

Masaya & Los Pueblos Blancos



Home to talented artisans, revolutionaries, witches and faith healers, there's nowhere on earth like Nicaragua's *meseta central* (central plateau). It's a picturesque patchwork of lagoons, steamy volcanic peaks and sleepy colonial villages, and the cooler temperatures and excellent transport connections make traveling here a breeze. While many just visit the regional giant Masaya on a half-day shopping spree, exploring the region can be a deeply gratifying experience.

These towns break out of their customary slumber with alarming regularity to celebrate *fiestas patronales* – holy days that seem less than Catholic, revealing something that the Spanish were never quite able to tame.

While trawling Masaya's well-stocked artisan market is obligatory, real fans of the craftsmanship on display should get out to the Pueblos Blancos, where each village specializes in the manufacture of a different item and visitors are welcome in the workshops producing them.

The Laguna de Apoyo is another must-see: its clear turquoise waters a joy for swimmers from its shores and photographers from a couple of easily accessible lookouts. Those who want more intimate knowledge of the lagoon can easily set up a scuba dive or rent a sailboat.

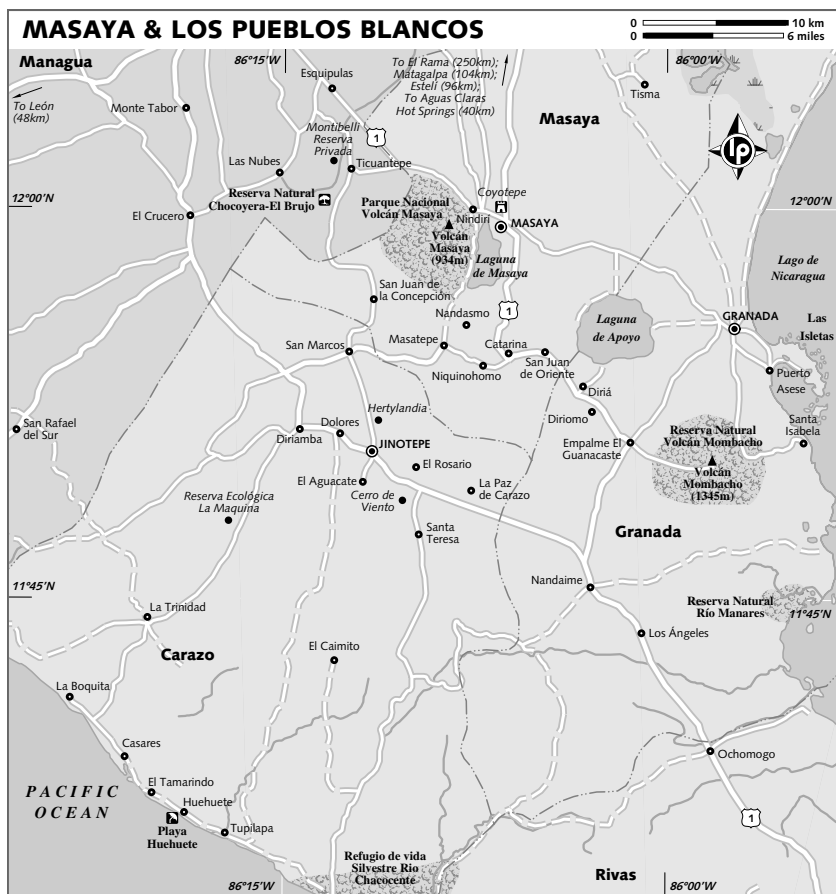
Towering over all of this is mighty Volcán Masaya, place of myths and legends, where hiking trails take you to lava-filled craters and bat-infested caves.

Sloping down from the *meseta* are the Carazo towns – pleasant stopovers on the way to a wild and seemingly remote stretch of coast where the waves roll in against an empty shoreline, just waiting for someone to surf them.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Shopping till you drop at the country's most famous handicraft market, the **Mercado Artesanías** (p102), in Masaya
- Watching history repeat itself as potters in the workshops of **San Juan de Oriente** (p107) continue the centuries-old craft of ceramics production
- Taking a dip in the **Laguna de Apoyo** (p104), said to be the cleanest water in the whole country
- Peering into that gorgeous *laguna* from the spectacular lookouts at **Catarina** (p107) and **Diriá** (p107)
- Driving to the 'gates of hell', then taking a full-moon hike up gassy, tempestuous **Volcán Masaya** (p103)





History

A thriving population center long before the arrival of the Spanish, Masaya and the network of small towns that surround it show signs of Chorotega inhabitation for at least the last 3000 years. While Masaya is without doubt the modern-day regional center, in pre-Columbian times the tiny town of Diriá was the Chorotega capital, a place where 28 chieftains would meet every seven years to elect a new leader.

The region's claim to fame, *artesanías* (handicrafts), has a long tradition, too – as far back as 1548 the Spanish required Masaya to provide hammocks and shoes for the colonizers as a tribute.

Masaya gained official status as a town in 1819, predating Nicaraguan independence by

only two years. The delay was most likely due to the fierce fighting spirit of the locals – their opposition to the Spanish in 1529, William Walker in 1856, US Marines in 1912 and the Guardia Nacional throughout the revolution is legendary.

These last skirmishes took a particular toll on the region, none more so than when, in 1977, the Masaya suburb of Monimbó rose up against Somoza forces (see the boxed text, p101). During the struggle much of the town's colonial architecture was destroyed. As if that weren't enough, a massive earthquake in 2000 badly damaged the majority of the remaining historical buildings, many of which today await funding in order to be properly restored.