Nicaragua: Land of Lakes & Volcanoes
With Naturalist Journeys & Caligo Ventures

March 25 – April 5, 2019
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Naturalist Journeys, LLC
Join Naturalist Journeys on a NEW! Nicaragua nature tour. Nicaragua’s varied natural landscapes are stunning and provide an incredible backdrop to our explorations; we also make time to learn about the Nicaraguan culture. Our tour is based out of three small eco-lodges, two or which are within private reserves. From our lodges, we explore rainforest trails, mountain lakes, two different volcanoes, and a variety of cultural sites at a relaxed pace. There are very few places in the world where you can drive right up to a living, breathing volcano and Masaya is one of them — a highlight of our tour! We make time for plenty of bird watching in rainforest, cloud forest, and dry forest habitats that offer a wide variety of birds, butterflies, and orchids. The combination of natural history, geology, and culture make this tour unique … Nicaragua is a neotropical wonderland.

Tour Highlights

- Spot hummingbirds like Violet Sabrewing, Green Violetear, Emerald-chinned Hummingbird, Violet-crowned Woodnymph, and Blue-throated Goldentail at El Jaguar Reserve
- Cruise Lake Apanás to spot a wide variety of water and shorebirds
- Visit two distinct volcanoes; one that is living and another adorned with cloud forest
- Take an evening excursion to Masaya Volcano to see the lake of lava at twilight
- Spend time at two sites where different styles of traditional ceramics are made
- Enjoy delicious local foods, including incredibly delicious chocolate-fruit smoothies
- Stay at private and secluded nature reserves filled with birds and other neotropical wildlife

Tour Summary

12-Day / 11-Night Nicaraguan Birding & Nature Tour with Robert Gallardo
$2890, from Managua
Airport is Augusto C. Sandino International (MGA)
Mon., Mar. 25  Arrivals in Managua
Welcome to Nicaragua! On arrival today, you are met by your guide and transferred to your first hotel. Today is a day to relax and get your bearings before we gather as a group for dinner to kick off the tour.  
*Accommodations at Best Western or similar, Managua (D)*

Tues., Mar. 26 & Wed., Mar. 27  El Jaguar Reserve
After breakfast this morning we take an interesting city tour with a local guide and learn about the country’s cultural and political past. We visit two or three different historical and modern sites nearby.

After an early lunch we depart Managua for El Jaguar Reserve, high in the cloud forest of the Isabelia Mountain Range in the northern province of Jinotega. A 100-mile drive from Managua, we enjoy the scenery as we make our way up to 4,500 feet above sea level, stopping en route as photo and birding opportunities present themselves.

Upon arrival, we settle into our lodgings, tucked away around a shade coffee plantation. The accommodations and food here are fairly basic, but clean and traditional. El Jaguar Reserve is a family-run Rainforest Alliance certified coffee plantation and reserve. Declared an Important Bird Area (IBA) in 2006, the reserve boasts an impressive 350+ bird species list. The reserve also has an active MoSI (overwintering survival Monitoring of Migrant Birds) site and we hope to witness banding during our stay. Mammals like Jaguarundi, Puma, Northern Tamandua, Collared Peccary, sloths, an endemic squirrel and gopher, and more have also been spotted on the property. Additionally, there is a nice variety of butterflies, which are frequent visitors to the...
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beautiful Porterweed (along with hummingbirds) planted around the reserve. What a great launching point for our trip!

The reserve hosts incredible biodiversity, and over these two days we wander short trails and access roads at a birder's pace, marveling at the stunning orchids and Jurassic-like tree ferns that give the whole reserve a feeling of stepping back in time. Hummingbirds like Violet Sabrewing, Emerald-chinned Hummingbird, Canivet's Emerald, Violet-crowned Woodnymph, and Blue-throated Goldentail are frequently found; quite often Highland Guans congregate behind the employee housing, as well as Gray-necked Wood-Rail; with luck, we spot the fascinating and vulnerable Three-wattled Bellbird. The reserve should also be packed with migrants at this time of year ... an added perk!

Accommodations at El Jaguar Reserve (B,L,D)

Thurs., Mar. 28  Lake Apanás | Black Pottery Cooperative

After breakfast this morning, we travel the short distance to Lake Apanás where we embark on a boat ride to witness the wide assortment of waterfowl that call this lake home. The Tuma River was dammed in the 1960s to create Lake Apanás, which is now on the list of Wetlands of International Importance. The lake provides power to the whole country, as well as employment opportunities to the surrounding community; tourism is just beginning to take hold here.

After our boat tour, we make the short drive to a local cooperative that makes black pottery. We have the opportunity to watch a full demonstration on how the pottery here is made. This is an old, traditional pottery, unique to the region. Later on during our tour, we have the chance to see a different style of pottery making; it is interesting to see the great contrast between the two styles.
This afternoon, you have a bit of free time to bird and explore the grounds of El Jaguar Reserve at your leisure, or indulge in a siesta if you prefer.

**Accommodations at El Jaguar Reserve (B,L,D)**

**Fri., Mar. 29   Selva Negra Reserve | Montibelli**

We say goodbye to El Jaguar Reserve today; after breakfast, we pack up and head south toward Montibelli. En route, we stop at Selva Negra, another private reserve. Selva Negra has found its niche as a bit of a tourist trap for local Nicaraguans, but it is a nice experience, all around. Around the lodge, we have the chance to see birds like Tropical Kingbird, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Bushy-crested Jay, Yellow-winged Tanager, and Melodious Blackbird. As we explore one of the loop trails here we look for Three-wattled Bellbird, noisy mixed flocks, and flocks of North American migrants. With a little more effort we hope to find Green-breasted Mountain-Gem, White-faced Quail-Dove, and with luck, a Collared Forest-Falcon.

We then settle in for a delicious lunch. Selva Negra is proud of their farm to table menu, with most ingredients grown or raised on the sustainable on-property farm. After lunch, we continue on to Montibelli.

After we check in, you are free to wander the grounds before dinner, or if there is time we may organize a group walk. On a previous trip here, a huge boa had captured a giant iguana right next to our rooms ... we can only hope for such a spectacle again on this tour! Eighty percent of Montibelli’s 400 acres is Pacific slope deciduous forest, filled with motmots, Elegant Trogon, different wrens, Long-tailed Manakin, Gray-headed Tanager, Common Potoo, motmots, and more.

The food here is excellent, and this evening we tuck into a hearty dinner.

**Accommodations in Montibelli (B,L,D)**

**Sat., Mar. 30   Montibelli | Masaya Volcano**

We dedicate the morning today to walking the trails here at Montibelli. Long-tailed Manakin should be quite vocal as we work
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our way through the forest. Turquoise-browed Motmot, Rufous-naped Wren, Gray-headed Tanager, Olive Sparrow, and Banded Wren are all common there. If we’re lucky, an Inga tree is in bloom, which attracts the regional Blue-tailed Hummingbird, Canivet’s Emerald, Plain-capped Starthroat, and the prized Blue-throated Goldentail. The local guide usually knows where to find the Common Potoo on its day roost.

After lunch, we visit the nearby Masaya Volcano National Park to get a view of the site during the day. Only having become very active since 2015, this has become one of the most popular tourist attractions in all of Nicaragua, and is comprised of two volcanoes and five craters. Feared by both the indigenous people and the Spanish conquerors, the active volcano was named “La Boca del Infierno” or “The Mouth of Hell,” and at one point during the 16th Century, there was an attempt to exorcise the Devil from the volcano!

Ash and volcanic rock still cover the ground here near the volcanoes; the scenery is rugged, yet peaceful and is home to fascinating flora and wildlife like skunks, coyotes, opossums, raccoons, iguanas, deer, and monkeys. In the daylight hours we visit an on-site geology and natural history museum to get a better idea of how Nicaragua is part of the Ring of Fire. We also see the live crater which allows us a different perspective during the dusk experience.

We then descend back to the entrance of the national park and may have a bit of a wait before going back up. But good things come to those who wait! As night falls, we hope to be one of the first groups that are sent back up the hill to catch a glimpse of the volcano’s lake of lava, glowing in the dusky night sky. Each group is only allowed 15 minutes, so our time here is short, but is well worth it.
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We then make the short drive to a nearby restaurant where we enjoy great food and company with the glow of the volcano in the distance.

Accommodations in Montibelli (B,L,D)

Sun., Mar. 31  Mombacho Volcano | San Juan de Oriente Pottery Workshop
Today we explore the Mombacho Volcano; tall and dormant and covered in deciduous forest below and cloud forest higher up. Here we are transported up the steep paving stone road to the visitor center on the top of the volcano — what a view! We listen to an introductory talk, and then embark on a slightly strenuous trail that loops around one of the extinct craters. Along the trail are several overlooks into the forested crater, and we watch for orchids and the star of the show: Purple-throated Mountain-gem. We enjoy lunch up on the mountain before departing.

Then we are off to visit the San Juan de Oriente engraved pottery shop. This shop is actually a school where nationals (and sometimes foreigners) come to learn the art of pre-Colombian style pottery making. Every color we see on these stunning pieces is derived from natural rock/earth sources — amazing! We are given a talk during which we learn about the pottery style, how they color raw pottery, how it is engraved, exactly how it is baked, and more. And then of course we make a visit to the shop where they sell a large variety of the pieces. We’re sure to stimulate the local economy with our visit!

Accommodations in Montibelli (B,L,D)

Mon. Apr. 1 – Wed., Apr. 3  Ometepe Island
This morning we make an early departure in order to catch a one-hour ferry ride to our next destination: the island of Ometepe on Lake Nicaragua, where we spend three nights. The island is actually comprised of two
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volcanoes: Concepción (active) and Maderas (dormant). Both were born in the Holocene period (the most recent time in geological history) and are now connected by a low-lying wetland. This unique destination, the activities to ensue, and the ecolodge’s picturesque setting are a pleasurable way to round out our tour.

Upon arriving on the island we make a short half-hour trip to the Totoco Ecolodge, which is nestled just upslope on the northeastern side of Maderas Volcano. It is nestled amidst Pacific slope dry forest where we may see Mantled Howler Monkeys descend onto the grounds; Pacific Screech-Owls call throughout the night and the whimsical White-throated Magpie-Jay is common. Different species of parrots and parakeets come and go throughout the day. The sunsets with the Concepcion Volcano as a backdrop are magical.

For the next three days we enjoy the quiet lodge grounds or take a dip in the pool. We dedicate one morning to visiting a nearby wetland where we can kayak. Double kayaks are available and for those who don’t want to paddle, a local guide is provided. These wetlands harbor kingfishers, Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, whistling-ducks, gallinules, and even Snail Kite. After our morning adventures we have lunch at a nearby hangout where they not only make their own chocolate goodies, but also the most ornate chocolate-fruit smoothies in the country.

On the last full day here we visit a nice butterfly farm/house located among a lush garden and forest. For those who have never visited this type of breeding facility, know you are in good hands — Robert built and operated several in Honduras. After our butterfly farm visit, we stop at a nearby cultural/archaeological museum where
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we get a tour that highlights an incredible Nicaraguan currency collection, as well as an extensive collection of indigenous artifacts from the island, some of which date back 3000 years. After this last delightful morning we enjoy a delicious lakeside lunch back at the butterfly farm. We return to the lodge to enjoy a swim, some bird watching, and another sunset.

Accommodations in Ometepe (B,L,D)

April 4 Managua
Today we say goodbye to Ometepe and depart early to catch the ferry back to the mainland. En route back to Managua we may have the opportunity to visit the Masaya Artisan Center, which covers an entire city block. Upon arriving in Managua we check in to a hotel across from the airport for a bit of relaxing, take a dip in the pool, or simply enjoy a little birding on the grounds. We have our farewell dinner tonight at the hotel.

Accommodations in Managua (B,L,D)

April 5 Departures
Departures are at your leisure today. Remember, you need to be at the airport three hours before your international flights.

Guide Robert Gallardo
Butterfly, orchid and bird authority of Honduras. An avid naturalist from childhood, Robert left his native California to join Peace Corps, finding a passion for tropical nature on arrival in 1993. He has authored two CD's, small field guides, and the forthcoming authoritative "Guide to the Birds of Honduras". He resides at the scenic Lake Yojoa and spends much of his time afield.

Cost of the Journey

Plan Ahead!
Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. Their website will show a grid of tour cost and your age category for you to make selections. As of January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Cost of the Journey
Cost of the journey is $2890 DBL / $3200 SGL (limited availability) per person, from Managua. Cost includes: all accommodations; all meals as stated in the itinerary; group airport transfers; ground transportation within Nicaragua; professional guide services; park, preserve, and other activity fees; and miscellaneous program expenses. Tour price does not include: roundtrip airfare to and from Managua, or items of a personal nature such as laundry, porterage, telephone charges, or alcoholic beverages. Gratuities for any local lodge guides in Nicaragua are not included; these are at your discretion, but highly appreciated and recommended. Please note
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that the cost of the journey is based on a minimum of 4 participants, with a limit of 12 persons; with fewer than 4 participants, a small surcharge of $100 – $300 dollars may apply.

Travel Information
Please plan to make air travel plans only after the minimum group size has been reached. Please arrive in Managua at the Augusto C. Sandino International Airport (MGA) by 4:00 PM on March 25. If you need to arrive a day early, we can help with hotel suggestions. Please plan outbound flights at your leisure on April 5, but do remember that you should be at the airport three hours before your international flight.

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El Jaguar Reserve Swing Bridge, Robert Gallardo (RG); Northern Tamandua, Howard Topoff (HT); Violet Saberwing, Sandy Sorkin (SS); Group at Masaya Volcano, RG; Morpho Peleides, RG; Collared Aracari, James Adams; Lake Apanás, RG; El Jaguar Reserve Dining Room, RG; Three-toed Sloth, HT; El Jaguar Reserve Rooms, RG; Green Violetear, SS; Black Pottery, RG; Tropical Kingbird, SS; Resplendent Quetzal, Greg Smith; Masaya Volcano by Day, RG; Masaya Volcano’s Lake of Lava at Night, RG: Trail at Mombachu Volcano, RG; Violet Sabrewing, RG; San Juan de Oriente Pottery Workshop, RG; Montibelli Reserve, RG; Concepción Volcano at Sunset, RG; Group at Ometepe, RG; Ometepe Boat Ride, RG; Motezuma Oropendola, Tom Dove.