

# Southwestern Nicaragua



Packed with attractions, the southwest offers up some of Nicaragua's classic vistas – the twin peaks of Ometepe rising up out of shimmering lake waters and pastel-hued sunsets glimpsed from an expanse of white-sand beach, to name just a couple.

This is where the country narrows to its slenderest point, a sliver of land between the Lago de Nicaragua and the Pacific Ocean. Surfers have been hitting this coastline for years, drawn by perfect, uncrowded waves and a minimal but adequate infrastructure. As the region's fame has spread, comfort levels have crept up a couple of notches and now beach getaway options run the gamut from a hammock between coconut trees to super-exclusive ecolodges and everything in between.

While the coastal land grab is definitely on and old-timers are shaking their heads about gated communities springing up around San Juan del Sur, there's still plenty of wilderness out there for beach bums, surf fiends and nesting turtles alike.

No trip to the southwest would be complete without at least a brief stopover on the Isla de Ometepe, whose Tolkeinesque topography dominates the skyline. The island is basically two volcanoes – one dormant, one not so much so – and scattered around their foothills are some of the country's most atmospheric places to stay. There's almost *too* much to do here – kayaking, swimming, hiking and biking – but there are also quiet spots that allow you to savour the island's beauty as waves lap gently at the shoreline.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Getting active on the **Isla de Ometepe** (p145) – climb a volcano, kayak the wetlands or swim in a lagoon. Or do all three.
- Welcoming the turtles. Seeing thousands of nesting turtles arrive at **Refugio de Vida Silvestre La Flor** (p166) is a not-to-be-missed experience.
- Riding a wave. World-class surfing (and sunbaking) awaits at the beaches **north** (p164) and **south** (p165) of San Juan del Sur.
- Catching a sunset. There are few places better on earth to say goodbye to the day than one of San Juan del Sur's **beachside bars** (p163)
- Going local. Get to know the real pace of village life with community-based tourism in tiny **El Ostional** (p167)



