mustard etc. from fast-food restaurants, as after repeated doses, the local food can get rather bland.
7. Don't drink the water. Take purifying tablets.
8. Take the strongest mosquito repellent you can get. Know-alls who have read a lot of magazines will warn you off with stories of toxic side effects of repellents such as DEET. But remember, the side-effects of mosquito bites can be much worse!
9. Set aside \$60 per person for the plane-fare home, and keep it safe. It's a very long journey by bus.
10. Remember that your boatmen are a skilled and experienced team. Theirs is not an easy job. It takes three people to crew a boat safely through the rapids, and for every day they take you down-river, it will take them two more days of hard work to get home again. Don't be mean with them. They deserve their pay.

CESESMA

Brief news from work: We are now installed in our new office in the little town of San Ramón, about 10 kilometres from Matagalpa city, so a slightly longer journey to work for me each morning. We no longer have the beautiful woodland surroundings outside the office window; all I can see from here is the roof of the house next door, but we have more space and much better conditions to work in (and fewer snakes and scorpions). We are planning to do some re-building to create more space for training and meetings, and maybe a small internet facility for local kids, funding permitting.

We still do not have a telephone in the new office, which means neither do we have regular access to our emails. We are hoping to have a phone-line installed next month. However, I will continue to use my hotmail address till further notice, so please address all correspondence to this address.

And don't forget our new website: www.cesesma.org. What with the wedding and everything, I haven't managed to update it this month, but hope to get to it soon. In the meantime, I repeat, all comments and suggestions (and donations) are greatly appreciated.

Don't forget to keep in touch.

Till next time,

Best wishes from Harry (and María)



Amak, a typical community of the Miskito people on the banks of the Coconut River

January 2007 – Letter from Matagalpa no. 16

Dear Friends,

It's hard to believe that more than two years have gone by since my last open letter from Matagalpa. The last one was in January 2005, when Maria and I were just married and back from an unusual honeymoon on the Coconut River.

I never intended the letters to end. Perhaps the story reached its natural conclusion around then. Certainly there were a number of factors involved. The most obvious was that I got married, and my life changed fundamentally. I guess I no longer felt the need to maintain ongoing communication with the world as before. That's not to say that I don't enjoy corresponding and answering individual e-mails as I always have, but I haven't felt the same urge to keep it going that I used to.

Another factor was the launch of the CESESMA web-site, which, together with the occasional newsletters I produce, takes care of all the work-related news that was always an important part of my earlier letters.

And finally, my brother Donald came up with the idea of turning all my letters from Nicaragua into a book; and not just the open letters, but some embarrassingly personal ones as well. When Donald showed me his compilation, it gave a sense of finality to the process. The last page didn't say "The End", but nor did it say "To be continued". And so it was that, without my taking any specific decision about it, the open letters from Matagalpa just stopped. For about a year, I kept saying to myself "I must get started on the next open letter", until eventually I forgot about it.

So why another letter now? Well, the recent visit of our friends from the Irish National Teachers' Organisation revived interest in the book idea and, re-reading all the letters, I made two decisions. The first was that all the painfully honest, but appallingly indiscreet revelations about my personal life in the letters to my brother would have to go. My life is different now, and making public some of those past encounters would cause too much embarrassment, not just to me, but to others.

The second decision was that the story needs a better ending.

María of the Angels

My wife's given name is María de los Ángeles, Maria of the Angels, and I would like to tell you a little more about her.

When we met in May 2001 (during my second week in Nicaragua), María had never seen the sea, never been in an aeroplane, or a train, never driven a car, never seen snow. She had, on the other hand, done many things that few young people in Ireland or Britain have done: She had survived a violent home-life dominated by an authoritarian, abusive father. She had worked since the age of seven, first as a street seller, then as a nanny and domestic, later as a waitress. With her own earnings, and without the support of her family, she paid her own way through secondary school. On her own initiative she applied for and won a scholarship that has enabled her to take evening-classes at the Popular University in Matagalpa, where she is now in the final year of a systems engineering degree. At the age of seventeen she entered her song "Vote for your future" in a national young songwriters' competition, and won it outright.

In parenthesis; this marked the start of our friendship almost six years ago. María needed an accompanist for the competition and asked me if I would play guitar. I

agreed, and started trying to work out the chords, but before we got to the competition a local band stepped in and my services were dispensed with. However, we had enjoyed singing and playing together, so we decided to carry on. María is a gifted singer who, like many great singers from humble backgrounds, cultivated her talents in the church before turning to secular music. However she never had the chance to learn an instrument. I, on the other hand, have been playing guitar since boyhood, but have never had the voice to go with it. We were a perfect match. Although we never got to play together in the competition, we started to meet regularly to sing and play together.

María taught me Nicaraguan folk-songs, and I learned to accompany her favourite romantic Latin ballads. I taught María songs in English, and she helped me translate Irish songs into Spanish; “Las Montañas de Mourne” and “Los Campos de Athenry” being our finest efforts to date in this genre. We have also continued working together on María’s own compositions. Over the years we fell in love, but, as related in the last letter, for a long time we refused to accept what was becoming increasingly obvious to everyone else. Eventually we could no longer avoid what our hearts were telling us – and you know the rest!

María’s life has inevitably changed a lot since we were married. She has learned to drive and has learned to swim. In partnership with her sisters Aurora and Digna, she has started her own small business; a grocery and convenience store called “Las Tres Hermanas” (The Three Sisters). They have converted the front part of their parents’ house into shop premises, as it has an ideal town-centre location and a big front room that the family wasn’t using. Their little brother Juan’s bedroom now doubles as the store-room, but he seems very amenable about it. It’s been going about nine months and is now well-established. María herself isn’t drawing a salary yet, but the proceeds are enabling both Aurora and Digna to go to university (Accountancy and Agronomy respectively).

The day before Christmas Eve the three sisters cooked a special Christmas dinner for fifty local street children. They also gave each one a goody bag to take away, as they suspected Santa Claus might not get around to all of them on Christmas Eve.

Although running a business keeps María busy, she also keeps up with her studies, and at the end of this year she will graduate and receive the title of “Ingeniera” (Engineer). This is a real achievement for a little girl who at the age of seven was selling nacatamales in the local market, and has had to fend for herself and pay her own way at every step.

Marriage has also brought María opportunities to travel. She has got to know her own country: Río Coco, Río San Juan, Granada, Ometepe, San Juan del Sur, Solentiname and many other places she had never visited before. She has also travelled to England and Ireland where she has been a big hit with my extended family, and is making plans to go back for a longer stay so she can learn English. María has accepted invitations to visit primary schools in both England and Ireland, where she has shared her personal story and those of other Nicaraguan child workers with British and Irish school-children. In July 2005 she went to Edinburgh with a message of solidarity from Nicaraguan coffee-growers to supporters of the Make Poverty History Campaign at the G8 summit, where she shared centre-stage with her compatriot Bianca Jagger.

María’s personal story, as she told it to school-children in Ireland and England, is Appendix V.

Another Day in the Life

Exactly five years ago, in January 2002, I described “A day in the Life”, trying to give a picture of what daily life was like for an Irish “Cooperante” in Matagalpa. Back then I was living in my big house on the hill, “Chateau Harry”, which I shared with my young English housemate Felicity. Five years on, it’s time to repeat the exercise. What is a typical day like in Harry and María’s house?

The alarm goes off at 6.30 a.m. and around the same time the paper-boy knocks on the door, which at least gets me out of bed. As I put the coffee on I glance at the front page of the paper, which almost always has new revelations of sleaze and corruption amongst our elected leaders and their friends. About the same time, one of the community night-watchmen also knocks on the door to hand over the jeep which is parked on the street outside. I pay the night-watchmen €5.00 a month to keep an eye on the jeep from seven at night till seven in the morning, and they insist on a formal handover before they knock off for the day.

While I shave and shower (with the luxury of electrically-heated warm water), María gets up and makes breakfast. María believes in the importance of breakfast, and insists that I eat something, if only toast and jam, before I leave for work.

I leave the house at 7.25 and walk the two blocks to Parque Darío where I sit on a park bench amongst the shoe-shine boys, and read the cartoons in the paper as I wait for the CESESMA pick-up to pass by. My favourite is Condorito, the archetypal Latino everyman – a kind of Mexican Andy Capp.

As I have done for the past five and a half years, I ride to work in the back of the CESESMA pick-up. Now that CESESMA has moved to San Ramón, the journey is longer – about 10 km – and the roads are a lot worse. On the positive side, we have fitted folding seats in the back of the pick-up and a tarpaulin top, which makes the journey less uncomfortable and a lot safer.

Working hours are from 8.00 to 5.30 with an hour for lunch. Almost all my work these days is office-based, and the new office is really not bad. Although it’s nothing by European standards, it is probably the smartest office in San Ramón. One thing it lacks, however, is a proper kitchen, so we can no longer have a shared traditional lunch every day like we did in the old days. I usually go to Doña Nelly’s diner just a few blocks away, where a full traditional cooked lunch of meat, rice, beans, vegetables and salad, complete with fresco (home-made fruit squash) costs me 25 Córdoba, just over one Euro.

Meanwhile, María takes the jeep and drives through the town to her shop. María does the buying, so her day often includes trips to the local wholesalers. When her college work starts to pile up or deadlines approach, she will leave her sisters to run the shop and spend time at home studying.

I leave work at about 6.00 pm, just as it’s getting dark, and usually head back to Matagalpa in the back of the pick-up the same way I came. By the time I get home María has already left for the university. She has classes five nights a week from 6.00 to 8.30 but, luckily for her, the information technology centre where she studies is just two blocks up the street from our house.

While she’s in class, I make the dinner. We are both into healthy eating at the moment, so these days dinner is usually an exotic mixed salad with any number of fresh local

vegetables and spicy dressings of my invention, often followed by a tropical fresh fruit salad. There are advantages to having a greengrocer for a father-in-law.

When María gets home, her job is to make the fresco. This she does by throwing whatever fresh fruit is in the fridge into the blender with a little water and sugar. As I've mentioned before, María is a Mormon and therefore strongly opposed to the consumption of alcohol. When we were thinking about getting married, this was one of many issues we had to consider. I was not interested in becoming an abstainer, and María was equally unlikely to change her ways. However, we did come to an agreement: When there's fresco in the fridge, that's what I drink. If there's no fresco I'll have a beer or whatever else takes my fancy. We have kept to the agreement and it has worked well. María never fails to make fresco, and I keep my end of the deal. María's home-made frescos are so delicious that giving up a glass of beer or wine with the evening meal is no sacrifice, and it's good for one's health and good for one's wallet.

We eat in front of the TV which is fixed to the wall in front of our bed. In other words, we eat dinner in bed. We get seventy channels of cable TV from all over Latin America, but this is our little secret. The old cable that was there when I bought the house still has a live feed, although no-one has ever sent us a bill. We just hope the cable company never finds out. María likes to watch the "telenovelas", the Mexican and Brazilian soaps that are the mainstay of both daytime and prime-time TV here, while I prefer a good movie or, if I can't find one, gringo detective shows such as Law and Order SVU. We usually come to some compromise on what to watch. On a typical week-night, if we bother to get up at all after this, it will only be to throw the dirty dishes in the sink, brush our teeth and bolt the front door for the night!

Week-ends are more varied. On Saturday and Sunday mornings I go running, straight up the mountain that rises up just a hundred yards from our front door. I don't go far, but the steep climb makes it a punishing cardio-vascular work-out, and the heat makes me sweat. My plan is to keep this up until my sixtieth birthday, and then switch to running on the flat for the next thirty years.

María has the shop to run, but on Saturdays she can often leave her sisters in charge so we can go for trips out, visit friends, go shopping or do odd jobs round the house. Recently we've been going swimming on Saturday afternoons as María has been learning. There are places to swim in the rivers hidden away in the surrounding mountains, but mostly we've gone to a local pool, which is easier for a beginner. On Saturday nights we go to the cultural centre at Grupo Venancia, where we eat fried chicken and gallo pinto and watch the regular Saturday night concert, and later go dancing at El Rincón Paraíso – "Paradise Corner".

On Sundays we get up late and take it easy. Since I have to cook dinner during the week, María takes over at week-ends. This is a good arrangement because María cooks traditional Nicaraguan dishes, while my style is sort of one-world vegetarian. Between us we eat very well, and very healthily. On Sunday afternoon María goes to church, and I sit on the balcony reading – or fall asleep! Sunday evenings we stay in and watch movies on cable.

So there you have it: everyday life in Matagalpa.

A new government, a new dawn?

On the national scene, the elections have come and gone and Nicaragua has a new Sandinista government, as Daniel Ortega won the presidency with 38% of the national vote.

I have to admit I predicted it wrong. I was convinced Ortega would lose again, as he is so widely reviled and mistrusted. However his hard-line Sandinista vote held up better than I expected, and his corrupt pact with ex-president and mega-crook Arnoldo Alemán helped him reduce the winning post to 35%, thus enabling him to benefit from the split in the liberal camp and scrape through on the first ballot. His winning vote, 38%, is considerably less than his losing votes in the previous three elections. If the winning post had remained at 40%, there would have been a second ballot, where a single liberal candidate would have united the right, and Ortega would have been soundly thrashed – which is what I predicted would happen.

This means Ortega has the presidency on a minority vote, but the country remains politically polarised, with the majority bitterly opposed to him. He doesn't have control over the National Assembly (Dail), so he will depend on his continuing pact with Alemán's PLC to get anything done.

What does this mean for Nicaragua? The only thing that is certain is that the Sandinista victory will not herald a return to the communist regime of the 1980s. The first few weeks of the new Government have shown both good and bad signs. On the positive side, within days of taking over, the new Education Minister announced the end of local autonomy in education, a policy which, under the previous liberal governments, had permitted rampant illegal charging in the schools, and so denied thousands of Nicaraguan children their constitutional right to free education. As parents register their children for the new school year we are already seeing the impact of this. Local people have been quickly trained and badged as independent inspectors to monitor the school registration process and denounce unauthorised demands for payment. The final figures aren't in yet, but it looks like there has been an enormous increase in registrations compared to last year. Of course there aren't enough schools, desks or teachers to cope with this sudden surge of new pupils, but the government is moving fast on the appointment of new teachers, and has unveiled its emergency "classroom under canvas" – a blue-and-white marquee that can be quickly set up as a temporary classroom, at least until new classrooms can be built. When one sees how quick and easy it has been to get thousands of children into school when the political will is there, what does this tell us about our previous governments?

Another positive move has been the abolition of the notorious "megasalarios" – the excessive salaries, perks and bonuses that politicians and senior government officials have consistently awarded themselves under previous governments. President Bolaños was the highest paid president in Latin America, earning more than the presidents of México or Brazil, and about the same as George Bush (we should bear in mind that, after Haiti, Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere). As well as his salary he also received a massive lifetime pension as former Vice-President, and of course, a limitless expense account. All other official salaries, from the Vice-President down, were correspondingly over-inflated. Meanwhile here in the rural communities of the north and the indigenous areas of Nicaragua, children died of malnutrition and easily-treated ailments such as diarrhea and flu. Ortega has proposed for himself a salary of \$40,000 a year, with all other government salaries reduced in proportion. Needless to say, the diputados (TDs), judges and other parasites are not

happy about this. It is sure to be challenged in the courts – but that won't be a problem as Ortega controls these anyway.

In strictly economic terms, the abolition of the *megasalarios* is not in itself the answer: it will be the increasing of teachers' and nurses' salaries, fair trade and assistance for local farmers etc. that will make a real difference. However, the *megasalarios* are of enormous symbolic importance, so getting rid of them is a good starting point, as are other signs of a new "austerity" in government.

On the negative side: Within days of taking power, Ortega had signed a friendship treaty with Iran, a government which the UN General Assembly has just condemned for human rights abuses, particularly against women. However, the text of the treaty has not been made available to the media, so no-one outside Ortega's office knows what is in it. He also illegally appointed his wife Rosario Murillo "Secretary for Government Information and Attention to the People", although our constitution expressly forbids such appointments, and took direct control of the army, which was previously the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence.

The oddest thing of all, from an outsider's point of view, is that Daniel Ortega is a child sex abuser, having abused his stepdaughter Zoilamérica Narvaez from the age of 12. He has never been convicted, as he controls the judiciary and so was able to manipulate it to avoid a trial, but the evidence is undeniable. Ortega's version – that Zoilamérica was paid by the CIA to make it all up – is of course a possibility, and we all know the CIA would have no scruples in stooping to this, but anyone who knows Zoilamérica or has expertise in child sex abuse cases will tell you it is an obvious smokescreen, and the man is as guilty as hell. In any other country this would put an end to a political career, but in Nicaragua nobody seems very bothered about it, and it hardly gets mentioned in the media any more. Zoilamérica's mother Rosario, instead of denouncing the bastard and having him locked up as he deserves, married him and was his campaign manager, and is now virtually running the country.

Just after the elections, María rang a local radio phone-in and asked, on air, "How can we rely on the government to defend our children from abusers, when the president himself is a known abuser?"

The response was dead silence, followed by, "We have another caller waiting on line three", and the line went dead. Only in Nicaragua!

Personally I have mixed feelings. I cannot deny that it is good for Nicaragua that we once again have a socialist government. I have no doubt that it will be an improvement on the last sixteen years of corrupt right-wing USA-backed free-marketsteering. There are already signs that the poor, particularly children and young people, are going to benefit. I don't see any reason to fear a return to civil war, economic blockade or the "errors" of the revolution, as the Washington-backed scaremongers predicted during the election campaign. It will more likely be a government of coalitions and compromises, maintaining a mixed economy and continuing to encourage foreign investment. If they invest wisely in education and infrastructure, tackle corruption, and build consensus between the key sectors of government, industry and organised labour, they may even replicate Ireland's economic miracle of the 1980s.

However, as far as I'm concerned, it brings shame on Nicaragua to have elected as its leader a man known throughout the world as a corrupt, thieving, manipulative, anti-abortionist child-sex-abuser. But do a leader's degenerate character and past crimes invalidate the good he is able to do for his country?

Fidel said, “History will absolve me”. I don’t think history will absolve Daniel Ortega.

And so to the final Top Ten:

Ten notable occurrences since I last wrote one of these letters two years ago

1. April 2005: To see the sea

In his youth my father-in-law Don Francisco worked on construction sites in the USA as an illegal immigrant, so he has seen at least a little of the world beyond Matagalpa. María and I snuck away to the seaside one weekend shortly before we were married, and there she had her first sight of the ocean. But the rest of her family, her mother, sisters and brother, had never seen the sea until we all went together at Easter the year before last. It is always an affecting experience for me to see the familiar afresh through different eyes; for example, the look on a loved-one’s face when you crest the last hill and there is the vast Pacific Ocean sparkling in the sunshine in front of you.

2. November 2005: Little Ivania’s photograph

This story started in September 2005, when an e-mail arrived from Trócaire in Ireland asking if I could help them identify three children in an old photograph. They were thinking of using it as a publicity photo in their 2006 Lenten campaign, but ethically they wouldn’t do it unless they could identify the children. Luckily I recognised the photograph and remembered exactly when and where it was taken; three years previously at Santa Martha coffee plantation. Santa Martha is remote and hard to get to, so I sent messengers with a copy of the photograph to ask if anyone there knew the children, could tell me their names, and where they could be found. Fortunately the reply came back: The three children still lived locally, and still worked on the coffee plantation. I got their names, ages and details of their families.

The information went back to Maynooth, and in November the Trócaire people turned up at CESESMA in a big shiny Toyota 4x4, eager to head out to Santa Martha and meet the three children. I vividly remember that day, especially the moment when we finally met up with Ivania, the little girl in the photograph. She had been four years old when the photo was taken, now she was seven: she had grown and changed in the three years, but her eyes and her smile were unmistakable. I can’t imagine what she must have been feeling suddenly finding herself the centre of attention from all these foreigners who told her they had come all this way to meet her. Even if she vaguely remembered foreigners coming to Santa Martha and taking pictures three years previously, which I doubt, I’m sure she hadn’t given it another thought in those three years. The Trócaire people explained to Ivania that her photo would be in almost every home in Ireland, and that this would help to raise a lot of money; not for Ivania herself, of course, but to help many poor children and communities around the world. Ivania smiled her little smile, and looked bewildered.

[You can see Ivania’s photograph, then and now, in Appendix VI]

3. December 2005: Corn Island

By Nicaraguan standards, María and I are now well-travelled. For our first anniversary just after Christmas 2005, we went to Corn Island, Nicaragua’s very own slice of Caribbean paradise. Corn Island lies about 50 miles off the coast; a long bumpy boat-ride, but just a short hop from Managua for those who can afford a plane ticket. The

culture is distinctively African Caribbean; although Spanish is widely understood, the main language is Caribbean Creole (patois), closely related to English.

There are two Corn Islands, Big and Little. Big Corn Island, contrary to its name, is small and isolated, with an economy based on fishing, tourism and, sad to say, drug-smuggling, as it lies on the coastal trafficking route from Colombia to the USA, and there is next to no law-enforcement, or what little there is can easily be bought.

We spent a couple of days on the big island, which would have been great if the weather hadn't been so stormy – always a risk in the Caribbean, it seems. When the winds died down sufficiently, we set out by boat for Little Corn Island, and there, as the weather cleared and the sun shone, we found our true Caribbean paradise. If Big Corn Island is small, Little Corn Island is miniscule: about 2 km by 1 km, and mostly tropical jungle and mangroves. Big corn Island has limited tourist facilities; Little Corn Island has nothing. From the beach where we landed on the West side, we followed a muddy footpath across the centre of the Island and so arrived at Derek's Place. Here travellers can stay in tiny bamboo cabins under the palm trees by the beach, with nothing but blue sea in front and green forest behind. It was perfect.

An aside: We found out that Derek's wife still has the designer dress that my friend Jackie bartered for a night's bed and breakfast when she found herself stranded without any money on Little Corn Island back in August 2002.

While we were at Derek's place, remote as it is, a big surprise was stumbling across a stylish Italian Restaurant about a mile along the beach. Well, I say a restaurant, but truthfully an Italian woman who lives in a beach house with a sign outside offering good Italian home-cooking and expensive wine to travellers. And so we found the perfect spot for our anniversary dinner.

4. February 2006: The Lenten Campaign

Finding little Ivania and her friends was just the beginning. Trócaire decided to try something new for their 2006 Lenten Campaign, and invited four young Nicaraguans to undertake a speaking tour of Ireland visiting schools, colleges and community groups. The young people were selected from Trócaire's partner organisations in Nicaragua; all of them former child workers who, thanks to their involvement in the organisations, had left behind their exploitative childhoods, made a new life for themselves and were now working with those same organisations to help other child workers. The idea was new, and risky some felt, because in previous years Trócaire's invited speaker had always been an adult professional, and an English-speaker. This would be the first Trócaire campaign where young people would speak directly to other young people about their lives. This could be powerful communication, but it would need good interpreters, in tune with the young people, to make it work.

One of the invitees was my colleague Eleazar Martínez, aged 20, a young Promotor and community activist from CESESMA's Yasica Sur team. Eleazar had been a child coffee-worker from the age of eight, but with CESESMA's support had completed his schooling and was now at agricultural college and sharing his knowledge and skills with other children and young people in his community. The other three were Yelda, a former child scavenger on Managua's city dump, who was now a community educator and student of journalism, Marcos, a former quarry worker, now organising other working children and studying medicine, and Karina, a talented young mural-painter and art teacher from FUNARTE, the famous children's mural workshop in Estelí. I was invited to accompany them as guide and interpreter.

Over three weeks Eleazar, Karina and I covered Ireland from north to south and east to west: Sligo, Galway, Kilkenny, Carlow, Dublin, Cork and Clonakilty God help us! The young people spoke to audiences in schools and universities, church and community groups, talking of their childhoods as child labourers and how, with the help of CESESMA and FUNARTE, they had been able to escape from exploitation, get an education and go on to share their skills in community education programmes. I translated their stories, and the questions and answers that invariably followed.

The other two, Yelda and Marcos, with their interpreter Zoila, did the whole of Northern Ireland and also took in Waterford and other parts that we missed. The Trócaire team were perfect hosts, going out of their way to show their visitors the best of Ireland in between the packed speaking commitments. I saw things I'd never seen before, such as the old Midleton distillery, a live senior hurling match, and a winter sunset at Rosses Point. I also saw my country afresh through the young people's eyes, as they experienced things that Irish people take for granted, but that most Nicaraguans never experience in a lifetime: a train ride, the feeling of snow on your face, going out for a curry, shopping at Dunne's Stores at midnight – and all of these on the first day in Ireland!

And indeed it was true that we saw little Ivania's photo in every school and every home we visited.

5. June 2006: Fame – but no fortune!

One of the last things I did before I left England in January 2001 was to submit an article for publication in the respected academic journal "Children and Society". I was pleased with the article, called "Pathways to Participation", because in it I felt that much of what I had learnt from my years of experience in the UK had crystallised into one simple diagram. I hoped people would read it and, more to the point, that someone might find it useful. However, by the time the article finally appeared in print in April 2001, I was already forging a new life for myself in Nicaragua, and had other things on my mind.

What has happened subsequently has overwhelmed me. Not only have people read "Pathways to Participation" and found it relevant, but it has caught on in a big way and become one of the best known and most widely cited theoretical models of children's participation, not just in the UK but throughout much of the English-speaking world and beyond. It has been reprinted, translated and adapted in different settings around the world, and provides the conceptual underpinning for policy documents, strategy papers, planning and evaluation tools from Australia to Addis Ababa. The Queensland Youth Charter, the African Child Policy Forum's participation guide, UNICEF's Children's Participation Project in Gansu Province, China, and the Dutch Foreign Office's strategy for greater involvement of people with AIDS are just some of the documents I found on the Internet that are based on Shier's model. And the strange thing is that until a couple of months ago, working away here in CESESMA, I was completely unaware that all this was happening.

Although I receive no material gain from this, it is nice to know that my 24 years of work in the UK left a useful legacy. It may be that CESESMA too can benefit in the future from having a team member who is known as an international authority in this field.

6. May 2006: CESESMA's new office

In almost six years with CESESMA I've worked in four offices. The first one was our old farmhouse, hidden away in the forest up in the mountains about five miles from here. It really was extremely basic, but it was lovely to be surrounded by the beauty of nature at such close quarters. Of course there were the dangerous and downright scary creatures, such as mosquitoes, bats, spiders, snakes and scorpions, as well as all the beautiful tropical birds and butterflies, but on the whole it was a delightful place to work.

Then we bought our present building and moved in. Although we had lots of space, and the convenience of being in the town of San Ramón, it was in dire need of repair, so while the building work was in progress, we moved again into the little house across the road. We worked there, packed like sardines, for more than six months.

And finally in May last year we moved into our new offices. They are very basic by European standards, but seem like a palace to us. And we know we wouldn't be here if our funding partners overseas didn't believe our work deserved it.

7. July 2006: INTO visit

An important recent event for me was the visit of the Irish teachers' delegation in July and August last year. It was important because I had dreamt up, put together and piloted this project from the start. As well as friendship and solidarity, it brought credibility, visibility and, let's face it, money to CESESMA. The Irish teachers' visit was the centre of the project, and the biggest challenge. The effort I put into planning and preparation paid off, because everything went according to plan, which in Nicaragua is nothing short of miraculous. The risk we took in making the visiting teachers spend a day and a night with families on a remote coffee plantation also paid off, as six of the ten participants later said that this was the highlight of the whole trip. It was quite an experience for me too, as I had to stay there with them.

Another highlight for me was our Irish-Nicaraguan cultural evening. Both sides made a great effort, and we had a terrific night of traditional song and dance from both cultures. It led me to reflect on the similarities between our cultures and histories: the importance of folk traditions in preserving our national identity under colonialism, and restoring it after independence, the influence of the colonial culture and language in both countries, and the survival and adaptation of elements of the indigenous culture despite this, the legacy of the freedom struggle and the songs of resistance and rebellion that are so important in both cultures. I could write a thesis on this. Perhaps one day I will!

Above all, I enjoyed working on the "Sharing how we live" project, that is another central element of the partnership with INTO. The idea has been to enable groups of local children to document every aspect of their daily lives, in their own words and images, then to send all the resulting information and materials to Ireland, as a basis for the INTO primary classroom programme on education rights and child labour. It was a challenge for the children to put their lives into words and pictures. It's one thing to live your life day by day, but quite another to have to describe it. The participating children met with the INTO delegation in July and proudly handed over their diaries, paintings and drawings. Later they sent photographs and recorded interviews. I don't believe anyone has ever empowered coffee plantation kids in Nicaragua to create such a true and vivid picture of their real lives. Now I'm looking forward to seeing what the project team in Ireland have done with it and, eventually, how this helps children in

Ireland get a better understanding of the lives of their Nicaraguan counterparts, and what lessons they will be able to learn from this.

8. August 2006: A new home for María's Grandparents

In August last year, María's grandparents' little house in Matagalpa was knocked down by a landslide caused by heavy rains. The household of eight, made up of María's grandparents who are in their late 70s, and three generations of their family, including a baby, were left in the ruins wondering how they were going to survive without a roof over their heads. In Nicaragua the local council has no obligation to help homeless people, and nor does anyone else – except family.

So between us, María and I re-built the house. I financed it by appealing to the generosity of my family in Ireland, and María appointed herself Clerk of Works, buying in the materials, contracting the labourers and overseeing the work. The house was finished a couple of months ago, except for the lean-to kitchen at the back, which we hope to get done this year.

My Uncle Victor Shier, who was my last surviving uncle, died in December, just a couple of months after sending a generous donation to help with the re-building. The new house is dedicated to his memory. The way my extended family in Ireland so readily accepted my wife's family in Nicaragua as if it were their own, has moved me deeply.

9. September 2006: Almost a new home for María and me

Back in December 2003, I wrote about the huge headache that was the rebuilding of my house. The builder, supposedly a trustworthy colleague, was cheating me at every turn, putting in shoddy materials where I had paid for the best, and pocketing the difference. I finally sacked him and put the foreman of the labourers in charge to finish the house. In the years since, we have had to pay the cost of this shoddy work. The biggest problem has been the disintegration of the upstairs floor. Don Vicente put in cheap untreated pine, which everyone but me knew wouldn't last two years. The termites started on it almost immediately, and by early last year I was putting my foot through the rotten floorboards. The spare bedroom became unusable because at any time a visitor might turn over in bed and wake up in the kitchen sink below.

And so once again María and I had to call the builders in. The Nicaraguans have a saying, "Lo barato cuesta caro" – The cheap costs dear. Having learnt this lesson the hard way, and not wanting to make the same mistake twice, this time I didn't go for the cheapest cowboy on the block. Instead I contracted Ingeniero Douglas, the expert who had just masterminded the renovation of the CESESMA office. His quotation wasn't cheap, but I knew I could rely on him. As the work involved removing and replacing the entire upstairs floor, and also re-building the staircase, María and I had to pack our bags and move out for a month, back to the apartments where I had my temporary home three years ago.

The work completed, we moved back in in October, and it's like having a new house. Not only do we have our beautiful new hardwood floor; we have a new staircase and new internal walls upstairs, a new ceiling, improved bathroom and a new front step downstairs, and the whole house has been repainted.

The hardwood floor cost us a fortune. Logging of precious hardwoods is, in theory, strictly controlled in Nicaragua, to ensure sustainable management of the rainforests. However, illegal logging is rife, giving rise to a dual market. Legal timber, quite

rightly, is prohibitively expensive, but illegal timber is available much cheaper for those who don't give a damn. We paid the price to save the rainforest, but I think it was worth it, as my conscience wouldn't have let me enjoy an illegally-felled hardwood floor, however lustrous the finish.

Needless to say, there's now plenty of room for visitors, and when you come to visit us you can sleep peacefully with no fear of waking up in the kitchen sink.

10. January 2007: Solentiname

In Nicaragua the school year, the business year and the calendar year coincide, and the main holidays, for those lucky enough to be able to take holidays, fall at Christmas and New Year.

For our holidays this year we went south and discovered Solentiname, an archipelago of verdant tropical islands in the far south of Lake Nicaragua which, like all the best places in Nicaragua, is difficult to get to. From the city of Granada, which itself is four hours and three buses from Matagalpa, it's an uncomfortable sixteen-hour overnight boat-trip the entire length of the lake to the town of San Carlos. From there there's a twice-a-week boat to Solentiname. Of course it was our luck to have missed the boat. Chartering a special trip is expensive, but we had the good fortune to meet up with another couple of travellers (Nicaraguans, surprisingly) who also couldn't wait to experience Solentiname, and between the four of us we found the hundred dollars for the trip there and back.

María and I loved Solentiname. It is green and forested, surrounded by warm clean fresh water, with a population of about three hundred people scattered over the five largest islands, leaving a dozen smaller uninhabited ones. People live by farming and fishing, and a small amount of tourism. The larger islands have small primary schools and health posts. Those seeking hospital treatment or secondary education have to travel to the mainland.

On Mancarrón, the largest island, we found a very basic but friendly hostel surrounded by flowers. Amongst our experiences on Solentiname, María went fishing for the first time in her life one afternoon when our host set out in a small boat to catch our dinner, and invited us to accompany him. She didn't catch anything, but we have a photograph that makes it look as if she did, and the camera never lies. Another day Don Martín, our boatman from San Carlos, who was staying over on the island sleeping in his boat, took us to visit some of the smaller uninhabited islands which are protected wildlife reserves. Thanks to Don Martín's local knowledge, we saw the nesting site of Solentiname's rare pink spoonbills.*

We plan to go back to Solentiname and spend more time there when we get the chance.

Thinking of the many wonderful places there are to visit in Nicaragua has given me an idea. I'm going to finish this last letter with a bonus Top Ten, with the express aim of encouraging you to pack a bag and come and visit us.

So, by way of an Epilogue, here is my:

* By chance, the preservation of a colony of pink spoonbills is significant in the plot of Ian Fleming's 1958 James Bond novel "Dr No", though it was written out of the better-known film version.

Ten-day itinerary for your first visit to Nicaragua

- Day 1:** A walk up Cerro Apante, the mountain behind Harry and María's house. From here you can get your bearings looking down over the City of Matagalpa, and gaze at the mountains stretching away endlessly in all directions fading from bright green to blue to lilac in the haze. Bathe in a mountain stream on the way up, and take a picnic to eat at the top. If you get back in time, check out the Carlos Fonseca Birthplace Museum on the corner by Harry and María's house, and the Coffee Museum in the High Street. Follow this with a Matagalpa Saturday night out consisting of fried chicken and gallo pinto, cold beer and live music at Grupo Venancia, then dancing at the Rincón Paraíso.
- Day 2:** Head out of Matagalpa on the road over the mountains to Jinotega. Lunch at "El Disparate de Potter" (Potter's Big Blunder) with spectacular views over the mountains. Then take a walk in the cloud forests of Selva Negra to look for tropical birds, monkeys and other wildlife.
- Day 3:** Visit CESESMA in San Ramón and spend a day joining in the activities organised by young people in the local communities. While in San Ramón you can also visit our friends at the Union of Farmers' Cooperatives to find out what difference the extra 50 cents you pay for the Fair Trade logo on you packet of coffee makes to real people's lives.
- Day 4:** Spend a day picking coffee with local children on a mountain plantation (November to February). This will mean a pre-dawn start so you could also stay the night there.
- Day 5:** Take a trip to Estelí, the city of murals, about two hours from Matagalpa. Arrange with our friends at the FUNARTE children's mural project for some of the young people to give you a guided tour of the murals they have painted around the city over the past fifteen years.
- Day 6:** Visit Granada and get to know our best preserved colonial city. While there, take a boat trip through the Isletas, the hundreds of tiny islands in Lake Nicaragua nearby.
- Day 7:** Visit the Island of Ometepe in Lake Nicaragua. Set out at dawn to climb the Maderas Volcano and swim in the eerie lagoon hidden in the clouds at the summit (physically fit and energetic visitors only: the rest can take a less strenuous walk to explore the Island's natural beauty at sea level).
- Day 8:** Visit the Pacific coast resort of San Juan del Sur and the beautiful unspoilt beaches nearby before unrestrained greed and corruption ruin them for ever. Swim in crystal-clear warm blue water, and surf the perfect waves at Playa Maderas if you have a mind to.
- Day 9:** Take a midnight trip to La Flor beach just a few miles further south, and see the giant sea turtles arrive in their hundreds to lay their eggs in the warm sand (April to September only, but in my book La Flor is worth visiting at any time of year).
- Day 10:** Visit the city of Masaya, Nicaragua's capital of folk culture. The markets here are the place for all your souvenir-shopping. On the way, take a detour to the rim of the very much alive Masaya Volcano and look down into the

smoking crater, and another to the beautiful secluded Laguna de Apoyo crater lake nearby.

These are all fairly accessible on a short visit. I wouldn't recommend really trying to do this in ten days, but you could do it in two weeks, slotting in rest days as required.

If you have more time, and an adventurous spirit, you can visit some of the less accessible places that I have written about in these letters over the years: Pearl Lagoon on the Caribbean coast, the Coconut River, Little Corn Island in the Caribbean, the islands of Solentiname, and Río San Juan with the Indio-Maíz biosphere reserve and the old Spanish fortress of El Castillo.

And that's that.

I don't plan to write any more open letters, but I do plan to keep up my commitment to reply to everyone who writes to me. So if you want to know what happened next, you'll have to take the initiative and write to me first.

Till soon,

Regards, Harry



Our first anniversary on Corn Island, one of Nicaragua's tiny Caribbean Island territories.

APPENDICES

I Empowering young workers in the coffee industry, the example of CESESMA

By Harry Shier

Originally published in “Rapport” the journal of the Community and Youth Worker’s Union (CYWU) in the United Kingdom, March 2002

After many years in inner-city Birmingham, I’ve recently moved to Nicaragua, Central America, where I am involved in community education and youth work in the mountainous coffee-growing region in the north of the country. I hope next year we can organise a solidarity project between British and Nicaraguan young people, but in the meantime, I’d like to share a little of what I’ve experienced of youth work in Nicaragua.

It’s hard to know where to begin because everything is so different. This is a rural area, with much of the population living in remote mountain communities. This Departamento (province) of Matagalpa, together with the neighbouring province of Jinotega, form Nicaragua’s coffee-growing region. The coffee is grown on the slopes of the mountains, mainly on large plantations known as “fincas”. Almost all the high-quality coffee is exported to other countries, including the UK. At present the price of coffee in world markets is catastrophically low. This means there is a financial crisis in the industry, leading to increasing unemployment, poverty and hunger in the rural communities.

At the same time, child labour is a universal problem in Nicaraguan society, with many of the most harmful forms of child labour found in the coffee industry. Children can start to work on the plantations from the age of five, and continue until adulthood. We estimate that there are over 70,000 children and young people between the ages of 5 and 14 currently working in the Nicaraguan coffee sector. During the harvest period this number can double. In some areas the majority of the labour force on the coffee plantations is made up of children and young people under 18.

It is against this background that my organisation CESESMA (Centre for Education in Health and Environment) is working to educate and empower children and young people, supporting the development of young “promotores” and “promotoras” (it’s hard to translate this, as the literal English translation “promoter” doesn’t really fit), young leaders of today who will be the adult community leaders of the future.

The way CESESMA works with young people is immediately impressive. They are regarded, and treated, not as service recipients (which is my perception of much youth work in the UK) but as active agents of transformation of the reality of their own lives and communities, both now and in the future.

The work involves a wide range of methods, including regular workshops, both practical and issue-based, practical work around organic agriculture, traditional crafts,

music and dance, and active back-up and support for the promotional work the young people themselves are carrying out in their own communities.

One example is the organic vegetable-growing project. With skilled guidance, groups of young people are setting up small vegetable plots and producing healthy chemical-free food. Even with most of the land in the hands of large landlords, these small plots can make a real difference to a family's health and finances. First the young people work in groups to gain background knowledge of organic food-growing and set up their first trial plots. Then, with this new knowledge and confidence, they establish vegetable plots in their own communities, and spread the word to other families in the neighbourhood. This is a small but important step in breaking the cycle of dependency on the large landowners, that has brought nothing but poverty and destitution in recent years.

Alongside this very practical work, the same young people (both boys and girls) may attend workshops on gender equality, identity and self-esteem, or leadership skills; they may be learning traditional dance or craft skills, and those that need it will be getting additional support with literacy and numeracy.

One of the key goals of this work is what we call "Progressive eradication of the worst forms of child labour in the coffee industry". This is based on the idea that, in a society like Nicaragua, child labour cannot be eliminated simply by passing laws against it. Such laws already exist and are completely unenforceable. To achieve significant and lasting changes will mean on one hand, talking with the proprietors and managers about how to eliminate the most exploitative and harmful working practices, while simultaneously working with the young people themselves on preventative healthcare, nutrition, education, literacy, self-esteem and, above all, alternative ways of making a living without having to work in the coffee plantations.

It's a very different world from the UK, and many incidents, big and small, constantly remind me of this fact. So, to finish this report, here is one that happened the other day during one of our rural youth workshops.

The young people were doing a group exercise, sitting around tables in the little village classroom, sharing their knowledge of traditional chemical-free pest-control. Suddenly one group let out a huge shriek and all leapt back from the table. A little red and black snake had dropped from the roof above and landed right in the middle of the table. Erick, one of my colleagues, picked up a large spade (we were planning to do practical work on the vegetable plot that afternoon and had come prepared), and battered the poor snake over the head till it was thoroughly dead. He then disposed of the corpse, calm returned to the group, and work continued as normal.

I asked Erick what harm a little snake like that would do if it bit you (I'm sure it was no more than 18 inches long).

"If it bit you", he said, "you would die!"

But the rewards of being involved in such exciting, progressive youth work are so great, that we take these little problems in our stride, and carry on.

With best wishes,

Harry Shier,

CESESMA, Matagalpa, Nicaragua, November 2001

II From their hands to yours, an experience with the child coffee pickers of Nicaragua.

By Felicity Butler.

Mercedes and her seven children were waiting with their baskets and plastic bags when I arrived at 4.30 am. They were excited and made me sit in the centre of the front room on a wooden stool. The children were as curious of me as I was of them and as they continued to stare, Mercedes proudly went to fetch a cane basket. She made one of the children empty their school bag for me too, as no one would be going to school that day. Mercedes was energetic and fussing and I was tired. I had not slept well in the wooden plank bed with the army of animals and their relentless noises. Nor could I be calm about the rat under my bed or patient with the blaring television or the snores of the whole family squashed into one bed next door. I was lucky to have my own bed, so as I brushed my teeth amongst the hens and pigs I felt glad this was going to be a one-off experience.

I followed Mercedes, her husband Rafael and five of their children, Ricardo 14, Myra 13, Sarita, 9, Geronamo 6 and the youngest, Yajaira 5, as they hurried up the steep mountain. It was too dark to know where we were going and the rain of the night made the rising slope more of an effort. To reach the coffee plantations is a one-hour climb through dense forest in the high mountains of Northern Nicaragua. It seemed romantic with the dawn breaking and the silent mist in its different shades of blue, but to Mercedes and her family this is their daily routine. Here 60% of Nicaragua's export coffee is produced and for every pound of coffee that is so casually enjoyed in the "North", it has taken the hands of families like Mercedes more than two hours to produce.

As I followed Mercedes' family I was aware that the silhouettes in front and footsteps behind – quick and concentrated – were a trail of other families. The children walked by my side and took turns holding my hand; my presence made this day different. Mercedes usually makes this daily hike with her eleven-month old baby strapped to her back. Today the baby was ill and was left with the eldest daughter of twelve who is in charge of cleaning the house and cooking for the family. She has an allergy that is aggravated by the pesticides used on the plantation and so does not have to pick coffee like her brothers and sisters. I wondered if she is in a better position.

Mercedes told me about her life: she lives in the house where she was born and has never travelled out of the mountains. She is thirty-seven but her wiry body and toothless mouth make her seem older. She has always picked coffee and is aware she will know no other reality. As little Sarita squeezed my hand I hoped that life will offer her something more. Mercedes spoke about the coffee crisis and what this means for her family. The children too spoke authoritatively of how little money they receive now in comparison to three years ago. By the time we had reached the half-way mark I had also learned of the dangers to lone parent families and the sexual and physical violence that both the women and children experience in the coffee plantations. It is as expected and inevitable as the rice and beans of every meal. Now some farms have women-only sections but this does not stop the plantation owners abusing their power. The welfare of the coffee families is not a priority for the owner, especially as children

are not accounted for or recognised as employees. The vicious cycle of debt, poverty and violence includes everyone here.

By the time we had reached the summit I was physically and mentally exhausted. It was now 6.30am and time for breakfast. I sat with the children on a plastic sheet as the parents went to find out which areas still had coffee. In February the harvest is coming to an end and there is desperation in the urgency to find areas to pick. There was one container and a plastic bag holding the family's food for the ten-hour day. The children took as much rice and beans as they could hold in their cupped palms. They were subdued and ate quickly; they did not ask for more. Mercedes and Rafael did not eat and were already heading to work as we shook the remains of rice and morning dew off the plastic sheet. Before we entered the thick coffee trees, six-year-old Geronamo gave me his baseball cap: he explained there are lots of dangerous insects and animals in the trees and that plants poke you and the dirt falls into your eyes. He works quicker with his 'lucky' cap. I accepted his gift because I didn't want to mention that I was three feet taller and that my height would allow me to escape the unkind world under the coffee branches.

So the children led me in to the rows of coffee trees and within seconds I was soaking, dirty, and on my knees trying to follow their nimble steps through the dense vegetation until we found a space to begin. The family each has a tree and works in a circle: the children pick the lowest branches and the parents continue to the top. Everyone has a basket to fill which earns them three Córdoba, roughly fifteen pence. Both Mercedes and Rafael can fill thirty baskets in a day, earning them about \$6, which is good money here in rural Nicaragua. The problem is the coffee harvest lasts for just ten weeks, so this is the only good earning opportunity for the family who depend on this seasonal work to survive the year. The children each fill at least six baskets a day, which contributes to the family's income. Mercedes' children work to be able to go to school. Without their fast hands the family could not afford school costs or uniform. The children will not miss a day of work or stop to play if it means they risk this year's opportunity to study. This season's harvest has not brought as many berries as the last and the children are aware of their desperate lack of resources. I asked Myra, Sarita and Geronamo what they like to do in their spare time. It took them a long time to reply until Myra (the eldest sister) explained that if they are not picking they are working in the house, or collecting water or studying: there is always some kind of 'work' to do and no time to play. I asked them also what they want to do when they are older. They all replied that they want to be teachers because here in the mountains the only option they know of – besides working in the coffee farms – is teaching in an over-crowded community school.

Child labour is a complex issue based in poverty. Work is an economic necessity for these children, but most working situations do not protect their rights and so they face many safety and health risks. Myra and her brother and sisters have few choices about their future or the consequences that these working conditions will bring later in their lives. The impact on their developing physiology is damaging and irreversible. They work ten-hour days in the blistering sun where snake bites and exposure to toxic chemicals are a continual threat. I worked shadowing Sarita and was amazed by the force of her tiny frame. She gave me instructions on which berries to pick and as I watched her and her brother fight over who was the 'quickest picker' I was surprised that they could remain balanced with the weight of the baskets. They pick all day and do not stop. They empty the full baskets into two huge sacks and start again until the booming sound of the Concha calls them to the measuring house. Often they do not

eat until they arrive home but today I had brought food to share so we ate in the shade of the coffee trees. The children for a moment became animated as together we created a fantasy world of strange foods, games and laughter. But they saw their mother continuing to pick and soon left for the never-ending berries and miles of trees.

I was relieved when it was finally time to measure what we had picked. My back was sore, my clothes filthy and my head pounding from the 35-degree sun and fatigue. I descended the mountain with the family to their wooden house where we found the baby howling and the eldest daughter staring vacantly into the pot of rice on the fire. I suffered a bad back for the rest of the week, but every time I went to complain I reminded myself that Mercedes and her family would still be picking... What a luxury it was for me to experience that world for a day, and leave as easily as the coffee beans for another world where to think, to act and to change are all choices I have control over.

To learn more about how to support Fair Trade coffee and Fair Trade in general, go on line to www.Fair-mark.org.uk or www.globalexchange.org. And for more information on how to support Nicaragua see the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign web page at www.nicaraguasc.org.

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III A Volunteer's Story

By Harry Shier

From "Socialclimbers – webs of significance" published by Volunteering Ireland, Dublin 2002

It's Saturday night at the Rancho Escondido in downtown Matagalpa; a warm summer night, which is hardly surprising as it's summer all year round here. On the dancefloor people are moving to a hot merengue beat. It's hard to keep still with this music playing. At the tables around the dance floor those who aren't dancing are enjoying the best rum in the world, and paying a quarter of what they would pay for it in Ireland. As I'm struck for the hundredth time by the extraordinary beauty and fluidity of the young women on the dance floor, I tell myself I can't imagine a better way to spend a Saturday night in mid-February.

Meanwhile, up in the mountains on the coffee plantations, things are desperate. There's no work, so there's no money and there's no food. There's also no school, no safe drinking water and no health centre. Because it's so isolated, if you don't have transport you're pretty much stuck there. If you have even a little land, you can grow some food, but most people have no land of their own and have depended all their lives on the owner of the plantation to provide food in return for work. Men, women and children, it's the same for all: everyone has to work if they want to eat. But now there's no work. So the choice is to stay put and starve, or to leave the plantation and hope for better luck begging in the city.

But my life is not like this. Set on a hillside, with a fine view over the city of Matagalpa, my house is easily the biggest in the street; big enough, by Nicaraguan standards, to house half a dozen homeless families. But as the Irish taxpayer is covering my rent, I don't really have to worry about this. I also don't have to worry about the housework as I pay someone to do it for me. So I can sit on my panoramic balcony, relaxed and happy, watching yet another magnificent sunset, and reminding myself that the secret of a great margarita is to squeeze the juice from fresh limes you have just picked in your own back yard.

For the street children in the city down below, life is not so much fun. Most of them are street vendors, selling everything from chewing gum and cigarettes to lottery tickets and mangos. There are also hordes of shoe-shine boys and others who fetch and carry for the adult traders. And then there are those who just try and scrounge the odd peso outside the supermarkets and gas stations. They start at around five years old. You can see the children who work on the streets, but you don't see the many thousands hidden away doing domestic work for next to no wages, and you don't see – unless you go looking for it – the shadow world of sexual abuse and child prostitution beneath the surface.

So it's nice to get away from the city from time to time. I spent Christmas day surfing at Playa Maderas, which fits the standard model of a tropical beach paradise: warm, clear blue water, perfect waves, miles of pristine golden sand, awesome coral-pink sunsets and romantic evenings with music, moonlight and ice-cold beer at the friendly beach-side bar.

When I told friends in Ireland that I was off to Nicaragua as a “volunteer” Development Worker, to tackle the injustice of child labour in the remote mountains of Matagalpa, people treated me like I was some kind of modern-day saint, giving up my comfortable cushioned life and heading into the unknown. “I think what you’re doing is so brave”, was a typical reaction. But the truth is that I have never been happier, never had more fun, never been better looked after, never seen such glorious sunsets in my life.

I suppose you can see the way this is going? Although I “volunteered” for an 80% pay cut in order to take on this assignment, my APSO living allowance (together with rent allowance, furniture allowance, medical insurance etc) easily puts me among the Nicaraguan middle classes. All in all it has cost you, the Irish taxpayer, a small fortune to send me here and, if I’m having such a great time whilst those around me are suffering so much, you have a right to ask if you’re getting your money’s worth.

I work with a local community education organisation, tackling poverty and child labour in the coffee zone through education, alternative agriculture and developing young leaders. I’m in charge of strategic planning, which means my job is to coordinate a process of establishing a vision for the future and a long-term plan to achieve it. But here is another of the unsettling contradictions of my life in Nicaragua. Back home I was coordinating a similar community education organisation and I felt pretty “expert” at what I did. That would be why APSO chose me for this post, I suppose. But here I am no longer so expert; in fact I am barely competent, the three main reasons being (a) I don’t know the culture, (b) I’m not familiar with the organisational or conceptual frameworks, and above all (c) I don’t speak Spanish. Or rather, I have made huge efforts to learn Spanish, and I speak it well enough to get by in everyday life, but not to pass myself off as a credible Strategic Planning Consultant.

I don’t have easy answers to any of these problems. But when I heard, a few months ago, that APSO had decided to close down the current Development Worker programme, and replace it with new strategies for supporting world development, no longer based on sending Irish people off to “share skills with the developing world”, I can’t say I was surprised. Sending people like me to do work like this in places like Matagalpa cannot be the best way for you in Ireland to challenge the unjust structures that are making Nicaragua poorer every year. Maybe by the time you read this we will already be able to see the new approach in action.

And as for me, soon to be the last surviving Irish Development Worker on the APSO programme in Nicaragua, is there anything I can say in my defence, or is the whole programme really just an excuse for surfing, dancing and drinking margaritas?

First of all, I can say I work hard. During the week I leave home at 7.15 am, arrive home exhausted at about 7.00 pm and often barely manage to eat before falling asleep in my clothes. I often work weekends too (as does everyone in my organisation; there are no stereotypical lazy Latinos around here!). Although I’m doing the same kind of work as I did before, doing it in a newly-acquired second language makes it ten times more tiring.

I am also very clear that the injustices suffered by the people of Nicaragua spring from fundamental inequity in the global power structure. Whilst my work here may contribute to a long-term process of change in these mountain communities, I cannot achieve anything for the people by suffering alongside them. In fact if I decided to live in poverty to show my solidarity, I would feel a fraud, because I would know that I had easy options, whilst few in Nicaragua have any options at all. So, whilst my eyes are open to the inequality and injustice that surround me, I have decided to enjoy my

life here, learning to live with the occasional pangs of guilt as I survey the golden beach, the swaying dancefloor, or the panoramic view from my balcony.

Finally, none of this makes sense unless you are prepared to think long-term. Development Workers who return to Ireland after two years invariably achieve more for world justice by consciousness-raising back home than they ever did in their overseas placement. And conversely, those who are prepared to stay for the long-haul, learn the language and the culture, and make a commitment to a local project, can go on to achieve results that may eventually justify their initial years of bewilderment and ineptitude.

I'm thinking in terms of the latter option. Right now, I don't have any answers. Ask me again in five years' time.

IV A parenthesis: Convalescence in England

Whilst not part of the original “Letters from Matagalpa”, I think the story of what happened to me after I was attacked and beaten up in Matagalpa in November 2002 is worth telling, so here it is:

When I came out of hospital, the APSO people told me I needed the best medical treatment available to ensure my full recovery, and arranged to have me flown to England (although I told them I would prefer to be treated in Cuba – a world leader in neurology – and already had my plane ticket bought and paid for).

Accompanied by my personal (male) flight-nurse, I was flown business-class to London, a wheelchair awaiting me at every airport en route, in case my legs should give way. From Heathrow I was driven in style to my brother’s house in Brighton.

Not wanting to waste a minute, I contacted APSO to find out where and when I was to receive the top-quality medical treatment they had promised me. They informed me that England had an excellent National Health Service which would take care of me, and I should contact my GP. They also told me I was entitled to receive Incapacity Benefit, which would help cover my living expenses in the UK.

When I eventually found a GP willing to see me (not easy), she told me I needed to see a neurologist, which I already knew, and offered to put me on the waiting list for a consultation, which, with any luck, would take less than three months. When I called APSO, they told me it was a matter for the Insurance Company and, instead of a neurologist, offered me counselling – which I accepted.

Unwilling to spend the next three months freezing to death on an NHS waiting list, I made an appointment to see a consultant neurologist privately. After doing various tests he concluded that no further treatment was indicated. The facial exercises I was doing daily would help the gradual recovery of my paralysed facial muscles, and there was nothing else he could recommend. He did however suggest I see an ear specialist about my continuing deafness, then he charged me £200. The ear specialist did more tests and he also told me he could not recommend any treatment, as the damage to my ear was permanent and, “It’s wonderful how a person can adapt to functioning with one ear”. He charged me another £150.

Both doctors gave me letters confirming I was fit to return to work, so I took a plane to Dublin and presented myself at the APSO office. After a lengthy interview, I received a formal letter informing me that (a) my APSO assignment was hereby terminated, (b) I had already received all payments and benefits due to me from APSO, and (c) I was strongly advised not to return to Nicaragua under the present circumstances.

Back in England, I continued with the counselling, but after six sessions my counsellor Cindy and I agreed that I showed not the slightest sign of psychological trauma, which, in Cindy’s opinion, was quite remarkable in the circumstances. The only emotional problem I appeared to be suffering from was bitter resentment towards APSO.

To be fair, APSO’s insurance broker finally sent me a cheque for the £350 doctors’ fees. And, ironically, APSO itself sent me a cheque for the plane fare back to

Nicaragua. I think they felt obligated, as I had complained that, in their determination to get me out of the country as quickly as possible, they had made me leave behind all my worldly possessions, and someone had to assume responsibility for reuniting me with them!

I contacted CESESMA, and told them I was coming back – if they would have me. Then I sold my house in Birmingham. To get rid of all the furniture and other stuff in the house, I organised a Grand Charity Auction in aid of CESESMA, which effectively cleared the house, and raised about £1,000 for CESESMA into the bargain.

I packed what I had left in a rucksack, and in May 2003 I was on a plane back to Nicaragua.

It's true that the events of this story caused ill-feeling at the time, but that is all in the past. Lessons have been learnt, and friendships have been restored. Sure, APSO wanted me out of Nicaragua, but APSO's gone and I'm still here.

V The story of a little girl who was born in The Clouds

By María de los Ángeles Espinoza Ruíz
with drawings by Harry Shier



This is the story of a little girl who was born in The Clouds. That is the name of a village in the district of Jinotega, Nicaragua, where she was born on the 7th October 1983 at four o'clock in the afternoon, when her mother Margarita, a poor country-woman, was making tortillas in her sister Filomena's house.

When she was seven months old, her mother and father took her and her older sister to live in the city of Matagalpa. Here the family started a new life from zero.



Time passed, and as the little girl grew up, her father changed. He had other women and was violent to his wife and daughters, not caring in the least whether the little girls went to school. Their mother was always fighting with him about the need to send the girls to school. From the start it was left to their mother to do what she could for them, because when their father gave them anything at all for school fees he complained that it was a waste of money. He said, "Better send them out to work. Work is what we are here to do in this life".

Every day, the little girl had to get up at four o'clock in the morning to grind the maize for the tortillas and nacatamales that her mother made to sell. Then she had to take the nacatamales to the market to sell them.



But what is a nacatamal? It is one of the typical foods of Nicaragua; a maize-dough pasty filled with potatoes, rice, tomatoes and chicken or pork, all wrapped up in a banana leaf. They are very popular in Nicaragua – like fish and chips in Ireland



When the little girl was seven and her sister was nine, they had to go to the market every day, where they went from house to house until all the Nacatamales were sold, because if they didn't sell them all, their father would beat them. The little girl wanted to do her homework and to play, but she didn't have time. Above all she wished she could have a doll, but her father never gave her one, or anything to play with. He said he had never played in his life, and his children had to learn what he learnt as a child, which wasn't playing, but working



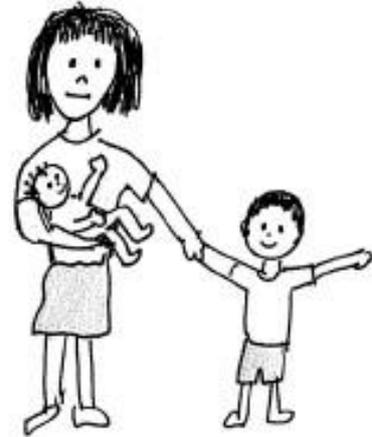
And as the little girl grew bigger, she also had to work in the kitchen. Her father told her she was useless, because a real woman must learn to make tortillas, wash and iron the clothes, and above all cook the rice properly. When she married, her husband would make all the decisions, and she must let him do as he please, because the man is head of the household.

So every morning she got up early to grind the maize for the tortillas, she washed and ironed, she went to the market to sell the nacatamales. Later, her father made her sell bananas at the corner of the street, so that everyone could see that El Chele's daughter worked to earn her keep, and wasn't like all the lazy good-for-nothings who wasted their time playing and studying and hanging about the streets. He said, "I won't have my kids ending up in gangs or getting pregnant or being prostitutes. They know that if they do, I'll disown them!" However hard the little girl worked to please her father, it was never enough to get her the doll that she yearned for.



When her classmates saw her selling bananas on the street corner they made fun of her. They used to jeer at her and called her "Cheap Bananas". She felt ashamed.

When the little girl was ten years old her father lost his business on account of his drunkenness and womanising. He sent her to work as a child-minder in a neighbour's house. They paid her €7 a month, most of which she had to give to help her family.



In spite of everything, the little girl struggled to keep up with her schoolwork. She had to start work at six in the morning, but her employer gave her permission to go to school in the afternoon. After school she went back to work until ten o'clock at night.

In this way she finished primary school and later secondary school as well. She got a scholarship and started a part-time university course. She met a good man and got married. And so, she was finally able to leave her childhood home.



The little girl that I have been telling you about is standing in front of you today, fighting for children's rights so that other children will not have to live through what I lived through. Because here today I can tell you that everything I have told you happened to me.

I am that little girl.

Well, boys and girls ...

Now I am happy, but I am left with a message for all the mothers and fathers of the world: Never mistreat your children. Love them, for they are a treasure that you must care for and protect from all who would do them harm. Be good parents. Ask your children what concerns them in their lives and promise to do for them what you can. Make sure they go to school, even if it's a struggle, and don't entrust their care to others who may not be trustworthy. Give them all your love, so that when they grow up they will speak well of you. Let them dream, but also teach them to set realistic goals.



And my message to all the children of the world is this: Never stay silent. Speak out and tell your parents if something is wrong. Don't let anyone mistreat you. Get help. Speak out if anyone treats you with disrespect. And to those of you lucky enough to have nice classrooms, good teachers, education and opportunities, my message is: Join the struggle with the rest of the world's children, the millions who don't have these privileges, so that they too can enjoy their right to education. My message to you, young people of England and Ireland, is that there are children and young people in other parts of the world who need those things that you have in abundance, and you can help to give them hope for the future. This should be your goal.

Before I finish this story, you should know something important. I can never forget all that I had to go through in my childhood because all of it is engraved in my mind and in my heart. Although now it is all in the past, it will always be a part of me. But one thing I have learnt is that as long as we are alive, hope is within our reach. It is up to us to make our dreams come true.

María de los Ángeles Espinoza Ruiz

VI Ivania then and now



◀ The original photo of Ivania, then aged 4, taken by a Trócaire photographer in Santa Martha Plantation in 2002



▲ The charity collection box distributed by Trócaire throughout Ireland for their Lenten campaign 2006



◀ Ivania, aged 7 when the Trócaire people sought her out in 2005

Ivania (right) in 2011, aged 13, as a member of a team of young researchers investigating domestic violence in their community

Ivania, aged 11, in 2009, learning new skills with CESESMA



VII Briefing Pack for visitors to Nicaragua

This is an edited version of the briefing pack I prepared for the delegation from the Irish National Teachers' Organisation which visited CESESMA in July and August 2006.

It draws heavily on the Information Pack for Solidarity Brigades put together by the UK Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign, and I would like to thank the NSC for sharing this material.

As this briefing was compiled in 2006, much of the information is out of date, as, Nicaragua is gradually modernising. For more up-to-date information see the travel guides listed in Appendix IX.

General information

1 Learning Spanish

About 96% of Nicaraguans speak Spanish. The indigenous languages Miskito and Mayangna are still spoken in the remote forests of the north-east. Nicaraguan Creole, which is a Caribbean patois with English vocabulary and West-African grammar, similar to Jamaican, is spoken in the African-Caribbean communities of the Caribbean coast. However, unless you intend to visit these places, Spanish will be your only means of communication with local people.

It is very unlikely that anyone in the communities you will be visiting will speak English, so the more Spanish you learn before you go, the more you will get out of your visit.

2 Passport, visa

If you have an EU passport you do not need a visa for Nicaragua. On entering the country you will automatically get permission to stay as a tourist for 90 days. The only practical way of extending this period is to leave and re-enter the country.

Make sure your passport is valid for *at least 6 months* from your date of entry into Nicaragua.

Take extra care of your passport. It is extremely difficult to replace a lost or stolen Irish passport in Nicaragua. The nearest Irish Consulate where you can get a passport replacement form is in Mexico City. The nearest British Consulate is in Costa Rica. Make a photocopy of the main page of your passport and keep it separate.

3 Money

(Note: This section is now out of date. Check on-line)

Euros are not widely recognised in Nicaragua. Therefore we suggest you take money in US dollars cash, hidden in a money-belt. Credit cards are accepted in larger city shops, petrol stations etc. You can draw cash in dollars on your credit card at most ATMs and banks.

The Nicaraguan currency, the Córdoba, is constantly devaluing against the dollar as part of the IMF-imposed structural adjustment programme. This benefits the rich, who have their savings in dollars, and hurts the poor, whose Córdobas buy less each month. At the time of writing, February 2007, there are 18 Córdobas to the US dollar, which

means around 23 Córdobas to the Euro, depending on the euro-dollar exchange rate; i.e. a Córdoba is worth about 4½ cents.

You will find many things are very cheap by Irish standards, but bear in mind that they are still beyond the reach of the average Nicaraguan. The primary school teachers that you will meet earn between \$80 and \$120 a month.

4 Climate

Nicaragua is a tropical country lying 11 - 15 degrees north of the equator. There are only two seasons: the hot rainy season from May to October, known as *invierno* (winter), and the hot dry season from November to April, known as *verano* (summer). In the rainy season temperatures are typically 27°-32°, and in the dry season 30°-35°.

However, in the northern mountain area around Matagalpa where you will be staying, the temperatures are significantly cooler, typically 20° - 30° all year round. It is hot, but rarely unpleasantly so, with fresh mountain breezes and moderate humidity.

If you visit in the wet season, you will inevitably experience heavy tropical rain at some point, and possibly the fringes of a tropical storm – or even a hurricane. However, it is never cold, and it dries up quickly when the sun comes out. This heavy rainfall occasionally leads to flooding in rural areas, making local dirt roads impassable.

5 Food

The basic diet in Nicaragua is rice, beans and tortilla three times a day, and sweet black coffee. To add variety, for breakfast and supper the rice and beans are cooked together, making the national dish of “gallo pinto”. For the mid-day meal, which is the main meal of the day, the rice and beans are cooked separately. People also eat meat and vegetables when they can afford it. Better-off people eat meat most days of the week, poor people very seldom.

Chicken is the cheapest and most popular meat, followed by beef and pork. Pig-meat is eaten as fresh pork. It is not cured to make ham or bacon (although these luxuries, like many others, are available in the supermarkets to the better-off). Fish is eaten mostly near the coast and the lakes where it is caught, and is less common in inland areas like Matagalpa. Nicaraguan meat, being mainly free-range, is strong on taste, but can be tougher than Irish teeth are accustomed to.

The most popular vegetables include familiar ones like onions, potatoes, tomatoes, green peppers and carrots, and unfamiliar ones like chayote, ayote, quequisque and pipián. Plantains and other members of the banana family are cheap and plentiful and a big part of the rural diet.

Dairying is widespread, although dairy production has had to adapt to the tropical heat and, until recently, lack of refrigeration. Cream is always soured and poured as a savoury sauce over rice and beans. Home-made curd cheese known as “cuajada” is universally popular, though perhaps an acquired taste. There are many other local cheeses, mostly white and hard, and delicious fried as part of a traditional country breakfast.

Dessert is rarely eaten unless it's a special occasion, although there are various local cakes and pastries you may wish to sample. “Tres leches” is a special treat. Ice-cream

is widely available, with the “Eskimo” brand having a virtual monopoly of the market – and a surprisingly good product!

There is a lot of delicious tropical fruit, although it comes and goes with the seasons: melons, watermelons, mangos, pineapples and, of course, bananas being some of the more familiar ones. In dealing with fruit and vegetables, take note of the health guidance below.

If you feel the need to supplement this basic diet, the supermarkets in Matagalpa and the shops at the larger petrol stations can accommodate you with a range of familiar snacks and fast-foods; even Snickers bars if you so desire.

For vegetarians

With plenty of fresh vegetables and ubiquitous protein-rich kidney-beans, following a vegetarian or vegan diet is easy if you are cooking for yourself. However, if you are eating out, it is more complicated. There are no menus with vegetarian choices identified, and you will often have to make a special request. However, Nicaraguans will find this odd, and may well mix in chicken broth etc. while reassuring you that what you are eating is vegetarian.

6 Drink

Non-alcoholic

“Fresco natural” is any kind of fresh home-made soft drink, including fruit squashes (fresh fruit, liquidised with water and sugar), and cereal-based soft drinks (maize, barley or oats). The classic Nicaraguan soft drink is “pinol” made with maize, sugar and cocoa. “Pinolero” – one who drinks pinol – means a Nicaraguan. Many local fruits are specifically used for frescos: maracuyá (passion-fruit), naranjilla, pitahaya. Nicaraguans put a lot of sugar in their frescos, making them too sugary for some tastes. Pure fruit juice is seldom served. In rural areas frescos may not be made with purified water or ice, so visitors should stick to bottled minerals or purified water (or beer) if in doubt.

Coke, Pepsi, Fanta etc. and a red cherry-cola called “Rojita” are available everywhere, and whatever your personal taste, are a safe alternative when the local water is dubious.

Coffee is widely drunk, sweet and black. White coffee is rare. Sadly all the premium quality coffee grown here is exported, and the cheap coffee normally drunk here is nothing special. Tea, as drunk in Ireland, is rarely found. Iced lemon tea is a popular fresco, and herb teas are used for medicinal purposes. However “proper tea” is available in the supermarket (or you can bring your own Barry’s tea-bags).

Alcoholic

Outside the big cities, there are basically two choices: beer or rum. The one national brewery company makes four brands of beer: Victoria, Toña, Premium and Búfalo; all similar lager-style brews, with slightly differing strengths and tastes. Provided they are served very cold, they are all quite acceptable. Imported beers, mainly Mexican, are served in city bars and restaurants. Guinness is only available in the “Shannon Bar” in Managua, Nicaragua’s one and only Irish bar.

The national distilling company makes two brands of rum: "Ron Plata" is a cheap fire-water (€1.50 - €2.00 a bottle) which should be avoided at all costs for the sake of health and sanity.

"Flor de Caña", on the other hand, is excellent in both light and dark varieties, and the flagship seven-year-old "Gran Reserva" is one of the world's finest rums – sadly little appreciated outside Nicaragua for lack of marketing. It costs €5.00 a bottle and is commonly drunk with a couple of ice-cubes, a splash of Coke and a squeeze of lime. On a night out, instead of ordering rounds of drinks, it is common to order a bottle of rum, which comes with a couple of bottles of coke, a bucket of ice-cubes and a bowl of limes.

7 Dress and appearance

Dress and appearance are socially important in Nicaragua. Nicaraguans in public dress as well as their circumstances will permit and, even if their resources are scarce, place great importance on wearing clean, freshly-laundered and ironed clothes. If you wish to be respected, you should do the same. Not doing so is considered the mark of an unhygienic foreign tourist.

In spite of the heat, Nicaraguan men rarely wear shorts away from the beach or sports-field, and wearing them makes you look like a tourist. They are to be avoided for formal meetings and activities, where they would be considered to show lack of respect for the hosts.

There is no cultural taboo on women dressing to show off their figure, and many young Nicaraguan women do so. However, visitors should be warned that this will inevitably attract male attention, both flattering and downright harassing.

8 Security

Nicaragua is one of the least violent countries in Central America. We do not have anything like the gang violence that is prevalent in Honduras and El Salvador. The Frente Sandinista is a major democratic party in local and national government, and no longer the rebel guerrilla army of the 1970s. The last remnants of the "Contra" terrorists were rounded up and disarmed years ago. You are more at risk from sunstroke or water-borne parasites than from violent crime during your visit to Nicaragua.

However, Nicaragua is a society sharply divided between rich and poor, with 70% of the population living in poverty, soaring unemployment and much social unease. There is a high risk of opportunist petty theft, and you should always be careful with your possessions.

- Never let luggage out of your sight. Beware of offers to help you with it.
- Be as discreet as possible with expensive cameras and other gadgetry that is easily snatched.
- Don't leave valuables visible in unguarded vehicles (or anywhere else for that matter).
- Don't go out on foot at night. Nicaraguan cities are the same as Irish cities, in that there are certain neighbourhoods where you shouldn't go wandering around at

night. If you don't know your way around, you are at risk. If you do go out at night, go in a group, and go there and back in a taxi.

- As a visitor, don't use buses in Managua, always take taxis. Taxis are generally safe and reliable – although, as a foreigner, they will be happy to overcharge you.
- Travelling between towns on inter-city buses is generally considered safe but be careful at bus stations, particularly in Managua.
- A hidden money belt is a good idea.
- Be extra careful with your passport. See the note above about the difficulty of replacing it if lost or stolen.

9 Awareness of Cultural Differences

People visiting Nicaragua in solidarity with local people need above all to be willing to look, listen and learn with an open mind. While in Nicaragua, this is the main way – perhaps the only way – that you can express genuine solidarity with the Nicaraguan people and their struggles. Other types of solidarity actions: fund-raising, educational work, promotion of fair trade, school or community twinning schemes, campaigning for trade justice etc, are what happens when you get home; and the effectiveness of your solidarity work at home will depend on your ability to listen and learn from Nicaraguans while you are here.

Although some places are used to groups of foreigners – the area around San Ramón, for example, has a developing Fair-Trade Ecotourism sector – be sensitive to the impact your group has on the local community. You may be a lowly primary teacher in Ireland, but in rural Nicaragua you will be perceived as wealthy compared to everybody in the community where you are staying. Be aware that you have possessions in your rucksack that local people may never have in their lifetime.

Keep in mind Nicaragua's turbulent history. In the past 50 years the country has been through a brutal dictatorship that lasted 30 years, an earthquake that left 10,000 people dead, a violent insurrection, the contra war that resulted in 30,000 deaths, a US trade embargo, spiralling foreign debt and structural adjustment, and Hurricane Mitch which devastated Central America in 1998. 70% of the population lives in poverty, which means that for the majority of the population life is a day-to-day battle for survival. Keep in mind how precarious the infrastructure and lives of most people are. Remember this when your transport does not arrive, when a meeting scheduled for 9 o'clock starts at 11, vehicles break down, people don't turn up at the expected hour, there's no electricity, water, telephone, cold beer etc.

When taking photos please be sensitive. Think about what it would be like having 12 foreigners descending on your community taking photos of where you live. The photo will be a treasured memento for you, but what's in it for the kids whose photos you've just taken?

Nicaraguans tend to dress smartly, particularly for community events and meetings. It is regarded as a mark of respect to those that you are meeting to be appropriately dressed (See section 1.7 above).

10 Ay Nicaragua Nicaragüita

"Ay Nicaragua Nicaragüita", by legendary troubadour Carlos Mejía Godoy, can be considered Nicaragua's alternative National Anthem – and is certainly more popular than the real one! You will hear it a lot, and can really impress the locals by knowing the words:

*Ay Nicaragua, Nicaragüita
La flor más linda de mi querer
Abonada con la bendita, Nicaragüita,
Sangre de Diriangén.*

*Ay Nicaragua sos más dulcita
De la mielita de Tamagás,
Pero ahora que ya sos libre, Nicaragüita,
Yo te quiero mucho más.*

*Pero ahora que ya sos libre, Nicaragüita,
Yo te quiero mucho más.*

In English:

*Oh Nicaragua, my Nicaragua,
the prettiest flower I hold most dear.
Nourished with the blessed, oh Nicaragua,
blood of Diriangén.*

*Oh Nicaragua, you are sweeter
than the honey of Tamagás.
But now that you are finally free, my Nicaragua,
I love you so much more.*

*But now that you are finally free, my Nicaragua,
I love you so much more.*

(Diriangén was an Indian chief who fought long and hard against the Spanish conquest)

Health

1 Before you go

- Get a check-up from the dentist.
- If you have long-term or recurrent medical problems - even if minor ones - make sure you take any drugs and equipment with you. You should talk over potential difficulties you could face with someone who has medical knowledge and experience of Nicaragua.
- A useful, up-to-date and user-friendly website to visit about healthy travelling is: www.fitfortravel.scot.nhs.uk

2 Immunisations

There are no legal requirements for immunisations for people travelling to Nicaragua from the EU. Therefore it is up to you to decide what is best for you, after seeking the advice of a doctor or tropical travel expert.

Among those you should consider are:

- Polio
- Tetanus
- Typhoid
- Hepatitis A, B and C

You don't need Yellow Fever vaccine. Rabies vaccine is available if you want it, but rabies is rare in Nicaragua. Cholera vaccine is no longer given, as it doesn't work.

Start your vaccinations at least six weeks before departure if you need several and/or you want the rabies vaccine. Look after your vaccine record card. It will come in handy another day.

3 Malaria

There is Malaria in Nicaragua, although cases are rare. Seek medical advice and make up your own mind if you wish to take anti-malaria tablets. If you do take them, follow the instructions to the letter, and keep on taking them for several weeks after you get home if you want them to do any good.

More important is to try and avoid mosquito bites. Besides Malaria, mosquitoes spread a more common disease called Dengue, which has similar symptoms, and is not prevented by anti-malaria tablets.

- Bring a mosquito net and use it at night.
- Take the strongest mosquito repellent you can get, based on the chemical DEET. Know-all who read a lot of magazines will warn you of the supposed toxic side-effects of DEET. But remember, the side-effects of mosquito bites can be worse!
- There are also repellents that come as incense sticks or coils that you burn, or in plug-in tablet form, all of which are useful.

4 Medicines to bring with you

Nicaragua is over-resourced with pharmacies, and all kinds of medicines are readily available if you have money, so you don't need to bring an entire medicine-chest. However, the following are often found useful:

- Sun block (Nicaraguans don't use this, and it's not widely sold, so it's best to bring it with you)
- Aspirin or paracetamol (which is called acetaminofen here)
- Mosquito repellent (see 2.3 above)
- Antihistamine cream or calamine for mild allergic reactions, insect bites and itching
- Assorted sizes of Elastoplast for cuts, scratches and large bites
- Diarrhoea tablets, e.g. Immodium. It is generally advised that these are to be avoided, as all they do is block off the escape-route of the alien bugs. However, sometimes it may be difficult to get to a toilet when you need it, so these pills do have their uses.
- Nail brush
- Wet-wipes (Sometimes there may be no water available to wash your hands)
- Condoms
- And don't forget a supply of any personal medicines you need

5 Keeping healthy

DO

- Drink bottled purified water only. It is widely available. If it is not available you can boil water or sterilise it with sterilisation tablets. If in doubt, it is better to drink a coke or a fanta than risk the local water.
- Avoid where possible "hidden" sources of contaminated water e.g. ice in drinks, ice lollies in bags and salad washed in local water. There's no point asking if the ice has been made with purified water, as you may be assured that it has whether this is true or not.
- And don't forget to use bottled or sterilised water when you brush your teeth.
- Wash your hands or use wet wipes each time you go to the latrine/toilet, especially if you have diarrhoea.

DON'T

- Don't eat pork, or any meat if it looks like it's been out in the open on a market stall in the tropical heat for any length of time.
- Don't walk around anywhere in bare feet.
- Don't overexpose yourself to the sun.
- Don't eat fruit unless you peel it. Avoid uncovered sweets and other food which attracts flies.

6 The most common illnesses

Diarrhoea

This is very common for foreign visitors and should not really be thought of as a disease. It is the effective and healthy response of the body to eliminate alien microbes encountered in the gut. Drink plenty of (purified) water. Carry a roll of toilet paper at all times.

Dysentery, which is more serious diarrhoea, which does not clear up quickly or which keeps recurring, sometimes with gut cramps, vomiting etc., may be due to infection by intestinal parasites, of which there are many. If you follow the advice above with respect to not drinking the local water, you will hopefully avoid this, but if it happens, seek medical advice.

The common cold and related viral infections

Known locally as "gripe" (Pronounced: gree-peh), this is very common, despite the heat. There is no known cure, but you can treat the symptoms exactly the same as you would at home: Paracetamol, cough-drops, Olbas Oil, hot Bushmills etc; all of which are easily obtained, except for the Bushmills, which you should pick up at Duty Free on your way over.

Indigestion

Due to the unaccustomed food, too much acidic fruit or plain nervous tension. Also sometimes caused by taking malaria tablets on an empty stomach. Again, as at home, there are plenty of remedies available in the pharmacy – or you can bring your own.

7 Other common health problems

Sunburn

Take sensible precautions: hats, sunblock and gradual exposure. Keep arms, neck and ears covered at first and acclimatise slowly. The sun is most damaging between 11 am and 3 pm. Do not underestimate the strength of the tropical sun, especially when travelling in the back of an open truck or on the beach.

Dehydration

Either through having diarrhoea, excess of alcohol or by not drinking enough to compensate for the heat. This can creep up on you without you realising. Symptoms include headaches, cystitis (inflammation of the bladder), passing small amounts of urine only and constipation. You may not feel particularly thirsty, but you should drink at least 3 litres a day whether you feel thirsty or not. Purified water is best, but if it is not available, drink any sterile fluid except alcohol.

Insect bites

Normally just a minor irritation, although there is always the risk of malaria or dengue (see above). If you are sensitive to insect bites take plenty of insect repellent, calamine lotion and, if you tend to suffer from allergic skin conditions, antihistamine cream. In the unlikely event of being bitten by a snake or stung by a scorpion, get medical assistance immediately.

8 Note for HIV-positive travellers

A visit to Nicaragua carries a risk of over-stressing your immune system. In the past this has been identified as a contributing factor to the accelerated onset of AIDS. Seek specialist advice on this before setting out.

9 If you get ill

- Don't be a martyr and carry on if you're feeling really bad. Sleep is a great, universal healer.
- Drink, drink, drink, even if you're vomiting and can't eat. Some fluid gets absorbed however much you are losing and it is essential to avoid dehydration which is a real danger with a bad stomach upset. Oral rehydration fluids are best or water as second choice.
- After diarrhoea etc. gets better, don't go mad and start eating rich oily food straight away - dry bread or biscuits are ideal.
- Pay special attention to personal hygiene, so as to avoid the risk of reinfecting yourself.
- Only take anti-diarrhoea tablets if it's going to make things easier when you are travelling or going to meetings or are desperate for an uninterrupted night's sleep, as the tablets only bung you up and do not solve the problem. If possible, allow your system to expel the alien bugs naturally.
- Only use antibiotics if you are sure of the diagnosis, and complete any course started or it won't be effective and the bugs become immune.
- If you have a fever drink plenty of rehydration fluid or water and fruit drinks, take paracetamol and keep as cool as is comfortable for you.
- If you need to see a doctor, it is easily arranged, but you will have to pay and claim it back on insurance when you get home. The same applies if you need hospital treatment.
- Finally, keep a record of any illnesses and treatment while in Nicaragua and tell your doctor if you get recurrences or new illnesses when you are back.

Check list of things to pack

It is possible to buy almost everything you will need in Matagalpa, much of it cheaper than at home, so it is quite possible to travel light. There's no need to come prepared for every eventuality. Your hotel will arrange a laundry service for you, so you can be clean and freshly-laundered like the Nicaraguans, without having to bring a vast amount of clothes.

- 3 pairs of trousers (loose & light)
- Shorts (optional: see note on this in 1.7 above)
- T-shirts and lightweight cotton shirts/blouses: short sleeves are cooler, but long sleeves give more protection against sunburn and mosquitoes, so you should always have a long-sleeved shirt available.
- Lightweight waterproof coat/poncho (a folding umbrella can come in handy in the wet season, and also doubles as a parasol)
- Sarong or light dressing gown/wrap (optional)
- 1 lightweight sweatshirt, cardigan or jacket (useful in the plane too)

- Neck scarf (vital if you are travelling around in the intense tropical sun)
- Sun hat/baseball cap
- Underwear and socks
- Swim-wear
- Flip-flops/plastic sandals (for showers)
- 1 pr. light shoes or sandals
- 1 pr. comfortable walking shoes/boots
- Towel
- Soap, shampoo, toothbrush and tooth paste, hairbrush/comb, shaving stuff etc.
- Sun block
- Sunglasses (optional)
- Spare glasses/contact lenses
- Mosquito net
- Torch and batteries
- Travel alarm (or you can use a mobile phone for this)
- Tampons (available in Nicaragua, but not as widely used as in Europe)
- Personal medicines (see section 2 on health)
- Wet wipes
- Money in US dollars cash (see 1.2 above)
- Money belt or leg purse
- Notebook, pens, pencils etc.
- Spanish dictionary and phrase book
- Day pack (for carrying notebook, water, camera, etc)
- Camera, spare battery and charger, with adapter for flat-pin American sockets, sufficient memory cards. If using a film camera, bring film as it is expensive in Nicaragua
- Pen knife
- Sewing equipment (optional)
- Small items you can give as gifts to people and groups you meet: Posters, badges, key-rings, pens etc.
- **Don't forget your ticket and passport**

VIII Chronology of the history of Nicaragua

Part One: From pre-history to the revolution

This part of the chronology is based on the one found in 'Nicaragua in Focus' by Hazel Plunkett (LAB 1999)

- 2000 BC** Earliest known indigenous settlements. Unlike their northern neighbours the Maya, the original Nicaraguans did not leave any striking monuments or written history for posterity.
- 1502** Christopher Columbus (Cristóbal Colón) skirts Nicaragua's Mosquito Coast but fails to find a navigable passage.
- 1517** Spanish make first landing and engage the *caciques* (tribal leaders) Nicarao and Diriangén in battle.
- 1522** Spanish invade and start colonisation of region.
- 1589** English and Dutch pirates make bases on Mosquito Coast.
- 1638** Kingdom of Mosquitia officially recognised by English Crown.
- 1783** Britain forced to withdraw from Atlantic Coast.
- 1821** Spain withdraws from Central America.
- 1823** Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica form a federal state.
- 1838** Nicaragua declares itself an independent republic.
- 1840s** Britain returns to Atlantic Coast and makes Miskito Kingdom a British Protectorate.
- 1848** British seize the Caribbean port of San Juan del Norte and rename it Greytown.
- 1855** United Statesian William Walker invades Nicaragua and makes himself President; institutes slavery and declares English the official language.
- 1857** Walker, defeated by a combined Central American army at Rivas, receives a hero's welcome in the United States and plots his return to Nicaragua.
- 1860** Britain withdraws from Atlantic Coast under pressure from US.
- 1860** Walker returns to Nicaragua, where he is arrested and handed over to the Honduran authorities, who have him shot.
- 1867** Total population, estimated at around 1 million when the Spanish first arrived, measured at 167,000.
- 1894** Atlantic Coast incorporated into Nicaragua by President José Santos Zelaya.
- 1811** USA asserts control over Nicaraguan economy through Dawson Accords.
- 1812** US marines intervene in Nicaragua to crush a peasant uprising and remain until 1933.
- 1927-1932** Augusto Sandino leads successful military campaign against US interests. His staunch resistance to US imperialism makes him a national hero.

- 1933** US marines finally withdraw from Nicaraguan territory. Before leaving, they organise and train a military force known as the National Guard, under the leadership of Anastasio Somoza.
- 1934** Sandino invited to peace-talks with the government in Managua, where he is assassinated on orders of Somoza.
- 1937** Somoza installs himself as President, establishing a 43-year dynasty of dictatorship.
- 1956** Somoza assassinated by Rigoberto Lopez Perez; his eldest son Luis Somoza, takes over as President.
- 1961** FSLN (National Sandinista Liberation Front) founded under the leadership of Carlos Fonseca
- 1967** Luis Somoza dies; his brother (another Anastasio) takes power.
- 1968** FLSN publishes its framework for a future revolutionary government.
- 1972** Earthquake destroys Managua and kills an estimated 20,000 people. Somoza diverts much of international aid to own coffers.
- 1974** Introduction of martial law.
- 1976** Carlos Fonseca killed in ambush by government forces.
- 1978** Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, editor of La Prensa, assassinated by National Guard.
- 1979** The Revolution: FSLN takes the country's largest towns and marches into Managua.

Part Two: From the Revolution to the present day

- 1979** Broad coalition of forces led by the Frente Sandinista (FSLN) overthrows the Somoza dictatorship that ruled Nicaragua for 43 years.
- 1980** Sandinistas launch a UNESCO acclaimed National Literacy Crusade. Adult illiteracy drops from 43% to 7% in six months.
- 1981** In an attempt to overthrow the Sandinista government the Reagan administration begins financing and training the contras, a mercenary guerrilla group based in Honduras.
- 1984** First free and fair elections in Nicaragua's history won by the FSLN with 67% of the vote.
- 1985** The Reagan administration declares that Nicaragua poses a threat to the national security of the US and uses this as a justification for imposing a trade embargo.
- 1986** World Court rules that the US war against Nicaragua is in violation of international law and orders the US to pay reparations. The US refuses to accept the jurisdiction of the Court or to pay the estimated £12 billion damage to the country's infrastructure.
- 1987** Contadora peace agreement signed by the presidents of the five Central American countries. This leads to the beginning of negotiations between the Sandinista government and the contra.
- 1981-1990** US-backed contra war leads to the deaths of 30,000 on both sides.

- 1990** Second free and fair elections won by the US-backed 14-party UNO coalition led by Violeta Chamorro. FSLN becomes main opposition party.
- 1990** Demobilisation of 22,000 contras and 235,000 army personnel
- 1992** The US temporarily suspends aid to Nicaragua demanding the return of property to former owners (now US citizens).
- 1991 - 2002** Imposition of IMF/World Bank ‘free’ market economy which stabilises the economy but results in cutbacks in public expenditure, privatisation and a flood of foreign products into the country which undermines local production. Unemployment reaches 70% and 40% of the population live in extreme poverty.
- 1996** Presidential and National Assembly elections won by the right wing Liberal Alliance led by President Arnoldo Alemán.
- 1997** Nicaragua’s foreign debt stands at \$6.4 bn, one of the highest per capita debts of any country in the world.
- 1998** Zoilamérica Narvaez accuses her stepfather Daniel Ortega of sexual abuse.
- 1998** New 3 year Enhanced Structural Adjustment (ESAF) package signed between the Nicaraguan government and the IMF.
- 1998** Liberal Alliance government implicated in the first of many corruption scandals involving a plane used for the transport of cocaine.
- 1999** A controversial pact is signed between the FSLN and the Constitutional Liberal Party (PLC) to reform state institutions and the electoral law.
- 2000** Municipal elections result in considerable gains for the FSLN (Sandinista Party) in urban areas where they win the main towns in 11 of the 17 departments including Managua. However, the PLC (Constitutionalist Liberal Party) secures overwhelming victories in rural areas.
- 2000** Nicaragua enters the Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) initiative along with 22 other countries. Providing that Nicaragua complies with IMF/World Bank structural adjustment conditions, the country’s debts will be reduced from \$6.4bn to \$1.9bn over the next few years.
- 2001** Convicted Iran-contra criminal Elliot Abrams is appointed by President Bush as National Security Council’s senior director for democracy, human rights and international operations.
- 2001** With the FSLN ahead in the polls the Bush administration sends an envoy to Nicaragua to undermine the position of the FSLN in the forthcoming elections and to help forge an anti Sandinista alliance. Post September 11th, the US intensified the campaign to undermine the position of the FSLN in general and Daniel Ortega in particular, labelling past, present and future opponents of US foreign policy as ‘terrorists.’
- 2001** November: Elections for the presidency, National Assembly and Central American Parliament. PLC candidate Enrique Bolaños wins the presidency with 56% of the vote. The second placed candidate was the FSLN / Convergence candidate Daniel Ortega with 42%.
- 2002** New President Enrique Bolaños attempts to bring corrupt members of the Alemán administration to trial. Arnoldo Alemán, ex-President and now

President of the National Assembly, uses his majority in the assembly to block anti-corruption legislation. Meanwhile, neo-liberal policy continues unchecked.

- 2002** Daniel Ortega renounces his political immunity and agrees to face trial for the sexual abuse of his 12-year-old stepdaughter. A Sandinista judge declares the case void, as the period for charges to be brought had expired. The charges are never heard.
- 2003** December: Sandinista judge sentences Alemán to 20 years in prison and fines him \$17 million for money-laundering, embezzlement of public funds, fraud and electoral crimes.
- 2004** Pro-liberal judges commute Alemán's sentence to house arrest, effectively allowing him to move freely throughout the city of Managua.
- 2005** Local government elections: Frente Sandinista makes strong gains and controls 70% of Alcaldías (District Councils) throughout Nicaragua.
- 2005** Sandinista Congress abolishes primary elections and declares Daniel Ortega for the fifth time presidential candidate for the 2006 elections. Expelled Sandinista dissident and popular ex-Mayor of Managua Herty Lewites launches challenge to Ortega under the banner of the Movement for Sandinista Renewal.
- 2006** Governments of Panama and USA bring further fraud and money-laundering charges against Arnoldo Alemán. Nicaraguan law prevents his extradition.
- 2006** November: Presidential Elections loom.*

* To read about what happened next, see "A new government, a new dawn?" in letter no. 16

IX Further reading

Nicaragua guidebooks

The one to go for is the “Moon Handbook, Nicaragua” by Joshua Berman and Randy Wood, published by Avalon Travel in the USA (ISBN 1 56691 481 7). If you can't find that, the Footprint Guide is not bad. Neither Lonely Planet nor Rough Guides do a guide to Nicaragua. However Nicaragua is included in decent Central America guides from both publishers, and either of these will serve your needs.

Information about CESESMA

You will find all you could wish to know about CESESMA in both English and Spanish on our website: www.cesesma.org. In particular, you can download and print out recent newsletters, which will give you a feel for the organisation and its work.

Background reading

This list is based on the UK Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign booklist, and all are available directly from them at: www.nicaraguasc.org.uk. You can also find most of them on Amazon.com and other internet booksellers.

Most of these books, and many more, are available for consultation, and some for sale, in the library of the Latin America Solidarity Centre, LASC, at 5 Merrion Row, Dublin 2: Tel: 01 676 0435, www.lasc.ie

▪ Nicaragua in Focus

Hazel Plunkett (LAB 1999)

Recommended overview covering history, politics, economy, environment, culture and tourism. Plenty of illustrations. If you only have time to read one book, this is a good choice.

▪ The Country Under My Skin

Giaconda Belli (Bloomsbury 2002)

Belli, now an internationally acclaimed poet, played a major part in the Revolution as a young woman. In this fascinating book she writes about the triumphs and failures of the Revolution; her poetry; her lovers and children; her exile and her current life in Nicaragua and the USA.

Nicaragua, the Imagining of a Nation: From 19th Century Liberals to 20th Century Sandinistas

Luciano Baracco (Algora 2005)

Welcome examination of the Sandinista Revolution in the context of Nicaragua's efforts at nation-building. Includes sections on the 1980 literacy campaign and the indigenous peoples of the Atlantic Coast.

Nicaragua: A Decade of Revolution

Lou Dematteis & Chris Vail, eds (Norton 1990)

A must-have book. Large format with unprecedented collection of photos (b & w) with text and chronology from 1979 to 1990.

Sandinista: Carlos Fonseca and the Nicaraguan Revolution

Matilde Zimmermann (Duke University Press 2000)

Important history of one of Nicaragua's heroes. This thorough and well-researched book is critical to an understanding of the enduring popularity of Sandinismo today.

The Undermining of the Sandinista Revolution

Gary Provost and Harry E. Vanden, eds. (Macmillan 1998)

Useful collection of essays on this complex topic.

Women and Revolution in Nicaragua

Helen Collinson, ed. (Zed 1990)

Comprehensive book covering women and the family, law, work, Atlantic (Caribbean) Coast and much more. Analyses FSLN policy and the impact of the war and US interference. A classic.

After Revolution: Mapping Gender and Cultural Politics in Neo-Liberal Nicaragua

Florence Babb (University of Texas Press 2001)

Drawing on interviews, this book analyses the impact of neo-liberalism and examines Managua co-operatives where women play a significant role. Informs and inspires.

The No-Nonsense Guide to Fair Trade

David Ransom (New Internationalist/Verso revised 2002). Tells the human stories behind the goods we consume, e.g. coffee, bananas, jeans, and examines the concepts of 'free' trade and 'fair' trade. A reader-friendly analysis.

Hidden Lives: Voices of Children in Latin America and the Caribbean

Duncan Green (Cassell 1998)

The lives of street and working children across the continent through their own eyes and voices, as they struggle to survive, get an education and earn a living.

Children's Mural Workshops

(The Children's Mural Workshops 1999)

Practical, heart-warming account of the mural workshops in Esteli, Nicaragua, which began in 1987 in the Sandinista period and continue in a completely different context today. A major emphasis is on raising self-esteem. Bilingual with colour and b & w images.

A Special Place in History

Jane Freeland (NSC 1988)

Excellent study of the history of Nicaragua's Atlantic (Caribbean) Coast, its peoples, languages and the autonomy process. This area was for many years a British Protectorate and many *costeños* speak English. Illustrated.

Finally one novel...

Desperadoes, Joseph O'Connor (Flamingo 1995)

Great Irish novel set in Nicaragua at the time of the Contra war. A must for anyone interested in links between Ireland and Nicaragua, or who just loves a good read.

And one film

Carla's Song (Ken Loach, UK 1997) is widely available on DVD. It tells the story of a Glasgow bus-driver (Robert Carlyle) who falls in love with a Nicaraguan refugee (Oyanka Cabezas), and returns with her to Nicaragua in search of the Sandinista guerrillero she had loved and lost.

Letters from Matagalpa

Harry Shier



Letters home from an Irishman in Nicaragua, 2001-2007



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