

León & Northwestern Nicaragua



Straddling 60km of volcanic ridgeline known as the Maribios chain, the northwest is Nicaragua at its fieriest and steamiest – literally and figuratively. León, the biggest city in the region, is and always has been a hotbed of intellectualism, revolution and independence. The city has played host to some of Nicaragua’s most important political and artistic moments, a fact reflected in the wealth of museums and galleries scattered around town. Not as polished as its age-old rival Granada, it’s loved by many for its rough edges and authentic feel, not to mention its grand cathedral, breathtaking art museum and hopping nightlife.

This is where the serious Spanish students come to study, a place that comes much closer to the full immersion model than tourist havens like San Juan del Sur or Granada.

Just out of León, more than a dozen volcanic peaks – five of which have erupted in the last century – wait to be climbed (or surfed). Even closer, some of the best and most accessible beach accommodation in the country is a short bus ride away, as are the virgin wetlands of the Reserva Natural Isla Juan Venado. Make a little extra effort and chances are the only people you’ll be sharing the beach with are the local fisher folk.

There are plenty of other opportunities to escape the day-trippers, though – the little towns of El Sauce and Nagarote are steeped in history and provide an excellent window into everyday Nicaraguan life. Further to the north, sultry Chinandega is the gateway to largely unpopulated coastlines (and some very empty, very surfable waves) and the biggest mangrove forest in Central America. Keep pushing north and you’ll find the remote, awe-inspiring beauty of Reserva Natural Volcán Cosigüina, where nesting turtles, hot springs and yet another volcano hike all beckon.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Climbing one of the spectacular volcanic peaks of the **Maribios chain** (p187) – and maybe sandboarding back down again
- Getting away from it all in a beachside cabin at **Playa Jiquilillo** (p197) or **Mechapa** (p198)
- Taking in some street art in mural-infested **León** (p170)
- Kayaking through Central America’s largest mangrove forest in **Reserva Natural Estero Padre Ramos** (p198)
- Soaking those aching bones in Potosí hot springs after climbing **Volcán Cosigüina** (p198)





History

The Maribios people were the first inhabitants of what is now León, in the township/suburb of Subtiava (p176). After a series of volcanic eruptions led to the evacuation of the original city of León (now called León Viejo – see the boxed text, p185), this site was chosen. It turned out to be a good choice – Subtiava provided plenty of indigenous labor, it was far enough from the ocean to prevent the pirate attacks that had plagued Granada, and the volcanoes were distant and dormant enough not to threaten the city.

León has produced various heroes, most famously poet Rubén Darío, but also independence fighter Miguel Larreynaga (look for him on the 10-córdoba note) and Luisa Amanda

Espinoza, the first female FSLN member to die in combat. A Sandinista stronghold, the city saw some of the toughest battles during the revolution, documented in the city's murals, museums and bullet-pocked walls.

Despite León's status as a religious and academic center (and the fact that it had been the nation's capital for 242 years), it was Chinandega, to the north, that was chosen as the meeting place for the ill-fated Confederation of American States in the 19th century. Chinandega's claim to fame as the 'city of oranges' waned in the 20th century, as cotton became the principal crop. This in turn changed as world cotton prices plummeted and farmers turned to sugarcane and peanuts, the region's main crops to this day.