Recycled Sandalistas: From Revolution to Resorts in the New Nicaragua

ABSTRACT In the post-Sandinista period, Nicaragua has adjusted to the new terms of a neoliberal economy by turning to tourism development as a leading industry. As the nation is refashioned as a safe and desirable tourist destination, efforts have been made to conceal evidence of the recent revolutionary past that might discourage visitors from traveling to the country. Nevertheless, there are indications that selected images and memories of revolution are making a reappearance and may prove marketable for tourism. This article argues that the twin projects of neoliberalism and nationalism may be served by this seemingly contradictory process. The Nicaraguan case offers an example of how the past figures in the remaking of postrevolutionary nations for tourism in the era of globalization. [Keywords: tourism, revolution, Nicaragua, cultural politics, globalization]
the country, notably the colonial city of Granada and the Pacific Coast, have also seen a host of renovation and construction projects designed to attract moneyed interests and tourism. Examining these localities in the midst of a fairly rapid process of change can tell us much—beyond this particular case—about the politics of location in a period of globalization (Appadurai 2001; Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

Two decades ago, Nicaragua was the destination of “tourists of revolution,” in the wry words of poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1984). Now it is being refashioned as the destination of another category of tourists, some adventurous and environmentally conscious and others simply eager to find an untraveled spot in the tropics. Here I consider the remaking of the country, from within and without, as Nicaragua struggles to make tourism its leading industry (surpassing coffee production), and as an international clientele discovers a new region to call its own. Until recently, the revolutionary nation was considered off limits to uninformed travelers and its inconveniences made even adventurous backpackers uneasy. Today, in contrast, the nation attracts these travelers and others desiring more luxurious accommodations. While postrevolutionary Nicaragua remains one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere, it is suddenly getting the attention of those who shunned it only a few years ago. Nicaraguans themselves are divided between cynicism and a desire to bring needed revenue to their impoverished, neoliberal economy. I am interested in discerning how these developments are being experienced locally and globally, as the Nicaraguan nation is reconstructed as a safe and desirable location that offers both the “traditional” and the “modern” for foreign consumption.

Furthermore, and more broadly, I am interested in the ways that some places appeal to travelers who are seeking more than a comfortable holiday at the beach or visit to colonial towns. Recently, we hear of not only “political” tourism but also “danger” tourism; not only religious pilgrimages but also “red” pilgrimages to postsocialist countries; not only “socially responsible” tourism but also tours to the world’s “trouble spots.” Newsweek International reports on organizations like San Francisco–based Global Exchange, which takes groups to such destinations as Kabul to “vacation in the remains of the Afghan capital” (Eviatar 2003). Other groups visit “areas under siege” in Israel and the Palestinian territories, or learn about “social struggles” in Chiapas, Mexico, and the “legacies of war” in Vietnam (www.globalexchange.org). Having traveled with this organization to Cuba twice over the past decade, I am aware that some group members particularly relish going to a country designated as illegal for U.S. tourists, requiring special licenses for entry. I will suggest that Nicaragua holds the same allure for travelers who desire to see for themselves “the land of Sandino,” even years after the demise of the revolutionary government.

Scholars of tourism have theorized the development of what is today, according to many sources, the world’s largest industry. Dean MacCannell’s classic text The Tourist, first published in 1976, delved beneath surface appearances to advance the argument that tourism offers “staged authenticity,” inviting visitors to “make incursions into the life of the society” (1999:97). More recently, writers have emphasized that representations and readings of tourist sites are always contested, so that the sites and their meanings are subject to interpretation (Hanna and Del Casino 2003; Rojek and Urry 1997). My work follows this line of research insofar as I view tourism as a set of cultural practices that are under constant negotiation and that may illuminate broader social and historical processes. Most significantly, I have sought to contribute to studies of tourism in past and present “danger zones,” in this case a revolutionary society experiencing prolonged instability and civil war, being ever mindful of the ideological projects that are under construction as nations establish the historical accounts that they wish to represent (Gold and Gold 2003; Rojek 1997).

The first section of this article considers prerevolutionary travel and later “solidarity” travel to the country through textual and ethnographic analysis. The second
section, based on my travel to tourism sites and interviews with tour operators, government officials, and tourists themselves, examines the way in which Nicaragua has undergone a transition from being a revolutionary destination to one of interest to mainstream travelers. The third section presents evidence from recent research that, contrary to my earlier expectations, indicates that the revolution is making a reappearance on the tourist circuit. By considering the Nicaraguan case, I will illustrate what may also be observed in other postrevolutionary societies such as Cuba, China, and Vietnam, as the past figures in the remaking of these nations for tourism in the present era of globalization.

**NICARAGUAN TRAVEL, PAST AND PRESENT**

Long before revolutionary Nicaragua was remade as a tourist destination, the country captured the interest of foreigners. In earlier times, the country attracted some adventurous travelers who were making their way by sea from one coast to the other in the United States or who were going on to Europe via the Central American Isthmus. No less celebrated a traveler than Mark Twain ventured there with a companion by ship from San Francisco during a transatlantic voyage in 1866–67. This was only a decade after William Walker, the U.S. expansionist, defeated warring factions in a traveler than Mark Twain ventured there with a companion by ship from San Francisco during a transatlantic voyage in 1866–67. This was only a decade after William Walker, the U.S. expansionist, defeated warring factions in...
political and geographic regions and gave revolutionary names to the streets and neighborhoods of the capital city. The new political culture was imprinted on the national landscape, not only through rezoning and renaming but also through the widespread painting of murals and construction of monuments to the people's history of struggle (Kunzle 1995; Sheesley 1991; Whisnant 1995).

Some guidebooks were clearly directed to the new breed of visitors to the country. Not Just Another Nicaragua Travel Guide (Hulme et al. 1990) proclaimed its intention loudly, and ads in its front matter included not just hotels and car rental agencies but also language and culture schools, fair trade coffee outlets, and the Bikes Not Bombs recycling outfit in Managua. Readers were congratulated for choosing to travel to a place that was “poised on the cutting edge of history,” serving as a “perfect vantage point to study the world” (1990:9). The country was summed up in a few words: “Revolution. Empty beaches. Lifelong friends and cheap rum. Priests, poets and rocking chairs” (1990:9). Many young people from the United States used the book to find their way to Managua’s centrally located Barrio Martha Quesada, named for an urban combatant who was shot in the neighborhood by the National Guard in 1978. The barrio is sometimes referred to as “Gringolandia,” since so many U.S. and European travelers have made its inexpensive hostels their base camp. Buses arrive and depart frequently in this barrio for neighboring Honduras and Costa Rica, so that there is a steady flow of budget and activist travelers making their way through Central America, along with others who stay much longer in Nicaragua. From the barrio, travelers may walk to the shore of Lake Managua and pay respects nearby in Plaza de la Revolución (now renamed Plaza de la República); there they may visit the National Palace (now the National Museum), which was famously taken during the insurrection by Sandinista Comandantes Eden Pastora and Dora María Téllez, and the tomb of the celebrated martyr Carlos Fonseca.

After the Sandinistas lost the 1990 elections to the opposition candidate Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, some loyal solidarity workers remained in the country and some curious travelers continued to arrive looking for traces of revolution. Their number was much reduced, but they could
be recognized by their oversized backpacks and copies of such “alternative” resources as the Ulysses travel guide to Nicaragua (see Figure 3). In its second edition, author Carol Wood’s (1999) tone is still sympathetic to the Sandinista government and what it accomplished, but she acknowledges that Nicaraguans became weary of the U.S. opposition that produced the Contra war and the economic embargo. There is more attention to the natural wonders of the country than to its politics. Indeed, the guide even urges visitors not to miss touring the Isletas, the small islands in Lake Nicaragua, noting that “It’s a great spot to dream about living on your own little tropical paradise” (1999:162). This casual remark presages the rapid sales of islands to foreigners, as recently trumpeted in Condé Nast Traveler.

**FROM REVOLUTION TO RESORTS**

The Chamorro government did not bring about the economic recovery that had been promised following the national election, but political stability was gradually achieved with the cooperation of the Sandinista party. When the United States failed to offer assistance at the level expected and international coffee prices plummeted, Nicaragua sought to develop tourism. By the mid-1990s
the Nicaraguan Institute of Tourism (INTUR), in collaboration with the national universities, promoted tourism as a key area for professional training. Reports of increasing levels of tourism showed that while the largest influx of visitors still came from the Central American region, a new class of tourists was coming to the country from the United States and Europe. Efforts were made to capture more of this market, through improvements in infrastructure catering to tourists and more effective means of marketing the country as a tourist destination (Ministerio de Turismo 1995). By the year 2000, the annual number of visitors to Nicaragua approached 500,000, significant in a country with a population of four million—although as many as half came for business rather than pleasure. The goal became to entice visitors to stay longer and spend more money, and to provide more facilities for them to enjoy during their stay (Instituto Nicaragüense de Turismo 2001:5).

To that end, a number of sites have been enhanced and promoted for tourism. The premier Pacific Coast beach destination Montelimar, which formerly was owned by the Somoza family and then nationalized under the Sandinistas, was sold to the Spanish interest Barceló and turned into a five-star, all-inclusive resort. San Juan del Sur worked hard to attract cruise ships to its sleepy fishing village and to appeal to a younger and environmentally conscious clientele to come to newly constructed guest houses and hotels. Selva Negra, in the mountainous north, also sought to capitalize on a more robust tourist industry to draw visitors to its German-style cottages and restaurant, where guests could visit the local coffee plantation and walk through tropical forest to spot howler monkeys and exotic birds. The colonial city of Granada was privileged to have a more complete makeover as a charming destination or stopping-over place for those traveling through the country. Already an architectural marvel and historical draw, the city received international support to renovate and restore its cathedral, convent, central plaza, cultural institute, and oldest hotel, making it attractive to international visitors. By adding canopy tours of the nearby forest and boat trips to the Isletas, the city has catered to the diverse interests of travelers in recent years.

Research over the last decade in Nicaragua has allowed me to observe the refashioning of Managua, Granada, Montelimar, and other well-traveled areas—indeed the country as a whole—as part of the national effort to attract tourist dollars (Babb 2001a, 2001b). On arrival at Managua's international airport, recently spruced up with five million dollars in U.S. support, visitors are greeted by signs for high-end hotels and the Hard Rock Café, in addition to the old signs for Victoria Beer and Flor de Caña rum. Since 2000, I have gone where tourists travel, consulted tourist agencies, and interviewed those in the industry and government as well as tourists themselves. Thus, I have considered how formerly revolutionary Nicaragua has readied itself for an influx of newcomers who may know and care little about the country's unique history and who expect to find a well-established tourist industry in place.

Before making my way to INTUR (part of the government's Ministry of Tourism) in Managua in 2002, I had been interested to discover its colorful and attractive website. The site offers a brief introduction to the country, a friendly appeal to tourists, and advice to those investing in the tourist industry or buying up private property. The INTUR office itself, tucked away just a few blocks from the landmark Intercontinental Hotel, was not as impressive. A woman at a desk in the small reception area welcomed me and offered several brochures featuring the usual half dozen attractions, all outside of Managua: Masaya and its volcano, Granada, León, San Juan del Sur, Montelimar, and the Río San Juan (serious travelers would also be told about Selva Negra and the Atlantic Coast). She told me that on a typical day only about three visitors come to their office. Across the street, there was more activity in INTUR's documentation center, as secondary school and university students crowded the few tables there. The woman heading the center confirmed that they were students of tourism, which has replaced computer school as young people's best hope for future employment. The walls of the room were decorated with framed pictures of the country's natural beauty and folklore; a portrait of a woman entitled "India Bonita" was emblematic of both aspects that INTUR hoped would enhance tourism (field notes, June 18, 2002).

Although Managua has had a major facelift, with improved roads, a new city center, hotels, casinos, and shopping malls in the area left devastated by an earthquake in 1972, Stephen Kinzer, writing in the New York Times, recently described it as "still among the ugliest capital cities in the hemisphere" (2002:10–12). Visitors to the city are generally there on professional business, as I learned during forays into the Princess Hotel, Holiday Inn, and Hotel Legends. Employees at the hotels offer suggestions about night spots and a few places worth visiting in the city, but in general Managua is regarded as uninviting to international visitors who would rather venture out to other parts of the country. Tour operators often recommend just a half day in the city to see the ancient footsteps of Acahualinca (evidence of early human presence), the National Museum and the National Theatre, and the view from Sandino Park. Those who stay longer might visit the artisan market known as Huembees, the malecón (promenade) alongside Lake Managua, or (until Hurricane Mitch) the volcanic Lake Xiloa just outside the city—but they find a better market for shopping in nearby Masaya and a lovelier lake in Catarina just 40 minutes away.

Indeed, many bypass the sprawling capital altogether by going directly from the international airport to Montelimar about an hour away on the coast or traveling in tour groups through Central America and stopping only in the more historic cities of León and Granada before heading on to San José, Costa Rica. The ruins of Old León have a unique distinction in Nicaragua as a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site (Patrimonio Mundial). The colonial city of León may soon emerge as the most popular destination in the country for tourism (as some operators predict), but for
now Granada draws the greatest number of international visitors, as well as a growing expatriate community of retirees from the United States.

Visits to Granada, which claims to be the oldest city in the hemisphere (much of it destroyed in a fire ordered by the failed dictator William Walker in 1856), provided opportunities to observe and query travelers and residents. They are a diverse group, ranging from the so-called relax category of international travelers and long-time residents in Managua wishing to get away from the “big city,” to day-trippers traveling in from the Pacific Coast, to backpackers pleased to find cheap accommodations in a place modern enough to have Internet cafés and a laid-back attitude. Well-heeled visitors stay at the landmark Hotel Alhambra with its arcade looking out on the central plaza or at newer and more expensive places like the Hotel Colonial. Several restaurants cater to this clientele, who are sought after by guides clamoring to provide package tours for fees that are very high by local standards (field notes, June 21, 2003).

European and U.S. travelers on limited budgets stay at the Hospedaje Central (Central Hostel) or other inexpensive lodging a few blocks from the plaza. The popular Bearded Monkey, a hostel operated by a young couple from England and the United States, is reminiscent of the hippie generation. Guests at this hostel listen to mellow music from places distant from Nicaragua’s shores as they relax in hammocks, eat natural food at the small restaurant, borrow books and videos from a lending library, and contemplate their travels. Access to the Internet and to phones for making international calls—as well as arrangements for getting a massage or even a tattoo—add to the hostel’s “hip” appeal. Speaking with travelers at several of these venues in Granada, I found that few knew much about Nicaragua’s recent political history, or if they did, it was little more than what they read in the Lonely Planet guidebook.5

At the other end of the spectrum are the retired residents who have come to live in Granada in recent years. Some have turned to Nicaragua rather than Costa Rica (a neighboring competitor for tourism and property ownership) because they find it to be less expensive and to suffer less from the overdevelopment of tourism. One tour operator went so far as to credit the revolution for having held off tourism development long enough that the city may now thrive. Capitalizing on Nicaraguans’ willingness to sell off property at locally high prices (only to see the value soar quickly in the hands of foreign investors and property owners), Granada’s historic center is fast becoming “Americanized.” All five real estate offices in the city are owned by U.S. citizens, men who see an opportunity to “get rich quick.” In interviews with two of them, I discovered that they fit the local pattern of older “gringo” males linking up with local “Nica” girlfriends or wives who were young enough to be their granddaughters—trophies and service providers in their businesses and homes.

An Austrian historian now living in Granada, Dieter Stadtler, has been central to the restoration project in the city. He qualified the enthusiastic reports of tourism in Granada when he told me that at present there are only about 450 beds in first- to third-class hotels in the city of some 100,000 residents. Most people who travel there are either backpackers, who spend little money, or Nicaraguans coming back to visit relatives over the holidays, who spend even less (but who may bring gifts and monetary remittances). Thus, despite heavy reliance on financial support from Spain, Sweden, and other nations to restore the city to its former grandeur, the present potential for tourism is limited (Stadtler, personal interview, June 22, 2002).

Nevertheless, tourism was touted in a two-page article from the New York Times (Rohter 1997: sec. 5, p. 10) that was still displayed prominently five years after publication on a stand adjacent to the Alhambra’s registration desk. Entitled “Nicaragua on the Mend,” the article averred:

Seven years after its brutal civil war, the country is at peace and putting out the welcome mat. . . . For more than a decade, the only foreigners likely to visit Nicaragua in any numbers were “internationalists,” sympathizers of the Sandinista revolution inspired by the idea of sharing the hardships and dangers of a country under siege. . . . Ordinary visitors were encouraged to stay away.

But, the author asserted, “Nicaragua has changed enormously” (1997:10). Quoting Nicaragua’s Minister of Tourism, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro: “We are on the brink of an awakening to tourism. . . . We want to make tourism the main product of Nicaragua, and we plan to do that by promoting our country as an exotic destination at a reasonable price” (1997:10).

Nicaragua is represented in various ways to different potential travel clienteles. To Nicaraguans themselves, notably the elite, there are efforts to eclipse the revolutionary past and show continuity from the Somoza family regime through the present, excising the Sandinista decade in a new revisionist history. A video produced a few years ago by the government’s Institute of Culture, Managua en mi corazón (Managua in My Heart, 1997), shows the capital city in ruins after the earthquake and, as if immediately after, the rebuilding of the 1990s, with no indication of the social transformation that occurred a decade before—and no irony as the spectacle of movie marquees and huge traffic circles are deployed as hallmarks of modernity. Another video, Tierra Mia, Nicaragua (My Land, Nicaragua, 2001), is directed to Nicaraguans living outside the country, especially in the United States, luring them back with the promise that “When you return to Nicaragua, it will all be as you remember.” Nostalgic images in both videos serve up a shared history and cultural identity that scarcely existed in order to endorse the present national project of neoliberalism.

The shared cultural identity that is frequently held out to both Nicaraguans and international visitors generally relies more on memories of the natural beauty of the land, its people, and ceremonial traditions than it does on any moments in the nation’s history. Localities like the Pacific Coast beaches, the mountainous north with its exotic

\[\text{\textit{Lonely Planet}}\]
birds and monkeys, and the Río San Juan bordering Costa Rica serve to invoke longings in those whose origins are in the country, as well as in those who know these places only through INTUR’s website or the available guidebooks. Music, dance, performances, and masks worn in traditional fiestas and rituals serve to conjure idealized and timeless sentiments of belonging for insiders and exoticism for newcomers. Urban attractions like the central plazas of León and Granada, with their colonial-era cathedrals, arcades, and monuments, invoke the nation’s often conflicted past when Liberals and Conservatives of the two cities vied for control; the political turmoil of the 19th and early 20th centuries is sufficiently distant that it may safely be remembered in travel promotion literature and city tours. In contrast to other parts of Latin America where indigenous culture and identity are utilized to encourage tourism, in Nicaragua only the area of Masaya is known for its indigenous artisans and uses this association to draw domestic and foreign visitors (Scruggs 1999). The Nicaraguan “myth of mestizaje” powerfully erases cultural difference so that one finds only passing references to enduring indigenous peoples and places. The recently constructed Gueguese Plaza in central Managua is a singular landmark celebrating the foundational narrative of mestiza Nicaragua as a land where the indigenous and the European long ago fused into one shared identity.  

Related to this homogenized depiction of Nicaraguan culture, there is little marketing of crafts and other products unique to regions in Nicaragua such as one finds in Guatemala, Ecuador, or Peru. Travelers may take home handmade hammocks, rocking chairs, wall hangings, black coral jewelry, leather belts, carved wooden birds, CDs of traditional music, and even shellacked frogs playing marimbas, but taken together this does not provide a great deal of revenue in the country. Some effort is being directed toward producing higher-quality items for tourist consumption as part of a national initiative to support small industries and microenterprises. However, tourists I have interviewed complain that the country’s artesanía “all looks the same,” as if mass-marketed, and more foreign currency is spent on ephemeral pleasures such as lodging, dining, and sightseeing. An emphasis on adventure tourism has expanded the offerings to include not only fishing, hunting, boating, and swimming but also surfing, kayaking, forest canopy tours, hot-air balloon rides, and biking down the sides of still-active volcanoes.  

Whether sex tourism will be added to the list (unofficially) as a significant aspect of international travel to Nicaragua remains to be seen, though there is already increased prostitution, sometimes associated with nightclubs and casinos in urban areas and no doubt growing as a result of high unemployment and economic need. Young girls await clients along the road to the international airport and in Granada’s central plaza, and sex workers—including transvestites—are now commonplace in certain locations around Managua. Massage and lap dancing are commonly advertised now in urban centers, and reports indicate that sexual satisfaction is often an assumed part of the arrangement. Men from the United States, traveling or living in Nicaragua, have told me of their surprise in being approached by young women and girls—and, sometimes, young men and boys—offering sexual services for payment. There is a gendered politics of tourism as women and girls cater to male desires, whether for sexual or other services. Of course, women travelers may also expect and enjoy the services of male providers in the tourist industry, but from what I have observed these are far less often sexual in nature.  

**REVOLUTION REHABILITATED**

One may ask which Nicaragua will be promoted and consumed in the future: popular or elite, traditional or modern, environmentally conscious or exotic and culturally different? How will the recent revolutionary past figure, if at all, in the imaginations of travelers to the country? First, I will consider the last several decades of tourism in the country and then turn to the evidence that the revolution may be making a comeback on the tourist circuit—even if the Sandinistas themselves have not returned to power. While there are few published sources that address tourism during the Sandinista period, one analysis takes a harshly critical stance on “political hospitality and tourism” of that time. In a report published by the right-wing Cuban American National Foundation, sociologist Paul Hollander (1986) argues that the Nicaraguan wave of “political tourism” followed the Cuban model in cultivating global support for the revolutionary government in the 1980s. He notes that visitors in solidarity tours were treated with devoted service and generally close monitoring, resulting in a selective view of the country. Hollander singles out the Sandinista Minister of the Interior at that time, Tomás Borge, for his generous hospitality toward international visitors, particularly those of high social or political stature. While the report’s excessively negative view of the revolutionary government and political tourists should be questioned, the account is nonetheless revealing of certain aspects of the period. Hollander is correct in suggesting that some travelers were so enamored of Nicaragua that they wrote uncritical, reverential travelogues. Staging tours to appeal to visitors and leave them with a favorable impression of the country is hardly unique to Nicaragua or Cuba, but these nations’ revolutionary governments have been highly motivated to counter mainstream U.S. views through carefully constructed tourism. The 100,000 visitors from the U.S. who visited Nicaragua between 1979 and the time of Hollander’s writing (1986) did indeed play a part in undercutting the effectiveness of Reagan’s Central American policy when they returned home to earnestly spread the word about the revolution that was under way.

Munditur, a tourism company owned by a Nicaraguan family, had its start in the pre-Sandinista period. In an interview, the head of the domestic travel division spoke about the early years, dating from when they opened for business in 1966. Adán Gaitán was just 11 years old at the time that Munditur was established by his family who, after
living some years in the United States and Argentina, returned to Nicaragua to launch one of the earliest travel and tourism agencies in the country (Gaitán, personal interview, July 1, 2003). While attending the American Nicaraguan school, he earned a few dollars by taking tourists to Masaya or Granada or on an afternoon tour of Managua—the tourist option still offered today by a majority of tour operators in the country. After graduating from the school, he worked in the family’s travel agency (Munditur Viajes) and in Munditur Sightseeing Tours before going on to study law. In 1976 he founded the National Chamber of Tourism (CANATUR), and he has continued to play a leadership role in tourism development and in promoting what he calls “a tourist culture.”

In the mid-1980s, when the Sandinistas were in power, the business was “confiscated,” and Herty Lewites, a Sandinista who is currently the mayor of Managua, was responsible for seizing their tour vehicles and imprisoning several family members. After the 1990 election of Chamorro’s government the business started up again, but the family’s experience during the Sandinista period colors Gaitán’s political outlook today. He remembers the Sandinistas’ tourism division, Turnica, and the consequences of state control of travel in the country. He offers the example of the Intercontinental Hotel in Managua, one of the few notable structures that was not destroyed in the 1972 earthquake, which under the Sandinistas made no profit as income went into state coffers. Like other tour operators, he resents the period of Sandinista government expropriation of private businesses and the legal decision made in the 1980s to keep travel and tour companies separate, so that even today their business carries an extra tax burden.

When the ruins of Old León were uncovered in the late 1960s, Munditur was the first to offer tours there, and they have continued to offer city tours in Granada, Masaya, and Managua. However, they have become best known for their dove- and duck-hunting trips in the San Juan River area, their “jungle safaris,” and sport fishing. Gaitán is proud to play host to well-known business, media, and sports figures from the United States—for example, people from Exxon, ESPN, Hollywood, and the Texas Rangers—and to offer high-end tourism with great attention to detail. The kind of sport and adventure tourism that Munditur promotes relies on careful advance planning and a quality “product” (i.e., tour package), and their clients have little need to come versed in Nicaraguan history and culture or to know how to maneuver around the country independently. Gaitán would like to see Nicaragua shed its old image and attract more travelers who are like his discerning customers; as he put it, “The image of Nicaragua is like a lady that has not washed off her old makeup to put on her new makeup.” 11

For the majority of tourists who do not have a thousand dollars per day to spend on the sort of travel described by Gaitán, guidebooks are all important in preparing them to make their way around the country. Several in current use, Let’s Go Central America (Gardner 2000), the Footprint Nicaragua Handbook (Leonardi 2001), and the Moon Hand-
need a “national brand”—something to capture buyers’ attention. Added to this, they seek to develop a “come-back package” to appeal to the many Nicaraguans who left the country during the Sandinista period and need to be coaxed back with nostalgic and sanitized images of the country of their childhood and early adulthood. The video Tierra Mía, Nicaragua (My Land, Nicaragua, 2001), mentioned earlier, is marketed to this target group, complete with discount coupons to use on their return. For this clientele, references to the recent revolutionary past are to be avoided at any cost (Hurtado, personal interview, June 27, 2003).

However, for some travelers there is a certain cachet in referencing the revolutionary society that has left only traces. Several young backpackers indicated to me that they had selected Nicaragua just because of its “different” and more “radical” image. One man from the United States told me that his mother had been to Costa Rica but, for him, Nicaragua held more hope of adventure: Whereas Costa Rica represented comfortable middle age, Nicaragua had a more youthful image. A young Russian woman traveling with him came because she was intrigued by the country’s revolutionary past, and she made some comparisons from her own experience living in a postsocialist society (field notes, June 30, 2003). Some lingering “humanitarian” groups that come to the country for shorter or longer periods are better aware of the revolutionary past and, depending on their politics, wish to revive the cooperative spirit of the past or to replace it with a “forward-thinking” entrepreneurial outlook suitable to the neoliberal present.

I want to suggest that in due time, and, perhaps, sooner rather than later, the Sandinista revolution will be restored to history, even if rehabilitated to suit specific political desires. Kinzer, in his recent travel article on Granada, reflects on the distant past of a city torn apart by rival political factions and ravaged by William Walker in the 19th century but only notes in passing “the civil war that tore the country apart during the 1980’s” (New York Times 2002:12). Some years from now, I anticipate that tourists visiting Nicaragua may hear idealized references to the Sandinistas and their struggle in much the same way that they now hear about the warring Conservatives and Liberals of the more distant past.

At INTUR, Raúl Calvet spoke with me about the tendency, not only in Nicaragua but also elsewhere in Latin America, to reference the more distant past in relating history to tourist audiences (personal interview, June 27, 2003). Stories of political conflicts of the 19th century serve to promote tourism, while those of the 20th century may still scare it away. Nonetheless, there are some travelers who are attracted to lingering notions of “danger.” Calvet described a young European who came to the INTUR office and chatted awhile about travel in Nicaragua. As the man was leaving, Calvet was surprised to see that on the back of his T-shirt was the image of a Nicaraguan woman with an AK-47. He called the man back to say that it was fine if this was the image he chose to have of Nicaragua, but that as director of Promotion and Marketing, Calvet hoped that travelers would begin to have other images as well. When he described the problem as one of romanticizing the revolution, I reached into my bag and pulled out a postcard with another image of a young Sandinista with rifle over her shoulder, this one the iconic image of a woman smiling with a nursing baby in her arms, from a photograph that has circulated widely in Nicaragua and beyond (see Figure 4). The evidence of this may be seen in the widespread availability of revolutionary images on tourist items sold in popular markets, and in the government resources recently given to turn Sandino Park into a national site to draw both Nicaraguans and tourists. High on a hill in the center of Managua, the park’s towering silhouette of Sandino had been given a new

![FIGURE 4. Postcard with iconic photograph of Sandinista woman with nursing child and gun over her shoulder. The image, captured by photographer Orlando Valenzuela, has circulated widely in Nicaragua and throughout the world.]
lighting system before Mayor Herty Lewites inaugurated the park in June 2003. Many came to the opening, which included a photographic exhibition that recalled the Presidential Palace of the past dictatorship, located on the hilltop before the earthquake brought it down. The mayor had plans to build a history museum to further memorialize the site.

Around the time of the park’s inauguration, I learned of a Sandinista Revolution Tour, departing from Managua and traveling to visit monuments and museums in the city of León. I attempted to track it down, going from a hotel where it was advertised to the place where the tour operator was said to be available, but like many other initiatives in Nicaragua, this one was ephemeral. Nonetheless, other solidarity tours have continued to operate in the country, including the San Francisco–based organization that takes groups for the annual July 19 march in honor of the triumph of the revolution and the Wisconsin sister-city project that takes activists to the country each June. Even Careli Tours considered offering a specialized trip in the footsteps of Augusto César Sandino, commemorating the route he and his men followed (1927–34) in their opposition to the Nicaraguan National Guard, although this did not turn out to be feasible (Henry Urbina, personal interview, June 27, 2003).

Given the capitalist orientation of neoliberalism and the profit motivation of tourism in Nicaragua, it is notable that Tomás Borge, a comandante of the Sandinista revolution and current member of the National Assembly, is the head of the Tourism Commission. In an interview one evening by the pool outside a small hotel he owns, he offered a number of observations regarding what a Sandinista perspective on tourism might offer (personal interview, June 30, 2003). First, he stated that the Sandinistas would win the next election and would not only make tourism the centerpiece of his political activity, he emphasized that if, for example, there were a U.S. invasion of Cuba, he would drop tourism in a minute to enlist Yankee imperialism. At the end of our taped conversation, I inquired about his views of the development of Managua’s Sandino Park. Borge remarked that he himself was the principal Sandinista held and tortured there while a prisoner for nine months, and he supports opening the park to the public so that its history may be better known. It is clear that for Borge, tourism is an important economic venture for the country, but if it can be linked to furthering the goals of the revolution to which he remains committed, so much the better.

The 54-foot silhouette of the hero Augusto César Sandino that dominates the Tiscapa hilltop overlooking Managua is an enduring icon of the revolution (see Figure 5). Created by Sandinista poet and artist Ernesto Cardenal, the work was installed just as Daniel Ortega was leaving office and Violeta Chamorro was entering as president in 1990. The symbolic value of raising the image of Sandino on the site of the bunker and torture chambers of past dictator Somoza was great, and because the military remained under Sandinista leadership the site was protected. Violeta Chamorro dedicated the area around the statue as a national park in 1996, and Herty Lewites, the Sandinista mayor of Managua, made improvements in 2000. Now there is a sign out by the Intercontinental Hotel beckoning tourists to follow the newly paved road and visit the statue and well-kept park that honors the national hero and martyr. Although young Nicaraguan couples may wander there simply for the privacy it affords them and some tourists go there principally for the view of the city, other Nicaraguans and tourists I interviewed wanted to pay their respects to the history that was made at the site.

Other monuments to the revolution have remained on view in the capital city. The tomb of Carlos Fonseca, founder of the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (the FSLN party), is quietly guarded in the city’s central plaza, formerly known as Plaza de la Revolución. After his death as a martyr in 1976 and on the revolution’s victory, Fonseca’s remains were placed at this site. However, after 1990, the tomb was left untended and its flame was extinguished, and two years later it was blown up by a bomb. Immediately, the Sandinista faithful rebuilt the tomb and a vigilant sympathizer set up camp to protect the father of the revolution. Nonetheless, in 2002 I found that the two women cleaning the site (one wearing a scarf imprinted with the U.S. flag) indicated little awareness of the tomb’s history (field notes, June 19, 2002).

One more monument, highly visible in central Managua, is an immense bronze statue created by Franz
Orozco to honor the “Popular Combatant,” a man of exaggerated proportions raising a rifle in one hand and holding a worker’s pick in the other. Often referred to familiarly as “Rambo,” the statue was commissioned by the Ministry of Public Construction and inaugurated in 1985 on the anniversary of the revolution. There was an attempt to destroy the monument with sticks of dynamite in the early 1990s, but only the iron around one heel of the figure was damaged. “Rambo” continues to greet travelers driving into Managua from the international airport who may be surprised by so militant a monument in neoliberal Nicaragua.

While the celebrated modernist poet Rubén Darío, who was born in a small town near León in 1867 and died in 1916, is not always mentioned in the same breath as the revolutionary hero Sandino, there are increasingly frequent references to the two together as heroic and revolutionary icons—both cultural and political. Managua’s prestigious National Theatre named after Dario withstood the earthquake and is only one of a number of locations where his statue is on display. Sandino’s ubiquitous image still appears on walls and buildings around the country. For many Nicaraguans and some visitors to the country, these two anti-imperialist figures who died in the early decades of the 20th century are recognized as distinguished national symbols of pride. To a significant degree, Sandino, like Darío, has been appropriated by the cultural and political elite and thus rendered safe for both domestic and international consumption.

On my most recent visit to Nicaragua in 2003, I was struck by the growing and widespread appearance of the image of Ernesto “Che” Guevara, resurfacing at a time when revolutionary icons were increasingly fashionable. I discovered an FSLN gathering in Granada honoring Carlos Fonseca, Che Guevara, and Nicaraguan–Cuban solidarity, and found a new monument in central Managua with Che’s famous portrait wearing a beret. His image was in less likely places as well, perhaps as a kitsch rather than revolutionary icon. A café alongside a real estate office by the central plaza in Granada, a place frequented by expatriate retirees from the United States, had the name Café Che and the familiar image painted on the wall; coffee mugs with the same likeness and logo were also for sale. The waitress informed me that the café had actually been renamed “Nacho Mama’s,” but the familiar logo was still in use. Necklaces and T-shirts with Che’s image were sold and worn everywhere, especially popular among young men who were no doubt attracted to this symbol of revolutionary masculinity.

Nicaraguans offered several responses to the question of why the image of Che had become so widespread. For some, it was enough to say that as Sandinistas they embraced Che’s image, while others noted the internationalism of Che’s politics. I have concluded that, at one and the same time, Che represents both a safer, more remote, and non-Nicaraguan radicalism, and in other instances a more radical longing at a time when Sandinista party politics are viewed as either “watered down” or contaminated by a “pact” between the Sandinista and Liberal parties. One young man who was wearing a Che necklace told me rather vaguely, “Some say he fought in the Cuban revolution. Others say in Bolivia” (field notes, June 24, 2003). Another man was more certain that both Sandino and Che were revolutionary and anti-imperialist, but whereas Sandino represented the “national,” Che was “more universal.” A street vendor was eager to assure me that those who bought his Sandino and Che T-shirts were not “communists” but only wished to wear the popular images. In any event, there are many Nicaraguans and tourists alike who appear to admire both men as legendary and to sport their portraits as broad symbols of cultural and political opposition (field notes, June 20–30, 2003).

WHAT REMAINS: TOURISM AND RECYCLED REVOLUTION

Originally, I had planned to study tourism and revolution, which seemed to me to name the two poles of...
modern consciousness—a willingness to accept, even venerate, things as they are on the one hand, a desire to transform things on the other.

—Dean MacCannell, 1976

MacCannell went on to produce a remarkable work that would chart the course for tourism studies, although he did not pursue his early objective of examining tourism and revolution. There remains a need to consider the ways that tourism and revolution intersect, particularly at a time when postsocialism is heralded and globalized capitalism reigns. Some writers have recently discussed the desires of tourists to discover what is new, unusual, and sometimes dangerous or disastrous (Rojek 1997), but little attention has been devoted to the ways that revolutionary or postrevolutionary societies have sought to strengthen economic development and national identity through the promotion of tourism. This article has undertaken such a project by examining the case of a society that has only recently made the transition from revolutionary to neoliberal-oriented government and that has begun to contend with the practical and political aspects of refashioning the country for tourism.

A recent Nicaraguan-made video documentary entitled Algo queda (Something Remains, 2001) suggests that some important gains of the revolution remain in the country. A contrast to the videos mentioned earlier that excise the revolution from nostalgic historical accounts, this one is nonetheless nostalgic in its somewhat idealized representation of a revolutionary past that brought about progressive change in the interest of all. Over a decade ago, photojournalist Susan Meiselas brilliantly captured a “war of images” in her video documentary on memories of the insurrection, Pictures from a Revolution (Meiselas et al. 1992). Here, I have pointed to the contested images of postrevolutionary society as the nation prepares for the much-heralded arrival of tourism on its shores and in its cities. How Nicaraguans view themselves and construct themselves both frames and is framed by outsiders’ perceptions of them as a people and as a nation. Whatever economic, political, and cultural advantages or disadvantages tourism may bring in its wake, it is also responding to and remaking Nicaraguan national identity.

So what are tourists to make of these remaining symbols of that radically different time—especially as they are so often poorly informed about the Sandinista revolution of just over a decade ago? Most who stay for more than a day or two in the country venture into local markets or hotel gift shops where they find—in addition to other items targeted to them as consumers—a variety of T-shirts and postcards with the familiar image of Sandino, now 70 years after his death. Long-reproduced photographs of triumphant Sandinistas from the 1970s—frequently including the iconic portrait mentioned earlier of a smiling young woman with rifle slung over her shoulder and nursing infant in her arms—are sold alongside ceramic bowls from the artisan community of San Juan de Oriente, paintings of the traditional Atlantic-coast palo de mayo dance, packages of Casa del Café coffee beans, and Flor de Caña rum, as “typical” gifts to show off to friends back home. Now that Nicaragua is viewed as a stable democratic nation to which tourists may safely travel, images of the revolution are no longer so threatening or undesirable and may even be a selling point for savvy travel agents.

Who knows, but perhaps Managua’s Museum of the Revolution, which has long been closed, may reopen its doors and persuade more visitors to spend time in the capital before heading for the beaches and colonial towns? And who knows what recycled notions of the revolution may become part of the memories travelers take home? As Nicaragua is remade as a neoliberal nation, these memories may serve to evoke nostalgia for the brief time when idealism reigned but had to give way to the logic of the unfettered free market and the downsized state. Across the political spectrum, Nicaraguans and foreign visitors alike may come to embrace Sandino, like Darío, as national hero, appropriating his image and memory as safe for public consumption and a draw for international dollars—conveniently enhancing the twin projects of nationalism and tourism in the new era.

Recent histories of violence, danger, war, and revolution may all serve to draw tourism once the dust begins to settle in a region. At a time when jaded tourists are becoming less fearful of the threat of terrorism and are seeking “a new thrill,” they may venture to new destinations. The New York Times describes a tourism “boom” in Vietnam following the September 11 attacks, citing travelers’ views that “the country’s controlled Communist society [is] reassuring at a time of travel warnings and attacks elsewhere” (Bradsher 2003:8). Another article in the New York Times (Noel 2004:10) comments that South Africa is attracting record numbers of tourists, who may safely visit the prison cell that held Nelson Mandela for 27 years and other sites associated with the brutal period of apartheid. Even Iraq, long before the end of conflict in that nation, has captured the interest of tour operators and organizations that are poised to set up business as soon as the time is right (Worth 2003:2). Thus, it is not surprising that Nicaragua is beginning to see a new generation of visitors who wish to follow in the “footsteps of Sandino.” Along with other revolutionary icons like Che, Mao, and Ho Chi Minh, Sandino may very well find new life as both historical figure and cultural commodity in the modern, global marketplace of tourism.

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NOTES
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1. All translations from the Spanish are my own. In Spanish, Borge said “Y por qué hay que estimular el turismo en este país desgraciado? Porque es la tabla de salvación de la economía nacional” (personal interview, June 30, 2003).


3. I discuss the work of these writers and others who made the pilgrimage to revolutionary Nicaragua in Babb 2001a.

4. See www.intur.gob.ni/.

5. See Leichty 1996 for discussion of the making of Khatmandu, Nepal, as a tourist destination, and the influence of a Lonely Planet guidebook in the process.


7. On November 4, 2001, a French biker broke the world record for mountain biking by flying down the volcanic slopes of Cerro Negro at over 130 kilometers per hour. Tour operator Pierre Gédéon of Nicaragua Adventures promoted the event in Europe and invited a French film crew.

8. Nicaraguan males are often the providers of services to female travelers, but the gendered politics generally have a different and less sexual character, as noted in a recent travel article in the New York Times (Klein 2003:15). However, my observations in Cuba and those of others elsewhere (Phillips 1999) suggest that women tourists, too, may seek sexual liaisons with “locals” when traveling. See also Bolles 1997 on women and tourism in Jamaica, and Rojek and Urry 1997:16–18 on gendered differences in the “tourist gaze.”


10. Although the telephone book currently lists some forty tourist agencies in the country, a number of them are devoted to foreign travel rather than to Nicaraguan tourism.

11. Visitors to Munditur’s website are informed quite candidly, “Our goal through these past few years has been to eradicate any negative perception the rest of the world has of Nicaragua” (www.munditur.com).

12. The photograph, taken by Orlando Valenzuela, became a defining image of the Sandinista period, inspiring artist Chico Emery to erect a mural entitled “Sandinista Woman and Child” on a wall in central Managua in 1985. The mass women’s organization AMNLAE used the image in a poster and it is now found on postcards in hotel gift shops and markets. Kunzle (1995) notes that this photograph has been copied in images as far away as Belfast, Ireland.

13. Erika Moreno (personal communication, February 4, 2004) has suggested that the safe reappearance of images and narratives of revolution might also be possible because of the decline of the revolutionary left in Latin America. In Nicaragua, the Sandinista Party remains a significant political force but is no longer perceived as a threat to national security—thus its past may be romanticized.


15. There is one such reenactment that takes place every year on June 28, the date when in 1979 the Sandinistas made a tactical retreat from Managua to Masaya before their triumphant return when they took power. Old and young Sandinistas make the long walk and are joined by internationalists in solidarity with them. This is a show of political strength and a commemoration, however, and no tour has been designed to follow the course of the insurrection.

16. In the prologue to Sheesley’s (1991) work on representations of Sandino in Nicaraguan public culture, artist and poet Ernesto Cardenal comments that the national hero may be unique in being recognized by his silhouette alone. Indeed, just the sketch of his hat, a sort of sideways figure-8 for the brim and a triangular line for the top, is instantly familiar to any Nicaraguan and to many others who have spent time in the country.

17. I am grateful to Aynn Setright for details about these monuments. Managua’s mayor had another “worker’s” monument erected across the street from the “Rambo” statue, depicting a man with a jackhammer and a woman picking through metal scraps. Both are hunched over and appear downtrodden—in contrast to the Sandinista virile worker/combatant. See Craven 1989 for detailed discussion of art and popular culture during the revolutionary period.

18. The Sandinista Party became “safer” with the new-age re-fashioning of Daniel Ortega for the 2001 elections; in the post–September 11 climate, however, the United States again helped turn the tide toward the Liberal party candidate.

19. See Mallon 2003 for a discussion of the popularity of Che in Allende’s Chile, and his image of revolutionary masculinity. Che’s image now appears around the globe as a kitsch symbol of cultural opposition; nonetheless, in Nicaraguan political culture there is a deeper connection between Che and ideas of revolution.

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