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# PASO DEL ISTMO TOURISM

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR  
COMMUNITY-BASED KAYAK TOURISM





# TECHNICAL REPORT

# KAYAKING IN EL OSTIONAL

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY-BASED KAYAK TOURISM

Conservation and Sustainable Tourism in Critical Watersheds  
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In collaboration with

Paso Pacífico  
El Ostional community

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Rock formations contrast with the cristal clear waters.



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Technical adviser Jerry Wylie stops paddling to enjoy the view.





## INTRODUCTION

The southern coast of Nicaragua has excellent potential for sea kayak tours, especially in the vicinity of the small fishing village of Ostional about 25 km south of San Juan del Sur, a major tourism center on the southern coast. Special attractions here include spectacular cliffs with blow-holes, small rocky islands, sandy beaches, and protected bays. In addition, there are migrating sea birds, dolphins, whales, and marine turtles. The well-known sea turtle nesting beach of La Flor is only 7 km away.

Ostional can provide basic visitor services, including rustic rooms for rent, home-cooked meals, and guides. The community currently offers three short tours: Fishermen's tour (including a fresh fish to take home), nature and history tour by horseback, and a boat tour of the coast.

Boating conditions are best from mid-December to May and the month of August according to Fidel Lopez, owner of a dive shop in San Juan del Sur. Paddlers may encounter more rain May through July, but this can be refreshing. Strong south winds may make paddling difficult from September through the first half of December, although the area may be somewhat protected from swells by the coastline of Costa Rica across the Bahía de Salinas.



- ◀ Bahía Anima beach.
- ▶ Co-author Jorge Paniagua paddling towards one of the many hidden beaches in the area.
- ▶ A unique rock formation near an unnamed beach.



## KAYAK ASSESSMENT

An initial survey of the coastline from San Juan del Sur to Ostional by powerboat in November, 2007 suggested that the best area for sea kayaking was north of Ostional. A more detailed assessment was made January 20, 2008 by Jerry Wylie and Jorge Paniagua in folding kayaks. After assembling the boats on the beach, we paddled northwest past Punta el Roble and Punta Clavo for an hour to the large sandy beach at the center of Bahía Anima, a distance of about 4 km (Figure 1). The wind was light and we only experienced a little choppy water around the rocky headlands where swells reflected off cliffs.

Landing at low tide at Bahía Anima beach, we observed tracks from two nesting turtles across the wide beach. One had apparently departed during the night soon after high tide, as its tracks were partially washed away. Since the other track was still fresh and intact, it must have left its nest quite recently. But unfortunately, both nests seemed to have been disturbed by turtle egg poachers. We learned later from French tourists staying at the same guest house in Ostional that there are hiking trails between the village and this beach.

Launching from the beach, we did not stop at the less inviting smaller rocky beaches nearby and continued paddling to the northwest around Punta Guacalito. At the point is a very impressive blow-hole spurting a shower of water 40 to 50 feet and occasionally making a loud boom. Tilted at 60 degrees, the sedimentary rocks here are not only dramatic but contain interesting colors and patterns. A narrow cleft immediately to the northwest of the blow-hole leads to tiny rocky beach that may be accessible in calm conditions.

Continuing between a series of low rocks and the cliff to Punta La Canoa, we turned into a small, sandy beach named “Brazil”

by locals. Although it looked very attractive, we were unable to land because of surf dumping directly on the beach. At this point, we were about half way to La Flor Beach and turned around and retraced our route back to Ostional. Paddling directly from Ostional to La Flor would take 1.5 to 2 hours at an easy pace and without stops.

Paddling back, we discovered that the unnamed bay between Punta Clavo and Punta El Roble bypassed earlier actually had more to offer than we had originally thought. The small sandy beach on the northwest corner was more protected from waves and easier to land than the first beach we visited. Plus it was next to an interesting rocky outcrop that can be accessed by foot through a small circular opening. The geology here is fascinating, with rocks that look like maps or ancient writing, so we called the area “picture rocks.” This would be a perfect place for a picnic and a swim; it was calm and the water clarity and color was more like the Caribbean than the Pacific.

At high tide it may be possible to paddle the shallow area between the island in the middle of the bay and the shore. However, care should be taken to watch for occasional waves refracting around the rocks and coming together like two hands clapping, something we observed. Although each wave is small, if they collide just right they create enough disturbance to capsize a kayak.

The rocky platform skirting the dual rock spires of the “island” is cut by a series of narrow channels forming what kayakers call a “rock garden.” This network of small waterways is accessible at the right tide level when the water is calm. It might also be a good place to fish, explore by foot, and even snorkel if conditions are right.



Heading back to Ostional, occasional wind gusts of 20-30 kph strengthened and became steady as we attempted to paddle around Punta El Roble. Not making any headway, we were happy to get a ride back by friends in a passing powerboat. We estimate that winds were 20 kph maximum with some higher gusts which, according to locals, was not typical. Also, surf up to 2-3 meters would also have made landing difficult. Paddlers facing such conditions when returning to Ostional can make a landing in a more protected cove on the northwest corner where fishermen anchor their boats, and then walk a short distance to the beach.

Since we were unable to paddle in the afternoon due to high winds, we hired a powerboat to explore the coastline to the southeast for about 7 km. It was very different. There were a lot of expensive vacation homes overlooking every beach; the coastline was more exposed and did not have the same dramatic cliffs; beaches were generally smaller; and there was only one small protected bay. Clearly, the best kayaking is the North of Ostional.

Before we left, we paddled up the Ostional River for about 400 meters to the edge of the village. Surrounded by tall trees, the area was full of wading birds even during mid-day. This area would be an excellent opportunity for bird-watching, especially when high winds make coastal paddling difficult. Locals said there are also crocodiles here, which would be an added attraction for night-time tours. The only negative was trash along the bank.



## KAYAK SWOT RAPID ASSESSMENT

### STRENGTHS

Dramatic coastal scenery
Two protected bays
Sandy beaches
Blowholes & rock gardens
No developments
Sea turtles and birds
Small mangrove river
Village of Ostional

### OPPORTUNITIES

Snorkeling and swimming
Turtle nesting programs
Kayak fishing
Kayak camping
Kayak surfing
Powerboat assisted kayak tours
Improved road access

### WEAKNESSES

Occasional strong wind & waves
Poor access in rainy season
Limited facilities in Ostional
Trash in river

### THREATS

Coastal real estate development
Turtle egg theft
Trash

Local community member practicing kayaking in the Ostional River.



## RANKING AS A POTENTIAL SEA KAYAK DESTINATION

Based on numerical values of the 11 variables listed below, Ostional ranks high as a potential venue for commercial kayaking. Highest scores were in water quality, scenic quality, natural attractions, and other recreational opportunities such as swimming, fishing, camping. The only areas of deficiency were the lack of cultural attractions and somewhat limited paddling diversity, meaning that the only practical route is to the north-east. Most coastal areas can only provide two directions and short or long tours.

A total of 22 to 23 points ranks Ostional near the top of various kayak venues in Central America and the Caribbean and above such commercially successfully kayak tourism destinations as Glover's Reef, Belize. This score could be improved by finding cultural attractions—which could be historic sites/events or local folklore—and expanding the kayaking options through the use of powerboats to ferry tourists and kayaks to other areas, for example to La Flor beach to observe turtles offshore as they gather before laying eggs.

Based on this successful review, we recommend purchase of a small number of kayaks and all equipment necessary to start tours as part of the Community Tours program, and also use these boats in an intensive 2-day training session for kayak guides. The training would be patterned after kayak guide training programs in the USA but not involve formal certification.

After the tours begin, the community should explore the possibility of using kayaks for sport fishing, which is becoming very popular in the USA, and for turtle watching.

Lake Gatun and Lower Chagres River, Panama	33-34 points
Kuna Yala, Panama	32 points
Marathon, Florida Keys, USA	23 points
Ostional, Nicaragua	22-23 points
Guanaja Island, Honduras	22 points
Culebra Island, Puerto Rico	20 points
Glover's Reef, Belize	19 points
Pearl Cays, Nicaragua	18 points



Details of this scoring is as follows:		Points	Max
A	Watchable Wildlife includes turtles, dolphins and birds	3	5
B	Water Quality is very good	4	4
C	Scenic Quality including dramatic cliffs, pristine bays & beaches	4	5
D	Paddling Safety is good to very good	2-3	4
E	Cultural Attractions (none)	0	5
F	Natural Attractions include beaches and bays	4	5
G	Paddling Diversity is low to moderate	2	4
H	Other Recreational Opportunities are swimming & fishing	3	4
I	Conflicts with Other Users is not a problem	no deduction	
J	Accessibility (physical) is good	no deduction	
K	Trash is not a serious problem	no deduction	
Total Score		22-23 points	



Co-author Jerry Wylie paddling back to Ostional

## KAYAKING RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop pricing and profit-sharing policies with the community. Current tours in Ostional organized by the Community Tours program cost \$23-\$30 per person. In the USA kayak companies offer 3-hour kayak tours for \$80. So a price somewhere between these two might be appropriate, for example \$50 per person with a minimum group size of two. Arrangements should be established to distribute profits to those directly involved, such as guides, equipment cleaners, and administrators, and the village as a whole so that everyone has a stake in its success.
2. Train local fishermen to be kayak guides. Kayak guides need to be strong paddlers, be able to demonstrate basic strokes and maneuvers, be familiar with the coastline, know how to deal with clients, have basic first-aid training, and be familiar with local hazards. The American Canoe Association has a 2-day Kayak Trip Leader certification program that can be adapted, and perhaps expanded to three days, to provide the training needed.
3. Purchase appropriate kayaks and equipment. Durable plastic sit-on-top kayaks are well suited for tropical areas such as this. They are especially easy to get on and off for snorkeling and back on after a capsize. They are stable and can also be used to surf in gentle conditions.

One double kayak and two single kayaks are recommended to start the program. This would accommodate up to three clients plus the guide. Additional equipment is listed in the attached list for a total cost of about \$4,250. However, it should be possible to obtain wholesale or discount prices by purchasing blemished boats. Typical professional discounts of 25-30% may also be available if purchased through a kayak company.

4. Develop advertising materials for kayak tours. A kayak rack card similar to the ones currently available for the three other tours should be developed for kayaking.
5. Offer 3 to 4-hour guided tours. Depending on conditions, a 3 or 4-hour guided tour could easily retrace the route

we explored. This could include a stop on the beach at Bahía Anima to look for turtle nests, and then a swim/snorkel stop at the second unnamed bay. Unguided kayak rentals are not recommended for safety reasons and the security of kayaks.

6. Test hourly kayak rentals for surfing. If surf conditions are less than 1 meter, it may be possible to rent out kayaks by the hour for surfing.
7. Consider kayak fishing and kayak camping in the future. Kayak fishing is a very popular sport especially in California. Like surfing, interest in this sport may quickly spread to Nicaragua. (During our boat tour of the coast in October 2007 we encountered an American kayak fisherman north of San Juan del Sur with his two Nica friends.) Kayak camping on the beach at Bahía Anima would be a great way to watch for nesting turtles.
8. Establish safety policies. Paddlers should wear life jackets at all times while on kayaks, have appropriate footwear (not sandals), not drink alcoholic beverages during the trip, take plenty of water, and wear hats and use sunscreen to protect against the sun. Expensive cameras are not recommended, even with dry bags, and car keys should be left with someone on shore if possible.

Clients should also sign a standard release waiver indicating that they recognize the inherent risks of kayaking (including serious injury and even death), that they take full responsibility for their own safety, and that they will not sue anyone involved in the kayaking business if there is an accident.

9. Protect all kayaking equipment. Develop a system to clean, dry, store and maintain the kayaks and equipment. After each use, everything should be washed in fresh water and dried to prevent salt damage and deterioration. Boats should also be stored under a roof to avoid damage from UV radiation. Unprotected boats will fade and become brittle in a few years.

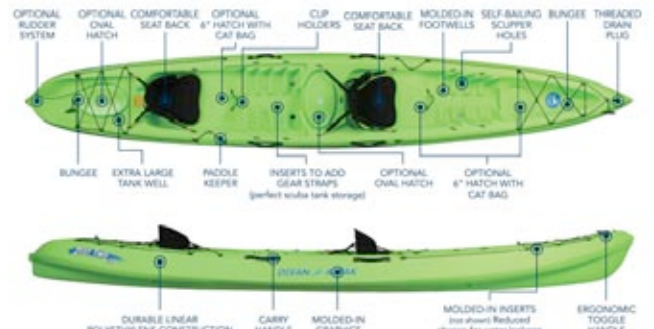


## RECOMMENDED KAYAKS AND EQUIPMENT (RETAIL PRICES)

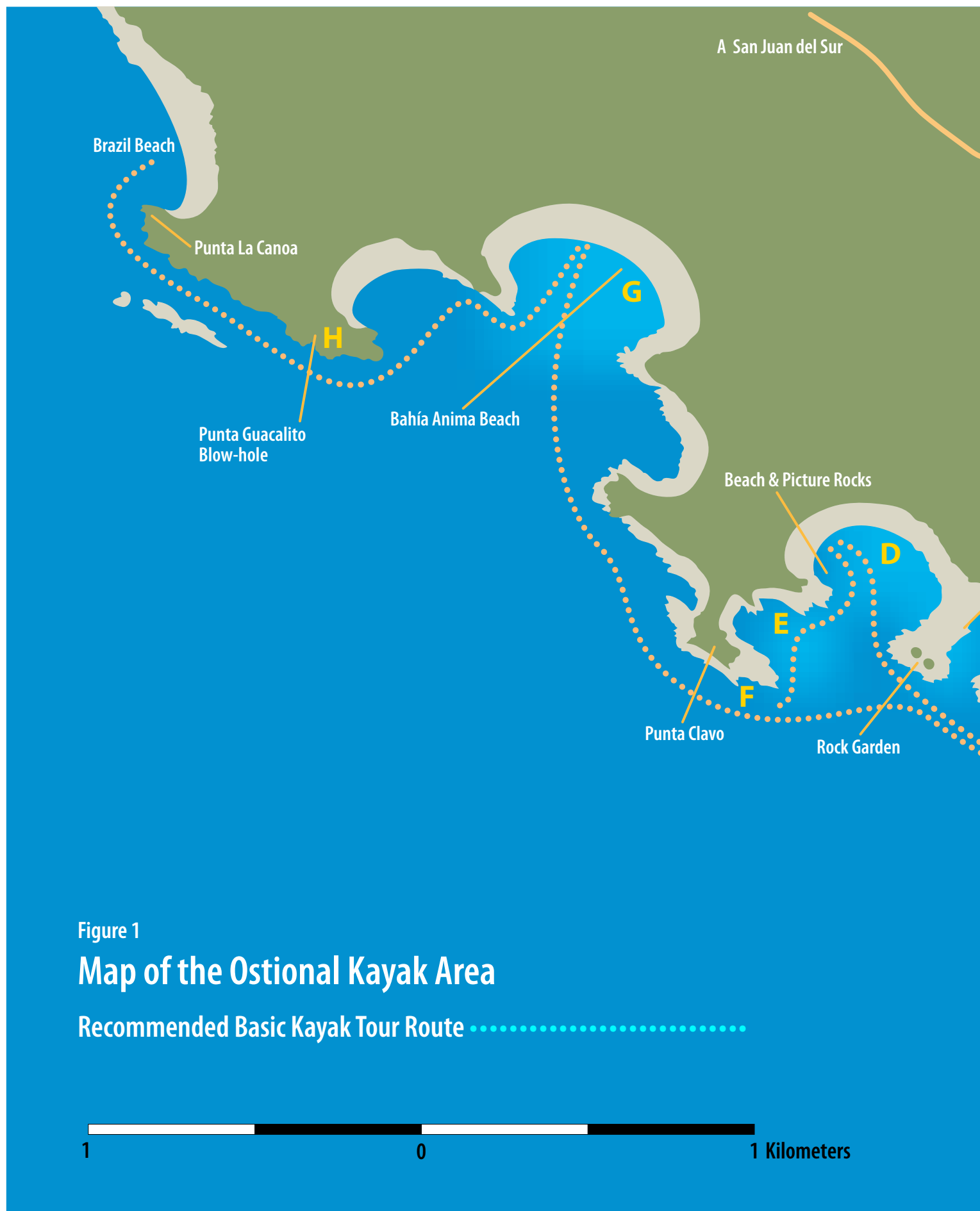
			Each \$	Total \$
Sit-on-top Ocean Kayaks	2	Single person Prowler 13	849	1698
	1	Zest Two Exp double	949	949
Equipment	6	Simply Magic paddles	105	630
	5	life jackets of various sizes	46	230
	6	safety whistles	5.50	33
	1	Set of wheels for transporting boats	137	137
	2	sets of fishing rod holders	38	79
	1	Folding anchor kit for snorkeling and fishing	40	40
	3	hatch kits for waterproof storage	76	228
	3	sets of tie-down straps for transportation	18	54
	2	sets of soft rack blocks for transportation	26	58
	3	large dry bags	18	54
	2	small dry bags	12	24
	1	first-aid kit	25	25
	1	waterproof map case	10	10
TOTAL				4,249



Prowler 13™



Zest Two EXP™





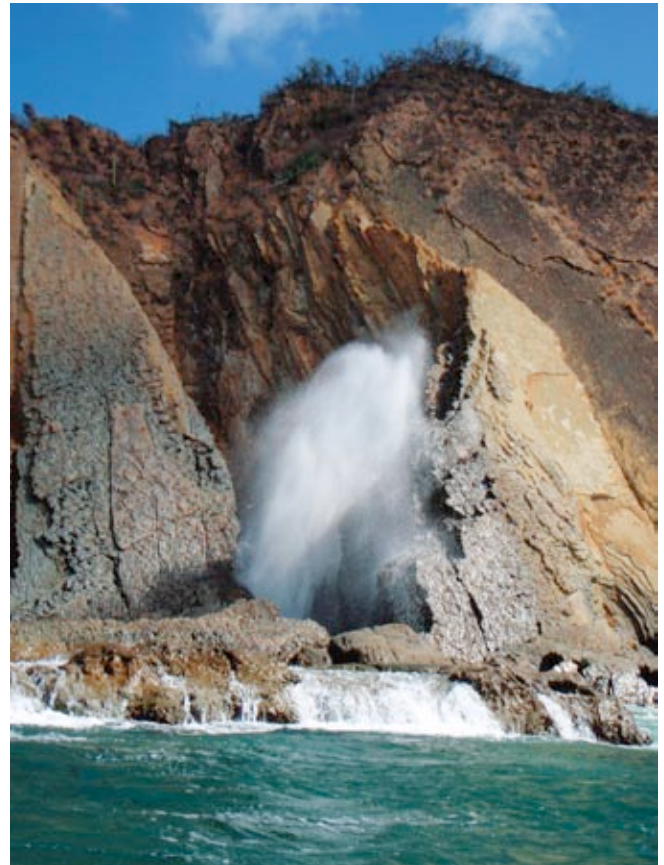
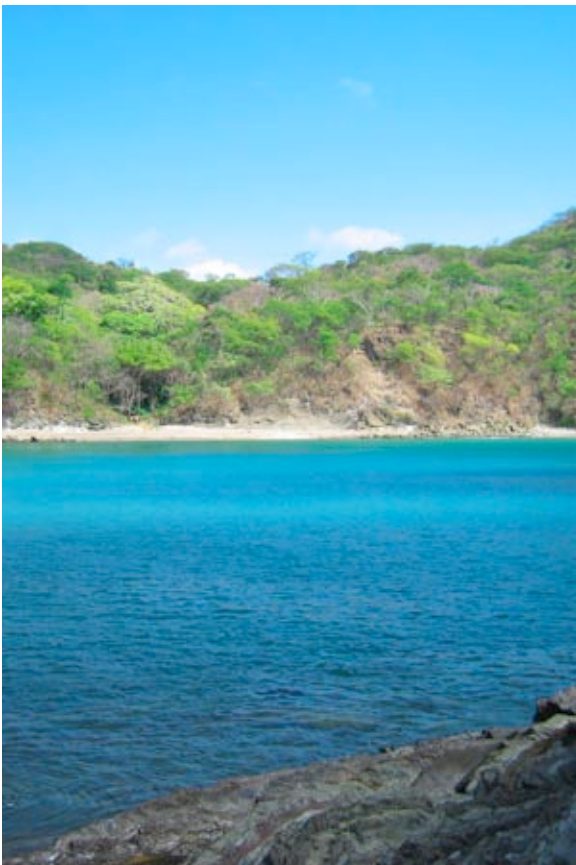
# EL OSTIONAL NICARAGUA





**G**

The beach at Bahía Anima is a good place to see nesting turtles.



**H**

Cliffs with blow-holes are a great attraction.

**D**

The beach between Punta Clavo and Punta El Roble is perfect for swimming.



**B**  
El Ostional beach.



**B**  
Launching kayaks at El Ostional beach.



**B**  
Guest House at El Ostional beach.

