



Caribbean Coast

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Why Go?

An overland ramble to Nicaragua's Caribbean coast would be the perfect terrain for an epic novel. Your settings would include wide, muddy rivers surrounded by thick jungle, a fascinating tropical port town and an expanse of mangrove-shrouded black water home to more than a dozen ethnic fishing enclaves. And we haven't even got to the pristine offshore islands ringed by white sand with a turquoise trim.

Your cast will feature tough and insightful characters from English-speaking Creole towns and indigenous Miskito, Mayangna, Rama and Garifuna communities. And there will be plenty of action too, with scuba diving, epic treks through dense rainforest, beachcombing, and fishing in the mangroves.

But even the most skilled author would struggle to capture the essence of the region, a vibrant mix of indigenous, African and European cultures that you'll only really get a feel for if you check it out for yourself.

When to Go

From February to April visitors are greeted by clear skies and perfect beach weather, although you may be sharing your patch of paradise and accommodation prices tend to increase.

The region's strong winds drop off significantly from March to April, bringing the best conditions for diving around the Corn Islands and snorkeling in the Pearl Keys.

While technically in the middle of the wet season, during September and October the heavy rains ease off, prices are low and beaches are empty.

For a high-energy full-color carnival experience, head to Maypole in Bluefields in May for a full month of partying, culminating in the colorful Carnival and Tulululu.

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. 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 free West Indian laborers of mixed ethnicity to form English-speaking Creole communities that are still thriving.

English-speaking Nicaraguans have never fully bought into Spanish-speaking rule. During the Contra war, many took up arms against the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front; FSLN) while many more fled to neighboring Costa Rica to avoid the conflict, emptying villages that have still not recovered. Although the region was eventually granted special autonomy status by the Sandinistas with the rights to have a say in the exploitation of its natural resources, it remains the poorest and least developed part of the country.

i Dangers & Annoyances

Nicaragua's Atlantic coast is as poor and underserved as Nicaragua gets. Expect dodgy infrastructure, bring a flashlight (torch) and enjoy those occasional bucket showers.

Local agents for Colombian coke impresarios have often done more to develop area infrastructure than the sitting government, but the cocaine traffic in Región Autónoma Atlántico Norte (North Atlantic Autonomous Region; RAAN) and Región Autónoma Atlántico Sur (South Atlantic Autonomous Region; RAAS) isn't bloodless. However, tourists won't have any problems as long as they refrain from purchasing and partaking.

But, given the poverty, even in seemingly innocuous small towns sober travelers should stick to big-city rules: stay alert, don't wander alone, take taxis at night and watch your valuables.

i Getting There & Away

You can travel overland from Managua to the Caribbean coast, but most visitors take the frequent, inexpensive La Costeña flights. There are active commercial airstrips in Bilwi, Waspám, Bluefields, Great Corn Island and two of the three Las Minas towns. Still, if you have more time than cash and enjoy the (really) slow lane, there are two overland routes into the region.

There are irregular passenger-boat services between Bluefields and Bilwi via Corn Island, but don't count on it if your schedule is tight.

BILWI (PUERTO CABEZAS)–WASPÁM & RÍO COCO

We won't sugarcoat this. You're in for a grueling ride on a beat-up old school bus packed to the gills. It begins with a 10- to 12-hour bus ride from Managua to Siuna in Las Minas, where you can access the Reserva de Biosfera Bosawás (Bosawás Biosphere Reserve). From Siuna it's another 10 to 12 hours on a horrendous road to Bilwi. Waspám and the Río Coco are a smoothish six hours north from there.

JUIGALPA–EL RAMA–BLUEFIELDS–CORN ISLANDS

The (much!) preferred trip to the crystalline Caribbean Sea unfurls on the smooth, paved road to El Rama, with rejuvenating side trips to the mountain towns of Boaco and Juigalpa. From El Rama, you can hop on a testing five-hour bus along the rutted dirt road to Pearl Lagoon or take a convenient two-hour fast boat ride down the Río Escondido to Bluefields, from where there are twice-weekly boat services to the Corn Islands and daily speedboats to Pearl Lagoon.

i Getting Around

Most local travel within the region is by *panga* – an open speedboat with outboard motor. Tickets are much more expensive than a comparable distance by bus.

BILWI (PUERTO CABEZAS)

POP 48,500

This impoverished Caribbean port town and ethnic melting pot sprawls along the coast and back into the scrubby pines on wide brick streets and red-earth roads, full of people and music, smiles and sideways glances. Old wooden churches, antique craftsman homes and ramshackle slums are knitted together with rusted sheet-metal fencing, coconut palms and mango trees. In a single stroll you'll eavesdrop on loud, jagged Miskito banter, rapid-fire español and lovely,