


The Lonely Planet logo, featuring the words "lonely planet" in a lowercase, sans-serif font, with a white circle around the letter "o" in "planet".

lonely planet

# EPIC SURF BREAKS *of the* WORLD

A vibrant, stylized illustration of a tropical beach at sunset. The sky is a gradient of orange and red, with a large white sun. In the foreground, a man and a woman walk on the beach carrying surfboards. In the middle ground, a surfer is riding a wave. The background features palm trees and tropical foliage.

*Explore the planet's most thrilling waves*





## POPOYO

*Scott Yorke headed to Nicaragua so he could eat, sleep, and breath surf for an entire week – not exactly the right move for a new relationship.*

**T**his is purely a surf trip. Nothing else, I said to Stef, the girl I'd been dating for only a few weeks. 'Are you sure you're down with that?' I'd been daydreaming about Popoyo for a while. It's home to Nicaragua's legendary reef break, where offshore winds blow 300 days a year and swells from all directions boost fast, hollow barrels right in front of the long, sandy beaches. When a short window in my September work schedule lined up with a weeklong forecast for consistent swell, I booked a ticket immediately, unconcerned with whether anyone was coming with me. But my excitement infected Stef and we were in that phase of our relationship where she was keen to show me she was game. She accepted my disclaimer, even assuring me she'd surfed before.

The thing is, Popoyo isn't exactly a great destination for a new relationship. It's one of those spots where life is reduced to eating, sleeping and surfing. No yoga retreats, no zipline canopy tours, and certainly no nightlife of any kind.

Popoyo is a place where abandoned beachfront mansions sit crumbling on their cracked concrete foundations. The wave was first discovered in the 1970s by Nicaraguan surfer Ronald Urros, but civil wars kept visitation at bay until 1990, when the country had its first democratic elections and the tourism ministry recognised surfing as an underexploited natural resource. In 1996, American expats JJ and Kimberly Yemma set up the rustic Popoyo Surf Lodge and began welcoming more and more surfers. But the vibe remains authentically Central American and locals dominate the lineup.

After flying into San Jose, Costa Rica (to save money), and driving north through the rainforest, we spent one night at the border, waking up to howler monkeys roaring in the treetop canopies above us. We then walked into Nicaragua and hired a taxi to take us to Las Salinas, the main strip of beachside hotels

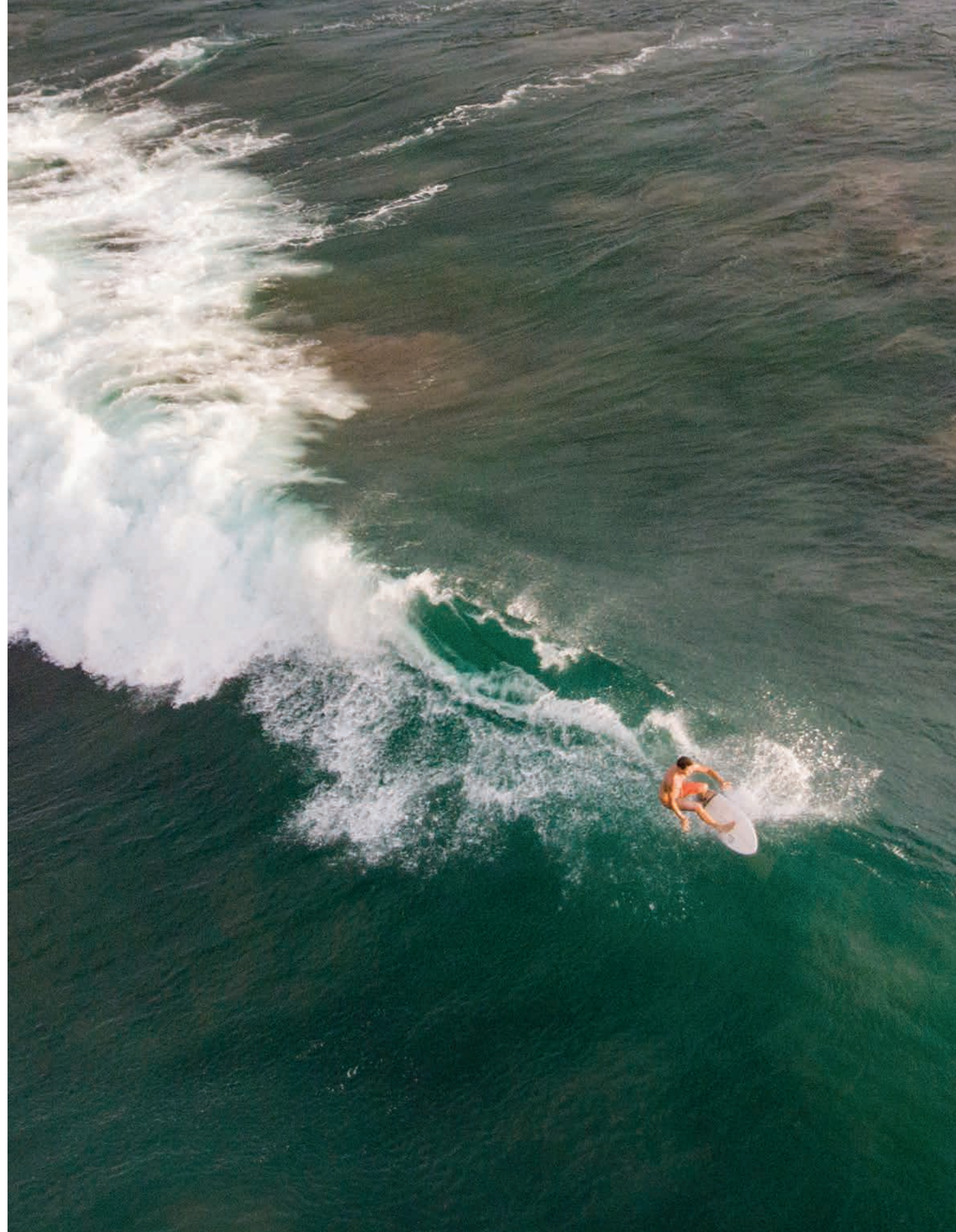
and restaurants. The taxi hung a left onto a bumpy dirt road and pulled into NicaWaves, a clean and friendly American-owned hostel with a pool, private air-con rooms, and a houseful of guests glued to their devices. A tech bro from San Francisco hobbled around with bandages on his foot and reef rash down his back. 'I got a little too stoked', he admitted.

My own stoke was boiling over as I frothed to catch the tail end of the morning session. I quickly waxed my short board, while Stef rented a clunky 11ft longboard. We trotted 10 minutes down a dirt path through the jungle to the beach. Local dogs escorted us the whole way.

'Ok, have fun!' I said to Stef, as I ran towards the water. I paddled straight to the lineup and began feeling out the takeoff



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*“The vibe remains authentically Central American and locals dominate the lineup”*

zones, catching several lefts and pumping through the fast-moving sections. A year of living landlocked in Boulder, Colorado had me starved for that hydraulic flow state and I couldn't get enough of it. After an extra hour of milking the smaller waves well into midday low tide, I rode one in to the beach wearing a salty perma-grin. 'This is going to be an epic week,' I said aloud to myself.

But then I saw Stef – standing right where I'd left her. She was trying to force a smile and there was blood trickling down her shins. After a thrashing in the shore break while struggling to control a massive fiberglass log, her surfing confidence tanked and, of course, I felt like a jerk for not taking a few minutes to help her get reacquainted. Apparently, her previous surf trip consisted mostly of pushing off the shallow sandy bottom on a soft top.

Nonetheless, the afternoon session, along with the next three days, continued to deliver the most consistent head-high waves I'd ever surfed, in bathtub-warm water. The locals took off deep and caught half the rides, but the vibe was 'tranquilo' with plenty of waves to go around. Stef wasn't quite ready to have another go.

After two nights at NicaWaves, Stef and I moved five minutes closer to the beach, to a rustic, thatch-roofed campsite called Camping Luna. After a lukewarm outdoor shower, we cooked pasta and beans in the outdoor kitchens. German backpackers with dreadlocks and soggy paperbacks, instead of devices, lounged in the hammocks, resigned to missing their upcoming return flights home. Without wi-fi or TV – or even much electricity – it was more communal and social.

Central America has seen surfers come from all over the world for decades, so there's no shortage of taxi drivers and English-speaking guides ready to help you find great waves. Especially for anyone from North America, the region is an easy, cheap destination for scoring surf year-round. Nicaragua is blessed with two major inland bodies of water – Lake Managua and Lake Nicaragua – which break up the American Cordillera mountain range and, therefore, funnel northeasterly trade winds onto the 150 miles (241km) of Pacific coastline. And there are far fewer crowds than in Costa Rica.

On our fourth day, we finally ventured north of Popoyo to Lance's Left, a nearby point break that is accessed by boat. Lance's is not a beginner's spot, so Stef sat on the boat, watching the waves break from behind and chatting with a British yoga teacher who'd tagged along for the ride. Back home, Stef is a serious mountain athlete who wins half marathons and tackles big backcountry skiing missions all year long. But she was still feeling gun-shy after her first session. However, in Popoyo, the surf bug is more persistent than the mosquitoes, and even she would soon be bitten again. That night, at Camping Luna, we feasted on lobster curry



**MISTAKEN IDENTITY**

Las Salinas' main break is misleadingly known as Popoyo, even though it's in front of a beach called Playa Guasacate; the actual Playa Popoyo is just on the north side of Mag Rock. Las Salinas itself gets its name from the beachfront saltflats where local artisans collect and boil down sea salt to sell at markets – the whole area is covered in a fine, powdery layer of the stuff.

*Clockwise from top left: Nicaragua is a hit with visiting surfers; aerial moves on the Popoyo wave. Previous page: waveriding paradise*

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with a few Toña beers and the panoramic view of an stellar sunset.

On our last day, Stef rented a lighter gft longboard and together we waded out into Playa Sardina cove, just south of Popoyo's main break. She was a natural paddler, for sure, sometimes going too far outside. But the cove is sheltered from the open water by Mag Rock and has a shallower rocky bottom, with mellower waves trickling off the point. After a few failures to launch, a hip-high wave came along, with just the right amount of power. It propelled her forward and she popped up into a crouch. She then caught the thrust down the line, and rode it all the way into shore. I could hear her shouting with delight for the entire 15-second ride.

Stef paddled back out with a fire in her eyes, like she'd just seen the light and couldn't wait to do it again.

If nothing else, she was settling into the unique rhythm of a dedicated surf trip – deep downtime, often doing nothing for hours in preparation for the next intense session. And Popoyo is certainly the place to do this. Finding a place on the perfect wave opens Popoyo up to anyone willing to surrender to the flow – even newer couples still feeling out the convergence point of their respective agendas. Our Nicaraguan adventure was indeed a pure surf trip. But once Stef got her taste of the supernatural power of surfing, we both had all we needed.



**ORIENTATION**

**Type of wave** // Point break, split-peak rights and lefts.

**Best conditions** // Building high tide, year-round except during heavy October rains.

**Nearest town** // Las Salinas.

**Getting there** // Popoyo is a 2½-hour shuttle ride from Managua's Augusto C Sandino airport.

**Where to stay** // Stay at NicaWaves for comfortable amenities, Camping Luna for rustic and cheap, or Mag Rock for the best views around.

**Things to know** // Bring plenty of heavy duty bug spray and sunscreen, which are hard to find locally. There is only one small tienda (shop) in Las Salinas and they don't have much, although a well-stocked fruit and vegetable truck does drive around every day selling to people on the street.



Opposite from top: overwater living  
in Panama's Bocas del Toro islands;  
Santa Catalina was once Tom  
Curren's secret spot

## MORE LIKE THIS CENTRAL AMERICAN SWELL

### BOCAS DEL TORO, PANAMA

Hailed as the best surf area on Central America's Caribbean coast, Bocas del Toro is an archipelago of nine main islands and a bunch of smaller cays and reefs providing a variety of wave types: from lefts to rights, for first-timers to pros. There are three main surf islands, so it helps a lot to have local knowledge here; hiring a guide will significantly up your chances of scoring good waves according to swell direction, tides and winds. Just 20 miles (32km) south of Costa Rica and 60 miles (97km) from the Pacific side, the Bocas del Toro islands have a decidedly Caribbean vibe and architectural aesthetic, with thatch-roof bungalows perched above warm, clear green-blue water. But the island vibes come with island prices, so this won't be your cheapest Central American option. January through March is the best window for waves.

**Nearest town // Bocas del Toro Town**

### PUNTA ROCA, EL SALVADOR

Punta Roca is the most consistent wave in El Salvador, with something to surf here almost every day, in all conditions. It's a perfect, long right-hand point break that, on the best days, impersonates South Africa's Jeffreys Bay (minus the wetsuits and sharks). Also known as La Libertad after its port city namesake, the original El Salvador wave has power, kicks up frequent barrels, and is a fast, steep ride. Due to its proximity to town, the break can get very crowded with locals that rip, so dawn patrol is the best call to score. Another move to avoid the crowds is taking a drive north to check out other right-hand point breaks nearby: Cocal, La Bocana, Sunzal, K59, and K61 are just a few within a 30-minute drive. Some of these waves will be a little slower and less steep than Punta Roca, but that makes them a little more accessible for beginner and intermediate surfers.

**Nearest town // La Libertad**

### SANTA CATALINA, PANAMA

The Pacific side of Panama is home to the biggest barrel in Central America, Santa Catalina. The main break is a right-hand point that is very consistent, and usually bigger than most spots due to the bathymetry (it holds waves of up to 20ft). Definitely for experienced surfers only due to its raw power, this was Tom Curren's secret spot during the '80s and early '90s until it got popular. There are smaller and friendlier waves in the area, too – like Estero, where sand-bottom surf kicks off consistent lefts and rights. All these breaks work best from April through October with south or southwest swells pulling rights off point breaks, but the size of the waves and remoteness of the location keeps the crowds minimal. Best to hit them at high and medium tide.

**Nearest town // Santa Catalina**



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