

THE TIPITAPA BATHS

In Tipitapa, which is half an hour from Managua, there's a "model prison." The signs on the road point you to it, but you can't go inside. You can just see the walls. A brother of the present Somoza built the place, I was told, and many Nicaraguans say it is exemplary because "you go inside a prisoner and when you come out you are a cadaver."

Near the prison sign the highway forks. If you go straight you go through town, around the barricaded Guard cuartel, and out the other end to some sulphur baths that were once very popular with the better classes from Managua.

Its not a very large place. There's an outdoor dining pavillion and dance floor; a low U-shaped building with motel-style units where people from the City can stay overnight, or for weekends; and two rectangular concrete hot pools, down below, along a terraced hillside which overlooks a cow pasture, a gordge, a wrecked steel bridge on which is mounted a red penant with just one word: Peligrosso.

Dangerous! The whole place is enclosed by ornamental iron gates which were bent out of commission some years back when a truck missed a curve in the narrow two lane highway and came

sailing up the front lawn of the spa. All the buildings beyond these unworkable gates are an ugly pistachio green stucco roofed with dark orange tiles.

Inside the dance pavillion there's a large juke box decorated with colored lights. Many tables surround the dance space. There's a bar, and a snack bar, coca cola signs, and ads for Ron Flor De Cana, and Victoria Cerveza.

Hardly any Managuans take the trip to Tipitapa since the war began. The local people, when they come to use the baths, bring their own frayed towels, and carry food with them in little paper bags.

The place wears its emptiness without abandon. Everything seems pretty much in order except the pistachio walls are all cracking and peeling; the lawns thick with dead leaves. Like with too much of Nicaragua's volcanic terrain, you have a feeling as you walk across those soft grassy lawns that your foot could suddenly sink deep into the soil, release a huge jet-like effusion of steam, or lava.

Tipitapa is a market town surrounded by large cotton fincas, the country's principal cash crop. There's a number of textile mills nearby, a pottery, some other small factories. On the day I visited the General Strike had been on for three weeks; in town grown men played pool, and wagered, sullenly; the market women

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haggled with each other.

At the baths a couple of local teenagers played splash games in the farthest pool; in the steamy vaporous air their faces were all awobble.

Another dark little boy in rags was their attendant. He busied himself with a shovel and push broom making a huge pile of hot green mud.

The near pool was entirely deserted. It looked as if nobody had been near it in quite some time, but it had not been emptied out: dead leaves floated on its steamy surface. I bent low over the water and there was a reek like dead fish, or blood.

The patroness, a European woman, did not wish to talk about what had become of all of her customers.

She claimed she was too busy.

Besides, she averred, they still came, some of them, on the weekends. "Its true senior."

But when I asked if I might drop in over the weekend to have another look-around, she said she did not think people would like to be disturbed when they came to her spa, but she could not stop me.

She said her customers liked privacy.

"Some of the men do not bring their wives," as if to put a certain spice into her baths for me.

"Entiendo."

"I spik English," she said.

She seemed to wish me to go now because she had so much to do, but it was hot and muggy, too uncomfortable to rush anywhere.

I asked if there was coke or coffee to be had at her snack bar. "Not today," she said. "For the weekend only. When it is like this," she shrugged, "I do not prepare..."

"Why don't the people come anymore?" I asked.

"Its a very old place this place here..."

She shrugged again.

"So?"

"It was once much better. Now we do not have the money..."

She was small, and leathery-faced, and brown-haired. She may have once been pretty; now her face with its large pores looked as if it had been tanned in so much sulphurous water, and vapor. Her eyes were dull, without any particular focus.

Sometimes she seemed to be inspecting a crack in the bathhouse wall over my shoulder. At other times she was talking to the ground, or to that large dark shady almond tree near the front gate.

Never directly at me.

"You see," I told her then, "I thought it must have something to do with the Sandinistas..."

"Que?"

She knew the word as well as I did. "Los Rebeldes," I explained.

"It has nothing to do with any such thing like that," she told me, loudly, in Spanish.

"Not with the shooting?"

"Where do you hear shooting?" Her voice was accusatory: "We have no war here. There is no war. There were just some disturbances, and many of my customers who are with the Army or the Police they know that and they tell me it will soon be over because they are with the government..."

"Claro." I felt disappointed with her for pretending to be hopeful. Very few people in Nicaragua were doing that nowadays.

From the terraced hill I heard a barrage of splashing, and the hilarity of the young bathers.

She held her ground and smiled at me, almost lubriciously:

"Now do you wish to bath here?"

I shook my head no slowly.

"It is just the same with us," she said. "It does not matter..."

As if responding to an insult.

As she showed me toward the front gate, I pointed at the ruined bridge.

It had been splintered right through its central span, as

if by heavy axe blows: Trusses, metal beams, and girders, seemed bent, warped, twisted. There was a gaping hole in the roadway.

Three young men balanced their way along the girders with their arms outstretched; and when they came to the hole they bent down and looked into the gordge and backed away again.

"I am sure that happened with the terremoto," I lied, deliberately making sure to use the Spanish word for earthquake so I would be understood.

"Si," she said. "Earthquake...de algodon con la dynamita... claro...

"Es lastima," I said. "Peligrosso..."

"Claro, Peligrosso," she said, as if admitting to a crime, and then she put a finger to her lips and repeated the word, loudly and slowly: PELIGROSSO.

More like a warning to me, as I turned and went out through her gates.