

Caribbean Coast



An overland ramble to Nicaragua's Caribbean coast would be the perfect terrain for an epic novel. Your settings would include three tough gold-mining towns surrounded by dense jungle; a wide, muddy river that divides two countries and nourishes the de facto capital of the Miskito nation; a once great port town groping for its second wind; and an expanse of mangrove-shrouded black water home to more than a dozen ethnic fishing enclaves. Oh, and let's not forget the offshore islands: pristine, deserted white-sand keys painted with turquoise trim, and a couple of larger, more accessible ones that have dodged mega-resort tourism to remain authentic.

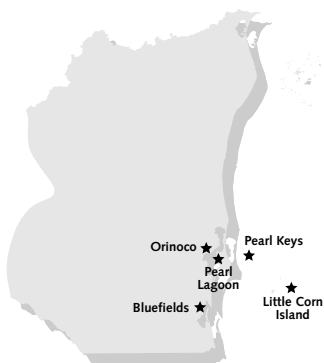
Your cast will include tough and insightful characters from English-speaking Creole towns and indigenous Miskito, Mayangna and Rama communities, who have seen it all and are filled with fierce pride in the face of centuries of injustice. And an enlightened Garífuna goddess whose people came from West Africa, never spent a day in chains, and landed on the shores of Pearl Lagoon with their drums and smiles intact.

There will be scuba diving, expeditions up rainforested peaks, beach combing, and fishing in the mangroves. And you'll eat some down-home Creole cooking – a sampling: fried fish, lobster and shrimp with coconut sauce, crab soup, *rondon* (slow-cooked seafood-and-coconut stew), coconut bread and soda cakes – drink spiced rum, and dance to Jamaican reggae, Colombian cumbia and Garth Brooks (the dude is huge here). Don't worry, given the visibility and viability of the international cocaine trade, and the dearth of tourist services, passable roads and economic opportunity in a large chunk of this gritty region that covers 70% of Nicaragua, you'll have ample opportunity to court danger, drama and loneliness.

Yes, it would make one hell of a story. But you'll be forgiven if you forget about writing the novel, once you've lived it.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Experiencing true Caribbean food and culture in stunning **Pearl Lagoon** (p260)
- Sipping spiced rum, eating fresh fish and dancing to Garífuna drummers in **Orinoco** (p261) during National Garífuna Week
- Chartering a speedboat to the luscious, snow-white **Pearl Keys** (p261)
- Diving with hammerheads and exploring the underwater caves off **Little Corn Island** (p267)
- Trolling for snook just outside **Bluefields** (p257), on the Rio Escondido



History

Christopher Columbus landed on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast in 1502, during his fourth voyage, but with the Spanish focused on settling the Pacific coast, their hold on the Caribbean was tenuous. Portuguese, Dutch and British pirates patrolled these seas (Bluefields was named for the Dutch pirate Blewfeldt), attacking and robbing Spanish vessels full of South American gold, and hiding out in the nearby keys for much of the 17th century. Meanwhile, the British crown cultivated relations with the indigenous Miskito people, who had battled Mayangna and Rama communities for regional supremacy long before Columbus came calling. In 1687 they created the puppet kingdom of Mosquitia, which ruled until the mid-19th century.

During this period British colonists moved with their African slaves from Jamaica to the Corn Islands, which until then had belonged to the Kukra and Sumu people. They also arrived in Bluefields, where slaves worked banana groves and mingled with fellow Africans who had escaped from Portuguese slave ships, and free West Indian laborers of mixed ethnicity to form English-speaking Creole communities that are still thriving.

After Nicaraguan independence the United States convinced the British to cede power, which left the US as the dominant influence in a still barely developed region. Finally, in 1894, Rigoberto Cabezas defeated local, English-speaking Miskito and Creole forces, and flew the Nicaraguan flag over the Caribbean coast for the first time. Nevertheless, American and English companies, such as Standard Fruit, continued to capitalize on the region's vast resources of fruit and timber into the 20th century. In fact when Kennedy launched the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961, some of the ill-fated forces left from Standard Fruit's dock in Bilwi.

English-speaking Nicaraguans have never fully bought into Spanish-speaking rule. In 1982 and 1984 large numbers of US-backed English-speaking forces rebelled against the new Sandinista government, in response to what they felt were heavy-handed, culturally insensitive policies. In 1985, Ortega divided the region into two autonomous states, RAAN (Región Autónoma Atlántico Norte, Northern Atlantic Autonomous Region) and RAAS (Región Autónoma Atlántico Sur, Southern Atlantic Autonomous Region).

Enter the Colombian drug runners. Their boats filled with cocaine and bound for the US and Mexico often shelter in Caribbean keys during inclement weather and when they are trying to ditch military patrols. Over the past 25 years they have built a trafficking network up and down the coast. They have also stepped in to fill the development gap. Cocaine dollars have built internet cafés, baseball diamonds and even schools and health clinics in the area. It's 500 years later, and pirates still have a place on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast.

Climate

More than 90% of Nicaragua's rainfall ends up on the Atlantic side, between 2000mm and 5000mm annually, so pack rain gear and wear quick-drying clothes; if you're toting a laptop, a dry-bag is a good idea. The northeastern corner of the country, the Miskito Savanna, is dryer. The climate can get hot and humid on the coast even during the rainy season, which lands in November with fierce winds and a serious swell. The rain and wind stay around until mid-December (which complicates those Corn Island crossings). Counterintuitive or no, islanders swear the best time to visit is during hurricane season, when the weather is mild and underwater visibility infinite. The stunning Serranía Amerrisque frame the gorgeous mountain towns of Boaco and Juigalpa, which will cool you off, dry you out and welcome you back into typical Nicaraguan life after a steamy session in the Caribbean.

Parks & Reserves

Dominating the northern reaches of the Caribbean region, stretching over 20,000 sq km from the outskirts of Jinotega to Las Minas (The Mining Triangle) and Waspám, is Nicaragua's largest forest reserve, Reserva de Biosfera Bosawás (see the boxed text, p241), home to well over 200,000 people including 30,000 indigenous Miskito and Mayangna. It's best accessed from Siuna, where you can hike into its nucleus, Parque Nacional Saslaya (p239), or Waspám. You can also hike into its Mayangna communities from Bonanza, after bypassing Reserva Natural Cerro Cola Blanca (p240). Bilwi is the gateway to the beautiful but seldom visited Miskito Keys Biological Reserve (p245), and Reserva Natural Laguna Pahara (p246), where you can stay in traditional Miskito fishing villages. The stellar fishing of the Parque Municipal Mahogany