

A woman with dark hair in a braid, wearing a white halter top and a watch, is smiling and paddling a wooden canoe on a wide river. The sun is low in the sky, creating a warm, golden light. The water is calm, reflecting the sky and the surrounding lush green forest on the banks. The overall mood is peaceful and adventurous.

Exploring the New Nicaragua

In 1866, one of America's greatest writers set out to cross Nicaragua by boat. One hundred and thirty-nine years later, armed only with two leaky canoes, **Matthew Power** follows in his wake—and explores Central America's hottest destination in the process.

Photography by Peter McBride

LOST PASSAGE: The Río San Juan was once the fastest route between New York City and San Francisco. Today it's nearly deserted and a canoe journey back in time.



FROM THE DECK OF A PADDLE WHEELER CHURNING

listlessly across Lake Nicaragua, a little known travel writer scribbled notes for a dispatch. It was March of 1867, and he was writing for a long since departed San Francisco newspaper called the *Alta California*. His story began with a cavalcade of purple prose: There were “two magnificent pyramids, clad in the softest and richest green,” and they looked “so isolated from the world and its turmoil—so tranquil, so dreamy, so steeped in slumber and eternal repose.”

Prose stylings have changed over the years, but from where I sit on the deck of a similar ship, crossing the same lake, the scene has not. Off our starboard bow, a fiery sun sinks to the horizon. In the distance those “two magnificent pyramids,” the twin peaks of Ometepe Island, are cast in golden light. The ferry is crowded with great piles of green plantains and wicker furniture. Passengers—more than any law should allow—hug every inch of rail. We’d left Granada only a few hours before, its tile-roofed mansions and 17th-century cathedral disappearing into the afternoon haze. And as we chug closer to Ometepe’s volcanic peaks I see what sent a young Mark Twain into raptures.

Just after Christmas, 1866, a 31-year-old, walrus-mustachioed Twain left San Francisco for New York City by

Nicaragua is reminiscent of Costa Rica in the 1980s, a gritty unexplored country that’s become the darling of the backpacker and ecotraveler set.

way of Nicaragua. Still a relatively obscure talent, he would not begin his rise to literary superstardom until the following year, with the publication of the short story “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.” His plan, the same as mine, had been to follow what was known as the Nicaragua Route, from the Pacific Ocean to the Caribbean.

In the years before the construction of the transcontinental railroad in the United States, the Nicaragua Route was the fastest way to travel between New York City and San Francisco. Due to a fluke of geography, southern Nicaragua (and thereby the isthmus of Central America) could be crossed



almost entirely by boat via Lake Nicaragua and its outflow to the Caribbean, the Río San Juan. The only overland travel required was an 11-mile stretch of jungle from the Pacific to the lake. The route was wildly popular, and at the height of the California gold rush, the steamships of Cornelius Vanderbilt’s Accessory Transit Company carried some 10,000 passengers a year coast-to-coast, for the princely sum of \$250 each.

But then the Panama Canal was constructed and the Nicaragua Route slipped into obscurity. The country, devoid of industry and exploited by foreign powers, drifted away with it. Oligarchies ensued, then devastating wars and crippling natural disasters, such as Hurricane Mitch in 1988. Only within the past dozen years has Nicaragua been shaking off its deep and troubled sleep. Today the country—the third poorest in the hemisphere, after Haiti and Honduras—has finally stabilized and is on the brink of sweeping economic changes as it catches up with a world that left it behind.

For travelers, Nicaragua’s newfound security, which according to the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol) has a lower rate of violent crime than almost anywhere in Central America, and its time-warp appeal are irresistible. And among present-day Central America explorers, a new Nicaragua route has emerged. Instead of transiting between coasts, travelers shuttle between the Spanish colonial towns of Granada and León, the black-sand beaches of Ometepe, the cloud forests of Volcán Mombacho, and the crystal clear waters of Laguna de Apoyo. Ecolodges have sprung up on the sides of volcanoes and in rich lowland jungles. Surfers flock to the unexplored breaks of San Juan del Sur. To old Central America hands, Nicaragua is reminiscent of Costa Rica in the 1980s, a gritty, unexplored country that

LIFE ON THE SAN JUAN: The town of El Castillo, alongside the San Juan’s most notorious rapid, is home to a historic Spanish fort (above). Here, the author and his group began their paddle to the Caribbean. Left: A river dweller in the village of Dinante cradles his pet forest pig,

has become the darling of the backpacker and ecotraveler set.

In light of this new Nicaragua route, it seemed only appropriate to revisit the old one, to load up a few canoes and set off down the Río San Juan. I’d trace the footsteps of Twain and of a boomtown past that seems bound to come again.

The ferry from Granada to the town of San Carlos is packed to the gunwales with San Carleños going home. A few backpackers on their way to Ometepe mix in the throng. Photographer Peter McBride and I, along with my friend Larka Bosnak, have procured first-class tickets, which give us the right to sit in hammocks on the top deck. As we churn along, several passengers rock themselves to sleep.

As sunset splays across the tropical sky, I strike up a conversation with two fellow travelers, Nora Hawkins and Kelly Rudger, a couple from Oregon, en route to Ecuador. In San Carlos, I tell them, we’ll intersect the Río San Juan and Twain’s route. From there we’ll take the river just as he did, 110 miles to its mouth at the Caribbean Sea. Transport, for

the most part, will be by canoe, maybe dugout. Not many *morteamericanos* have followed the route, I say, at least not since the late 1800s. The only certainty is jungle, lots of it: For almost the entire the trip, we'll be passing through the Indio Maiz Biological Reserve, a massive and incalculably rich trove of biodiversity, unmarked by a single road or town. I don't have to say much more to Kelly and Nora. With no hesitation, our crew swells by two.

That night, darkness comes quickly and I drift off to the sound of plowing wake and rumbling diesel. When Twain crossed the lake to San Carlos, his hundred-mile paddle-wheel journey took 12 hours, which he deemed "not particularly speedy, but very comfortable." Here, 139 years later, by the wonders of modern technology our hundred-mile trip takes 14 hours. So much for progress.

"THERE IS, OF COURSE, THE MATTER OF THE freshwater sharks," Pete says to me over a breakfast of eggs and *gallo pinto* (rice and beans, a staple of the Central American diet). We are in El Castillo, a town of tin-roofed houses that clings to a bank three hours south of San Carlos.

"I hear the river's full of them," he says with a grin. *Carbarhinus leucas*, the bull shark, is one of the only shark species that can live in freshwater. They have been caught in the Mississippi River as far north as Illinois and are common in Lake Nicaragua and the Río San Juan. They are thought

once, and Horatio Nelson made his name capturing the fort (though he was quickly driven out by sickness, a hardier foe than the Spanish).

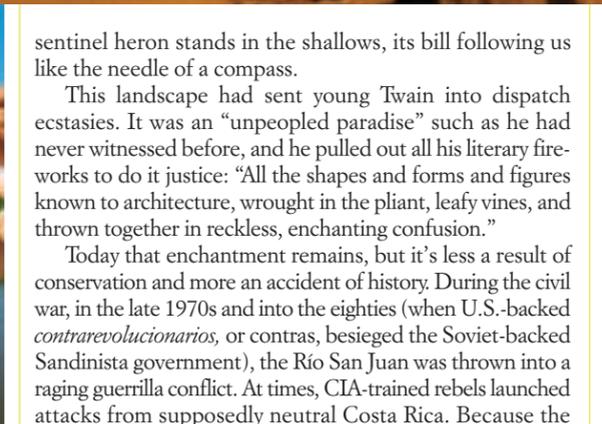
The last time the fort was overrun was a mere decade before Twain's arrival, by a power-mad American named William Walker. In 1855 Walker, a soldier of fortune, landed in Nicaragua with 57 gun-toting men and overtook El Castillo and Granada. He promptly appointed himself president of the country, reinstated slavery, and so thoroughly gunned up Vanderbilt's transportation racket that the Wall Street tycoon financed a private army to defeat him. Walker bolted to Honduras only to be captured and eventually executed by a firing squad in 1860. The fort, a moss-covered ruin looming above the town, is a silent repository of all this strange and violent history.

In town Pete and I ask around for some *canoletas*, the dugout canoes commonly used by Nicaraguans on the river. We find one tied up at the dock and climb in to get a feel for the vessel. Narrow across the beam, round on the bottom, leaky as a sieve, we learn immediately that if you haven't grown up in one, it's as easy to maneuver as a telephone pole. We nearly capsize looking at the thing.

Nixing that plan, we start asking the locals about more stable vessels. With no decent leads, it seems our journey might be over before it has truly begun. Then we meet Don Napoleon. A local patrician like those found in nearly every one-burro town

in the Americas, Don Napoleon's actual title is immaterial: Perhaps he's the mayor of El Castillo, perhaps the mayor's brother-in-law. He is a man who can get things done, he tells us. A take-charge kind of caballero. And he leads us behind his tin-roofed house, where we meet Mia and Emma. His daughters? Even better, we are offered two dinged-up but serviceable fiberglass canoes. They

This landscape had sent Twain into writerly ecstasies: "All the shapes and forms and figures known to architecture, [are] wrought in the pliant, leafy vines, and thrown together in reckless, enchanting confusion."



to be responsible for more attacks on humans than any other shark species after great whites and tiger sharks. "And don't forget the crocodiles, either," Pete adds, the smile on his face growing wider.

Great news considering that El Castillo is where we've planned to pick up our canoes and start paddling. Even better that it's here we'll face the most challenging white water of the trip. In fact El Castillo's very raison d'être is the Raudal del Diablo, "the devil's flood," a churning rapid that's one of the few on the San Juan that is impassable to large ships. For the Spaniards it was a logical spot to build defenses—which they did in the form of a massive fort—to guard against the pirates and privateers who would swarm up the San Juan and sack Granada. Buccaneers such as Henry Morgan (of Captain Morgan Rum fame) passed through El Castillo more than

INNOCENTS ABROAD Kelly Rudger, the author, and Nora Hawkins "stay left" on the river (above). Clockwise from top right: Dhyana Tse walks El Castillo at night; an oversize crayfish; traditional paddles (note the infamous pizza paddle at left); hospitality by headlamp in the village of Dinante.

will be ours for the sum of \$7 a day. Each.

And the paddles? Apparently they're worth their weight in córdobas in El Castillo. After much haggling, Don Napoleon uses his connections to gather a collection of hand-carved, jerry-built, and unbelievably sorry-looking devices. One resembles an oversize spatula used to pull pizza from the oven; it's promptly dubbed the "pizza paddle." Another appears to have been hacked from uncured mahogany with a rusty machete and weighs about eight pounds. They'll do fine, we tell him.

Just as we are wrapping up our negotiations, a *panga* (a sort of aquatic school bus) pulls up to the town dock and men begin to unload case after case of Victoria, the national beer of Nicaragua. It is a good omen. As Che Guevara was fond of saying, "*Hasta la victoria siempre!*—Toward victory, always!"

IN A MISTY SUNRISE WE TACKLE THE RAUDAL DEL DIABLO, WHOSE DULL roar inspires visions of snap-jawed crocodiles and ravenous freshwater sharks. We decide to run the canoes empty, so that if we do capsize, our supplies won't get drenched. While the others in our group shuttle loads to the bottom of the rapid on foot (as Twain had done), Pete and I get ready to run the treacherous waters. I've got the best paddle of the lot, about as light and responsive as a stop sign, and the canoe shudders as I step in. I scour the river for dorsal fins or crocs slipping off the far bank, but I see nothing.

They're probably lying in wait already. Pete pushes off first, then I do, and our canoes are tossed around like corks in a washing machine. We paddle frantically to avoid rocks and hack our way through seams of white water that wash over the canoe walls and threaten to swamp us. The shops and houses stacked on the shore go by in a blur, and then, as quickly as it began, it's finished. It couldn't have been more than a Class II. Spared from the jaws of death again.

At the bottom of the rapid, we load the canoes, putting the essentials in drybags and stowing as much water as we can carry. Nora cinches everything expertly in place (for work she runs pack trips in Oregon's Willowa Mountains, so cinching is sort of a specialty). She, Kelly, and I take one canoe, with her in stern. Pete, Learka, and Pete's girlfriend, Dhyana, who joined us in San Carlos, take the other. In the spirit of improvisation (but really because my luggage is still MIA in Miami International Airport) we have no map, no GPS, no compass. Don Napoleon, who'd come to see us off, doles out one final piece of advice: "*Siempre mantenerse la izquierda*—Always stay left." Hopefully the only direction we'll need.

Floating islands of water lilies drift along the current, providing some sense of the river's speed, no faster than a jogger's pace. There are a few minor rapids, which we run easily, and a couple of large back eddies that we have to finesse. Giant silvery tarpon surface nearby, their dorsal fins splayed like Chinese fans. The forest looms up from the banks, towering hills appear and vanish in the early morning mist. A

sentinel heron stands in the shallows, its bill following us like the needle of a compass.

This landscape had sent young Twain into dispatch ecstasies. It was an "unpeopled paradise" such as he had never witnessed before, and he pulled out all his literary fireworks to do it justice: "All the shapes and forms and figures known to architecture, wrought in the pliant, leafy vines, and thrown together in reckless, enchanting confusion."

Today that enchantment remains, but it's less a result of conservation and more an accident of history: During the civil war, in the late 1970s and into the eighties (when U.S.-backed *contrarevolucionarios*, or contras, besieged the Soviet-backed Sandinista government), the Río San Juan was thrown into a raging guerrilla conflict. At times, CIA-trained rebels launched attacks from supposedly neutral Costa Rica. Because the San Juan is effectively the border between the two countries for much of its length, it saw some bitter fighting.

For Nicaragua the 11-year conflict was bloody and debilitating, and it left an estimated 30,000 people dead. The only upside to the horror may have been for the jungle along the San Juan. Even after the conflict ended, in 1990, settlers were reluctant to carve farms within the disputed territory; de-mining efforts were only conducted on some of the river islands in the past few years. By the time the jungle was ready for development, it was recognized for a different kind of value and was set aside as the Indio Maiz Biological Reserve.

The eastern lowland jungles of Nicaragua are the largest intact rain forests in Central America, a veritable mini-Amazon, and Indio Maiz represents a sizable chunk of the virgin territory. The reserve contains the vast majority of Nicaragua's 676 species of birds, 176 species of reptiles, and 200 species of mammals. While a few eco-resorts, such as the Río Sabalos Lodge near El Castillo, have sprung up on the perimeter, the reserve is as untouched as it was in pre-Colombian times, maybe more so.

At a military checkpoint about four miles downstream

from El Castillo, we pull up to the bank. We are the first U.S. citizens in four months to sign the logbook. From this point on, river left will be uninterrupted old-growth forest until we reach the Caribbean. River right, the Costa Rican frontier, will be almost as pristine, with only a few small cattle farms and thatch-roof houses cut into the hillsides.

Drifting along with the current, the spectacle is primeval: Cormorants pose drying their wings; yellow-breasted tanagers dart low over the water; scarlet macaws screech overhead—far prettier to look at than listen to—and iridescent blue morpho butterflies drift on the tropic breeze. On distant sandbars we get glimpses of huge crocodiles slipping into the water as we approach. One of them, Pete estimates, is at least 14 feet long. None let us get close, and seeing as we're fully loaded, with water four inches below the gunwales, that's just fine.

There is scarcely any traffic on the river, just the occasional panga. While we drift I contemplate what the fate of the river might have been if history had unfolded differently. As early as 1826, draft proposals for an engineered canal along the San Juan were presented to the U.S. Congress. They would have involved

ROUGHING IT From left: Nicaraguan soldiers man a border checkpoint near Boca San Juan; locals in a dugout canoe eye, Hawkins, Rudger, and the author.



dredging the river and building a system of locks and tunnels to lift ships the hundred feet from sea to lake to sea again. In the late 1890s several U.S. commissions supported such a project. A hopeful American company even began dredging at the Caribbean mouth of the San Juan.

But it never happened. American politicians were worried that an eruption from one of Nicaragua's 40 volcanoes could destroy a canal. Even worse, a revolution could put a major trade route in unsympathetic hands. Instead, the French canal project in Panama—derailed by a yellow fever epidemic that killed some 20,000 workers—was bought in 1903 by the U.S. When the Panama Canal opened in 1914, the balance of power in Central America shifted dramatically and traffic on the Nicaragua Route dried up. The Río San Juan became the canal that never was.

WITH THE TROPICAL SUN A HAND'S WIDTH ABOVE the horizon, we come upon a creek on the Nicaraguan side of the San Juan, perhaps 20 feet across and running slowly from the depths of the jungle. The low light penetrates deeply into its recesses, and we paddle in silently, as if we're entering a cathedral. A huge, vine-tangled epiphyte hangs

above the entrance to the inlet, lit like a chandelier, and we glide beneath it. The creek goes far back into the old-growth of Indio Maiz, vanishing around bends. As we push upstream against a barely perceptible current, I look over my shoulder for the twinkling surface of the San Juan. It has been blotted out, sealed off by vegetation as if someone had closed a door behind us.

We become silent creatures of the understory, whispering to one another as we push upstream in the diffuse light. The forest seems to hold its breath. Vines snake down into the water, which is the color of milky tea, while the orchid-sprouting trunks of mahogany push 150 feet up through the triple canopy. Water lilies like teacups float by filled with rain, and the smell of decay fills the humid air. We pray for a glimpse of a jaguar on the dusky bank, and there is an impulse, very difficult to resist, to push up the runnel until we reach the mysterious heart of the forest. None of us say it, but we all seem to share the desire. Then the sterns draw water and spin us around. We wind back out the capillary into the spell-breaking sunlight of the San Juan.

As the sun goes down we spot an empty field on the Costa Rican shore, with a pair of soccer goals made from saplings and a couple of horses grazing. By the river's edge is an enormous ceiba, its buttressed root system perhaps 50 feet around; its eight-foot wide trunk stretching up ten stories. It probably colonized a hole in the canopy before Columbus discovered the mouth of the San Juan on his final voyage. We set up camp beneath it.

Dinner is canned tuna and crackers and hot sauce, as it will be for most every meal along the river. Pete's teriyaki beef jerky and our woefully inadequate supply of rum are the first casualties of not rationing. Twain had complained about the sameness of the food on the Nicaragua Route: two pieces of bread enclosing one

Before we run the Raudal del Diablo, I scan the river for the dorsal fins, or crocs slipping off the far bank, but I see nothing. They're probably lying in wait already.

piece of ham or one piece of ham between two pieces of bread. His ironic refrain "There's nothing like variety!" becomes our catchphrase at every meal.

AS DAYS PASS WE GROW MORE attuned to the river, exploring tributaries and the swift channels behind bamboo-covered islands. Pete discovers that he's fluent in howler monkey, the throaty booming cries that echo through the forest. Holding on to vines beneath an overhanging tree, he sets a group of them into hysterics, as they dangle by prehensile tails and howl fearlessly at the human intruders below. At sunset we come across a tree topped by hundreds of great egrets, audible at half a mile.

They explode into a flurry as we approach, winging off in a storm of beaten air only to settle back into the same spot once we pass.

Our only company is the starry-eyed children waving on the Costa Rican bank and the occasional dugout loaded with plantains and people *Continued on page TK*

ADVENTURE GUIDE: Nicaragua's Next Level

Trading a troubled past for a bright future in ecotourism, Nicaragua has become a watchword among the Central American travel elite. Rain forests and volcanoes are repositories of jungle adventure. Beaches offer world-class surf breaks. Colonial cities look straight out of the 16th century. And the time to see it all is (you guessed it) right now.

RÍO SAN JUAN: To mirror the author's route, consider an eight-day motorboat trip down all 110 miles of the Río San Juan from **Tours Nicaragua** (\$1,671; www.toursnicaragua.com).

To go it alone, there are regular ferries from Granada to San Carlos and from San Carlos to El Castillo. There, canoes can be rented from Don Napoleón, who operates a café at the ferry dock.



gaining a following for its café-lined streets, well-preserved colonial center, and laid-back vibe. The **Hotel El Convento** (\$69; www.hotelesconvento.com.ni) has a spectacular garden.

COLONIAL CITIES: Founded in 1523, Granada is Nicaragua's oldest city, a vibrantly colored warren of ornate churches, mansions, cathedrals, and museums. **La Gran Francia Hotel** (\$85; www.lagranfrancia.com) has 21 rooms, each decorated in original colonial style, and makes a good base. For a great meal, try the seviche at **El Tercer Ojo** (+505-552-6451), a tapas-fusion delight on Calle Arsenal.

Less visited than Granada, León is

Mount Fuji and is a challenging trek. Atop its twin peak, the 4,573-foot Volcán Maderas, hikers are rewarded with a misty, crater lake. **Berman Gomez**, at the Hotel Ometepetl in Moyogalpo, is a recommended guide for Concepción (\$tk for tk; +505-569-4278). Treks up Maderas begin at the coffee collective of **Finca Magdalena**, which has guides (\$tk for tk; www.finca-magdalena.com).

ECOLOGES: Located on the banks of the Río San Juan near El Castillo, the **Río Sabalos Lodge** offers four-day all-inclusive horseback riding, kayaking, bicycling, and trekking packages in the Indio Maiz Biological Reserve (\$315; www.sabaloslodge.com). Its cabins are set on the water's edge and are perfect for wildlife viewing.

Situated in a protected reserve on Playa Ocotál, **Morgan's Rock Hacienda & Ecological** has 15 luxury



LATIN BEAT: The view over colonial Grenada, from the bell tower of the San Francisco Church (above). Left: A mariachi with a *guitarrón* in the river town of San Carlos. Below: Relaxing on the Río San Juan; Las Isletas on Lake Nicaragua.

bungalows (\$205; www.morgansrock.com), each with a private west-facing deck for watching sunsets.

BEACHES AND SURFING: With crowds at many of the breaks in Costa Rica, surfers are heading to the untapped waves outside of the beach town of San Juan del Sur. The **Hotel Villa Isabella** has decent, no-frills rooms (\$50; www.sanjuandelsur.org.ni/isabella).

Nearby, the **Popoyo Surf Lodge** on Playa Guasacate, offers weeklong stays with daily guided surfing trips (\$990, www.surfnicaragua.com).



For scuba divers, the Corn Islands, on Nicaragua's Caribbean side, are scattered with acclaimed coral reefs. On Little Corn, **Dive Little Corn** has trips and instruction (\$tk for a two tank dive; www.divelittlecorn.com).

Casa Iguana, rents wooden cabins (\$25; www.casaiguana.net) on the island's breezy southeast side.

GETTING THERE AND AROUND: **American Airlines** flies two and a half hours direct from Miami to Managua (\$700, www.aa.com). In country, **La Costeña Airlines** serves most major towns and the Corn Islands (prices vary; www.centralamerica.com/nicaragua/tran/costena.htm). For shorter trips, the bus system, "expresos," is clean, relatively safe, and goes almost everywhere. —**M.P.**



MAP BY COMPUTER TERRAIN MAPPING



shocked to see us. It seems to be beyond the comprehension of everyone we pass that we would be canoeing down the river for fun.

“Well, you probably wouldn’t see them walking down the New Jersey Turnpike just to see how beautiful it is,” says Learka. Good point—and maybe not far from the truth. Even today various proposals, vigorously opposed by environmentalists, have been repeatedly tabled by the Nicaraguan government to revive the unrealized dream of a Nicaraguan canal. Even the most sensitive proposals would involve massive dredging and tankers four times the size of Panamax ships (the largest that can fit through the Panama Canal) ferrying up and down the river. The economic benefits could be enormous, but the ecological impacts would be irreparable. With the face of Nicaragua changing so rapidly, it’s hard to say what the future will bring for the San Juan; for now, at least, the river remains unbothered.

One evening the river is so glassy and the twilight so peaceful that we draw our boats together and drift along as a full moon rises. We come upon a farmhouse on the Costa Rican side, and the young man who greets us says that sometimes boats hit manatees at night and capsize. Then the crocodiles slide in. They feed at night, he tells us. We all get a retroactive case of the willies.

We camp out in the farmyard, stringing up hammocks between posts. For dinner, more tuna, and for a change, sardines. There’s nothing like variety. I ask our host, Ramon Martinez, 23, what he thinks of life on the border and the sometimes heated disputes that arise between the two countries over navigational rights. Nicaragua claims authority over the entire river straight to the Costa Rican shore. His response? “No distinguimos—We do not distinguish.” People on both sides belong to the river.

FIVE DAYS INTO OUR JOURNEY WE still have no idea how far it is to the Caribbean.

“Maybe we missed one of the lefts,” says Pete when we pull over on a paddle break. We eat the last of our tuna and a few handfuls of raisins. Drinking water is running low. There’s nothing to do but keep going, so we push off again hoping we haven’t made a terrible mistake.

Pete’s crew has gotten whipped into shape (he’s a former ski coach), and by this point in our journey my boat has to rally to keep up with them. Fifty yards ahead, rounding a bend, their paddles go into the air and the whole canoe lets out a whooping cry. Then we see what they are shouting about: the white breakers of the Caribbean, curling over a bar of black sand and mixing the river currents into a heavy chop. We have crossed Nicaragua.

The river continues north behind a narrow

spit, hugging the coastline. The deep jungle of the day before has given way to saw grass and the occasional clump of trees. We pull up to a ramshackle fisherman’s house, calling out a greeting in Spanish. It feels like we’ve reached the end of the world. A white-haired man comes out.

“Hey y’all, what’s up?” he asks in a Southern drawl.

Joe Pinder, 59, a Florida-born fisherman, moved to San Juan del Norte to get away from it all. He couldn’t have gone much farther. There’s sporadic phone service in town. Not a DSL for love or money. Not even a way to receive regular mail. He makes his own lures, fixes his engines, sets lobster traps in the bay.

We become silent creatures of the understory, whispering as we push upstream. The forest seems to hold its breath. Vines snake down into the water while mahogany trunks soar 150 feet into the canopy.

His Nicaraguan wife, Juanita, brings us a bowl of fresh lobster-and-tomato salad with lime.

We’re the first Americans he’s seen in quite a while, he tells us. Not a lot of tourists venture down to the end of the river. It is a wild frontier: Seven of Pinder’s dogs have been killed by jaguars in the eight years he’s lived here, and a favorite pastime of the locals, he tells us, is to look on the shore for bales of cocaine dumped overboard by smugglers on the run. I tell him about Twain’s journey. At the San Juan’s mouth he’d described a rough port town where the “cows marched through the thoroughfares with a freedom pen cannot describe” and a good bed could be had for a dollar.

“Oh sure. But the town he stayed in is long gone,” Pinder tells us. “Old Greytown, it was called. But the river shifted and cut it off. Now nothing’s left there but a ghost town.”

It seems hardly fair that after all our time and effort the goal of our journey has just up and disappeared. There are rumblings among the exhausted group, a mutiny perhaps, but then Pinder’s fishing buddy Silvio Reyes pulls up to the dock in a powerful fiberglass launch. Sure, he’ll take us to Greytown, he says, and in

a few minutes we are blasting across the bay at a heart-stopping 40 miles an hour. We shoot past a sunken steamship, overgrown with vines and mangroves, the boiler blistered and rusted through, looking just as Twain had described a wreck he’d seen here 139 years before. Near that is the towering, rusting dredge used by the overzealous American speculators to dig the first—and only—mile of the Nicaragua canal. With creeping inevitability, the jungle reinstates its authority over the works of man.

Reyes nudges the boat through a raft of water lilies to a decaying wooden dock, and leads us down a path into the jungle. We arrive at a clearing—the center of the once bustling port city of Greytown. Not a single house still stands. Nothing is left but a graveyard, the encroaching jungle kept at bay by a government caretaker. Some of the crumbling stones are bullet-pocked, and a line of leaf-cutter ants wends its way between them. Bureaucrats, sailors, children, and transients who died passing through lay buried side by side; one read “Consul to the German Empire,” while into another was chiseled “Killed by a fall from the mizzen top.” If Twain had caught “the cholera” that was stalking the region in his day, he could well have ended up here—and the course of American literature would have been forever altered. If the Río San Juan had seen a different turn of fate, southern Nicaragua might have been as important to global trade as the Malacca Straits or the Suez Canal. Greytown would have been a glittering city of skyscrapers with a toll booth for every oil tanker and container ship threading its way between the oceans. Instead, the end of the Río San Juan seems like an oxbow lake of history and abandoned dreams, forgotten to time, cut off from its original flow.

Back at Pinder’s we bid farewell and clamber into our canoes for the last time, cutting across the bay to the new settlement of San Juan del Norte. As we approach town, the blasting chords of Survivor’s 1982 hit, “Eye of the Tiger,” float across the water from a riverside bar. At this point Twain had boarded a steamship and continued north toward the wilds of New York City. For us it means the end of an epic journey, the departure point of the twice-weekly ferry that will wind us back up the river to San Carlos. Amid more than a few strange looks we pull up and pile onto the dock in front of the bar. The Victoria is cold; the victory, sweet. That night, we fall asleep in rooms that have outrageously quintupled in price since Twain paid a single dollar for them. The pounding surf of the Caribbean echoes through coconut groves, and where the river meets the sea, the ghosts of a thousand journeys drift on a slight breeze. ▲