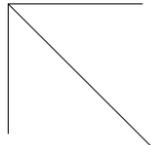


RESTORATIVE POWERS

With cultural riches found aplenty amidst its charming tumbledown streets, León is one of Central America's best hidden gems

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(From top) Statues of Virgin Mary and Jesus in the cathedral



Frederico Quezada creates art with sawdust and paint

Perfect for people-watching, El Sesteco cafe serves local classics



(Facing page from top) Delivering banana leaves for wrapping steamed corncakes, nacatamales

A vendor at the main market, Mercado Central

Avenida 1 is crowded with scruffy but cheerful houses, brightly painted in yellows and pinks. Locals are chatting and laughing on doorsteps. Open doors mitigating the evening warmth allow glances into twilight blue interiors containing podgy women and old men in rocking chairs turned towards blaring televisions. Portraits of the Virgin Mary abound. This seemingly unexceptional street leads directly to the Cathedral of León, Central Park's 18th-century cathedral, which cuts an impressive figure in spite of ongoing restoration work. Faded white with two bell towers, its gothic aspirations are emphasised by moody lighting.

Nicaragua's second largest city still feels like a developing town and the only tourists are a few backpackers. Though at times a little ragged, León's tumbledown colonial style – dating back to the 16th-century arrival of Christopher Columbus – is a big part of its charm. But as it begins to witness the mixed-blessing of 'gringo' investment, León demands to be visited sooner rather than later, and before the lively nightlife and rich cultural scene are transformed into something more sanitised.

The area around Central Park is full of bars and music. Next to the wide, leafy square, I'm tempted to enter Mijunas Bar Café. It lies opposite a basketball court covered in compelling graffiti focussed around the Sandinista revolution that ended the Somoza dictatorship in 1979, and the artwork continues along the pub's façade.

But having just arrived in León after a long journey, I'm in need of sustenance. Rather than join

the revellers, I go in search of a restaurant. Central Park's El Sesteco (Tel +505 2311 5327) is the first I come across, which despite being relatively pricey (food and drink are normally very cheap in Nicaragua) is a perfect spot from which to admire the cathedral as the sun goes down.

Another option is nearby Carnivoro (Tel +505 8244 6735) – a smart restaurant with timber beams, dark-wood pillars and an affluent crowd. As the name suggests, the menu is dominated by meat; I opt for a skewer of grilled Nicaraguan pork, as recommended by the elegant waiter, served with rice, bread and a generous portion of salad. Despite being considered high-end in León, total price with wine and starter is less than USD20.

At the less fine end of the scale are a number of local comedores or eateries. The next morning, I try my first Nicaraguan breakfast at the appropriately named Desayunazo: fried eggs, grilled plantain, white cheese, and gallo pinto. This is composed of rice and beans fried with chopped onion, supposedly resembling the feathers of the 'spotted rooster' after which it is named. It comes with just about everything in Nicaragua.

The best comedor in town is San Benito's on Calle 2. Lunch is served here daily except Sunday via a canteen-style bar. Chicken, beef and pork dishes are available, cooked in rich sauces, and at impossibly low prices, best enjoyed in the pretty courtyard amongst the locals. Be sure to arrive early when the food is fresh from the pot and before they've run out of the most popular dishes.

It's also worth walking through the Mercado Central behind the cathedral. There are a couple of restaurants serving local fare there, but the atmosphere is what's really worthwhile. Amidst the vendors calling out prices loudly ad nauseum, locals noisily snap up huge, ripe tomatoes and fragrant mangoes.

Beyond its various dining options, León boasts a number of notable artistic and cultural stops. >>



León demands to be visited sooner rather than later



The legendary poet Ruben Dario, who helped create the *Modernismo* movement in Latin America, hails from León and there is a museum dedicated to his life and work on the street named after him. His tomb is also in the cathedral.

Foremost amongst the city's art museums is Ortiz Gurdian (fundacionortizgurdian.org), started by local entrepreneurs and collectors in 1996. The main draw of this elegant gallery, which sprawls across two houses on either side of Calle 3, is a series of etchings and prints by Picasso. But Ortiz Gurdian is famed throughout Central America as much for its big Latin names such as Diego Rivera and Fernando Botero.

Running parallel to the city's museums is a lively arts scene. The Garabato cooperative is an example of one of the grass-roots associations that help young artists. "Without the cooperative," says 34-year-old painter, Mario Jarquin Escobar, "I couldn't do this." Another local artist, Frederico Quezada, has been experimenting with sawdust and paint for more than two decades, and is one of León's most successful.

Churches are one of León's defining features. Visiting some of the most important is necessary for an understanding of the city's devoutly Catholic background. San Francisco was once one of the oldest convents in Nicaragua (the convent itself has now been restored and reopened as Hotel El Convento), dating back to 17th century, and its ornate altar is stunning. El Calvario church is also hard to miss, its red and yellow façade looming in the

near distance when walking down the central streets. My favourite is the bright yellow Church of the Recolectión, built in the 18th century, and containing a unique baroque façade.

If León's religious side begins to weigh heavy, spirits can be livened with ease with the city's notorious nightlife. Bars are invariably full on weekends and many weeknights, with music pounding down the aged streets. I start at La Olla Quemada where a rock band works through a restless set that includes covers of songs by Mexico's Maná and Argentina's Soda Stereo.

Then it's off to Via Via on the central Avenida 2. The interior is styled as a rock 'n' roll bar with a Latin inflection, thanks tonight to an eight-piece salsa band. They have everyone on their feet, the locals dancing with wild abandon. It's terrific fun but beware of pickpockets amidst the throng.

By now a little worse for wear, I round off the night at a karaoke bar. This may seem like a garish anti-climax to the evening, but Snake Bar is a classic Central American drinking hole and tonight its wooden tables are crowded with cheery locals.

Amongst the wailing singers, some of whom are ear-piercingly bad, there are a couple of talented crooners whose booming renditions of Latin favourites more than make up for the rest. It's a fitting ending to my León visit, where extraordinary cultural peaks rise against 'troughs' of local authenticity. This mix is what makes the city such a compelling destination. ■

Like León? What about...

1

Granada, Nicaragua

If you've fallen for León's ragged colonial charm, you'll surely appreciate Granada, to the south. Its colonial buildings are the oldest in the country, while the freshwater Lake Nicaragua is nearby – one of the biggest in the world.

2

Oaxaca City, Mexico

Home to some truly unique crafts and original cuisine that's famous throughout Mexico, Oaxaca is a culturally formidable alternative to the tourist-haunted Yucatan peninsula of Cancun and Playa del Carmen fame.

3

Cartagena, Colombia

On the northern coast of Colombia lies the unusual port city of Cartagena, with a unique mix of indigenous, Spanish and Afro-Caribbean influences. Try to catch some live music and sample their superb fish dishes.