



León & Northwestern Nicaragua

Includes ➔

León.....	139
Pacific Beaches.....	155
Volcanoes.....	158
San Jacinto.....	159
El Sauce.....	160
Chinandega.....	160
Cosigüina Peninsula Beaches.....	165
Reserva Natural Volcán Cosigüina.....	168

Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Mesón Real (p153)
- ➔ Fritanga La Parrillada (p162)
- ➔ El Mediterraneo (p153)

Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Tortuga Booluda (p149)
- ➔ Surfing Turtle Lodge (p155)
- ➔ Rancho Tranquilo (p167)

Why Go?

This is Nicaragua at its fieriest and most passionate. The regional capital of León is – and will always be – a hotbed of intellectualism and independence. The city has nourished some of Nicaragua's most important political and artistic moments. Less polished but somehow more profound than its age-old rival Granada, the city is beloved for its grand cathedral, breathtaking art museum, hopping nightlife and spirited revolutionary air.

Just out of León, more than a dozen volcanic peaks wait to be climbed (or surfed). This region has some of the best beach accommodation – and gnarliest surfing – in the country. And the virgin wetlands of the Reserva Natural Isla Juan Venado are not to be missed.

Further afield, you'll find the biggest mangrove forest in Central America, awe-inspiring beauty at Reserva Natural Volcán Cosigüina and unique windows into everyday Nicaraguan life in the little towns along the way.

When to Go

December is good for cool temperatures. This is the hottest part of the country, with daytime temperatures just above 30°C (86°F) almost year-round, spiking in sweltering April and dipping into the relatively cool mid-20s (mid-70s) in December.

October and November are the peak months to see nesting turtles at the Reserva Natural Estero Padre Ramos – the whole season lasts between July and December. This is also a good time to think about volunteering as a beach warden or visiting Reserva Natural Isla Juan Venado.

Semana Santa (Holy Week) is held in late March to early April, and Easter week is a Technicolor dreamscape in León. There are sawdust 'carpets' in colonial suburbs, and a sandcastle competition at a nearby beach.

History

The Maribios people were the first inhabitants of what is now León, in the township/suburb of Subtiava. After a series of volcanic eruptions led to the evacuation of the original city of León (now called León Viejo), this site was chosen. It turned out to be a good choice – Subtiava provided plenty of indigenous labor, it was far enough from the ocean to prevent the pirate attacks that had plagued Granada, and the volcanoes were distant and dormant enough not to threaten the city.

León has produced various heroes, most famously poet Rubén Darío, but also independence fighter Miguel Larreynaga (look for him on the 10-córdoba note) and Luisa Amanda Espinoza, the first female Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front; FSLN) member to die in combat. A Sandinista stronghold, the city saw some of the toughest battles during the revolution, documented in the city's murals, museums and bullet-pocked walls.

Despite León's status as a religious and academic center (and the fact that it had been the nation's capital for 242 years), it was Chinandega, to the north, that was chosen as the meeting place for the ill-fated Confederation of American States in the 19th century. Chinandega's claim to fame as the 'city of oranges' waned in the 20th century, as cotton became the principal crop. This in turn changed as world cotton prices plum-

meted and farmers turned to sugarcane and peanuts, the region's main crops to this day.

El Corinto – these days Nicaragua's busiest commercial port – has entered the history books in a big way twice: first when it was the landing site for William Dampier and a band of French and British pirates in the only recorded pirate attack on León, and second when US president Ronald Reagan ordered the illegal mining of the bay, which set in motion a series of machinations that would eventually lead to the Iran-Contra affair.

LEÓN

POP 201,100 / ELEV 110M

Intensely political, buzzing with energy and, at times, drop-dead gorgeous (in a crumbling, colonial kind of way), León is what Managua should be – a city of awe-inspiring churches, fabulous art collections, stunning streetscapes, cosmopolitan eateries, fiery intellectualism, and all-week, walk-everywhere, happening nightlife. Many people fall in love with Granada, but most of them leave their heart in León.

History

Originally located on the slopes of Volcán Momotombo, León committed some of the Spanish conquest's cruelest excesses; even other conquistadors suggested that León's punishment was divine retribution. When the mighty volcano reduced León to rubble

THE CITY OF CHURCHES

With more than 16 places to pray, including several more in Barrio Subtiava, the city tourist board is lobbying to have León officially declared 'The City of Churches.'

The 1639 **Iglesia de San Francisco** is one of the oldest in the city, a national heritage site with lots of gold, a gorgeous nave and a rather rococo interior. It was abandoned between 1830 and 1881, then refurbished with two elaborate altarpieces for San Antonio and Nuestra Señora de La Merced (Our Lady of Mercy). The attached **Convent San Francisco**, founded in 1639, was badly damaged during the 1979 battle for León. Check out what used to be the convent at Hotel El Convento.

Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, built in 1743, is León's only church oriented north–south, and it's historically connected to the city by the 1850 **Puente Guadalupe**, built across the Río Chiquito. And don't let the dumpy, modernist, neoclassic exterior of 1625 **Capilla San Juan de Dios** (1a Calle SO) fool you – when it's open, the interior is one of the city's prettiest, with lots of precious wood and a very human scale.

For something completely different, swing by ultra-Gothic 1884 **Iglesia Zaragoza**, one of the best spots for film students to stage a vampire flick. They could also use one of the several ruined churches around town, including **Ruinas Veracruz** and Iglesia Santiago (p146) in Barrio Subtiava, and **Ruinas San Sebastian**, near La XXI (the 21st Garrison).