

Northern Highlands



You've officially escaped Central America's backpacker superhighway and arrived in a place where colorful quetzals nest in misty cloud forests, and Nicaragua's best coffee and tobacco are cultivated with both capitalist zeal and collective spirit. With a little time and commitment you'll duck into ancient, crumbling cathedrals, get pounded by countless waterfalls, explore recently discovered canyons, and pay tribute to the pirates, colonists, revolutionaries, artists and poets who were inspired by these fertile mountains and mingled with the humble, open-hearted people who've lived here for generations.

On either end of the region are two up-and-coming cities. Estelí, Nicaragua's next great college town, is both a hotbed of Sandinista activism and the jumping-off point for Área Protegida Miraflores, where you can hike, ride, live and work with the local people whose dreams of collective, subsistence living were at the heart of the revolution. Matagalpa is slightly hipper, and better funded, thanks to nearly a century of successful coffee cultivation. All around and in between are dozens of small towns, granite peaks and lush valleys that share a familiar beauty and a healthy caffeine addiction.

So whether you're swimming through hidden Cañon de Somoto, or on horseback with the friendly *campesinos* (farmers), know that you are never far from a damn good cup of black and yet another jaw-dropping view.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Hanging in **Estelí** (p202), Nicaragua's next great college town
- Hiking through the **Área Protegida Miraflores** (p208)
- Scrambling, swimming and floating through the magnificent **Cañon de Somoto** (p212)
- Rambling from *finca* to *finca* on the rutted back roads of **Jinotega** (p218)
- Getting civilized and overcaffeinated in **Matagalpa** (p224)



