

# History

## PRE-COLONIAL TIMES

Monkey Point, south of Bluefields, has evidence of one of the earliest human encampments in the Americas. More impressive, however, are some 6000-year-old footprints found near the banks of Lago de Managua, within the area occupied by the present-day capital. At the site, you can see the squelches made as these early Nicaraguans headed lakeward.

Nicaragua was home to several indigenous groups, including the ancestors of today's Rama, who live on the Caribbean coast, and the Chorotegas and Nicaraos, on the Pacific side. The latter spoke a form of Náhuatl, the language of the Aztecs. Many Nicaraguan places retain their Náhuatl names.

By 1500 BC, Nicaragua was broadly settled, and though much of this history has been lost, at least one ancient treaty between the Nicarao capital of Jinotepe and its rival Chorotegan neighbor, Diriamba, is still celebrated as the Toro Guaco (see p110).

The exact date of the Isla de Ometepe's first inhabitation is the subject of some debate. Earliest estimates put it sometime in the Dinarte phase (2000 BC to 500 BC), but little is known about this early period. The general consensus is that most of the island's present-day inhabitants are descended from Náhuatl-speaking Chorotega who began migrating south from Mexico in the late 7th century and probably arrived around 1350, heralding the Ometepe ceramic period (AD 1350 to 1500).

Colonies of possibly Mayan origin had already settled the central highlands of Matagalpa, Chontales and Juigalpa, while the Atlantic coast was home to a number of groups, including the Bawihka (predecessors of the present-day Miskito – see boxed text, p248) and Mayangna (see p240) peoples.

## EUROPEAN ARRIVAL

Although Columbus stopped briefly on the Caribbean coast in 1502, it was Gil González de Ávila, sailing north from Panama in 1522, who would really make his mark here. He found a chieftain, Cacique Nicarao, governing the southern shores of Lago de Nicaragua and the tribe of the same name. The Spaniards thus named the region Nicaragua.

Nicarao subjected González to hours of inquiry about science, technology and history; González famously gave Nicarao an ultimatum: convert to Christianity, or else. Nicarao's people complied, a move that in the end only delayed their massacre at the hands of the Spanish; other native groups were thus warned.

Six months later González made Cacique Diriangén the same offer; Diriangén went with 'or else.' His troops were outgunned and eventually

There were forgers even before coins were invented and the currency was cacao – they'd scoop the cacao out of the seed and replace it with mud.

## TIMELINE

6000 BC

Clam shells are left at Monkey Point and other sites on the Caribbean coast; these are among the oldest remains left by humans in Central America.

450 BC

The agricultural revolution arrives in the region, with the introduction of domesticated corn, yucca and beans. Soon after, trade links with modern-day Colombia and the United States are established.

AD 800

Petroglyph and statue fever sweeps across Nicaragua. Many designs, including an Aztec calendar and representations of the deity Quetzalcóatl, herald the arrival of one of Nicaragua's most important migrations.

destroyed but inspired further resistance. After conquering four Pacific tribes – 700,000 Chorotega, Nicarao, Maribios and Chontal were reduced to 35,000 in 25 years – the nations of the central highlands halted Spanish expansion at the mountains, with grim losses.

## COLONIAL SETTLEMENT

The main colonizing force arrived the next year, founding the cities of León and Granada. Both were established near indigenous settlements, whose inhabitants were put to work.

The gold that had attracted the Spaniards soon gave out, but Granada and León remained. Granada became a comparatively rich colonial city, its wealth due to surrounding agriculture and its importance as a trading center. With its wealthy business class, Granada eventually became the center for the Conservative Party, favoring traditional values of monarchy and ecclesiastical authority. Originally founded on Lago de Managua, León was destroyed by volcanic eruptions in 1610 and a new city established some 30km northwest.

León in time became the center for radical clerics and intellectuals, who formed the Liberal Party and supported the unification of Central America and reforms based on the French and American Revolutions.

The difference in wealth between the two cities, and the political supremacy of León, led to conflicts that raged into the 1850s, at times erupting into civil war. The animosity stopped only when the capital was moved to the neutral location of Managua.

While the Spanish were settling the Pacific lowlands, the English were the dominant influence on the Caribbean side. English, French and Dutch pirates established settlements and attacked the east coast in the 17th century, at times even penetrating to Granada via the Río San Juan (see the boxed text, p117).

By forging alliances with disgruntled indigenous groups and committing acts of considerable derring-do, pirates helped weaken Spain's hold over the New World. This, combined with conflict in Europe, helped bring about Central American independence.

## EARLY INDEPENDENCE

Nicaragua gained independence from Spain in 1821 and full independence in 1838. The cities of León and Granada continued to feud. After independence, the Liberals and Conservatives weren't the only groups vying for power. Britain and the USA both became interested in Nicaragua and its strategically important passage from Lago de Nicaragua to the Caribbean.

Both countries wanted to build an interoceanic canal through Central America, and Nicaragua looked the likeliest spot. In 1848 the British seized the Caribbean port of San Juan del Norte, at the mouth of the Río San

For more about Diriangén, Chorotega chief and national inspiration, check out [www.diriamba.info/Diriangen.htm](http://www.diriamba.info/Diriangen.htm)

### 1502

Christopher Columbus sails down the Caribbean coastline looking for a sailing route to the Pacific Ocean, landing briefly in the north. First recorded contact between indigenous inhabitants and Europeans.

### 1523

The main colonizing force arrives, led by Francisco Fernández de Córdoba. Cities of León (later moved after being buried by Volcán Momotombo) and Granada are founded soon after.

### 1633

The first European settlement on the Atlantic Coast is founded at the modern-day site of Pueblo Viejo by the grandly named British Providence Company – a contingent of pirates.