



The Latin American Travel Association



Nicaragua FAM trip 2019 Report



In recent years, Nicaragua has seen positive growth in UK-outbound visitor numbers, becoming the second fastest growing destination in the America's and eight in the world by end of 2017 (World Tourism Organisation), however after a brief period of unrest the UK FCO changed their travel advice in April 2018 to avoid 'All but essential travel' thus making any travel insurance void and disabling sales from UK Tour Operators and Travel Agents.

In April 2019 the FCO advice was relaxed and LATA were approached by the Nicaraguan Embassy in London to work on a strategy to reinvigorate the market.

LATA hosted a round-table event with a small focus group of tour operators in order to provide the best possible advice on how to start bringing UK travellers back to Nicaragua.

Sending media on press trips and providing co-op marketing budget was discussed, but the group felt it was vitally important that a FAM trip was arranged to give Tour Operators confidence that Nicaragua was ready to receive tourists, and to educate sales staff. The group also agreed that the itinerary for the FAM trip should be discussed and reviewed by tour operators to ensure it covered everything they needed in order to start promoting travel to the country once again.

LATA was subsequently appointed to run a Nicaragua FAM Trip in June 2019. The trip would take 7 tour operators, 1 travel trade journalist and a member of LATA staff on an 8-night FAM trip around Nicaragua.

Using a small focus group and LATA's extensive knowledge of the market, the following itinerary was agreed:

Day 1: Managua

Day 2: San Juan del Sur

Day 3: Granada and Jicaro Island

Day 4: Granada

Day 5: Managua – Meetings with DMCs, Overnight Habitarte Hotel

Day 6: Leon

Day 7: Little Corn

Day 8: Big Corn

Day 9: Depart

On return to the UK, LATA carried out a feedback exercise on the FAM Trip, looking at each aspect of the FAM in order to give the Nicaraguan Tourism Board an honest assessment of the country's saleability and ideas on how tourism provision could be enhanced.

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK IN BRIEF:

Before the political unrest and change in FCO advice, the group sold 1905 room nights in the preceding 12 months.

What was your overall impression of Nicaragua?

- I was very impressed with Nicaragua. The infrastructure and tourist sites were very well set up for travellers and it would appeal to a mix of adventure/wildlife seekers as well as those interested in the history of the cities.
- A really lovely country, bit of a hidden gem, and deserves to be more on the tourist radar, with some lovely hotels, beautiful scenery and unique experiences, and really exceptional guides. With room for improvement in some areas.
- Superb country with lots to see and do. There's something for all types of traveller and I absolutely loved the place - was very gutted when we went home as I would have liked some more time in the country.
- Nicaragua's an unforgettable destination, full of surprises and amazing scenery. It was great to experience the vast variety the country has to offer from the volcanoes, forests, beaches and vibrant cities. Nicaragua felt safe, welcoming and ready for tourism again.
- I really enjoyed visiting this country. I found the local people to be very friendly and relaxed, but still helpful and efficient at organisation. People are clearly keen to see visitor numbers increase and are trying hard to encourage this.
- I loved it and had a much more Latin American feel than its neighbour.
- Superb. Diverse. Friendly. Adventure packed. I was very pleasantly surprised at how beautiful it is and just how diverse.
- Beautiful country, a lot better than expected. Would certainly recommend.

Did you feel safe travelling around the country?

- Completely. There were places where I wouldn't have gone out alone (Leon, port on Big Corn) but 99% of the time, I felt as safe as I would in the UK.
- Yes. Even walking around on my own, which I did quite a lot, I felt perfectly safe, at all times, both with the group and on my own.
- Completely safe. Compared to other Latin American countries I've been to, Nicaragua felt super safe, especially during the times I wandered about on my own. Very few people hassle or bother you, which is a change from other places.
- Yes, I felt safe throughout the trip. Although we didn't spend much time in Managua I didn't perceive it as being the safest city to spend a lot of time in. That being said, I didn't notice any signs of the political unrest or causes for concern for tourists.
- Yes, I was actually surprised considering the unrest of the previous year how little presence the authorities had in the cities and town - other than odd roadblocks there was none. The atmosphere came across very relaxed and normal, I didn't have any safety concerns here at all.
- Yes, very.
- Yes
- Yes - everywhere. The only impression I got where areas may be a bit dodgy was Managua itself, but I don't think I would suggest spending long there as everywhere else has so much to offer.



Do you feel Nicaragua is ready to receive UK tourists?

- Yes, definitely. The infrastructure and attractions were much more 'tourist-ready' than I had expected and I think it would appeal to UK visitors either as a twin-centre with Costa Rica or as a stand-alone destination.
- Yes, absolutely - with some room for improvement.
- Definitely. Some of the hotels may need to up their game a bit, but I feel this will come as the number of visitors start to increase. You could tell from many places that numbers have been low as there's isn't as much care given to places and a number of the hotels had that dusty feeling to it. Places mainly just need a good clean and maybe a fresh lick of paint, especially in the places which have been sat empty for a while. I feel it may take a 6 months to a year for things to be back up and running to what it used to be, but I don't think this should prevent people travelling to Nicaragua - people who visit now will be able to take advantage of the fewer tourists and reduced costs with regards to hotels etc.
- Absolutely. Nicaragua has a lot to offer the UK market. In terms of adventure travel, there are plenty of opportunities and activities throughout the country and it offers the chance to explore a wide range of environments.
- As mentioned, the country felt safe and there was no sign of unrest or security issues.
- Yes definitely, now feels the time very much to visit as it is still quiet and it feels quite exclusive.
- yes, although we must advise clients that not many other clients will be there! Some properties I visited (Ometepe) were closed but said they would open on demand.
- Absolutely
- I feel like it's nearly there. I think we would need to see a bit of improvement of the FCO advice as it still is worded quite negativity towards Nicaragua, which I think will be putting people off.

What improvements could be made to attract more tourists?

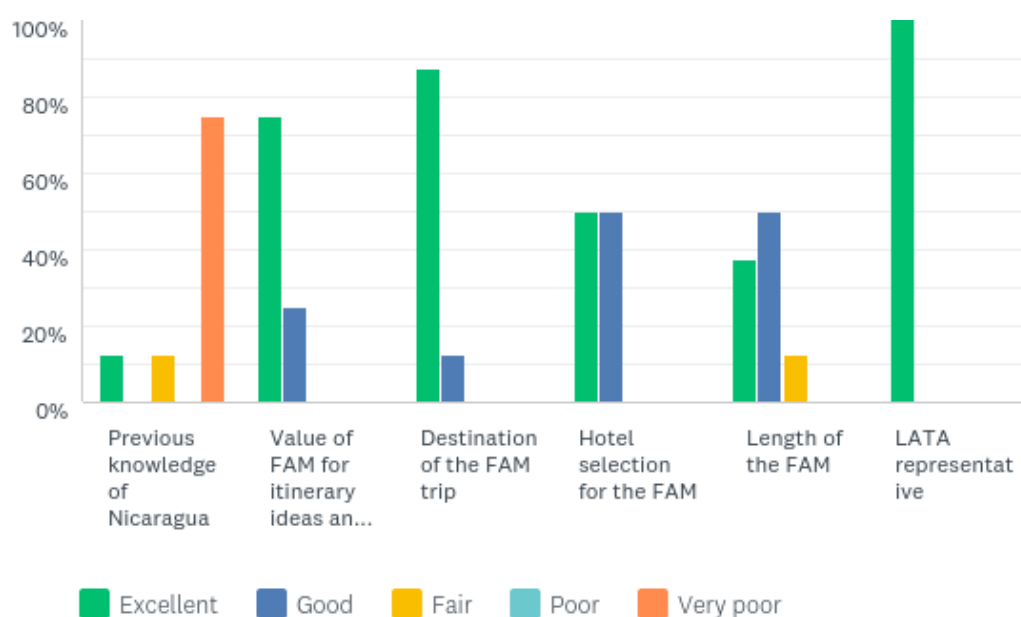
- Flight connectivity - I would like to explore alternative options as three to four flights would be a barrier for most UK tourists.
- Nicaragua already has so much to offer, as was evident from this trip, and tourists will already be so rewarded by choosing a holiday here. Some suggestions for improvements - the main roads are good, but sometimes the roads leading off main roads to hotels could be improved, to improve access and the overall experience for guests, and the standard and comfort of vehicles could be improved for transfers and excursions. Some hotels, as mentioned, need improvements to bring them up to an acceptable standard. Another big thing is the flight routes - obviously we had a bad experience on the return, while the inbound journey worked like clockwork - but either way, it's a long journey on three routes (or two if you go via the US - and deal with the US customs) - and is 20-24 hours door to door even when all the flights are on schedule - so this will put a lot of people off, unfortunately, and especially those with families. Nicaragua would really benefit from direct flights, and eventually this may happen as it has been happening elsewhere in this part of the world.
- To attract people as a whole, there just needs to be a bit more promotion throughout for the country as a place to visit. It's needs to be put back on people's radars, especially for people who are look for an alternative to the super busy Costa Rica!
- A direct flight from a European airport would make a big difference and definitely attract more tourists. Apart from that, it would be good to see the lesser known destinations around Nicaragua to be advertised better. For example, Jicaró and the surround islands were one of the highlights of the trip but not very well known to tourists.
- Better European airline routings, although I appreciate this is difficult until the visitor numbers warrant it. Perhaps organise a code-share airline to Managua with BA via San Jose.
- More direct flight connections.
- A few tweaks from hoteliers (i.e. airing out rooms that haven't been used in a while) and ensuring their properties are in top condition
- Better flight connections from the UK and less negative FCO advice.



What could the Tourist Board or Nicaraguan companies do to help you sell more Nicaragua?

- The meet-and-greet event was useful, for an opportunity to meet different companies and guides and see what they offer. There are lots of attractive experiences in Nicaragua, and the focus on eco-friendliness and wellness is a definite plus as this is a growing theme in tourism, and travellers also increasingly like the chance to immerse themselves in local cultures and communities and give back during their stay, and there is a lot in Nicaragua that ticks these boxes. Continue the good work - and keep telling us about hotels and experiences!
- More information about updates and changes in hotels so we can be aware of these and inform our clients. Any new ideas about alternative locations and itineraries would also be good, so we can offer clients something different and unique.
- Following the change in FCO advice, it's important to market and advertise Nicaragua in a way that gets the message out that the country is safe and open for business. Travel advice can always have a long-lasting impression on travellers so to see the country being advertised in the right way can start to change perceptions.
- Really go all out to advertise the country. It is a fantastic place but is still pretty much off the radar to a lot of travellers. Highlight the natural beauty of the country, emphasis the quiet feel compared to the busy of Costa Rica. Encourage eco-tourism, push the reusable/ renewable angle as this is very popular at the moment.
- Try and encourage a European airline to fly there. Air Europa was being mooted?
- Promote the diversity of the country. I hadn't realised there was so much to see and do (this was also evident to a client I spoke to this week). Promote that it is a great stand-alone destination as well as being great for a twin centre holiday
- From our point of view, we are looking to introduce tours to Central America which would involve more than one country. As long as the different DMCs in each country will work alongside each other, I don't see there being much of an issue.

The LATA FAM Trip





Any other comments you think would be useful?

- I enjoyed seeing the Corn Islands and I think this was interesting, but I think the product here was relatively similar to the rest of the Caribbean, whereas there might have been other areas that are unique to Nicaragua - e.g. to see wildlife or the tobacco plantations in the north - which might have been more informative for people trying to sell Nicaragua over other destinations.
- I haven't been to Nicaragua before and didn't know much about it and was blown away! It is a beautiful country. This trip gave plenty of new ideas and experiences - we have some of these hotels and experiences already, but plenty more to consider from this trip, and it was really useful as well as really enjoyable. Hotel selection - some exceptional hotels, some good hotels, and just a couple that were not so good. Overall an amazing hotel experience and there were a couple that are in my all-time favourites. In terms of length of the trip - for us, obviously we were fitting a lot in and having one night in each place to see as much as possible, and was perfect for that, but for clients, would probably be a bit longer in some destinations to experience more, e.g. 2 nights in the cities, and maybe a few days on one or more of the islands to relax. Megan you were amazing throughout - especially getting us all home!! Thank you again!
- I found this a really useful FAM trip. Both Megan from LATA and Mitsy from the Nicaragua Tourist Board were great representatives. Megan was an absolute star sorting out any number of points along the way from itinerary changes, traveller sickness, dealing with the airlines on our return journey and deserves a lot of recognition for her hard work. Well done Megan.
- Rather tiring having to move each night and unable to wash any clothes (due to travelling with small amount of luggage). Great mix of adventure and sightseeing. Fabulous company and a good size group. Enjoyed the mix of ground agents at each excursion, this was very useful to see how they worked (or didn't!)
- Cannot fault anything about the FAM. The only thing that would have been nice was to perhaps spend 2 nights in one place as a hotel every night was a bit full on. I think it gave us all a great overview of Nicaragua. I also think JC, the guide made the trip even better!

CONCLUSION

Overall the FAM trip was a huge success. All the operators who travelled felt that Nicaragua was safe and ready to receive UK visitors.

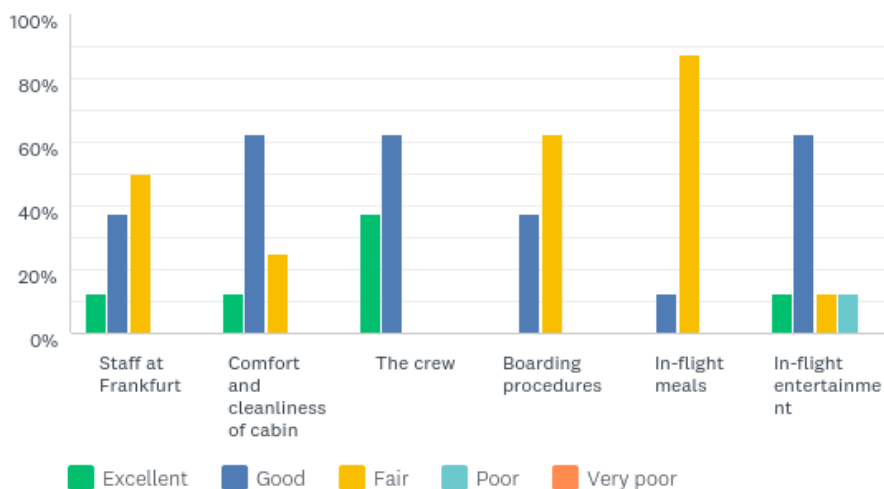
Hotels that have remained closed for several months will need ventilating and potentially a lick of paint.

Local operators should try and stay up to date with this so they can advise their UK operators on the best options for their clients.

Operators should use the diminished tourist numbers as a selling point. In a world where over-tourism is becoming such a concern, Nicaragua is an exceptional place to visit.

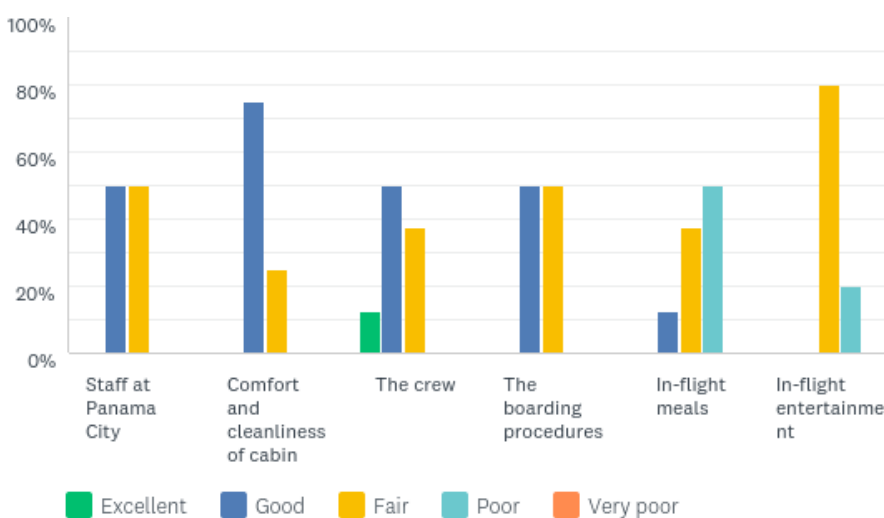
After the FAM trip, LATA are very happy to endorse that Nicaragua is ready for business and hope that our members will support our work in reinvigorating UK-outbound tourism to the region.

Outbound UK-PTY



Overall, everyone was happy with the Lufthansa flights to Panama via Frankfurt. There was a feeling that the newer planes employed on the long-haul section had a very narrow seat pitch and the seats reclined too quickly, causing spilled drinks. Entertainment was good and the staff were very pleasant and efficient.

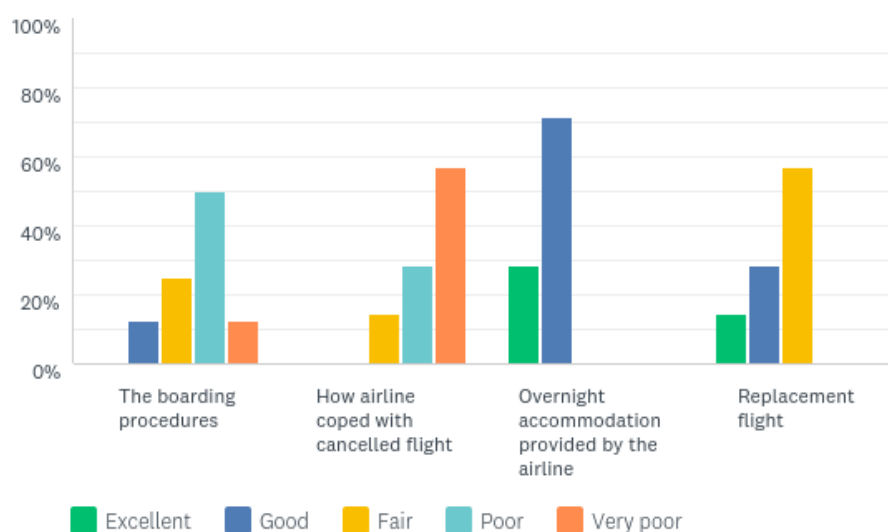
Outbound PTY-MGA



The flight was comfortable, but there was no entertainment and no vegetarian food option.



Return MGA-PTY



Return PTY- UK

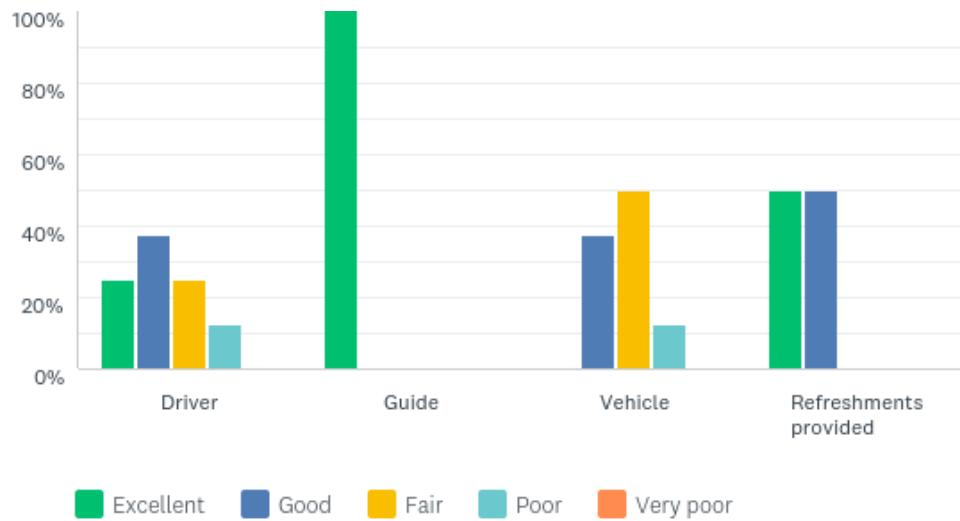


There was a technical fault on the flight from Managua to Panama leading to cancellation, which meant that the onward connection was missed in Panama.

The aftermath was somewhat chaotic, and communication was quite poor between *Copa* and *Lufthansa*. Responsibility for re-booking us on new flights was passed back and forth and was only finally sorted after lengthy arguments with managerial staff.

As a group of travel professionals with a Spanish speaker, we were able to navigate this, but there was concern in the group that such a situation would be extremely difficult and stressful for clients.

TRANSFERS THROUGHOUT FAM TRIP



The group were extremely complementary about our guide, Juan Carlos. He was friendly, accommodating and attentive and his knowledge of Nicaragua was incredible.

The vehicle itself was quite dated and had a broken gearbox, which made hills very difficult. There was plenty of room, but many felt it could have been more comfortable for the distances travelled. There were also no seat belts provided.

Some refreshments were provided (cold drinks and cold towels), but some felt uncomfortable about the use of single use plastics and that a large thermos to fill reusable bottles would be preferable.

The driver was a nice man, but several of the group felt he drove too fast and made unsafe manoeuvres.

“ Juan Carlos was an engaging and knowledgeable guide, clearly very experienced and I would highly recommend him. I loved the extra touches he thought of such as the cold towels and plentiful iced drinks on the bus. ”

The Hyatt Managua

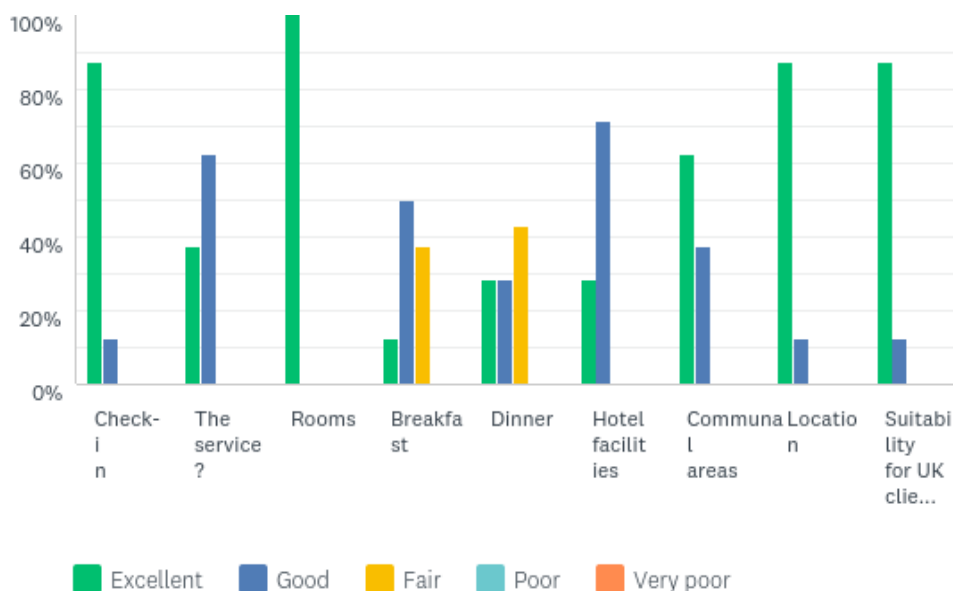


Most would recommend the hotel to their clients but felt that they were more likely to recommend a hotel closer to the airport, unless the client specifically wanted to stay in Managua itself.

The group all felt that the hotel was the perfect level of service and comfort after a long flight. The set dinner menu was nothing special, but the breakfast buffet was exceptional.



Morgan's Rock



Everyone in the group would be happy to recommend this hotel to their clients.

The group felt this was one of the best hotels on the trip. The rooms were phenomenal with spectacular views out across the private beach. Every little detail had been thought of in the rooms: reusable water bottles, a large water decanter, over-bed air-con and refillable toiletries. It was an eco-lodge in every sense. Though one member of the group did feel that getting a paper receipt for every drink you bought went against the sustainable ethos of the rest of the hotel.

The group did not have time for the available activities but enjoyed the free use of surf boards and body boards on the beach.

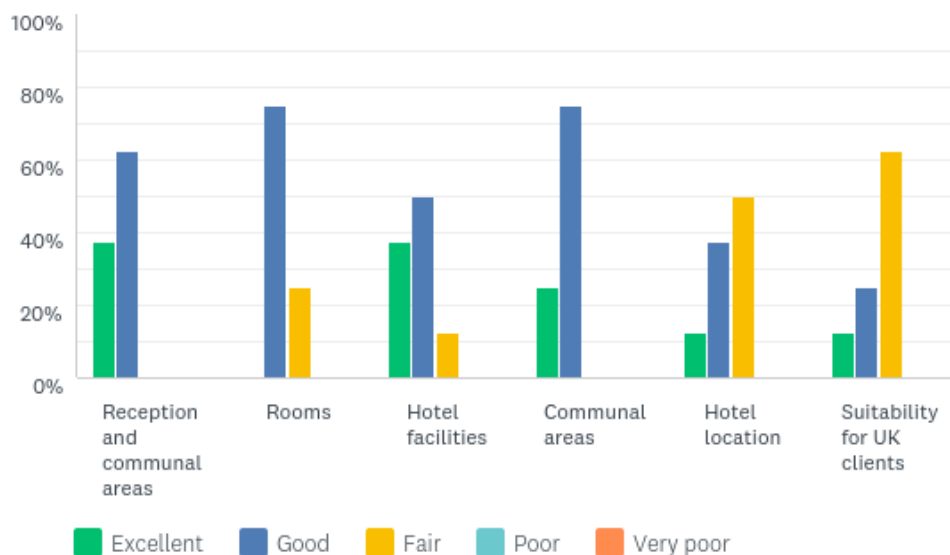
There were a lot of steps at the property, so not suitable for all clients and a large suspension bridge between the reception/restaurant/pool and the room, which would not be good for those with a fear of heights.

The food at the hotel was not as high a standard as you would expect, and the food and drink prices are high. The group felt clients would feel unhappy receiving such a high bill at the end of their stay and that this property should be booked, at the very least, on a full board basis.

“ A real highlight to wake up to these views and hear the waves from your bed ”



Rancho Santana (Inspection)

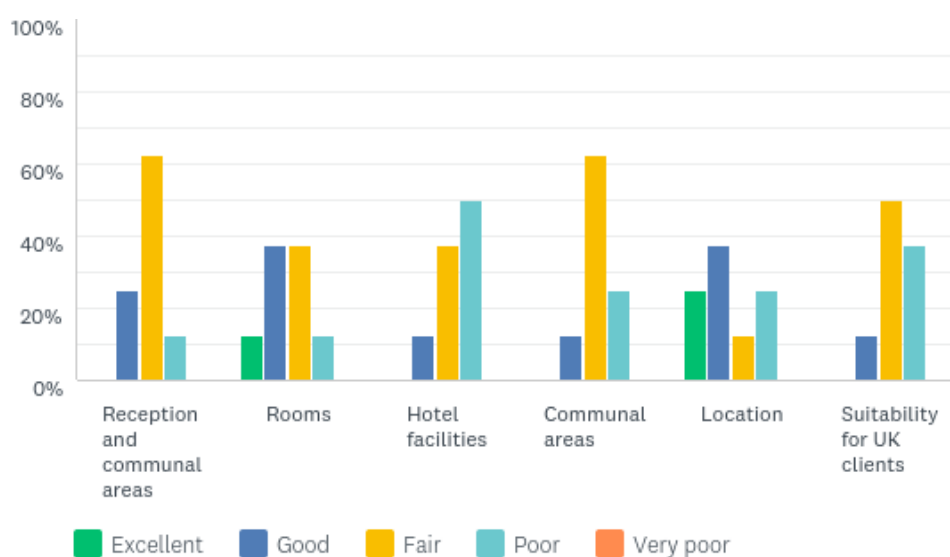


All the tour operators said they would happily recommend the hotel to their clients.

Most of the group felt that this was a big resort-style hotel, and has everything you need, with grand villa-style accommodation by the beach, a nice colonial style, and nice pools and facilities. Great for families, although possibly a little soulless.

Some of the villas and rooms did have evidence of damp/mustiness, but this is potentially due to the lack of tourist and the wet season.

Aqua Wellness (Inspection)



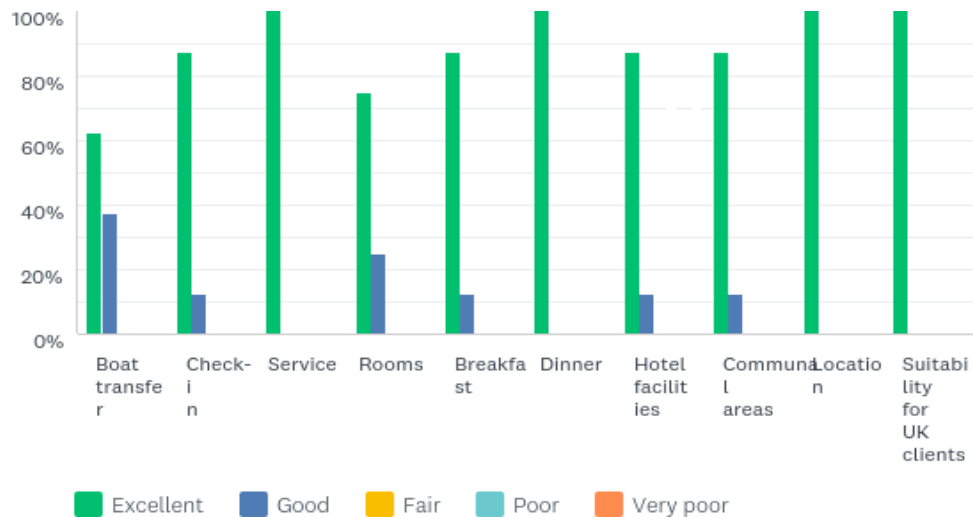


There were very mixed feelings about this hotel, the main issue being that the hotel was far more a rustic eco-lodge, than the wellness resort that the name suggests. The spa facilities were very poor. The restaurant set up in one of the villas felt like an afterthought and there was a smell of drainage when on the beach.

The rooms felt quite cramped in and there was very little seclusion from other rooms. There were a lot of steps, which would be unsuitable for some clients. Many felt it would be unsuitable for children due to both the steps and the unmarked plunge pools.

Overall the hotel felt a little neglected, but this could be due to lack of tourists. Unfortunately most of the group did not feel they would be able to recommend the hotel to their clients.

Jicaro Lodge



This hotel was the highlight of the trip for most people. The food and service were outstanding. The staff could not have done more to make the group feel welcome. The rooms were beautiful and there were lots of little touches: free mini bar, body scrubs, message oils included.

The group were excited to start sending clients to the hotel



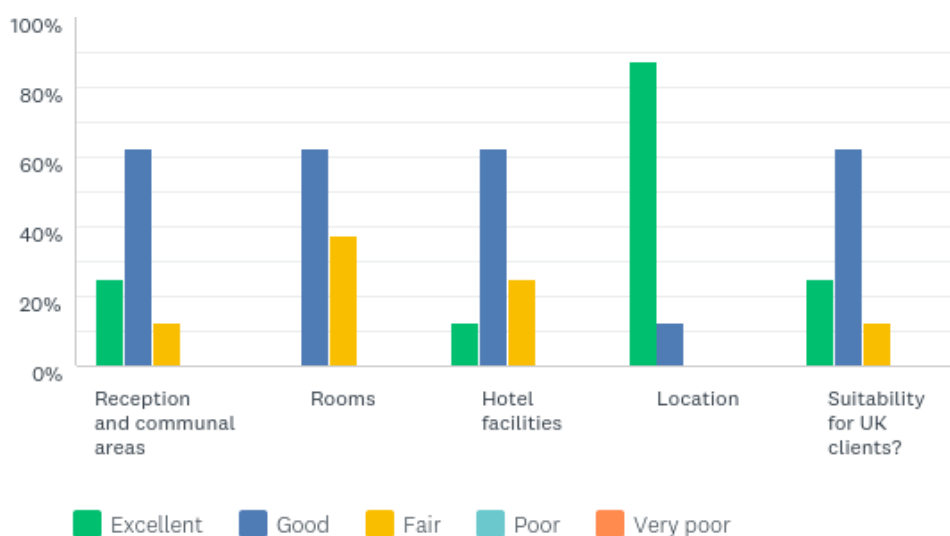
“ A lovely hotel and a lovely experience to be on an island in such a beautiful, serene setting with gorgeous lake views ”

“ What’s not to like at this property! ”





Hotel Plaza Colon (Inspection)

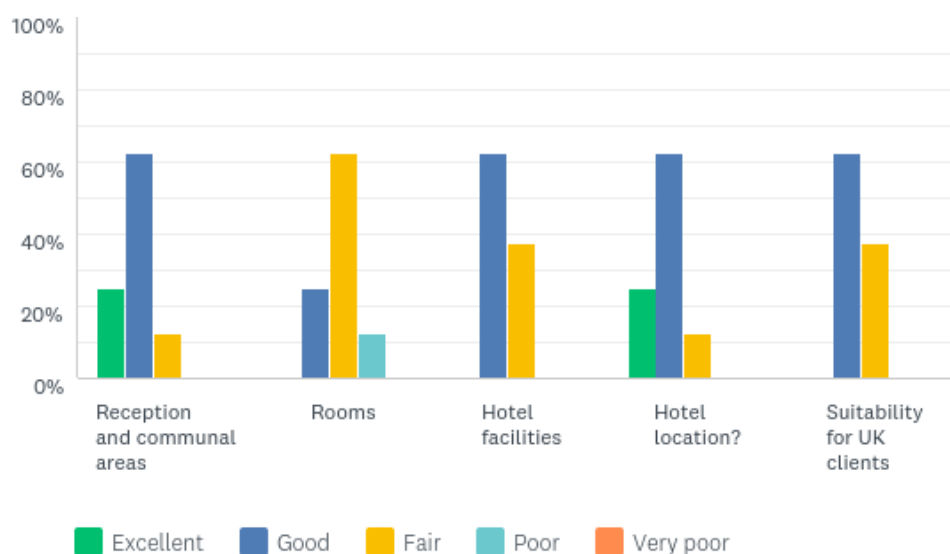


The group unanimously felt that this was a characterful hotel, in a great central location overlooking the central plaza and iconic cathedral. It is perfect for UK clients.

The standard rooms were a little dark, typical of colonial buildings of this style, but the suites had large terraces overlooking the square. There was some concern, however, that there would be noise from the square in the evening, although we were reassured that activity in the square subsides at around 9pm each night.

The hotel had great sustainability practices and had labelled recycling bins in the bathrooms and no single use water bottles in the rooms.

Hotel Real La Merced (Inspection)





The group felt that they would recommend this hotel, but that only the junior suits were suitable for UK clients.

This colonial hotel located opposite La Merced tower had an interesting history and impressive marble staircase and pool. The rooms were less impressive, and most had no windows and were very dark. The junior suites were better, which had balconies overlooking the church.

Hotel Patio del Malinche



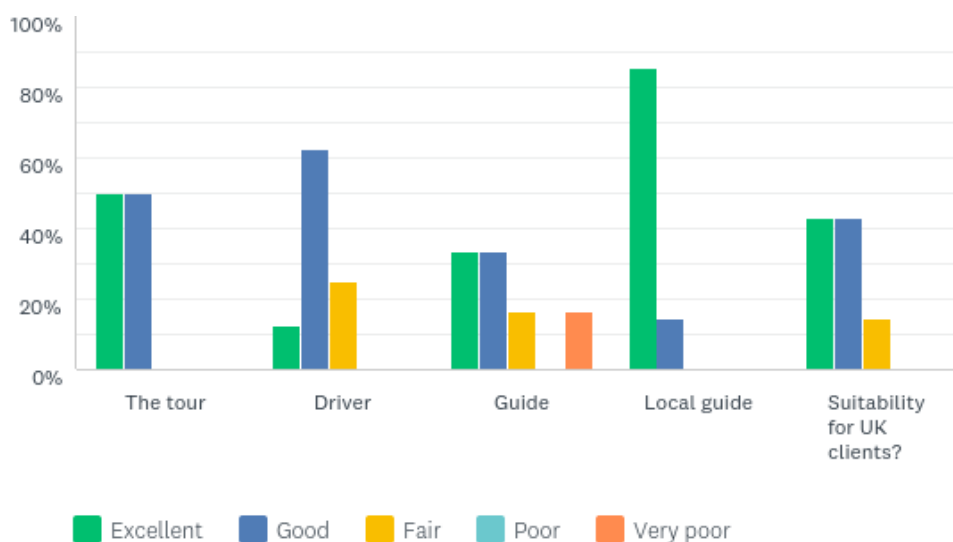
Most of the group felt they would recommend this hotel to budget-minded clients.

The group felt that this colonial hotel was a good budget option. The rooms were quite small and dark and the bathrooms were quite dated. That said, the communal areas and courtyards were lovely, there is a nice pool, a decent breakfast and friendly staff. The location is also good.

Some of the rooms were a little musty, but this is likely due to a lack of tourist in recent months.



Mombacho volcano excursion



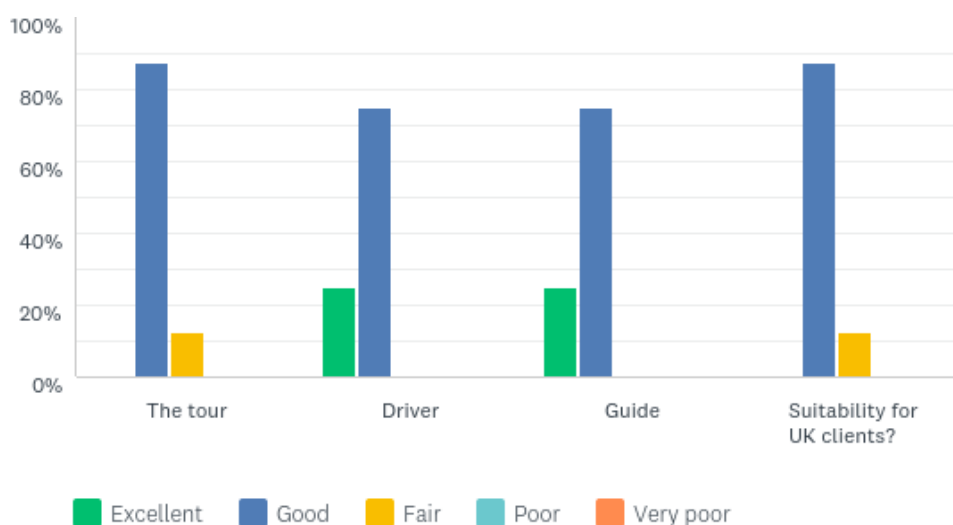
“Lovely setting and views, learning about flora and fauna along the way”

Everyone felt they would recommend this tour to their clients.

The group enjoyed this excursion enormously. It was well-paced in a fantastic setting. The local guide was very passionate and knowledgeable, giving a very enjoyable commentary about the flora and fauna. The highlight was seeing the elusive salamander.

The van used was very cramped and uncomfortable, but we understand that smaller, more comfortable jeeps are used for smaller groups

Horse and Cart City Tour

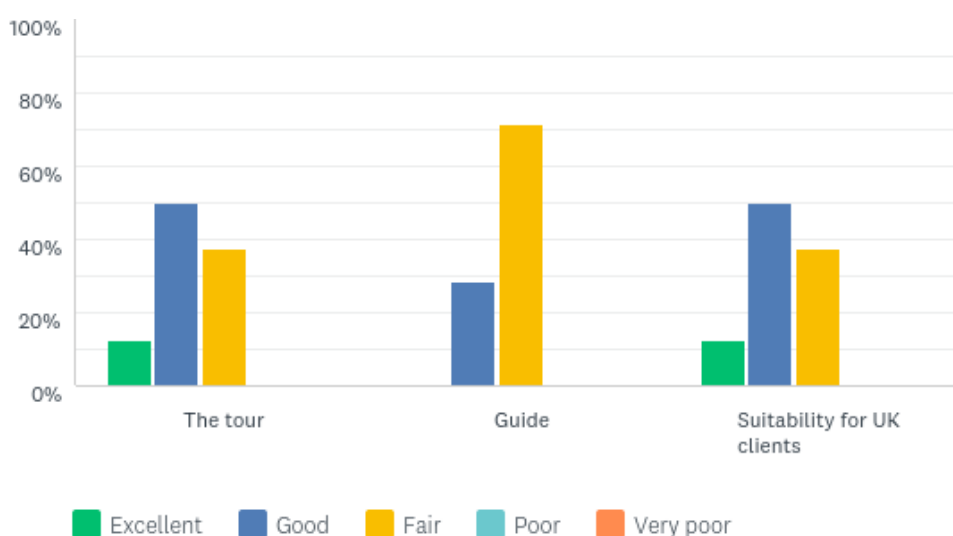


The group all felt they would be happy to recommend the tour to their clients

There were certain reservations from the group about taking a horse and cart tour as they were worried about the welfare of the horse. However, everyone felt that the horses seemed well looked after. There is always room for improvement and the horses could be in better shape, but there were no obvious sores, etc., and the harnesses were maintained.

Some of the group only had non-English speaking drivers which meant that they didn't get as much out of the tour as the rest and it was suggested that if no English-speaking guide is available, a map should be provided.

Cigar factory tour



Most of the group felt they would recommend this tour to clients, but it's not for everyone – non-smokers would not enjoy this tour. Clients would need to be aware of the smoke in the air as this is something not everyone would enjoy.

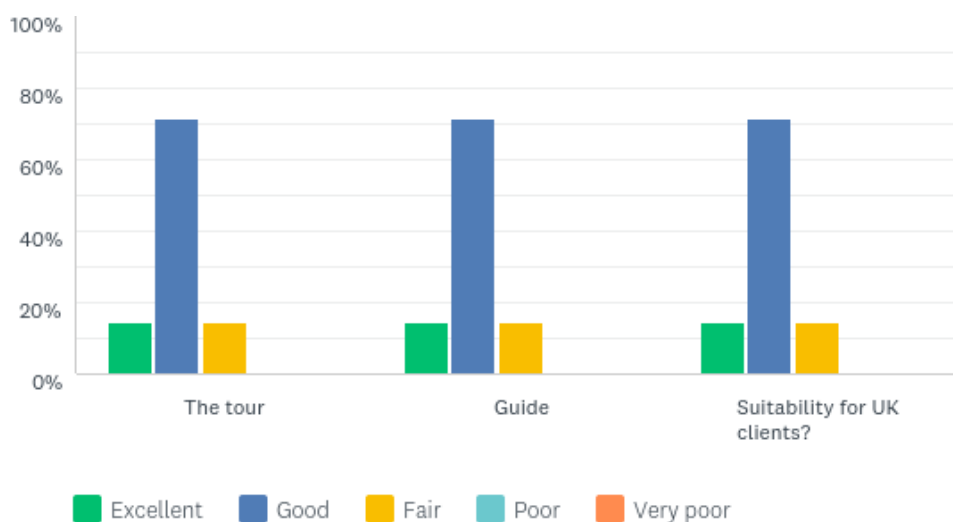
The group felt this was a very interesting and informative local tour. They loved that it was interactive, and several people got to learn how to roll a cigar. It was also a great place to buy cigars, which were reasonably priced.



This is a must see for visitors to Nicaragua. Even if people only have time for a quick visit this is quite a unique experience and shouldn't be missed.



Mirador de Catarina excursion

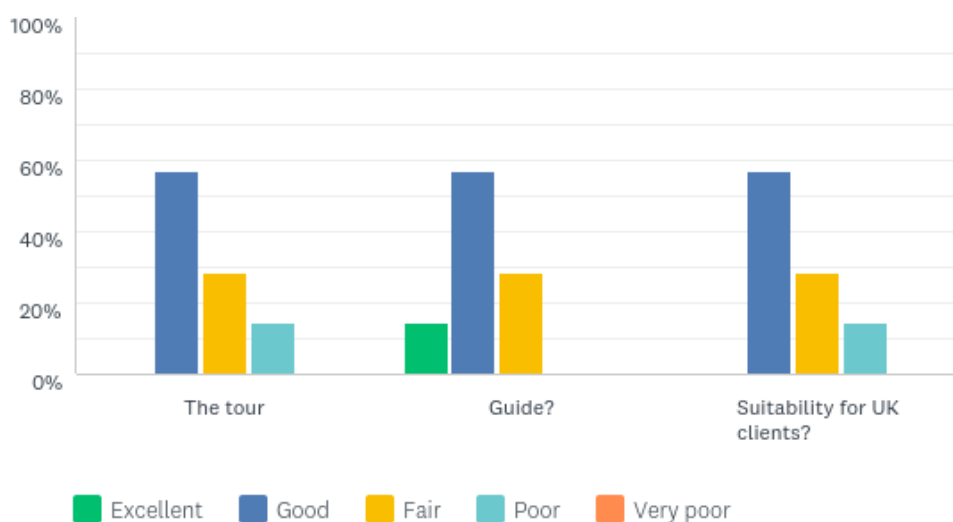


Most the group would recommend this tour to their clients.

The group felt that this was a worthwhile excursion. The journey through local villages was interesting and the views of the Apoyo crater lake are spectacular. The little market close-by was less impressive with most of the stalls selling very similar tourist souvenirs.

“ Apoyo crater lake is an exceptional view - perfect photo opportunity ”

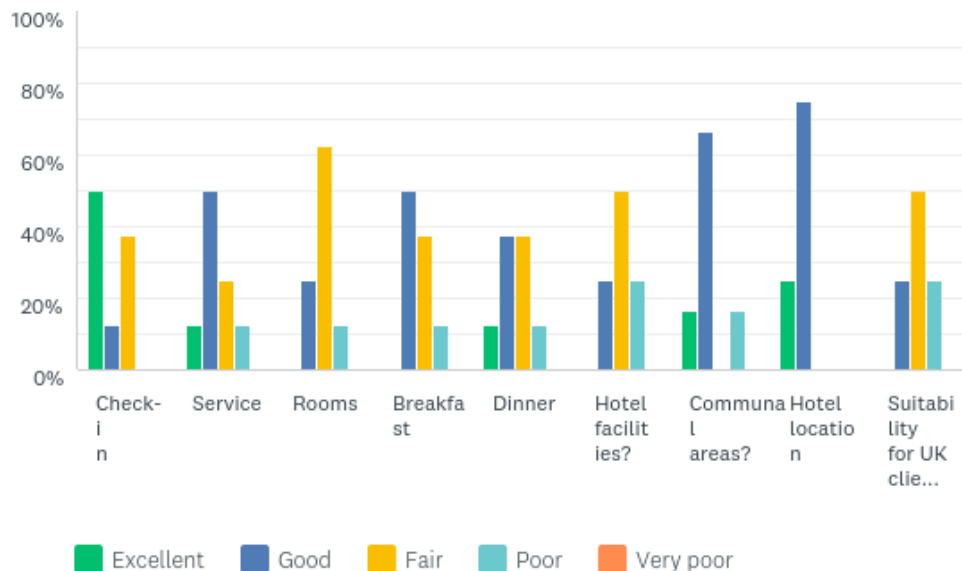
Artisan Market excursion



There were mixed comments from the group as to whether they would recommend it to their clients as it lacked the colour and originality of markets in other destinations.

This large historic market had some nice souvenirs - handicrafts, rum, t-shirts, etc, and was nice to browse, without the vendors being too pushy. Visitors would need cash, but there is a cash-point situated close to the Market.

Hotel Habitarte



This hotel received very mixed comments. The hotel's unique design and location is spectacular. The rooms are very impressive too, with the conical ceilings and walls and verandas, and local wood features. The communal areas were beautiful too and there was very much a feeling of being in the forest.

There were, however, a lot of issues with this hotel. None of the rooms had numbers and navigating the grounds was not easy. Some of the rooms were extremely damp, which meant the bathrooms were mouldy and the bed linen damp. The walkways between the rooms and the hotel were very steep and could have been very dangerous. There also seemed to be quite a few areas where they were either making changes or things were half done, which didn't give a very good impression. The restaurant was nice, but the service was slow and seemed very disorganised.

Overall, the group felt that the hotel had a lot of teething problems, maybe because they had opened just before the tourism dropped off and they haven't had chance to fix the issues. The group felt that these issues would have to be addressed before they were able to recommend it to UK clients.

Hotel El Convento

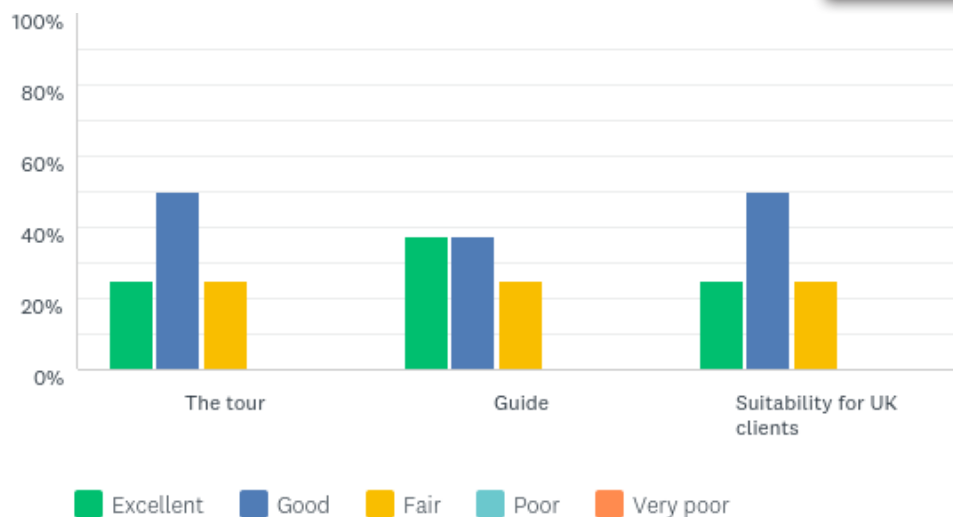


Most of the group felt they would recommend the hotel to their clients, but if they were able to update the rooms and restaurant, it would be much more saleable.

A beautiful colonial-style hotel with a good location not far from the cathedral and main square. The rooms are large, spacious and clean, if a little characterless in comparison to the rest of the hotel. There was a nice plunge pool and the staff were friendly and efficient. The restaurant at the hotel was rather dated and with a wealth of great restaurants in Leon (The Garden Restaurant is highly recommended), the group felt they would recommend against dining at the hotel.



City tour of Leon: Parque Central and Cathedral

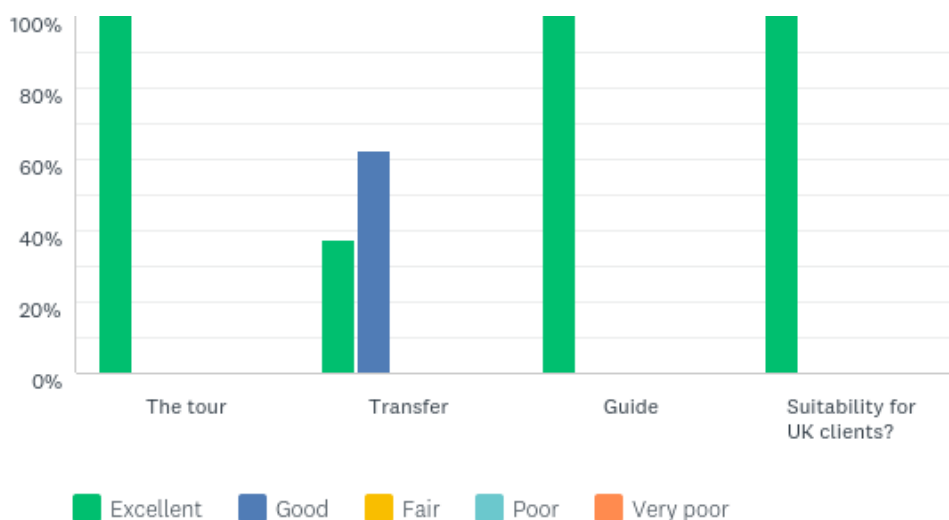


Everyone felt they could recommend this tour to their clients.

The group enjoyed the city tour, which gave them a great overview of the city. The cathedral and rooftop tour were particularly enjoyable. Juan Carlos, the guide, was brilliant – as he had been throughout the trip.

The group had mixed feelings on Leon itself. Some felt a little underwhelmed as it is less restored than Granada, but others preferred the realness of Leon, which had a very university-city feel.

Cerro Negro Volcano – trek and sand boarding

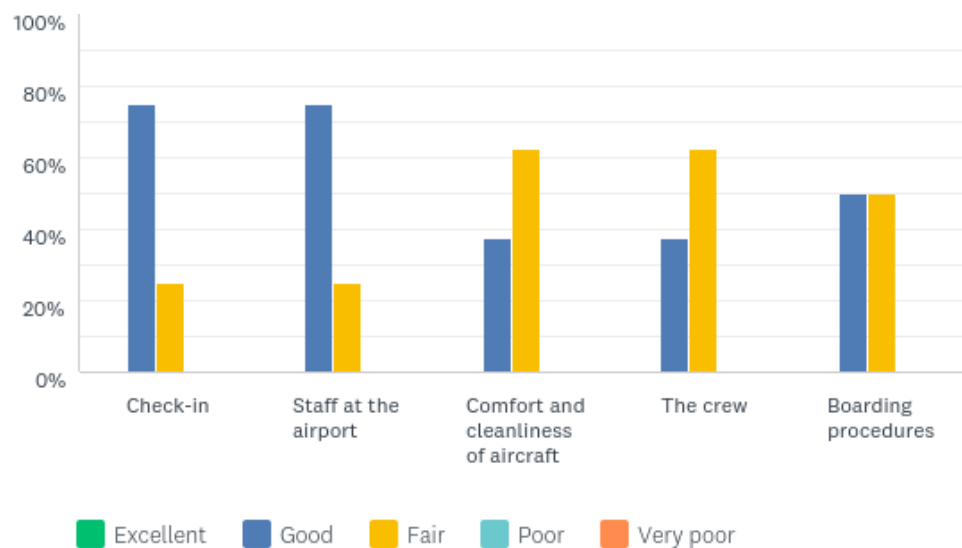


Everyone would recommend this tour to clients, but with the caveat that they are fit and active, as the climb up the volcano is steep in places with loose gravel underfoot.

This tour was a real highlight for much of the group. The trek up the volcano was brilliant, with spectacular panoramic views and then a thrilling ride down the volcano on a board. The guides were brilliant and kept everyone at ease. Some of the group were apprehensive about the boarding, but everyone participated (there is an option to walk down) and were thrilled that they had done so because it was such fun.



Flight to & from Big Corn

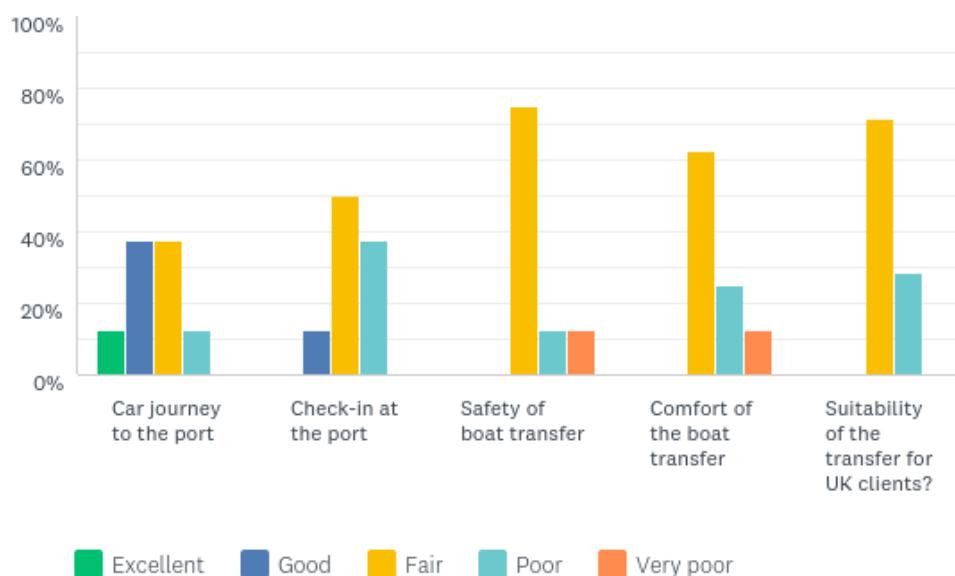


The flights to and from Big Corn ran smoothly. Check-in took some time as all the luggage and people had to be weighed. The flight itself was a little bumpy, which is to be expected for such a small plane, but the experience was enjoyed by everyone.

No refreshments are served on board, so the cafe in the airport is very convenient.

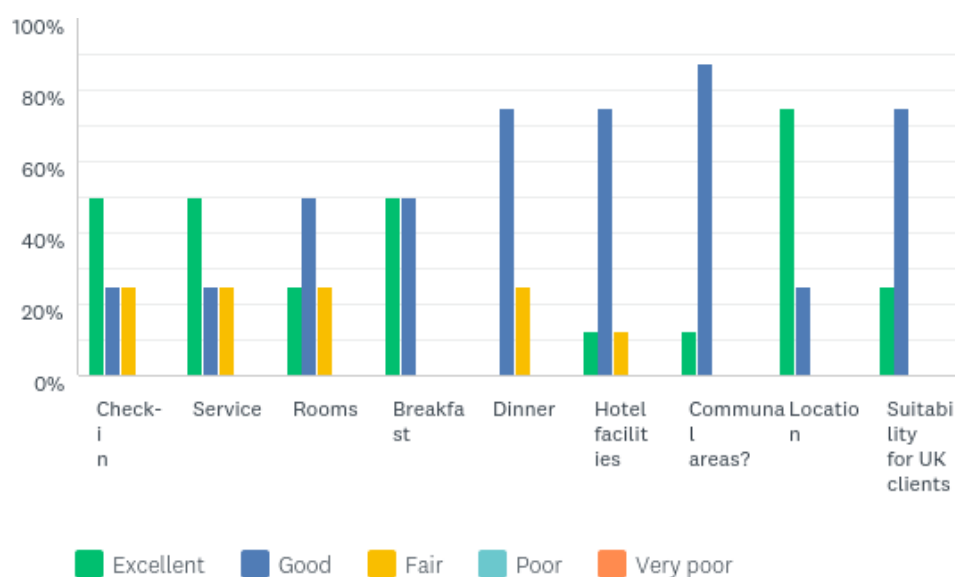


Transfers to and from Little Corn



The speedboat journey across to Little Corn was good fun, but definitely not for all clients. The water was very rough when we crossed, so everyone got very wet and the only shelter was a large tarpaulin that we pulled over everyone's heads. Expectations would need to be managed, particularly for bad sailors. It is worth noting that in high season Yemaya have their own boat, which we saw in dry dock on Big Corn. This appeared to be significantly better for high-end clients.

Hotel Yemaya – Little Corn



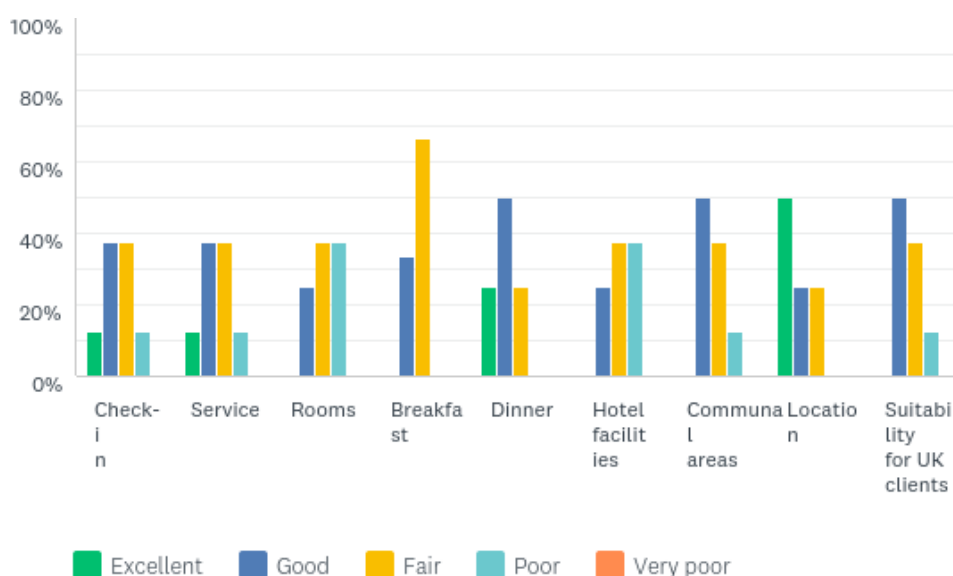


Everyone felt they would recommend this hotel to their clients.

The hotel had a beautiful, secluded, island setting: the beach, the palm trees, the hammocks - a true taste of the Caribbean! It was the perfect place to end a trip. The rooms were spacious with fabulous bathrooms and verandas overlooking the sea, though some reported that their rooms were a little dated. The staff were very friendly and helpful and even laid on a welcome party for us.

The food was mixed: The BBQ in the evening could be improved upon, but the breakfast was delicious. There are excellent snorkelling opportunities, colourful fish and clear water not far from the shore, and nice spot for swimming off main beach. Some of the pathways were a little uneven and potentially a dangerous at night.

Arenas Beach - Big Corn



Half the group said they would sell the hotel to budget-minded client, but the rest felt it was too basic for their clients.

This hotel was very basic, and the group felt that they would only sell the front facing 'A' rooms to UK clients. The beach setting was fantastic and the beach bar simple, but pleasant and served good food. The service at the hotel was very slow, but the impression was that there was limited staff due to it being low season.

Report by Megan Greaves on behalf of LATA
megan@lata.travel



lata
Latin American
Travel Association