

Nicaragua

To the new generation of travelers, Nicaragua represents booming beach breaks, volcano hiking, thrilling island paradises and laid-back colonial towns, so it seems that the message – ‘the civil war finished decades ago, people!’ – has finally gotten across to an audience who had it pegged as a trouble spot. In fact, it’s now the safest country in Central America, and a surprisingly easy place to travel around.

Yet the iconic images of idealistic young people giving their lives for a dream of liberty have never quite disappeared, and Nicaragua remains a land where people, whatever their beliefs, tend to go beyond cheap chatter. A place of poets and artists, of opinions both well-informed and cheerily imparted. Despite the landscape being extra well-endowed with natural beauty, it is the Nicaraguans themselves who remain their country’s chief asset.

Nicaragua boasts both a Pacific and a Caribbean coast, and these two sides of the country differ in myriad ways. In the west of the country you can zip between colonial cities on good paved roads, while in the east is an enormous wilderness that, a couple of golden Caribbean paradises apart, won’t be touristy any time this century.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 129,494 sq km (approximately the size of Greece or New York State)
- **Budget** US\$20 to US\$30 per day
- **Capital** Managua
- **Costs** Hostel in León US\$6 to US\$8, bottle of beer US\$0.70, three-hour bus ride US\$3.50, lunch US\$3
- **Country Code** ☎ 505
- **Languages** Spanish, English
- **Money** US\$1 = C\$21.00 (córdobas)
- **Population** 5.5 million
- **Seasons** Dry (November to April), wet (May to October)
- **Time** GMT minus six hours, no daylight saving



TRAVEL HINTS

Shared taxis often cost little more than buses. A lightweight hammock is great for boat trips and can save you heaps on accommodations.

OVERLAND ROUTES

Nicaragua’s border with Honduras can be crossed at Las Manos, El Espino or Guasaule. From Costa Rica, you can enter by road at Peñas Blancas or by boat via Los Chiles.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Isla de Ometepe** (p500) Scramble to the summits of the two volcanoes that join to make this majestic island.
- **Corn Islands** (p513) Snack on coconuts and swim crystal-clear waters in this unspoiled Caribbean getaway.
- **Granada & León** (p484) and (p476) Savor the delights of these cultured colonial towns, easily reached from Managua.
- **Río San Juan** (p507) Board a riverboat to explore this picturesque watercourse, home to abundant birdlife and an unexpected fortress.
- **Matagalpa & Estelí** (p465) and (p470) Discover the hard-working highlands in these earthy, open cities, coffee and cowboy country respectively.
- **Off the beaten track** (p512) Bargain with local fishermen to take you boating in the intriguing Miskito area of Laguna de Perlas.

CURRENT EVENTS

After 16 years on the sidelines, the return of President Daniel Ortega was always going to be eventful. The Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN; Sandinista National Liberation Front) leader got off to a positive start, resolving the energy crisis that had crippled the country for years and reintroducing free health care and education. But municipal elections in late 2008 brought a real sense of crisis to the country, with the opposition claiming widespread fraud. Both the US and EU agreed with them and froze large amounts of aid to Nicaragua.

Ortega threw more fuel on the fire by pushing for constitutional changes to allow him to stand for re-election when his current term expires in 2011. After failing to get the votes necessary in the parliament, the FSLN rushed a bill through a court stacked with judges loyal to the party. This brought the usually divided opposition onto the streets in mass protest, but whether the unity lasts long enough to curtail the president's ambitions remains to be seen.

While the politicians have been concentrating on their power plays, the world economic crisis has battered the country, particularly those many Nicaraguans that live hand to mouth. Foreign manufacturing companies have cut staff, tourist numbers have dropped, and, most importantly of all, the international remittances from family and friends that many depend upon have dried up. With no money coming in and little faith in their leaders to resolve things, more young Nicaraguans than ever are packing up and heading abroad,

most as undocumented immigrants, in search of a way out of poverty.

HISTORY

Early History

Fascinatingly, the earliest traces of human habitation in Nicaragua are some 6000-year-old footprints found near the banks of Lago de Managua, within the area occupied by the present-day capital.

Nicaragua was home to several indigenous groups, including the ancestors of today's Rama who live on the Caribbean coast, and the Chorotegas and Nicaraos, on the Pacific side. The latter spoke a form of Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs. Many Nicaraguan places retain their Nahuatl names.

European Arrival

The indigenous inhabitants' first contact with Europeans was in 1502, when Columbus sailed down Nicaragua's Caribbean coast.

The next exploratory mission, led by Gil González de Ávila, came north from the Spanish settlement at Panama, arriving in 1522. It found a chieftain, Cacique Nicarao, governing the southern shores of Lago de Nicaragua and the tribe of the same name. The Spaniards thus named the region Nicaragua.

Two years later the Spanish were back to colonize, led this time by Francisco Hernández de Córdoba, who founded the cities of Granada and León in 1524. Both were established near indigenous settlements whose inhabitants were subjugated and put to work. Attempts at founding a similar city near