

EXPLORING NICARAGUA

Catarina Looks to Expand Upon Budding Success

By Sam Jacoby

Nica Times Staff

CATARINA – Perched high on the eastern lip of Apoyo Volcano, Catarina owns one of the most impressive views in Nicaragua.

The town sits above the Laguna de Apoyo, offering a clear view of the crater lake with its strikingly blue water and, on a clear day, Granada, Lake Nicaragua and the island of Ometepe to the distance beyond. It is an awe-inspiring view, the development of which is serving as the linchpin of Catarina's burgeoning tourism sector.

The Mirador, a colonnade of a dozen or so restaurants and shops arrayed along the crater lip, is at the heart of this growth.

Constructed just over a decade ago with a grant won from an Austrian development commission, the Mirador has since been gathering its own momentum.

Erwin Sánchez, Mayor of Catarina, is proud of its success.

"We get more than 600,000 visitors a year," he boasted in a recent interview with The Nica Times. "Next year, we're hoping for a million."

A savvy businessman, Sánchez is well aware of the tourism boom that has stimulated investment throughout Nicaragua, and is eager to find a way to ensure that the wave does not pass Catarina by.

"Nicaragua is at a critical point in the development of its tourism," he said. "We are just beginning to see really tremendous growth."

How small communities like his take advantage of the increasing numbers of travelers remains to be seen, though Catarina is not putting itself at the mercy of anyone.

The town already has plans for a major expansion of the Mirador, adding a crater-rim walkway to the facilities already in place. The additions are intended to work in tandem with Catarina's already considerable assets.

"We are trying to take advantage of our natural resources; to create a place to be near nature, to sit under the trees, to enjoy the view," Sánchez said. "We are trying to cultivate a more ecological type of tourism."

So far, more than \$65,000 has been secured for the expansion project, and it appears that construction will go ahead as scheduled later this year. Though the expansion will not add any new restaurants or shops to the Mirador complex, area business owners, especially those who already have a foot in the door, are applauding the development.

Fatima Nicaragua, who owns a small cafe-



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Famous View:
Catarina's Mirador overlooking Laguna de Apoyo (left) and its booming flower industry (below) have this little town dreaming big.

teria just inside the entrance, is pleased with the changes she is seeing around Catarina.

"The municipality here has done a really great job getting things moving," she said. "They're always looking for funding, trying to develop business and planning new projects."

David Ruiz, proprietor of the nearby Bar y Restaurante Carolina, shares her optimism.

"We hope there will be more tourists, more tourists from all over the world, France, Holland, and from Nicaragua, of course," he said.

About 20% of the visitors to Catarina are foreign tourists. The rest are from within Nicaragua, many from nearby Masaya and Managua, but increasingly more are coming from farther afield.

Sánchez says the influx of visitors has helped strengthen other local businesses as well, not just those lucky enough to have secured a spot on the crater's rim.

"The Mirador helps support our artisans," he said. "Our furniture craftsman, bamboo workers, ceramic artists and woodworkers."

Catarina is also the traditional home of Nicaragua's ornamental plant industry, offering quaint and cool flower-lined streets that are a pleasure to stroll on the way up to the Mirador. Each nursery is a dense maze of lush ferns, trees, shrubs and flowers of all colors.

Carlos Ruiz, the owner of the nursery Jardín Esmeralda, doesn't feel like he is in competition with the Mirador. On the contrary, he says of the Mirador's expansion, "It's good for everyone."

The expanded Mirador, he added, will make "people visit Catarina more often, and when they walk by, they'll think, maybe a beautiful plant or two?"

Perhaps visitors will also venture to one of Catarina's surrounding neighbors, such as San Juan del Oriente, which specializes in fine handmade ceramics.

Indeed, the dozen or so towns in the area, collectively termed the "Pueblos Blancos" – or White Towns – may all enjoy the benefits of the Mirador's planned expansion.

The central government, too, has recognized the tourism potential of the area and has recently invested \$1.5 million, with the help of the Inter-American Development Bank, to complete a 42-kilometer highway maintenance and repair project in the White



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Towns of Ticuantepe, La Concepción, San Marcos, Masatepe and Catarina.

Distant from the type of foreign investment that is blooming up and down the Pacific coast, these small communities, led by Catarina, are creating their own strain of tourism-driven success with a combination of homegrown development, small-town charm and unique idiosyncrasy. ■



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