

Follow the White Crow

The story



The birth and flight of Balta Varna to Nicaragua

Have you ever seen a white crow? A crow yes, but white? You would be extremely lucky because there is only one on Earth today, and it has only been living in Nicaragua for 3 years.

You will find it in the air saturated with salt spray and the scent of exotic flowers, on a small hill covered in eternal green, between the quivering leaves of the moringas and the colorful fruits like presents, of the mango, papaya, and banana trees swaying in the wind. Here, three small houses, green, blue and orange face the Pacific Ocean.



Welcome to Balta Varna. In Lithuanian, this means White Crow and for Michael and Zivile Skiles it means their workspace and their home, which has hosted all their projects and commitments over the last 3 years. From here, Guasacate Beach and Popoyo surf break is 3 minutes away as the white crow flies. The white crow is the logo Michael and Z have chosen for themselves. Because it is the unimaginable that they created together in Nicaragua. It is not a finca, nor a rancho, as you will find plenty in Nicaragua, no. The White Crow is a new species, not endangered but being born, something that lives between dream and reality, that seems to not yet exist, but could! A chimera, a utopia of conscience, of well being, of freedom, all of this

gathered in the guise of an imaginary crow that you will follow on the capricious dirt roads along the emerald coast of Nicaragua to find the entrance to Balta Varna. Here you will be greeted by three adorable dogs who will surely become your best friends during your stay in Paradise. Like all paradises not yet lost, it remains a secret, so we reveal it to you in a whisper.

Popoyo. This exotic name with a very pacific echo, may not be foreign to you, and if so you may be a surfer. Because this name is celebrated around the world as well as by this community as one of those rare pearls to ride at least once in a lifetime. Your first time on the wave will not be enough. We imagine you at the same peak a few years later, a big smile on your lips across your tanned face.



3 years ago it was a jungle, Michael says. The jungle is still here, but it is a jungle that Michael and Z organize now, made of paths marked by bricks, and flowerbeds where beauty pushes up from everywhere thanks to Z's green fingers. In the middle, like a perch in the sky, a Rancho of dried palms houses a wooden platform. It is here that Z welcomes teachers and students for Yoga or hosts Workshops, circles and retreats. Balta Varna is a rich edible garden where you only have to reach for healthy meals and lie down in the shade of trees to rest. Here nature grows fast, the passion fruit vine planted only 2 years ago already offer a superb shade under the crushing sun.



Michael is American. Born in Georgetown, raised in North Virginia. Z comes from old Europe, Vilnius, Lithuania. Since the world has no borders for love and love has none either, they met one another in



Philadelphia at a restaurant where they worked, Michael as a bartender and Z as a waitress. After service, they began to talk and soon fell in love. They came to know the other's daily life behind this night job. Michael was a photographer. He still is. Gifted with a practical intelligence and a manual know-how inherited from his studies in fine arts, he carried out small projects of construction for individuals, touching all, from carpentry and metal work, to fine details. He also managed a silk screen/textile printing

company specializing in live events for clients such as Converse or Absolut where he printed up to 2,500 t-shirts per event with their logos and slogans.

Z, who arrived in the United States as an Au Pair, spent her mornings in her studio designing and creating pieces for her jewelry brand, made with carefully sourced wood, shells, and stones that she collected everywhere as she would in her childhood in Lithuania.

Z and Michael soon found themselves 3000 miles from Popoyo, on the American east coast, and it was here that the



White Crow was born in their minds to take off soon to Nicaragua. This bird was born from their meeting. But also from their respective encounters which arrived at about the same time with the two passions that give shape and meaning to their lives today. It was at the age of 35 that Michael came across surfing and the pure joy of dancing on the waves. In the damp heat of where he is today, he recalls with a smile his winter icy sessions in New Jersey where Z accompanied him. It was not the same story, man ! They woke up at 3:40 in the morning, took the night road, and arrived an hour later on the Ocean City spot, before the sun had fully risen, just in time for him to put on his thick wetsuit, his gloves and Neoprene balaclava to dive into the water and catch his first waves while Z walked miles on the beach. Surfing was a real therapy. It helped him to become aware of his body, to catalyze his energy, and to hold on to life as balancing on the wave.

As for the balance of Z, she finds hers in her garden and on her Yoga mat. She likes to put her hands into the soil without gloves. This is where she can connect with the inheritance gifted to her by her family. Her grandparents owned a small garden just outside of Vilnius and a big farm in the Lithuanian countryside where she spent long idyllic summers until the age of 14. On this land, her family grew everything. All the animals, the plants, the fruits. The only thing



they did not provide themselves with, came from outside the county: rice and salt. Z planted the seeds and took care of the animals with her little hands to find them a little later on her plate. This circuit runs from land to table, as was necessary in a country controlled by the Soviet Union in the 80s. The bright side of this is today an ideal and a way of life that she cultivates in Balta Varna and that she shares and teaches to those who have the chance to visit. In an easy to consume world, another way of living is possible and it starts with some seeds, a little land, know-how and patience. This legacy left by her grandparents is a great strength for Z. Like the one imbued by her mother who, as a child and she became ill, treated her and her sisters with natural therapies, essential oils, raw garlic on a slice of black bread, or the ancient tradition of cupping. It is these ancestral techniques that she offers to her



clients in the middle of her garden today. She recalls collecting washed up amber on the beach of the baltic sea, and now uses pieces of amber to balance the water on the kitchen table.



In Philadelphia, Z discovers another form of treatment and protection: Yoga. Like Michael's surfing, it has been a late revelation for her. An encounter with a practice that changed her relationship to her body as well as the course of her life and quite literally taught her to breath.

As often, in life, an unexpected element came to precipitate things as well as the flight of the white crow towards Nicaragua. This element came from the sky, one night, in the crack of a storm. 20 days after Z had moved in with Michael, a bolt of lightning hit the house,

the roof went up in smoke, firefighters arrived to extinguish the fire and swallowed everything under their spear spewing thousands of gallons of water. Between the still warm walls, under their charred roof, Michael and Z discovered their ravaged home, and in the rubble, they tried to salvage what they could. But they found with terrible amazement, that all Michael's negatives had been destroyed, their possessions were now extinct, their art drowned and souvenirs lost. That night, their whole life was engulfed violently. But in the ruins, this very human reflex of optimism and survival already made them think of the future, to rebuild, to move forward.

9 months follow where Michael and Z rebuild their lives and their home. Z pushes deeper into her Yoga mat. Twice a week she attends Anusara classes to receive her certification as a teacher. Mike goes surfing more often in New Jersey, the only things the disaster could not take away, that nothing could ever take away. In this storm that shakes their lives, they cling to their new passions which help them, and maybe saved them. They also travel, returning during the rainy season to Nicaragua which they had discovered earlier during the dry season, and this time it becomes a revelation. Since their roots were fiercely torn from the soil of Philadelphia, they could now taste the freedom and the possibility of replanting elsewhere, why not here? In the heart of nature, facing the Pacific Ocean. Back in the States, they carry with them a small Nicaraguan seed that will grow to become a project, and soon set a date on a calendar with which they covered the walls of their newly rebuilt house.



As for Turner, their 4-year-old dog, he does not foresee the radical changes and smells that soon await him. On September 23, 2015, Michael, Z, and Turner take off on a white plane like their Crow, and set



their bags on the Emerald Coast of Nicaragua. That day, their new life began. Michael tapped into his studies in fine art, his know-how in carpentry and experience in metal work to design the Main and Guest house plans. He had in mind the open floors of the industrial buildings in Philadelphia, which allow nature and light to enter generously into the space, creating as many views as possible on the outside. From the bedrooms, the living room or the kitchen, the eye is drawn to a window framing a sea of green, a tree in bloom, the blue sky blur

ocean still. Little by little, with a team of local workers, Michael and Z built the house from floor to ceiling and after months, they finally received the long-awaited letter from the Ministry of Energy. Electricity would finally light up their nights ! With the same model as their Main home, they soon built the Green and the Orange houses to open the doors of Balta Varna and of their arte de vivir to the public.

Balta Varna is today an open door sanctuary of nature and inner peace where Mike and Z welcome those from all over the world to come and rest and share their passion. Here, for a few days or a month at a time, you can take a break from frantic city life, in a home away from home. You will taste the simple pleasure of the crushing sun, sometimes of the pouring rain, the ocean and the earth gathered here in this paradise where nothing is missing. Balta Varna is also a base from where you'll be able to discover the Emerald Coast and its countless wonders. Balta Varna offers the tailored services that one can expect from a travel agency. Thanks to their contacts within the local communities, Michael and Z will help you plan perfect trips and experiences around for boat rides, yoga retreats, horse riding excursions, or wildlife explorations.



When the boards are stowed in the quiver and the yoga mats are rolled, Michael and Zivile still hear the ocean roar in their garden as they look into the horizon, where the lines run like a score of music. The waves smash stubbornly day and night on the sharp reefs of Popoyo and stretch like silk on the endless beaches of Guasacate. At dusk, the sky blazes with orange and pink and red as

in a dream before fading to reveal more stars than have ever been counted.