

Visitors guide to Venecia and Laguna de Masaya

Going around the Masaya Lagoon there are many amazing views of the Masaya volcano, strange trees over lava stone and the rocky walls of the collapsed volcano. However, there are many stories to tell about the places, the plants and the popular mythology, and these can be difficult to understand, when the guide is poor in English and the wind is blowing. The idea with this text is to give some basic information that may help to catch the meaning of what the tour guides will be showing.

The lagoon

The Masaya lagoon is placed in the caldera after an ancient volcano, which was probably much bigger than the modern version of the Masaya Volcano. When burned out this volcano sunk in the ground, and a new raised to the West. The new volcano partly filled the gap with lava, wherefore the current lagoon is shaped as a half circle.

The water covers 8 square kilometers and maximum depth about 70 meters.



The water of the lagoon is supposed to be the groundwater level of the surrounding area, but the local people has another explanation: The lagoon was created by the tears of a big snake, which was bound to a tree on the slope of the former volcano. The snake is still in the lagoon, and is now and then seen by fishermen and neighbors.

Houses and ruins

By the 1970th Venecia and the lagoon cost was a popular beach with several restaurants and nice country houses. With 80th revolution, the ongoing pollution of the lagoon and the creation of the National Park the place lost its clients, and most houses were abandoned. Some were taken over by caretakers others simple consumed by the forest, and getting around in the wilderness you see many stumps of walls and basements. Many of these ruins has a story to tell, if you are lucky to find someone who remember.

A kind of pier build of lava stone next to the house known as Los Quinchos. Lately the water level of the lagoon has decreased and the structures are now more likely to be a viewpoint. Anyhow the boat traffic on the lagoon is very reduced, so no ships will be likely to search the pier.



House of Los Quinchos. In the 90th an enthusiastic Italian voluntary created a home for clue sniffer children from the markets of Managua. The center is placed in San Marcos, but the children needed fresh air and physical activity, and a little house was build at the cost of the lonesome lagoon.

By the years the Quinchos also forgot the lagoon, and now your only meet the caretaker don Manuel.



Basement of doña Tinas house. A lonesome lady living there thirty years ago. One day washing cloth in the lagoon she saw the big snake jumping up from the bay to fly up on the volcano.



Forest gaining territory

Around in the forest you can see a stone fence like this taking care of some wild trees. Probably a country house had its place here many years ago. Another place there are a number of basins, where a tanner did his business in the past. Or the rest of houses with trees growing inside.

There are many such examples of the capacity of tropical nature to re-conquest what was taken by man.



Ruins of General Moncadas Summerhouse

Jose Maria Moncada was president of Nicaragua 1928-32 and played a rather important role in the country's history. He fought the US-marines during 1927 and forced them to negotiate. But his agreement included the permanence of US-troops, and was rejected by his general Sandino... initiating another 5 years of civil war. Moncada arranged that his (god)son Anastasio Somoza got leader of the army... and few years later Somoza had taken total control over Nicaragua.



Moncada was from Masatepe and had his summerhouse, for which reason we have the nice road down in the edge of the crater. After the eathcrake of Managua 1931 Moncada attended the government from this place... so we say Venecia was capital of Nicaragua for 3 days.

Later the house was flooded by the lagoon, rebuild and changed and the only surely authentic memory of Mr. Moncada is the floor in the sitting room.



Birds

Garzón grande / Garza (*Ardea alba*) Engl. Great egret

Whenever you go to the lagoon there will be one or more egrets sitting on a rock looking over the water. Then they fly a little and take a new seat... and sometimes they go down for a fish.



Uraca (*Calocitta formosa*) Engl: Magpie jay

A tropical version of the magpie. A little more blue than the Northern relatives, but the same hoarse shouting, which you would not expect from such a nice bird. Common in the tree crowns, jumping and flying around.



Martin Pescador (*Megaceryle spp.*) Kingfisher.

Alike to hide in the branches of coastal trees, from where it seak out the fish to be the next victim.



Güis (*Pitangus sulphuratus*) Great Kiskadee.

Rather common little bird, always talking. Both the Spanish and the English name are phonetic reproductions of what the visitors hear. Especially the “kis-ka-dee” sound has many interpretations for what could be the message in human language.





Guardabaranco (*Eumomota superciliosa*) Engl.
Motmot

The very colorful National Bird of Nicaragua. Normally flying in couples, and sitting down on a branch a little ahead waiting that you shall look at it. Then it turns around, so that you can see that the back is also nice.



Black vulture

Zopilotes (Negro = *Coragyps atratus*, Caceciroja = *Cathartes aura*) Engl. Vulture
There will always be a vulture somewhere above you; looking for dead fish or maybe garbage. The black vulture normally join a group, while the turkey vulture is a lonely hunter.



Turkey vulture

Lavastone

Wherever you look around, the rough, black lava stone pops up between roots and soil, but at the Northern end of the lagoon there is an complete "lavastone dessert". Local people name these areas "piedra quemada" (burned stone). This stream of lava dates from the last strong eruption in 1772, and is extended several kilometers to the North and East; one branch turned towards the lagoon and that's the on what we can see. This eruption came from the apparently peaceful San Fernando crater, while the always bobbling Santiago crater has never gone beyond its bounds.



Plants

Malinche (*Delonix regia*), English: Flamboyant

A remarkable tree for its precious reddish flowers that cover all the crown for a period, and for the very big pods which make any boy think of a sword... and when dry they can be used as rhythm instruments shaking the seeds within the pod.



The tree is introduced from Madagascar many years ago, and few Nicaraguans are aware that this is not part of their own nature. In Venecia it reproduces willingly, but note that outside the village it is very seldom.



Guanacaste (*Enterolobium cyclocarpum*). Also known as Eartree!

Remarkable for the thick stem and broad crown. In Venecia you find trees with diameter of 8 feet. Seldom in a natural forest, as it is sown by the cattle. The cow will eat the ear formed pod as the shelter is very nutritive, but it cannot digest the hard seeds, so they come out again with the manure, where they start life protected from the weeds and with a good nutrition base. So when common along the lagoon, it is because the forest is being used for grassing.

Live strong, die young. The Guanacaste grows very fast, and may increase diameter 2-3 inches a year. The giants you see are therefore not necessarily old, and they probably do not last. You may see several fallen or broken trees in the area.

The wood is dark and soft. It is widely demanded by the carpenters, as you can make a tabletop out one sole piece.

The roots are aggressive and may lift floors and roads. They also grow over rocks and even in the air, like the tree to the right, which base was washed away by a stream.



Matapalo (tree killer – *Ficus spp.*) , English: Strangler fig

With its ability to establish and survive on the bare rocks this tree is very characteristic for the volcanic landscape. It is easy to recognize on the multiple stems and roots covering the stones and walls. The name is not quite correct, as this species is seldom to attack other trees; it just *strangles* the stones. But, it has several relatives within the fig family which starts as lianas climbing the bigger trees in the forest, later they strangle them and take over there place.



Ceiba (*Ceiba pentandra*) English: Kapok tree / Bottle tree

A through giant, which marks the landscape, where the soil layer is a little thicker. The tree affronts the draught by storing water in the stem, which is the reason they grow so thick and that the younger trees tends to have the shape of a bottle. When young is has characteristic thorns and green lines in the bark. The bigger trees can be recognized by the huge horizontal branches.



Jiñocuabo (*Bursera simaruba*) English: Copperwood / Gumbo-limbo

Easy to identify on the red film that covers the green stem.

Common in living fences, as the cuttings sprout easily, and the standing tree has no value as wood, firewood or pasture, so you can have yours poles in peace. When pruning the healing and new sprouts takes round “human” forms, and many observers identifies a face or part of a body in the plant. The red bark and the human forms has led to the nick name: “Naked indian”, but the natives prefer the name:



“Naked gringo” as the crumbling red shelter more looks like the red skin of the tourist who has stayed too long at the beach. An indian wood never do that!

The biologic explanation is a very advanced adaption to dry climate. When water is scarce the leaves are sacrificed, but photosynthesis may continue with the green bark. The thin red film is to avoid excessive evaporation from this process.

The strong water economy makes it able to be one of the first pioneers in the lava stone areas, and you see it as the

dominating trees in most of the forest, when you go along the road North from Venecia. However these trees are thin and fragile and after every hard wind you see the fallen stems of even rather young trees. The form is much more strait in these natural stands than the cuttings in the living fence along the road leading to the village from Masatepe, but it is also evident that in the good soil they grow bigger and live longer.



Pinuela (*Bromelia bromeliad*) English: Heart of flame

At first sight very alike to the penca, but it has different properties. In dry areas it is used for living fences, as its sharp thorns make it really difficult to cross. The flower is surrounded by red and yellow leaves, which gives them a colorful presentation. The fruits can get a sweet flavor and may be eaten or used for porridge.



Lianas – climbers.

Before converted in a national park, the area of the volcano was an important source for lianas for the furniture industry of Masatepe. The area offers a wide range of species and types, and only a specialist may figure out, which are the useful ones. Other visitors will just see the hanging lianas, which are fine strings wiping in the air, probably as a tool for condensing water from the air, and the climbing lianas which are thick and may form a dense network of understory that may be hard to penetrate. Many lianas has precious flowers.



Flor de Agua (*Eichhornia crassipes*) Water hyacinth

Surely one of the world's most precious and useful pests. This plants invades lakes and lagoons with too high contents of nutrients; which are mostly coming from excessive fertilizing of crops and spoiled water from cities. The plant may cover the total water surface with up to 3 feet of leaves and roots, so that you can walk over it. However, the green material can be harvested for fodder or bioenergy, and so removing it constantly the plant can convert in a useful helper in cleaning the water for surplus minerals, including toxic metals. The plant is native to our area.



Penca (*Bromeliacea family*)

A relative of the agaves used for fiber production, such as for ropes and hammocks. The name penca es used for a wide range of plants that may be used for fiber.

The penca of the lagoon area sets extraordinary high stalks for its flowers. However flowering is not very frequent.



Pitahaya (*Hylocereus undatus*) – Wild Dragon Fruit – Queen of the Night.

Dragon fruit is a delightful dish, whatever you eat it with a spoon, get it in icecream or as a fruitdrink, and it has increasing commercial importance.

In nature, this cactus is a through climber and prefers to colonize high, horizontal branches. It sprouts after strong rainfalls, and may get 5-6 flowerings a year. The flowers are pretty and big as a hand, but only open one night... until about 8 a.m. If you happen to see it, you understand why it's also called Queen of the night.

