EXPLORING NICARAGUA

'Chica Brava' Surf Camp Braves the Big Waves

By Tim Rogers
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SAN JUAN DEL SUR – Ashley Blaylock considered herself an experienced surfer when she first came down here from Texas almost five years ago. But the waves of Nicaragua quickly convinced her otherwise.

She says she spent her first summer here mostly getting tossed around by the breaks, and learning how to fall in the waves without hurting herself.

Still, she proved that she was unintimidated by the big surf and equally fearless of the Nicaraguan men with whom she was competing for waves. It didn't take long for Blaylock to make a reputation for herself at the local surf spots.

As a stunning and tall blonde, Blaylock is naturally prone to turning heads on the beach. But it was her gung-ho surfing style in a sport that was dominated by men that got her noticed in the water and ultimately earned her the nickname "*chica brava*," or "valiant girl."

"The guys had never seen a girl in the water," said Blaylock, 27. "I spent the first summer falling, but I didn't think of myself as a beginner so I was taking big waves and crazy breaks. That's when they started calling me 'chica brava.'"

Since that first summer, Blaylock has mastered the waves. In fact, now she's the national surf champion for Nicaragua, and ranked fourth among all women surfers in Central America. She also happens to be a lawyer and real estate agent in San Juan del Sur – a job that has kept her close to the waves, but ultimately not close enough.

"It's an easy job, I was living like a retired person, but it wasn't challenging and I needed a new challenge," she said.

Blaylock had long toyed with the idea of starting an "all girls" surf camp; she had even bought the Internet domain name for **chicabrava.com**, just in case. But it was not until her grandmother passed away last July that Blaylock started to act on her dream.

"Having my grandma pass away really helped me to focus on what is important in my life," she said. "I realized that real estate is definitely not. Life is short. It's extremely important to do what you want, when you want to do it, and to do it to the fullest extent. That's the spark that set the fire."



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La Chica Brava: *Ashley Blaylock is putting her surf knowledge into a new surf camp for women.*

Blaylock finally got her Web site online last month, and got two friends to come on board – Ashley Sartin, a surfer friend from Houston, and Elsis Marin, the first Nicaraguan woman surfer from San Juan del Sur and a member of the national surf team. Blaylock has already booked her first tour and is ready to hit the waves paddling later this summer.

Although there are several other surf camps in San Juan, Chica Brava is the first in Nicaragua to cater only to women.

Costa Rica has several all-female surf camps, but Blaylock says the surfing conditions are better in Nicaragua, where the waves are less crowded and where the breaks are benefited by a unique off-shore breeze from Lake Cocibolca.

"These are some of the best surfing conditions in the world," she said. "There are offshore winds 300 days a year, which lets you surf all day long, if your body lets you."

Blaylock also hopes to eventually distinguish her surf camp by catering to more experienced and advanced female surfers, though she acknowledges that at first most of her clients will probably be beginners.

Blaylock says her target audience won't be "backpacker chicas," rather "more sophisticated professionals who want to go on a surf trip."

The custom surf packages cost $1,500 per person for a week of surf lessons, transportation, healthy food, housing, yoga and a massage.

The housing is in a luxurious private home overlooking the bay, with a pool and "five-star service."

Blaylock says that her "surf knowledge" is one of the main advantages of signing up for Chica Brava surf tours as opposed to just renting a board and trying to learn yourself.

"Surf knowledge is important in this area, because most people keep quiet about spots. Without a guide you are not going to get into the good waves, which work on swells and tides," Blaylock said.

As a result, she said, most tourists fight for waves on the popular nearby beach of Playa Maderas, when some of the lesser known breaks go mostly un-surfed.

Plus, Blaylock said, with beginner tours the clients will be brought to more manageable waves in less crowded spots to avoid learning the hard way by fighting the locals and the rough breaks. After all, San Juan del Sur is too small of a town for more than one Chica Brava.

To learn more, **www.chicabrava.com**.■







