

GOOD LOCATION FOR...

# Granada, Nicaragua: An Up-and-Coming Wellness Destination

By Kate Robertson

With a laid-back lifestyle and increasing access to modern amenities, it's easy to see why a growing number of expats are calling Granada home. This colonial city in Nicaragua has year-round hot weather, brightly-painted buildings and colonial-era architecture in the historic center, and diverse natural surroundings. It's not surprising that it is becoming Nicaragua's tourism hub. What is interesting, though, is how it is growing as a wellness destination.

The 2014 trend report of the Global Spa and Wellness Summit says that Nicaragua is "now considered in the early stages of becoming a spa destination." It also estimates that wellness tourism is expected to grow internationally by 9% annually through 2017—a whopping 50% faster than "regular" tourism.

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*Entrepreneurs are taking advantage of low start-up costs to set up wellness businesses in Granada*

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# Granada, Nicaragua: An Up-and-Coming Wellness Destination

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Nicaragua's wellness industry has centered around Granada. "Most tourists end up spending a few days in Granada on the way to the beaches, and it has been a good place to open our yoga retreat hotel from a business perspective," says Eloisa Mayers, who started a wellness business there with her sister Arantxa.

Warren Ogden was in on the trend early. He opened a gym, yoga center, and spa, called PURE in the city in 2006 and has seen a boom in the last few years. "Granada has suddenly become a hot spot for yoga and wellness," he says "Three years ago, PURE was the only yoga studio in town. Now yoga is offered at four or five places, and at an eco-lodge on an island nearby."

"Granada in particular—and Nicaragua in general—has seen a spectacular increase in the number of yoga studios and retreats offered. It seems that, without any official program to promote it, Nicaragua is becoming a 'wellness destination' in the same way that Costa Rica became an 'eco-adventure' destination."

## Yoga Hotel

Eloisa and Arantxa, who are both in their 30s, have set up a boutique yoga hotel, Casa Lucia, which they operate themselves and also rent out as a yoga retreat center to visiting teachers. They grew up in Bermuda, where industry is based on tourism and international business, and have worked in



*Arantxa and Eloisa Mayers have set up a yoga hotel in the up-and-coming wellness destination of Nicaragua*

hotels since they were students. "Hospitality is in our blood and is part of our lifestyle," says Eloisa.

Four years ago the sisters decided they wanted to open their own business. "We stumbled upon Nicaragua during our travels and decided this was a great place to open the yoga retreat and hotel we dreamed of," says Eloisa. "We are both trained yoga teachers, so we are able to combine our holistic experience with our background in hospitality."

Location was an important factor in the decision to set up business. They found Granada far more affordable than setting up business in North America. You can secure business permits for minimal fees, lawyer's fees are very low, and so are rents, ranging up to \$1,000 a month for a commercial property of small hotel size. The sisters chose to purchase a property, carrying out extensive renovations and additions to the original building.

"If you wish to purchase a property, you are looking at anywhere from about \$150,000 to \$700,000, depending on size, set-up, and location," says Arantxa. "Labor and certain materials are a lot cheaper than elsewhere in Central America. So if you are looking to start from scratch, you can do it affordably."

Casa Lucia has a yoga pavilion with tropical hardwood flooring and space for 15 to 20 students. As well as teaching yoga themselves, Arantxa and Eloisa rent out the space to visiting teachers who want to host yoga retreat groups. Casa Lucia supplies the yoga mats and props and an open-air kitchen fully equipped for juicing and raw food retreats. Arantxa and Eloisa also help provide marketing support in the Granada community for the retreat.

Arantxa admits there have been some challenges in finding trained kitchen and bar staff for the hotel because hospitality is still a new industry in Nicaragua. But investing time in training has paid off. "We have been fortunate in that we have a core staff of dedicated employees who have been with us from the start."

Even though Casa Lucia is a new business, having opened its doors in November of 2013, the sisters say they have been living comfortably on their income.

"Living expenses in Granada are low," says Eloisa, "For example, a large bag of fruits and vegetables at the local market costs \$5 to \$6. I don't know anywhere else in the world where you can buy exotic fruits for this price! I would say \$100 to \$200 per week is a good budget for two people, including eating out once per week and your utilities. Electricity and gas for the car are the biggest expenses we have incurred."

*Millions of people around the world are practicing yoga, and generally they tend to be people in the mid- to higher-income bracket.*

—Eloisa Mayers

But standards within wellness businesses must be kept high. "Millions of people around the world are practicing yoga, and generally they tend to be people in the mid- to higher-income bracket," says Eloisa. "Therefore, when this market travels in a country like Nicaragua, they want to enjoy comfortable accommodation while exploring this beautiful, undiscovered, and unique country," she says.

What advice would they give others who want to open a business? "Go for it! You need a basic understanding of the country, the legal system, the people, the culture, etc. Once you have this and you think the market can benefit from your business, don't let anything hold you back."

## Portable Wellness

Sara Castaneda, a 40-year-old from Boston, is also getting in on the wellness trend. For her, yoga is a portable career that can take her anywhere. It's easy to travel and teach yoga without a visa, and Sara is no stranger to teaching yoga in other countries. She previously taught in Panama and India. She's staying in Granada for the next five months.

It's a nice lifestyle, but Sara has a word of caution. "You must love yoga and not be attached to any idea of becoming rich, especially in underdeveloped countries. It is helpful to know that you are providing a service to help humans with the development of self-awareness and overall physical, mental, and spiritual health."

## Know Your Market

According to a 2013 report commissioned by the Global Spa and Wellness Summit:

- Wellness tourists tend to be middle-aged, wealthy, educated, and from Western and/or industrialized countries.
- Right now they come mainly from Europe and North America, but future potential exists from Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East.
- An international wellness tourist spends about 65% more per trip than the average international tourist.

Sara had initially taken up yoga to help deal with the stress of a busy life working in finance. She wanted to be a yoga teacher but just didn't have time to pursue that goal while working 40-plus hours a week, finishing up a degree at night, and being a single mom.

However when she was laid off in 2008, she decided to train as a yoga teacher. She also enrolled in a school of Ayurveda, the traditional Hindu medicine system. Switching careers took a bit of an initial investment.

"Depending on the yoga school, start-up costs for becoming a yoga teacher can range anywhere from \$3,000 to \$5,000," Sara points out. "To teach public classes in the U.S., a minimum of 200 hours of training is required and must be recognized by the Yoga Alliance." There are currently no certification requirements in Nicaragua.



*Sara Castaneda is using yoga-teaching to fund her travels...right now, the demand is in Nicaragua*

Sara started in Nicaragua with just a few weeks of teaching classes through PURE's "visiting therapist" program and has now returned for five months to manage the center. She feels confident that she will be able to live comfortably on what she makes doing that and teaching yoga classes, and she has budgeted \$300 extra a month from savings to supplement. When the five months is up, Sara will return to the U.S. to plan her next yoga teaching trip.

## Low Costs

Granada is not expensive, and you can easily rent a small house with an extra room for private practice for about \$350 a month, according to massage therapist, Janet Scarborough. Five hundred dollars a month will get you a nice apartment with air-conditioning, a pool, and maid service. "I live quite comfortably on my retirement income supplemented with my massage therapy work. Fifteen hundred dollars a month is more than enough to live on in Granada and have fun doing it."

Janet, 63, a licensed therapist from South Carolina, has been in the wellness business for 22 years. "2013 was the magic number for me," she says. "This is the year I decided to semi-retire and start traveling more, and my first order of business was to start drawing my Social Security in order to have a base income."

The idea to go to Granada came from a massage therapist friend who had heard about PURE's offer to visiting therapists and yoga instructors to work at the facility in return for accommodation and food.

In Janet's case, there were no start-up costs because everything was provided. But she says it doesn't cost much to start on your own. "All a massage therapist really needs is a table, which could be purchased in Granada. Or one could bring their own and check it as baggage."

"My agreement was that I would stay six weeks. I figured if I didn't like it, I could cut my time short...I stayed 12 weeks! And I am back for even longer."

Therapists and teachers working with PURE also have the option of holding private classes. Sara, being bilingual, is planning to teach yoga in Spanish, which will expand the number of people she can reach from beyond the wellness tourist into the local market. "I think adding this element will change the face of yoga in the community in Granada," she says. "I love community and believe this will be important in the health of the locals."



*Janet Scarborough has fallen in love with Nicaragua where her massage skills have found a ready market*

Janet admits that her lack of Spanish has been a challenge in relocation to Granada, but says, "I work with a group of local massage therapists who are kind enough to interpret for me with clients."

"Granada is a magical place," she continues. "I felt instantly connected. The people are incredibly hospitable and happy, locals and tourists alike. There is something to be said about being able to teach naturally-heated yoga while listening to the symphony of birds chanting their beautiful songs."

The biggest appeal for Janet is her new community. "Granada is filled with musicians and poets and kind, hard-working people. Plus, the expat community is lively and welcomes newcomers with open arms. I love it."

## Spot the Opportunity

You can get a feel for the wellness business in Granada in two ways before deciding to move there.

- **Offer Your Services at PURE.** In exchange for teaching classes or giving treatments, **PURE** will supply you with accommodation, meals, and Spanish lessons. You can even add some private classes of your own there to generate income
- **Host Your Own Retreat.** Organize a group trip and hire **Casa Lucia** for accommodation and group sessions. They will supply yoga props and take care of the catering, allowing you to get on with your retreat.

Either way, you'll be able to get a sense of the city and the potential for your style of wellness business.