

# HOUSTON

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## THE TRAVEL ISSUE!

### RETURN TO PARADISE

Jeff Gremillion on  
The Best of Bali

Thailand & Vietnam  
Seduce Again!

Weekend Update:  
Gulf Coast Comebacks

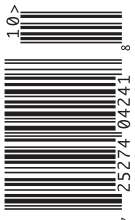
São Paulo, Miami  
& Nicaragua's New Wave

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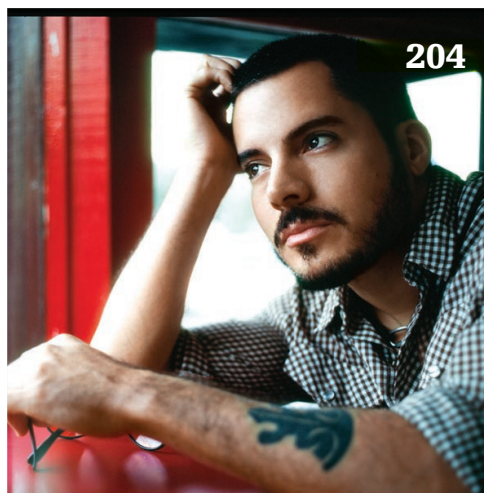
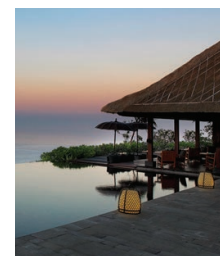
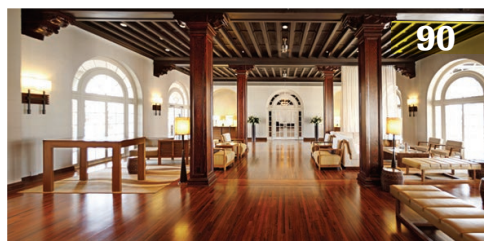
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**ON THE COVER**  
*Photograph courtesy of Bulgari Hotels & Resorts*

A cliffside lounge and an infinity pool keep watch over the Indian Ocean at the Bulgari Resort in Bali. The resort is situated on a plateau in the Jimbaran Bay area, near the southernmost point of the Indonesian island. Bali, Thailand and Vietnam are featured in this month's Travel Issue.

LET HER RIP! Ashley Blaylock, left, with one of her students on the beach in Nicaragua



## Blue Crush

*Blaylock left Houston for Nicaragua in search of killer waves. Instead, she found a movement* | By Allison Bagley | Photography by Oswaldo Rivas

The first time Ashley Blaylock surfed in Nicaragua, the local boys on the beach nicknamed her *chica brava*, or “brave girl” in Spanish. “They had never really seen a girl in the water,” Blaylock remembers. “I fancied myself a better surfer at the time than I really was. I tried to go for big, crazy waves.”

As a full-time resident of Nicaragua’s coastal city of San Juan del Sur two years later, Blaylock had the idea to found the country’s first all-girls surf camp. And she knew exactly what to call it.

Chica Brava has put the native Houstonian on the map in less than a year’s time. Women from the East Coast, California and Texas, as well as the U.K., travel to Central America to learn from one of the region’s best—Blaylock competes on Nicaragua’s national team and is currently the women’s national champ. She’s also ranked fourth in all of Central America.

Campers turn out for the intense week-long sessions at Chica Brava ([www.chicabrava.com](http://www.chicabrava.com)). The fee of about \$1,500 includes daily lessons, yoga instruction, massages and lavish accommodations. Ladies bunk up on the Cloud Farm, a 500-acre private reserve complete with tropical gardens, orchards, pools, wandering animals and a killer view of the Pacific Ocean. The serene set-up is perfect for relaxation after the all-day practices Blaylock and her staff of beach babes dish out. Campers range in skill and age—they start at 18, and a 63-year-old is signed up for the spring. Watching a novice student ride a wave for the first time is “incredible, and something I wasn’t expecting to enjoy so much,” says Blaylock.

Bronzed and sun-bleached, Blaylock, 28, is more than a smokin’ surfer chick. Laid-back? Sure. “Stoked” about the perfect ride? Absolutely. But the entrepreneur’s passions lie beyond the beach. In her former, more traditional life, Blaylock, one of eight children, attended high school at Foley’s Academy Downtown. She lived in Montrose as a U of H undergrad and law student.

During her graduate work, she investigated claims of Death Row inmates.

It was during a summer-abroad law program in Costa Rica that Blaylock traveled to bordering Nicaragua and developed a blue crush on the country. “It’s a surfer’s paradise, breathtakingly beautiful,” she says. “I knew immediately I wanted to live here, it was just a matter of how I could make it happen.” During her first year in law school (she was in the top-25 percent of her class) and while she studied to pass the Bar exam, Blaylock plotted her relocation. She hasn’t practiced law formally in Nicaragua, but keeps her license current so she can do death-penalty or environmental work down the road.

For now, Blaylock is part of a changing tide in Nicaraguan culture, where an influx of tourism and American influence is giving local girls interest in becoming *chicas bravas*. “A lot of them don’t even feel comfortable in a bathing suit—they swim in shorts and a T-shirt,” Blaylock says. “It’s a very conservative culture in some ways, but slowly a lot of them are coming around.” She also plans to give lessons to local girls on a pro bono basis, with the hope of inspiring them to surf when they see other women in the water.

Like her, most of Blaylock’s friends are expats and surfers. After the sun goes down, they frequent the local discos. “Everyone dances and enjoys life here.” Low-key nights are spent at the local coffee shop playing Scrabble. Blaylock lives on the beach in an open-air, three-bedroom home where she constantly plays hostess to friends and family who come to visit. The carefree surfing starlet has a long-time “on again, off again” relationship with a local surfer who represents Nicaragua in competitions, but says for now, she’s trying to focus on her business.

In fact, she’s done such a good job showcasing female skill in her sport that local boys are finally asking the *chica brava* for lessons. And while they won’t admit it, she usually leaves them in her wake. ■