

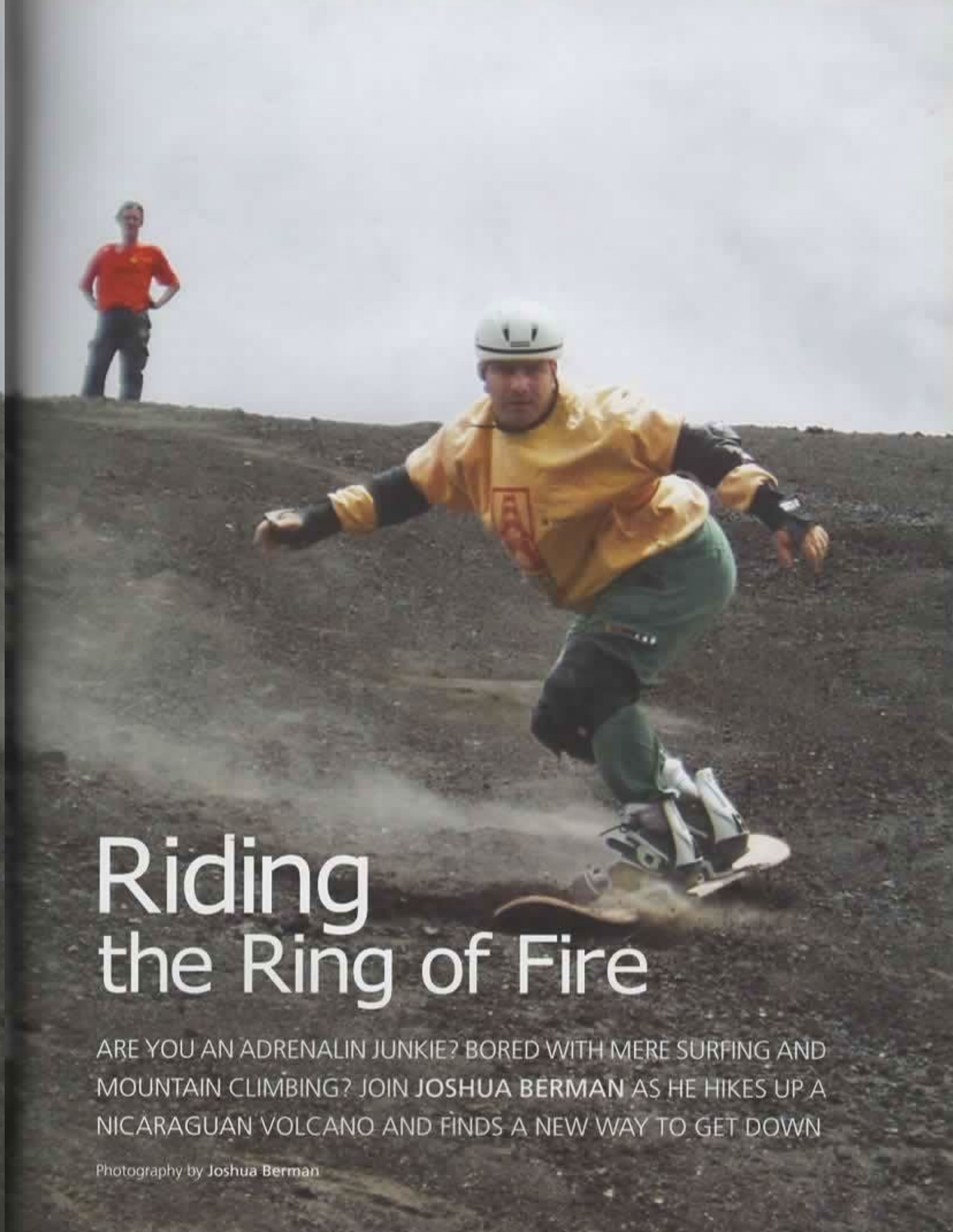
CARIBBEAN & CENTRAL AMERICA

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DESTINATIONS

Secrets of
Guatemala's Lion's Inn
Riding
Nicaragua's ring of fire
The Courting of **Canouan**
Tobago's top ten beaches






Riding the Ring of Fire

ARE YOU AN ADRENALIN JUNKIE? BORED WITH MERE SURFING AND MOUNTAIN CLIMBING? JOIN JOSHUA BERMAN AS HE HIKES UP A NICARAGUAN VOLCANO AND FINDS A NEW WAY TO GET DOWN

Photography by Joshua Berman



I AM SITTING ON THE RIM OF CERRO NEGRO, NICARAGUA'S YOUNGEST AND most recently active volcano, strapping my feet onto a steel-plated plywood board and looking out over the wide, green and black vista that extends in all directions. A wave of childish anticipation washes across my body with another gust of warm, sulphur-smelling wind. Black gravel crunches beneath my bottom as I shift to place a bicycle helmet on my head. Joost and Jan, my two Dutch companions on this extraordinary morning, glance at me across the ridge, each offering a thumbs-up; we are all grinning the wild grin of boys-out playing.

I am, I think to myself for the hundredth time, about to sandboard into the crater of a live volcano.

Tourism is a fairly recent phenomenon in Nicaragua, and access to fringe sports even moreso. Gravity slaves from around the world are occasionally found experimenting throughout Nicaragua. I've seen paragliders testing the winds above Laguna de Apoyo, climbers scrambling on boulders in Boaco, and windsurfers skimming along the great Lago de Cocibolca. And, of course, plenty of surfers, enjoying perfect waves formed by the year-round offshore breezes on Nicaragua's southwestern Pacific coast.

So why not sandboarding?

Out of Nicaragua's dozens of volcanoes, Cerro Negro, with its relatively even slopes of sand and ash, was a natural pick to try it out. French outfitter Pierre Gédéon first rock-skied Cerro Negro in 2001 and it was only a matter of time before someone modified a snowboard for the unique descent. That someone was Jan Strik, a Dutch expatriate who had a handful of boards custom-crafted, and began offering sandboarding trips in the activity menu of Va Pues Tours.

And now I'm standing on one, poised before my plunge.

In one swift motion, I pull my knees—and the weight of the board—toward my chest and throw myself downhill. The board lands on the inclined sand and I lean back, testing my weight and judging the speed, which is slowly beginning to increase. Sand is much slower than snow, I realise but the slope is just steep enough to carve, and I attempt my first turn, only to stall out and face plant into the mountain.

Jan gets it all on film and I wave him off as I get up and try again. There's only room for a few more turns before the proximity of steaming sulphur vents forces me to unstrap and slog back up to the top. The next run will be a long ride down the outside of the volcano.

At 675 metres above sea level, Cerro Negro is not the tallest of Nicaraguan volcanoes, but, after its spectacular eruptions in 1999 and 2000, it is the most rambunctious. And the view is stunning. To the northwest, the rest of the Maricao Chain extends into the haze toward the Gulf of Fonseca and El Salvador; to the south, the perfect cones of Volcán Momotombo and its little brother, Momotombito, rise out of Lago de Managua. So many volcanoes, so little time.

Below, my line extends to the flats; an old magma flow degraded into crumbly substrate that will carry my weight and pull me earthward. The outside of the volcano is steeper than its crater, the sand finer, and everything is wonderfully wide open. I take one more breath, point my board downhill, and I ride. **M**



WHERE AND HOW

Your volcano surfing expedition begins in the colonial city of León, an hour northwest of Managua. Cerro Negro is a short drive from León and transportation will be provided by your tour operator. The trail to the top is relatively short (about an hour), and the ride down much quicker.

VA PUES TOURS

(tel. 505/611-8784, info@vapues.com, www.vapues.com) maintains their office in the lovely Restaurante Cocinarte, in a 300-year-old colonial building across from the Iglesia Laborio. They are the premier board-riding outfitter in Nicaragua and will provide safety equipment, board, and a skilled guide.

NICARAGUA ADVENTURES

(505/883-7161, info@nica-adventures.com, www.nica-adventures.com) is based in Managua and, although they do not offer sandboarding, can get you up on a pair of rock skis.

Joshua Berman is the co-author of Moon Handbooks Nicaragua (Avalon Travel Publishing), the best-selling guidebook to the country. He is a freelance writer who was last seen on his way to live and work in India. His website is www.stonegrooves.net.

