The radio crackled to life just after dark on Sabbath evening. My family was gone to Managua and I had just settled down to the computer to check how life outside Nicaragua was going. I answered the radio; it was Pastor Herrera, the only accredited church pastor over the whole region, who lived in Puerto Cabezas. He had a visiting American from Maranatha Volunteers International, Darrell Hardy, who wanted to build some churches in Nicaragua. It was their first time to the RAAN (Northeast Nicaragua) and they didn’t know what they were getting into. They planned to just rent a truck to get around, and had scheduled 4 days to see 25 churches. Some of the locations required a day travel each way, so there was no way they could see them all in 4 days. They figured out right away after flying in that the nearest car rental places are 2 days travel away on the other side of the country. The Pastor asked me if I would be willing to help with our truck. They were happy to pay the expenses, so I committed 4 days to drive around. After all, building Seventh-day Adventist church buildings is something that is right along the lines with what we like to do, so helping them is a priority for us as well.

I left at 6:15 AM the next morning, Sunday, and drove to Puerto Cabezas. The roads are now quite nice, recently graded. I zipped along quite nicely and arrived by 10:30 AM. By 11:00 we were on our way to Rosita, the first stop. It was a 7 hour drive crossing over quite a few questionable bridges, fording several rivers in 4x4, and a barge across the largest river close to the ocean. We spent the night in Rosita, and left at 5:30 AM for Bonanza, a 1 hour trip to a little mining town right on the edge of the deep jungle. I had never been there, only seen it from the air flying. It surprised me as it was a bustling little place with a bank, trucks and motorcycles everywhere, people in hard hats, and lots of businesses. With the price of gold so high, it keeps business alive. There was the first church sight survey, complete with GPS coordinates. Maranatha requires a lot of information on each site, and even measurements of the size of the property and any existing buildings.

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using a tape measure. From there we headed back to Puerto Cabezas, checking 5 more sites on the way. We arrived just in time for Pastor Herrera to jump into his church clothes and walk onto the platform to give his sermon. There was a camp meeting going on and several hundred people had been ready and singing 15 minutes before he arrived.

The next day Darrell and I left Pastor Herrera to do the camp meeting work, and we took the Waspam district pastor, Mauricio Tucker. We stopped by my home in Tronquera for a 10 minute lunch, and visited another 5 sites, arriving back to spend the night in Tronquera by dark. The 3rd day we were on the road by 6:30 and visited only one site, arriving to Puerto by 12:30.

Pastor Herrera had scheduled a boat to take us up the ocean shoreline to a community with no road access. We were told a normal boat takes 4 to 6 hours each way, but this was a speedboat and only takes 35 to 40 minutes. That would give us plenty of time to go and come before dark. By the time we got the boat engine, filled gas jugs (30 gallons), pushed the boat out to the water and got it ready, it was 2 PM. A stiff wind was blowing, and the boat's powerful engine quickly plowed through the pounding surf waves. I was looking forward to the trip, my first time out on the open ocean here in Nicaragua. The guy turned the boat into the wind and opened the 75 hp engine. The 20 foot boat hit the first wave, lifting us off our seats as it dropped and hit the trough on the opposite side, smashing us hard down. We caught our breath – just in time for the next one! The pounding was incredible; I've never had anything like it except when I've fallen from quite a height. Amazingly the boat stood up to the pounding, there was just a small crack in the center that we watched slowly get bigger. Fortunately it held. We estimated the swells were 4 to 6 feet deep. The pounding physically hurt not only your tailbone, but back, neck, and even head. We had to keep our mouths closed because it would jam your teeth closed when you hit, no talking, just grunts on the harder waves. Pounding was every 3 to 5 seconds, with every 3rd or 4th wave actually lifting you off your seat before slamming back down. We told the guy to slow down, and he would for 2 or 3 minutes, then speed back up. The ocean spray drenched us to the bone, but fortunately it was warm tropical ocean salt water. It was hard to keep your eyes open as the spray stung them, but you needed to see the big waves coming. Many times the only part of the boat in the water was the engine in the back as we crested the waves. After 10 minutes, we had a hard time imagining how we were going to handle 40 minutes of this. Time seemed to be standing still as the pounding jarred every possible bone in our bodies. After 45 minutes, I asked if we were close, they said another ½ hour. Wow! Oh well, we weren’t going to turn around! At 1 hr 15 minutes they also said another ½ hour. No one here has watches or keeps track of time.

After 2 hours of brutal pounding, we were finally there! We looked for houses, none on the beach. They said, “Oh yes, it’s only a quick 15 minute walk to the village”. Not complaining to be on solid ground, we happily started walking. Through a splitting headache, I calculated we would be getting back to Puerto after
dark. Hitting those waves and weaving side to side around on the top of them didn’t seem to be such a great idea in the dark, but we were already so far along we couldn’t turn around. Turns out the “trail” was filled with mud and water knee deep. The local lay pastor with us just took off his shoes and rolled up his pants to past his knees. We picked our way around, trying to keep up with him. The black mud sucks in your feet and makes it harder to pull them out each time. After 15 minutes of slogging along, I asked if we were close. The response? “halfway”. I guess I should be use to that now after 7 years living in Nicaragua. A quick calculation through my now clearing headache verified that we would be lucky to be back to the boat on the beach by dark. We found the village, a nice little town (named Dakura) with electricity brought in by power line from Puerto Cabezas and lots of cement sidewalks. We were told in July the walk we had just done with knee deep water was waist deep, so we felt lucky it was the beginning of the dry season now! A quick check of the church and we were on our way back down the muddy trail.

Fortunately we were back to the beach before dark as the thought of wading through the mud in the dark wasn’t as appealing as sitting in the boat in the dark. We were fortunate to have the wind behind us and the pounding was much gentler and the trip back was quicker. The boat drivers went far from the shore, it became a dim outline, but the moon was bright. We discussed the distance of the swim if the boat tipped over, and how the shore would not be visible if we were down in the swells swimming. We marked the position of the moon in relation to the shore, just to be ready. In just an hour we were back to the beach, and my waiting truck with its watchman there on the sand was a welcome site. I spent the night in Port, and was thankful for a soft bed. The next day I drove home to Tronquera and met my wife and kids, just returned from Managua.

Now 3 days later, I’m starting to sit down on soft chairs without pain (no hard chairs yet) and my back is starting to feel better. I felt sorry for Darrell, who was quite a few years older than me. It was a pleasure getting to know more about Maranatha’s work in Nicaragua – they sure know how to have fun!

Don’t forget Nicaragua this Christmas.
Thank you and Merry Christmas,
Clint and Marilyn