



San Carlos, Islas Solentiname & the Río San Juan

You could roam the globe for decades and it would be tough to top what you are about to experience here. This is a place where an enlightened priest once mingled with transcendent artists on forgotten island utopias. Where the beautiful teenage daughter of a Spanish conquistador stared down an on-rushing armada of British pirates. It's a haven for migratory birds, ranchers and fishermen, and an old revolutionary war vet who now owns the sweetest jungle lodge in Nicaragua. Here the monkeys howl and fly, alligators cruise the black water, and enormous 500-year-old trees bangled in delicate orchids shelter fluorescent fingernail-sized tree frogs and carnivorous jaguars under one canopy.

It's also a place thousands of backpackers simply pass through on their way from Granada and Ometepe to Costa Rica, ignoring the sweet Archipiélago de Solentiname, mythic Río San Juan and spectacular Reserva Biológica Indio-Maíz. Huge mistake. Spend some time and money. Explore. Take it all in. These are the places you imagined when you booked your ticket. This is why you travel.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Spotting migratory birds on a tour through the wetlands and humid forests of **San Miguelito** (p276)
- Fishing, hiking, swimming, and stargazing in the peaceful **Archipiélago de Solentiname** (p277)
- Dining on sweet and giant river shrimp in the peaceful **Sábalos** (p282) and **El Castillo** (p284)
- Hiking beneath 500-year-old orchid-jeweled giants in the spectacular **Reserva Biológica Indio-Maíz** (p286)
- Exploring hidden, jungled lagoons by boat in **San Juan de Nicaragua** (p287)



History

Almost as soon as Columbus happened upon Nicaragua in 1502, the search was on for a passage that would link the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. In 1525 Martin de Estete was assigned to explore Lago de Nicaragua and the Río San Juan – a route that Aztec traders had been using since the 13th century. He got as far as the Raudales del Diablo (Devil Rapids) in El Castillo, before he doubled back to the lake and settled the city of San Carlos. In 1529 the Spanish finally navigated the rapids and reached the mouth of the river at the Caribbean Sea, where they established San Juan de las Perlas in 1539.

In the 17th and 18th centuries Granada was growing wealthier by the year, which attracted unwanted attention from English, French and Dutch pirates, who sacked the city three times in five years. A series of forts, including one in San Carlos and another in El Castillo, were built along the river and lake to ward them off. It worked for a while. In 1762 a teenage Rafaela Herrera forced a British fleet to turn back, but in 1780 Horatio Nelson and his men finally conquered El Castillo. Of course, malaria conquered them a few months later.

Although Nicaragua won independence in 1821, the fight for regional supremacy was not over. In 1848 Jamaican governor Charles Grey seized San Juan de las Perlas in the name of the Miskito Kingdom (one of many losses suffered by the Rama people at the hands of the Miskito-British allies) and modestly renamed it Greytown – not a bad title, considering it's the rainiest spot (over 5000mm annually) in the hemisphere.

With the North American gold rush in full swing, the Río San Juan became part of the fastest route between New York and San Francisco. American Cornelius Vanderbilt's ships sailed from New York to New Orleans and then steamed down to Greytown before sailing upriver to Lago de Nicaragua, where voyagers traveled overland to an awaiting steamship on the Pacific. Greytown became a seedy boomtown, with whorehouses, gambling halls and hotels hewn of mahogany and precious cedar. Between 1851 and 1868, more than 155,000 travelers passed through. Some of them died there.

After the Panama Canal was built in 1914, dashing Vanderbilt's hopes for a local version, Greytown was ceded to an independent Nicaragua, reclaiming its original name of

San Juan (San Juan del Norte, to be exact). Investment ceased and the once attractive Victorian town slipped into decay. It was already in shambles when Sandinista leader turned Contra commander Edén Pastora, aka 'Commandante Cero,' burned it to the ground in 1982. Rebuilding efforts were devastated by Hurricane Juana in 1988. The current site of San Juan de Nicaragua was established in the early 1990s.

The Islas Solentiname, on the other hand, have always been here. Yet they didn't appear on Nicaraguan maps until the 1960s, when an idealistic young poet-priest named Ernesto Cardenal arrived. He built a church, and recorded the remarkable *La Misa Campesina*, or Peasants' Mass, when the islanders stood and spoke the word of God. He also built an economy based on art and community.

He wasn't nonviolent, however. Largely inspired by Cardenal's socialist leanings, a group of Sandinista supporters from the islands attacked San Carlos in 1977. They failed. On October 3, as retribution, the Guardia Nacional burned every structure on the islands to the ground. Survivors fled to Costa Rica, leaving the archipelago all but abandoned.

When the revolutionary government took power, the islanders returned and rebuilt, raising a new church. They also began painting and sculpting again. Solentiname, for so long a commune in the purest sense, remains more staunchly committed to the Marxist ideals of the revolution than perhaps anywhere else in the country. One artist explained, 'It's just hard to get used to capitalism.'

Information

Historically this has been a cash-only destination. Some of the nicer hotels and restaurants now take credit cards, but at research time San Carlos banks offered no services other than changing US dollars. However, in February 2009 BanPro planned to open a branch with an attached ATM. You'll still need to stock up on cash before hitting the lake islands or heading down river, but it's an improvement.

Reliable internet access is available only in San Carlos.

Climate

This is one of the wettest regions in the world, getting anywhere between 2500mm and 5000mm of precipitation annually. Even