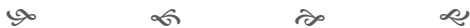




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On the first Saturday morning in early February, before the sun revealed itself and before the neighborhood dogs disturbed the late sleepers with endless barking, I began my trek much like any of the other trips I've taken over the past year. The alarm clock released its unwanted cyclic chirps, and I roused from a sleepless night to welcome a day of journey.

It was cold in Colorado Springs with temperatures in the low teens and a brisk, chilly breeze stung my face as I greeted the morning outside my front door. The drive to the airport further confirmed the grating winter weather with patches of ice meandering over the asphalt and small-to-medium snow drifts decorating the sides of the roadways. It was quite a humorous twist considering I would be in a warm tropical climate near days end, and I would prove to be overdressed having to shed my gloves and sweatshirt and jacket.

My destination: the Central American country of Nicaragua.

When traveling, nothing excites me more than visiting new places, seeing new sites, and experiencing different cultures. This is true when going to different states in the United States—the calm and relaxing mentality of the south, the more direct and decisive attitudes of the Great Lakes region, or the cool and fashionable recreational areas along the west coast. But it's certainly true of the few visits I've had thus far to other parts of the world, and "few" being quite an overstatement. In fact, I've had only two previous trips outside our borders—one to Guatemala nine years ago and the other to Costa Rica the following year. I was both excited and anxious about my expedition to this vibrant isthmus.

Most of the day was comprised of the normal—dragging luggage around behind me, sitting in cramped and uncomfortable airplane seats, and maneuvering through terminals and gates.

Watching hurried travelers always seems to entertain, and it's a constant reminder of how disappointingly demanding we've become as a society. I knew that over the next few days it will become more of an irritant for me, because I would be interacting with others who are less concerned with the trivial pursuit of extravagance and more concerned with wondering if *and* when their next meal will come.

At midday I united with the other members of my team at the large intercontinental airport in south Texas. Our group was small, sixteen total, and comprised of people involved with the organization I work for, Compassion International. Some, like me, were staff members, some were volunteers, and all of us were sponsors of children in third world countries. From there we journeyed together, on the last leg of our trip, to our destination near the equator.

There are various kinds of international trips—some tourism, some mission, and some, not to name them all, relief efforts. This was a vision trip. It would give us a better picture of how real poverty is and how it affects children who are helplessly born into these unfriendly conditions. We would visit several child projects where many of these children are nurtured and cared for through Compassion's child sponsorship program, receiving not only supplement for their physical and health-related needs but also their holistic and spiritual needs as well. We would witness those outside these walls who were not as fortunate—children who are infected and orphaned and hungry. It would prove to be emotional and convicting, which further reinforced the purpose of our vision trip—to help us see the daunting reality that the poor are everywhere and that it will take a greater number of those who "have" to reach out to the millions who "have not."

Finally, we arrived in Managua. As the jet began its decent into the capital city, I peered out my window and saw the glittering lights below. From there it looked like any city in America with the darkness hiding a distant land. The same moon that lights the skies of my home in Colorado lends its light here. If I were completely honest, an innocent fear of the unknown overshadowed me. I was both apprehensive and anticipating. The following morning revealed what stood to challenge my heart.



As the sun rose and I began getting ready for the day, nothing could have prepared me for the *Chureca*, which I will mention later. After breakfast and a quick team meeting we loaded our uncomfortable, yet air-conditioned tour bus—quite a departure from the colorfully redecorated school buses I was used to on my previous mission trips. We departed for Sunday morning church at *Hosanna Sur Assembly of God* for worship, about a thirty-minute commute across the city from our hotel. The drive would be our first look at Nicaragua and the city of Managua. The people, the streets, and the multi-colored buildings resembled most of the other Latin-American countries. Bright shades of turquoise, yellow, pink, and more turquoise defined the shops linked like LEGO™ blocks along the roadways—a small open-air bike shop next to a soda stand, next to a mattress store that connected to another bike shop—meager businesses and homes randomly scattered together to form communities. While our bus driver weaved through taxi after taxi and over every bump and pothole the street could provide, the citizens emerged from their doorways to open for business or to visit with neighbors.

There's not a lot you do on a drive like this beyond carrying on small conversations and taking it all in—it's a whole new world where we are now the guests, visitors of their country and subject to their way of life. Naturally it makes you a little uncomfortable, or at least it made me uncomfortable. The language barrier has already introduced itself creating a sense of dependence and trust. Our translators, four courteous and delightful women, generously pointed out different landmarks while answering our multiple questions about any-and-everything. Everyone pathetically attempted to speak the scarce Spanish we knew, much to the chuckles of our host.

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The bus turned off the main street onto a narrow, gravel road so tight, in fact, that it stops occasionally for pedestrians using the

road as a sidewalk or for an approaching horse-drawn cart needing to pass by. The area we passed through was more of a neighborhood of homes and tin-roofed dwellings than businesses. Although, no area was void of some sort of soda or fruit stand—they were everywhere and when I say homes, they are not the three-bedroom, two-bath houses we are accustomed to. Most of them were meager concrete block shacks with open windows, corrugated metal roofs, and wooden doors pieced together with boards from shipping pallets. But they were homes none the less to the people who casually watched us pass by. At the last turn we passed a small dirt courtyard on the corner where a group of twenty or more teenagers played an intense game of soccer; a dust cloud surrounded their legs as they fervently chased one another and kicked the ball. Across the street was the church. As we pulled into the dirt parking lot, an usher from the church promptly directed us to an open spot near the front. Actually, there were not more than ten cars in the parking lot so finding a spot wasn't a problem. But we were guest and our arrival was anticipated.

I forgot to mention that our translators were staff members of the Compassion International office there in Managua. Thus, I want to credit them with a well-organized schedule and thought-out preparation, they were hospitable and sweet. After we parked they distributed headsets for us to wear during the service so it could be translated into English. As we unloaded the bus, sounds of joyful, rhythmic music poured out of the building as the service had already begun. We were escorted in and seated on the front row—no surprise there—the bright sunlit room was filled with around a hundred people.

The service was a great experience for me. I shed a few tears during the time of worship just witnessing the beauty of two different cultures from different parts of the world, coming together to worship the same God—it was moving. In that moment we all had one thing in common. We were all Christians. The church was also host to a Compassion child project, so after the service we toured the school where the children meet. The buildings were much like the others we'd seen on the drive there, but these were attended to with extra care—they were clean and organized. Most of the rooms were occupied with stacks of multi-colored plastic kid-sized chairs or handcrafted, wooden school desks—it was easy to visualize them filled with

children getting an education and receiving real hope.

Afterwards we went for lunch at a local restaurant, *Cocina de Dona Haydee*, and experienced authentic Nicaraguan food. An array of fried cheese and pork, with sides of beans and corn tortillas—each was unique and featured a taste all its own. Then we were off to see some historic landmarks, important pieces of the country's heritage and past. We visited Central Park and the National Palace and the Cathedral of Managua. The latter (pictured on the heading) was the most fascinating to me, a ghostly façade because of the 1973 earthquake that destroyed it. Its high neoclassic, gray stone walls, with arches and statues of patron saints, stood as a symbol of religion and a century past.



And finally, on this day, the aforementioned *Chureca*. I don't know how I can adequately write the next few words to successfully paint a picture of the absolute horror we witnessed next. It was the most agonizing thing I had ever seen in my life and it will forever haunt my memory as a painful depiction of the ugly face of poverty. The *Chureca* is the municipal garbage dump of the city of Managua and is located in the western zone of the capital. Trucks enter and exit everyday, dumping thousands of tons of garbage on the forty-two acres. Piles and piles of every unimaginable filth—rotten food, torn clothing, hospital waste, shards of glass, and sharp metal scraps to name just a few.

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Our bus bumped and swayed over the trash—littered road—it was literally garbage we were driving on as we moved deeper and further into the massive dump. It seemed like forever. The scenes before us worsened. The stench and smoke and grime were overwhelming,

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coming to drudge through the heaps for not only food, but also things that can be collected and sold, and more than 600 of these are children. Most of them walked without shoes on their feet, barefooted and exposed to potential injury, infections, and disease.

We watched in awe, completely taken back by what we were witnessing—a few gasps, some sighs of shock, but mostly stillness from disbelief. I have experienced silence before, but never quite like this. For a few brief seconds no one from our group whispered a word, because

no one knew what to say. The bus came to a stop at the end of the road and we were surrounded by mounds of junk as far as we could see. Large, black vultures and more cows and even more people pilfered through the rubbish in search of sustenance. Inside the bus our lungs ached from the mere view of the polluted dust and the clouds of smoke rising from burning fires. The presence of this place made me feel like I was in hell, and for some it was, because they had no other home to return to.

Now our tour bus didn't seem as uncomfortable, except for the nausea that was stirring within in my stomach. And the air-conditioning blowing over my shoulder; well, suddenly I felt convicted of it. The site we were left with, before leaving the *Chureca*, was that of an older teenage boy, playfully chasing what might have been his younger brother, in a simple game of tag. They were laughing and smiling—my heart sank. How they could find joy in the midst of their horrendous living conditions? It's something I ponder even to this day. I can only be encouraged by Psalm 113:7 which says, "He (God) raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap," and I can only determine in my heart to become His hands and feet.



The following days would be the most rewarding with several home visits in the remote countryside and child projects in the city. The tour began with a stop down a small dirt road at the home of a little girl named Martha. We delivered a family gift of beans, rice, cooking oil, and other food items to her, her mother, and younger brother. The father was in town selling firewood to make money for the family. Their open-door shelter was constructed with pieces of wood to form a frame, with tin on the sides and roof. Several baby pigs, some chickens, and a few dogs roamed freely in-and-out on the dirt floor of the home. Their family was among the poorest-of-the-poor, but their hearts were among the richest.

Martha's Compassion project was a couple of miles down the road, where she walks to-and-from everyday. When we arrived we were greeted by more than a hundred bright eyes and smiling faces, and the children proudly

showed us around their sanctuary of hope. Our team gathered with them under an open-air, covered pavilion to be entertained with songs, dance routines, and a birthday celebration complete with piñatas and gifts.



We spent our remaining days and hours of the trip in several other Compassion child projects

around the city, and we toured the country offices. It was a time of celebration of life and a reminder of God's great faithfulness. He truly cares for the "least of these" and has opened doors of refuge in this country filled with political turmoil and overwhelming poverty. I was reminded that we all have a part in helping the less fortunate around the world—a responsibility to share our resources with those who have so little. Our role as Christians demands it because it's who we were created to be and it's the example Christ has set for us. The excuses for doing nothing run a dime-a-dozen, myriads of good intentions void of any significant action. We say we don't have enough time, but don't we have time to voice a simple prayer? We say we don't have the money, but can't we sacrifice a few lattes so that someone else can eat? Inconvenience is a poor excuse for evading the reality of object poverty. The truth is we are simply inconsiderate of the needs of others—those who seem to be forgotten, lost, and without hope.

Matthew 25:34-40 – "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

For more information on helping children around the world and making their dreams a reality, visit www.compassion.com and start sponsoring a child today.



Written by Jim Ed Hardaway March 2007

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