

# Welcome to Nicaragua

*Affable Nicaragua embraces travelers with offerings of volcanic landscapes, colonial architecture, sensational beaches and pristine forests that range from breathtaking to downright incredible.*

## Beaches

Whether it's dipping your toes into the crystalline Caribbean or paddling out to the crashing waves of the pounding Pacific, Nicaragua's beaches always deliver the goods. The big barrels of Rivas are revered in surfing circles while the clear waters of the Corn Islands are superb for snorkeling. More sedentary beach bums can choose between accessible slices of sand lined with fine restaurants and happening bars or natural affairs backed by a wall of rainforest. Even the best beaches in the country are refreshingly free of development, so you can experience them just as nature intended.

## Outdoor Adventures

Looking for the ultimate rush? Nicaragua's diverse geography, intense energy and anything-goes attitude is perfect for exhilarating outdoor adventures. Get ready to check a whole gamut of new experiences off your list including: surfing down an active volcano, diving through underwater caves, canoeing through alligator-infested wetlands, swimming across sea channels between tiny white-sand islands and landing a 90-plus-kg tarpon beneath a Spanish fortress in the middle of the jungle. There's no signs, no crowds and no holding back.

## Colonial Splendor

Nicaragua's colonial splendor comes in two distinct, but equally appealing, flavors. The elegant streetscapes of Granada have been entrancing travelers for centuries with their architectural grace. It's Nicaragua's best-preserved colonial town and boasts a meticulously restored cathedral, well-groomed plaza and perfectly maintained mansions that shelter lush internal courtyards. Far less polished, working-class León offers a different colonial experience where your crumbling 300-year-old houses come interspersed with revolutionary murals and architectural masterpieces housing corner stores. It's a vibrant city that, while proud of its heritage, is too busy to feel like a museum.

## Getting off the Beaten Track

There are few destinations with such beauty that are as undeveloped as Nicaragua. Before you know it, you've dropped off the tourist trail and into a world of majestic mountains, cooperative farms, wetlands thronged with wildlife and empty jungle-clad beaches. Forge on and discover remote indigenous communities, overgrown pre-Columbian ruins and untouched rainforests. No matter how far you go, you'll always find friendly locals who are more than willing to share their culture with strangers.



## Why I Love Nicaragua

By Alex Egerton, Author

Upon arriving in Nicaragua, like so many others I was captivated by the youthful energy and crumbling colonial charm of León, a city quite unlike others I had known. But after settling down there I soon identified the unparalleled adventure opportunities that were waiting on my doorstep and up and left to the wild Caribbean Coast. Now I live on the placid shores of Pearl Lagoon where I spend most of my spare time paddling my sea kayaks around the bays, up the jungle creeks and around the stunning Pearl Keys. Every trip's a new experience.

**For more about our authors, see page 320**

# Nicaragua's Top 15

1





## Granada

**1** Granada (p83) is a town of immense and palpable magnetism. At the heart of the city's charms are the picture-perfect cobblestone streets, polychromatic colonial homes and churches, and a lilting air that brings the city's spirited past into present-day tight focus. Most trips here begin and end on foot, and simply dawdling from gallery to restaurant to colonial church can take up the better part of a day. From there, it's off to explore the myriad wild areas, islands, volcanoes and artisan villages nearby. *Catedral de Granada*

## Little Corn Island

**2** With no cars and no noise, just white-sand beaches and secluded coves mixing it with the crystal-clear Caribbean, Little Corn Island (p237) is the paramount place to take a break from the big city. There is plenty to keep you occupied during the day, including diving with hammerhead sharks and through underground caves, kitesurfing the stiff breeze and scrambling over jungle-covered headlands. And there's just enough to do at night, too. Add some great food to the mix and it's no surprise that many find it so hard to leave.



MILENY PHOTOGRAPHY / GETTY IMAGES ©



**2**

ANDREW BARNETT / ALAMY ©

## León

**3** A royal city with revolutionary undercurrents, León both enchants and baffles. Within the city, you'll find an artsy, slightly edgy vibe originally fueled by the Sandinista revolution and now by the university (p148) and a 120-horsepower party scene. Come sunrise, you can spend a good day exploring the Catedral (p143), museums and downtown area, before heading out to honey-blond beaches, volcanoes and Old West cowboy towns. *View from León*

*Catedral*

## Isla de Ometepe

**4** Lago de Nicaragua's beloved centerpiece, Isla de Ometepe (p112) has it all: twin volcanoes, lush hillsides cut by walking tracks, archaeological remains, ziplines, monkeys and birdlife, waterfalls, lapping waves at your doorstep, and a laid-back island air that keeps travelers in the now as they make their way through this lost paradise found again. At the heart of the island's charms are the cool hostels, camping areas and peaced-out traveler scenes. Custom-fit your experience from high-end luxury lodges to groovy-groupie hippie huts.



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JOHN COLETTI / GETTY IMAGES ©



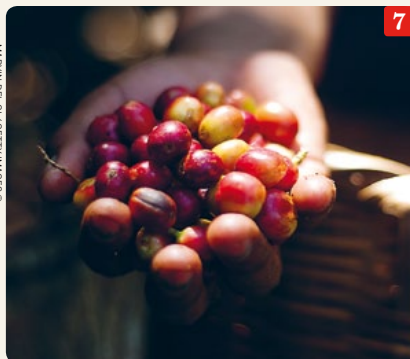
JOHN GUSTINA / ALAMY ©

5



PETE NIESEN / ALAMY ©

6



MARVIN DEL OJO / GETTY IMAGES ©

7

## Río San Juan

**5** Once favored by pirates and prospectors as a path to riches, today the Río San Juan is exalted by nature lovers. All along the river, scores of birds nest on branches overhanging its slow surging waters while its lower reaches are dominated by the Reserva Biológica Indio-Maíz (p256), an impenetrable jungle that shelters jaguars and troupes of noisy monkeys. The only artificial attraction along the river's entire length is the grand Spanish fort (p254) over the rapids at El Castillo.

## Pearl Keys

**6** As you approach the dozen tiny islands ringed by snow-white sand and brilliant Caribbean waters that make up the Pearl Keys (p230), you will enter the realms of the ultimate shipwreck fantasy. Fortunately, you'll be marooned with a capable Creole guide that will cook up a spectacular seafood meal and source ice-cold beers from a mysterious supply, leaving you more time to swim, snorkel, spot sea turtles, or just lie back in your hammock and take in the idyllic panoramic views.

## Coffee Country

**7** A visit to Nicaragua's coffee zone is about more than just sipping plenty of joe, it's about getting out and seeing where it all comes from. Hike among the bushes shaded by ethereal cloud forest around Jinotega (p189) and pick ripe cherries alongside your hosts in a community farming cooperative near Matagalpa (p194). And why stop there when you can follow the beans to the roasting plant and then learn to identify flavors in a cupping session. After this, you'll savor your morning cup in a whole new way.

Coffee beans from the mountains of Matagalpa



8



CHRISTIAN HEBB / GETTY IMAGES ©

9



WAYNE LYNCH / GETTY IMAGES ©

## Surfing near San Juan del Sur

**8** Nicaragua sparked into international stardom on the wake of tanned-and-toned surfer dudes and dudettes. And the surfing scene north and south of regional hub San Juan del Sur (p127) remains cooled-back, reefed-out, soulful and downright brilliant. The stars of the scene are the long rideable waves that fit the bill for surfers of all abilities, but the chillaxed surf camps, beach parties and cool breezes add to the vibe, making a beach vacation here work for everybody in your crew (even the boogie boarders).

## Turtles at La Flor

**9** Head to Nicaragua's southern Pacific coast between July and January to witness sea turtles by the thousands come to shore to lay their eggs at Refugio de Vida Silvestre La Flor (p137). There's a decent beach here, as well, but the highlight is a night tour (generally from nearby San Juan del Sur), where, if you're lucky, you'll see a leatherback or olive ridley mama come to shore to lay her eggs at the end of one of nature's most inspiring and remarkable journeys.

## Islas Solentiname

**10** The Islas Solentiname (p247) are straight out of a fairy tale. You simply must visit in order to experience the magic of this remote jungle-covered archipelago where a community of exceptionally talented artists live and work among the wild animals that are their inspiration. It's a place where an enlightened priest inspired a village to construct a handsome church alive with the sounds of nature and shooting stars illuminate the speckled night sky. Even having been there, you still find it hard to believe it's real. *Woman painting a balsa-wood carved chicken*

10



MARGIE FOLTZER / GETTY IMAGES ©

## Volcán Masaya

**11** Hovering above the artisan villages of Nicaragua's Central Plateau, the smoldering Volcán Masaya and its surrounding national park (p73) are a singular highlight not to be missed by volcanophiles, nature lovers and adventure seekers alike. This is one of the region's most active volcanoes, and it's pretty exciting to see the sulfurous columns of gas billow toward the sky as you relish the million-dollar views. Super-fun short treks take you to lava caves and butterfly gardens. Come sunset, an eerie bat tour tops off your adventure.

JANE SWEENEY / GETTY IMAGES ©



11



## Wildlife-Watching

**12** From the colorful parakeets flying over busy Managua to ubiquitous iguanas scratching across your hotel roof, exotic wildlife is everywhere in Nicaragua. Dedicate some energy to the pursuit and you'll discover some truly phenomenal natural spectacles. Head into the rugged rainforest-covered mountains of the Bosawás (p214) to spot three types of monkeys, toucans and tapirs, while reptile fans will not want to miss getting close to the alligators of Los Guatuzos (p251). Wherever you go, keep your binoculars handy. Baby green iguana



PAUL KENNEDY / GETTY IMAGES ©

## Canopy Tour in Managua

**13** Big-brawling Managua doesn't make it onto many traveler top 10 lists, and one of the best parts of visiting this city is getting away. But you won't have to go far. Within the city's confines, the Parque Histórico Nacional Loma de Tiscapa (p43) is home to the silhouetted statue of Augusto Sandino and was once the site of the presidential palace. Today the highlight of the park is a homegrown canopy-tour operation that swings you through the lush foliage. Zipline canopy tour, Parque Histórico Nacional Loma de Tiscapa



KIKE CALVO / GETTY IMAGES ©

14



CHRISTIAN HEEB / GETTY IMAGES ©

15



PICTUREGARDEN / GETTY IMAGES ©

## Volcano Boarding on Cerro Negro

**14** What goes up must come down. But why walk, when you can strap on a custom-built volcano board and rip-roar your way down a slope of fine volcanic ash? That's the genesis of volcano surfing. And one of the best spots on the planet to dig this new adrenaline sport is atop 700-plus-meter Volcán Cerro Negro in northwestern Nicaragua's Reserva Natural Pilas–El Hoyo (p159). Tour operators in León will even provide you with cool jumpsuits for your dusty-bottomed descent.

## Reserva Natural Estero Padre Ramos

**15** The Reserva Natural Estero Padre Ramos (p167) is a vast nature reserve located in the far northwestern corner of Nicaragua. The largest remaining mangrove forest in Central America, the reserve is home to ocelots, alligators and a universe's worth of birds. While this is a wild corner of Nicaragua, basic tourist services will get you into the spider-webbing mangrove forest, to the beaches where sea turtles lay their eggs and good surf dominates, and into local communities.

# Need to Know

For more information, see Survival Guide p290

## Currency

Córdoba (C\$)

## Language

Spanish

## Visas

Generally not required for stays up to three months.

## Money

ATMs in most large towns. Credit cards accepted in larger hotels and restaurants.

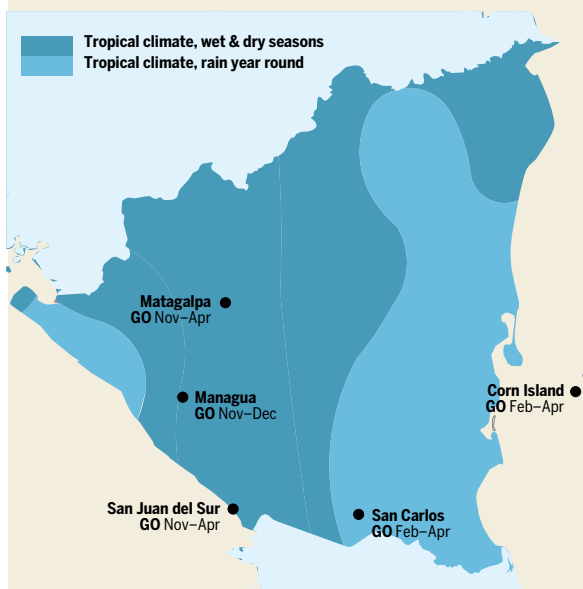
## Cell Phones

Local SIM cards work in any unblocked North American or Latin American phone. Other phones may need to be set to roaming.

## Time

Central Standard Time (GMT/UTC minus six hours)

## When to Go



## High Season

(Dec–Apr)

- ➔ Prices increase by up to 25% in popular tourist spots.
- ➔ Make reservations in advance for beach-side accommodations.
- ➔ Hot, sunny and dry conditions throughout the country.

## Shoulder

(Nov)

- ➔ Rains ease throughout the Pacific but Caribbean still wet.
- ➔ Cool weather and green countryside make for best trekking.
- ➔ Coffee harvest energizes northern region.

## Low Season

(May–Oct)

- ➔ Heavy rains make some roads in rural areas difficult to pass and mountain hiking trails slippery.
- ➔ Biggest swell on Pacific side pulls a crowd to the best breaks.
- ➔ Advanced reservations generally not necessary.



## Websites

**Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) A comprehensive online overview of the country for travelers.

**Vianica.com** ([www.vianica.com/traveling](http://www.vianica.com/traveling)) Log on to this interactive map and click on your route to find Nicaraguan road conditions, travel-time estimates and more.

**Intur** ([www.visitnicaragua.com/ingles](http://www.visitnicaragua.com/ingles)) The official government website is in English and Spanish, with lots of cheerful, vague information and an awe-some photo gallery.

**Latin American Network Information Center** ([www.lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/nicaragua](http://www.lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/nicaragua)) An excellent portal with academic and tourism-oriented offerings.

## Important Numbers

<b>Nicaragua country code</b>	☑ 505
<b>International access code</b>	☑ 00
<b>Fire (from cell phones)</b>	☑ 115 ☑ 911
<b>Police</b>	☑ 118
<b>Ambulance</b>	☑ 128

## Exchange Rates

<b>Australia</b>	A\$1	24.95
<b>Canada</b>	C\$1	24.21
<b>Euro zone</b>	€1	32.44
<b>Japan</b>	¥100	25.89
<b>New Zealand</b>	NZ\$1	20.20
<b>Serbia</b>	100DIN	€0.88
<b>UK</b>	£1	38.19
<b>US</b>	US\$1	24.30

For current exchange rates see [www.xe.com](http://www.xe.com)

## Daily Costs

### Budget:

#### Less than US\$25

- ➔ Guesthouse: US\$10-15
- ➔ Typical meal: US\$4
- ➔ Museum admission: US\$2
- ➔ Local bus: US\$0.15

### Midrange:

#### US\$25-75

- ➔ Midrange hotel: US\$20-40
- ➔ Restaurant meal: US\$10-12
- ➔ Adventure tour: US\$25
- ➔ Short taxi ride: US\$2

### Top End:

#### More than US\$75

- ➔ Luxury hotel: US\$80
- ➔ Gourmet meal: US\$18
- ➔ Car hire: US\$40
- ➔ Internal flight: US\$100

## Opening Hours

Opening hours vary wildly in Nicaragua as there are many informal and family-run establishments. General office hours are from 9am to 5pm. Some offices and shops, especially in rural areas, close for lunch from noon to 2pm. Government departments usually only attend the public in the mornings, but this varies between departments. Cheaper eateries usually open for breakfast and lunch while more formal restaurants serve lunch and dinner.

**Banks** 8:30am–4:30pm

**Bars** noon–midnight

**Clubs** 8pm–3am

**Government Offices** 8am–1pm

**Museums** 9am–noon & 2–5pm

**Restaurants** noon–10pm

**Shops** 9am–6pm

## Arriving in Nicaragua

### Managua International Airport

(p60) Official taxis inside the airport meet all incoming flights and charge around US\$20 to most local destinations. During the day, cheaper licensed collective taxis wait outside the domestic terminal. If you're heading out of Managua, it's possible to prearrange a pick-up with a private shuttle service.

## Getting Around

Transport in Nicaragua is functional rather than comfortable and probably more chaotic than you are used to.

**Flights** Domestic flights are moderately priced and the fastest way to get you where you're going; however, they only serve more far-off destinations. They are often slightly delayed, but rarely canceled.

**Car** Renting a car enables travel at your own pace and access to off-the-beaten-track destinations. There is not much traffic on the roads and driving in Nicaragua is fairly stress-free (once you learn how to handle the traffic cops).

**Buses** Nicaragua's fleet of old-school buses are slow and uncomfortable but will get you anywhere you want to go for next to nothing. There are more comfortable, but far from luxurious, coach services to some long-distance destinations.

For much more on transport, see p298



# First Time Nicaragua

For more information, see **Survival Guide (p290)**

## Checklist

- ➔ Make sure your passport is valid for at least six months
- ➔ Check latest visa requirements online (see p296)
- ➔ Arrange travel insurance with medical evacuation cover (see p294)
- ➔ Inform your debit/credit card issuer that you are traveling to Central America
- ➔ Organize vaccinations against hepatitis A and typhoid and consult your doctor about malaria prophylactics

## What to Pack

- ➔ Sturdy walking shoes
- ➔ Comfortable sports sandals
- ➔ Insect repellent containing DEET
- ➔ An emergency supply of US dollars in small bills
- ➔ A two-pronged electrical adapter
- ➔ A lightweight raincoat capable of resisting tropical downpours
- ➔ Contact lens solution and other personal toiletries

## Top Tips for Your Trip

- ➔ Always go for a window seat in public transport, the landscapes are absolutely breathtaking.
- ➔ Take some Spanish classes at the beginning of your trip. Nicaraguans are outgoing and friendly but few have foreign-language skills.
- ➔ Hire local guides wherever possible, they're cheap and you'll learn not only about the attraction you're visiting but also about the culture.

## What to Wear

The heat in Nicaragua can be oppressive, so you'll probably spend most of your time in lightweight t-shirts and shorts or cotton trousers. If you're heading to the northern highlands, you'll probably make use of a medium pullover for the cool evenings.

Note that in general, men in Nicaragua don't wear shorts unless practicing sports. Go for jeans and short-sleeved shirt or polo shirt if you are going out with locals.

On the beach women going topless is almost never acceptable and in rural areas bikinis may draw unwanted attention; consider swimming in shorts and a t-shirt like the locals.

## Sleeping

Outside absolute peak periods in major tourist destinations, it's rarely necessary to reserve accommodations in advance in Nicaragua. See p290 for more accommodation information.

- ➔ **Hospedajes** These cheap guesthouses are often family run and are sometimes the only option in smaller towns.
- ➔ **Hotels** Larger, more polished and less personal; they offer more facilities including reception and often a restaurant.
- ➔ **Hostels** Traveler's hostels with dormitories and common areas are only found in the main tourist areas.
- ➔ **Ecolodges** Usually at the higher end of the market, these offer comfortable rooms surrounded by nature.

## Money

ATMs are widespread in most mid-sized towns in Nicaragua, but you'll need to stock up on cash before heading to rural areas. Visa is the most widely accepted card followed by cards on the MasterCard network. Amex is not generally accepted. Most Nicaraguan ATMs charge a fee (around US\$3) on top of what your bank charges.

Credit cards are widely accepted in larger towns but rarely in rural areas apart from in higher end hotels. US dollars are the alternative currency and are widely accepted, but for smaller items using Córdobas is cheaper and easier.

It's worth carrying an emergency supply of dollars in case you have problems with your card.

For more information, see p294.

## Bargaining

All-out haggling is not really part of Nicaraguan culture; however, a few back-and-forths at an outdoor market or over a hotel room is considered acceptable.

## Tipping

Tipping is not widespread in Nicaragua except in the following situations:

- ➔ **Guides** Tipping guides is recommended as this often makes up the lion's share of their salary.
- ➔ **Restaurants** A tip of around 10% is expected for table service. Some higher end restaurants automatically add this to the bill.



Girl in Nueva Segovia

## Etiquette

- ➔ **Greetings** A firm handshake for men and a peck on the cheek for women.
- ➔ **Titles** When addressing Nicaraguans add Don (for men) or Doña (for women) before their given name.
- ➔ **Drinking** If you are sharing a bottle of rum, use the supplied shot glass to measure your drink; don't pour freely from the bottle.

## Language

Even in major tourist destinations, very few Nicaraguans speak English. However, Nicaraguans are outgoing and friendly and will patiently listen if you make the effort to communicate. Learning a few basic phrases in Spanish will make traveling in Nicaragua a much more rewarding experience and is highly recommended if you plan on traveling to remote rural destinations. Hiring a translator to accompany you around town or on longer trips is affordable – ask at your hotel.

On the Caribbean coast English speakers will have no problem communicating with Creole residents, although it may take some getting used to the accent and grammar.

See Language (p303) for more information.



# If You Like

## Beaches

The Pacific has the waves, the Caribbean's got the reefs.

**Little Corn Island** Brilliant turquoise waters meet snow white sand in secluded coves on this enchanted isle. (p237)

**Playa El Coco** A spectacular stretch of sparkling sand framed by imposing forest-covered headlands. (p137)

**Pearl Keys** Live out your shipwreck fantasies beneath the coconut palms on this group of tiny, idyllic Caribbean islands. (p230)

**El Ostional** Charming fishing village with a sweeping brown-sand beach. (p137)

**Playa Aserradores** Long, smooth stretch of sand with a powerful, hollow beach break. (p166)

## Volcanoes

**Volcán Masaya** Watch parakeets return to nest among clouds of sulfuric gases above visible pools of lava. (p73)

**Volcán Maderas** Hike up through cloud forest to reach a chilly jade green crater lake. (p123)

**Volcán Momotombo** Perched regally at the top of Lago de Managua, its perfect cone is a symbol of Nicaragua. (p158)

**Volcán Cosigüina** Climb the remnants of what was Central America's biggest volcano to look out over three countries. (p168)

**Volcán Mombacho** Accessible cloud forest with great hiking and even better bird-watching. (p102)

## Colonial Towns

**Granada** Charge your batteries, Nicaragua's wonderfully preserved colonial showpiece lays on the charm from the moment you get off the bus. (p83)

**León** Energetic and unpretentious, this gregarious city has stunning colonial streetscapes, awe-inspiring churches and fine cosmopolitan eateries. (p139)

**Ciudad Antigua** Boasting a remarkable Moorish-influenced 17th-century church, this is one of Nicaragua's oldest towns. (p185)

**San Rafael del Norte** Surrounded by peaks, this charming small town is centered around the light-filled Templo Parroquial San Rafael Arcángel. (p187)

## Coffee

Matagalpa and Jinotega departments have the pedigree but Estelí and little-visited Nueva Segovia also produce some outstanding beans.

**La Bastilla Ecolodge** Hike through immense shade-grown coffee plantations before improving your cupping skills at the laboratory. (p192)

**San Ramón** Try your hand picking coffee beans at local farms then visit a community roasting plant. (p200)

**Selva Negra** Follow the coffee from bush to cup or just sit by the mist-covered lake and enjoy a fresh brewed mug. (p201)

**Área Protegida Miraflores** Combine your coffee tour with a spot of bird-watching or a visit to waterfalls surrounded by cloud forest. (p177)

## Wildlife

**Refugio de Vida Silvestre La Flor** Watching thousands of marine turtles arriving on this beach to lay their eggs is one

### IF YOU LIKE... CIGARS

Make sure to join some factory tours in Estelí (p173) where you can watch classic stogies being hand rolled.



JAMIE PERIN/GETTY IMAGES ©



ALFREDO MANQUEZ/GETTY IMAGES ©

(Above) Coffee beans

(Below) Chestnut-mandibled toucan

of Latin America's superlative nature experiences. (p137)

**Refugio Bartola** Don rubber boots and head out into the jungle to spot three kinds of monkeys, fluorescent frogs and maybe even a tapir. (p256)

**Volcán Mombacho** Accessible cloud forest with great hiking and even better bird-watching. (p102)

**Refugio de Vida Silvestre Los Guatuzos** Perfectly preserved wetlands with fantastic bird-watching during the day and action-packed crocodile-spotting at night. (p251)

**Islas Solentiname** Bring binoculars to spot some of the thousands of migratory birds nesting in this remote archipelago. (p247)

**Reserva Natural Macizos de Peñas Blancas** Clinging to magnificent mountain peaks, this jungle is home to pumas, jaguars and ocelots. (p201)

## Outdoor Adventure

**Volcano boarding** Volcán Cerro Negro is one of the few places on the planet to tick this deranged adventure sport off your list. (p148)

**Kayaking and canoeing** Paddle through the mangroves of Padre Ramos (p167), down the mighty Río San Juan (p254) or around majestic Isla de Ometepe. (p112)

**Tubing** Float with the current down the narrow **Cañon de Somoto**. (p182)

**Diving** Head to the Corn Islands for cave and reef dives in crystal-clear Caribbean waters. (p231)

**Surfing** Base yourself in San Juan del Sur, a vibrant beach town surrounded by top-class breaks. (p127)

# Month by Month

## TOP EVENTS

**Noche de Agüizotes,**  
October

**Maypole,** May

**Turtle-Watching at La Flor,** October

**International Poetry Festival,** February

**Semana Santa in León,** March/April

## January

Perfect beach weather in the Pacific region with almost nonstop sunshine – expect bigger crowds and more expensive accommodations.



### Baseball Finals

Stadiums get packed for the finals of the Liga Nacional de Beisbol Nicaraguense (Nicaraguan National Baseball League; [www.lnbp.com.ni](http://www.lnbp.com.ni)). Catch games at the Estadio Denis Martínez in Managua.

## February

Crowds thin out but it's still all sunshine, making this one of the best times to plan a beach break. It can be uncomfortably hot in cities.



### International Poetry Festival

Top Spanish-language wordsmiths from around the globe gather for this festival ([www.festivalpoesianicaragua.com](http://www.festivalpoesianicaragua.com)) in Granada with regular readings and more low-key fringe events.

## March

The heat wave continues with soaring temperatures and dry conditions. Whether it falls in March or April, Easter is big business: prices spike, accommodations sell out and beaches get packed.



### San Lazaro

Head to Masaya on the weekend before Palm Sunday for this religious festival that involves getting dressed up in bizarre costumes – even local dogs get in on the act.



### Semana Santa in León

Easter is a major event all over the country but nowhere does it quite like León, where the traditional fireworks and parades are accompanied by sawdust mosaics and a sandcastle competition.

## April

More sunshine, this time accompanied by big surf in the Pacific and calm seas throughout the Caribbean. After Easter crowds drop dramatically.



### Surf's Up!

The combination of big swells along the Pacific and bright sunshine bring optimal conditions (and big crowds) to many of Nicaragua's best surf breaks, including the acclaimed Popoyo.

## May

Low season gets underway with sunshine still sticking around but by the end of the month the skies open, marking the beginning of the wet season.



### Maypole

Bluefields celebrates fertility with a series of neighborhood block parties culminating in the bright and boisterous carnival on the last Saturday of the month and the closing Tuluulu when the entire town takes a midnight romp through the streets accompanied by a brass band.



## June

Heavy rains drench the entire country, bringing significantly cooler temperatures but turning some rural roads into impassable pools of mud.



### San Juan Bautista

The normally serene flower-growing town of Catarina is transformed by this wild festival in honor of San Juan Bautista, featuring dancing, ceremonial fights and music.

## July

Rains continue unabated throughout the country. Most hiking trails are now muddy but many waterfalls are at their very best.



### Aniversario de la Revolución

Dress in red and black and head to the plaza in Managua to celebrate the revolution alongside hard-drinking Sandinista supporters bussed in from all over the country. Or check out the bohemian fringe event in San Antonio.

## August

Rains generally ease a little in the Pacific with most days enjoying stretches of sunshine. Meanwhile, the Caribbean experiences one of its wettest months.



### Santo Domingo de Guzmán

Managua's biggest religious procession sees believers covering themselves in

pitch-black used motor oil to accompany a tiny statue of the saint in his journey from the hills of Santo Domingo into the heart of the capital.



### Crab Soup

Corn Island celebrates the end of slavery with a parade, concerts, plenty of beer and free ginger bread and bowls of crab soup for everyone.

## September

The height of hurricane season in the Caribbean may disrupt travel plans, but when there are no storms the weather is generally bright and there are great deals on accommodations.



### Feria del Maíz

The farmers of Nueva Segovia descend on the northern town of Jalapa for a celebration of everything corn. There's corn clothes, corn altars and corn dances, not to mention plenty of *chicha* (fermented corn drink).

## October

Rains return with a vengeance throughout the Pacific with frequent heavy downpours in the afternoons. Traveler numbers are at their lowest.



### Turtle-Watching at La Flor

Refugio de Vida Silvestre La Flor is the backdrop for one of nature's most amazing spectacles when olive ridley turtles arrive en masse (sometimes up to 3000 in one night) to lay their eggs on the sandy shores.



### Noche de Agüizotes

This spooky festival in Masaya brings to life characters from horror stories of the colonial period with elaborate costumes. Keep an eye out for the headless priest.

## November

Things get moving again following the easing of the rains. Travelers spread out throughout the country and the festival season warms up.



### Garifuna Week

Nicaragua's Garifuna community celebrate their rich cultural heritage with drums, dancing and gastronomy in the remote community of Orinoco on the shores of Laguna de Perlas.



### Carnival Acuático

Dancers from all over the country travel to San Carlos for this colorful parade of floats on the Río San Juan accompanied by concerts and a food fair on the waterfront.

## December

The end of the rains in the Pacific region sees the high season begin in earnest.

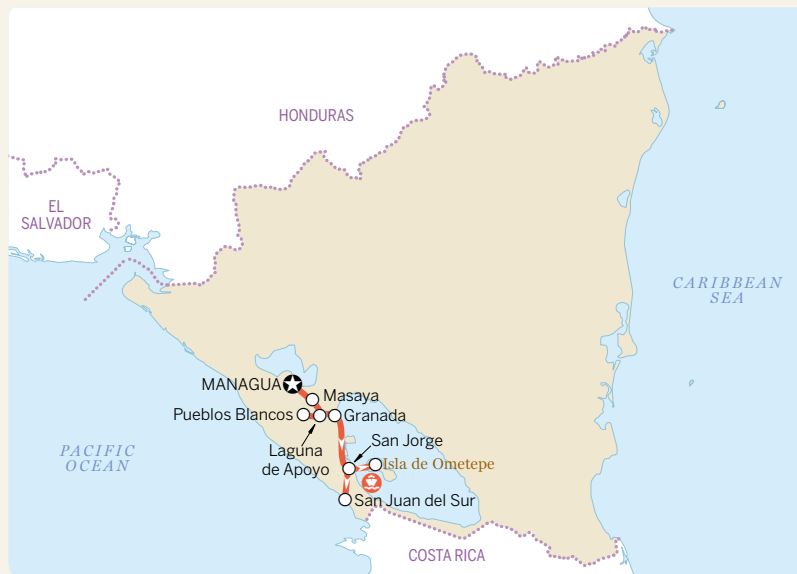


### La Gritería

Celebrated on the eve of the Immaculate Conception, La Gritería sees hordes of children going from door to door singing songs to the Virgin Mary and receiving candies. It's celebrated throughout the country but León gets into it with unrivaled vigor.

## Plan Your Trip

# Itineraries



10  
DAYS

### Stunning Southwest

If you've got limited time in Nicaragua, a trip through the southwest is big on awesome and small on hours in the bus. The region is a condensed wonderland of barreling surf, volcanoes, crater lakes, colonial towns and artisan villages that includes many of Nicaragua's must-see highlights.

Fly into **Managua** (p40) and take in the view across town from Sandino's silhouette on the Loma de Tiscapa before heading south and descending into the lush crater at **Laguna de Apoyo** (p75) for the

night. Spend the next day swimming in the rich sulfuric waters or spotting birds and howler monkeys in the forest, before enjoying the spectacular night sky.

The following morning, visit the artisan workshops of the nearby **Pueblos Blancos** (p76), including the pottery cooperative at San Juan del Oriente.

Then head 30 minutes down the road for some colonial splendor in charismatic **Granada** (p83). Spend three nights taking in the wonderful streetscapes, visiting the museums and churches, and dining in the fine restaurants. While you're here make



Cascada San Ramón, Isla de Ometepe

day trips to kayak through the islets just offshore and hike among the cloud forest atop Volcán Mombacho.

Next head down the highway to San Jorge, from where you'll take the ferry across to the out-of-this world **Isla de Ometepe** (p112) with its twin volcanoes and endless outdoor activities. Spend one night among the howler monkeys at Reserva Charco Verde and another at the base of Volcán Maderas, from where you can hike to the crater lake surrounded by cloud forest.

Then head across the isthmus to the surfing capital of **San Juan de Sur** (p127),

where you'll spend three days lazing on the splendid surrounding beaches or surfing some of the many excellent breaks in the area. Take a day trip to the charming fishing village of El Ostional or, if you're lucky, to watch sea turtles arrive en masse at Refugio de Vida Silvestre La Flor. In the evenings, work your way through the happening beachfront bars and restaurants.

On your way back to Managua, stop off at **Masaya** (p67) to shop for souvenirs and gifts in the excellent Mercado Artesanías (National Artisans Market) and visit the hammock workshops.





3  
WEEKS

## Northern Loop

Rich in nature and revolutionary culture, northern Nicaragua serves rugged and refined equally. In one trip you'll go from sipping organic coffee at the source to surfing an active volcano. Charge your batteries, you'll want to take plenty of pictures or no one will believe you when you get home.

Upon arrival skip through **Managua** (p40) and head for the crumbling colonial beauty of **León** (p139) to give Nicaragua the fantastic introduction it deserves. Spend three days exploring this endearing city on foot, visiting fascinating museums, spacious mansions and glorious churches. If you're feeling energetic, hike one of the nearby volcanoes or surf the slopes of Cerro Negro.

From León head out west to the beach at **Las Peñitas** (p156) and find a spot in a sand-floor beachside bar for the spectacular sunset. In the morning make an early start to travel north to **Jiquilillo** (p166) and spend a couple of days soaking up the ambience in this pretty fishing village and paddling through the mangroves of the nearby Reserva Natural Estero Padre Ramos.

Then travel across the Maribios Volcanic chain and into the mountains to **Estelí** (p172), where you can visit cigar factories and check out the revolutionary murals. After a couple of days head into mountains in the **Área Protegida Miraflores** (p177) for two days of horseback riding, wildlife-spotting and farm-culture immersion.

Move on to **Somoto** (p181) and to Monumento Nacional Cañon de Somoto to swim, jump and rappel your way through the canyon.

Next morning travel to **Matagalpa** (p194) for a few caffeine-fuelled days picking coffee beans and hiking on local plantations. Continue climbing higher into the mountains, stopping at the gorgeous Selva Negra coffee estate, before arriving in **Jinotega** (p188), gateway to the cloud forests of Reserva Natural Cerro Datanlí-El Diablo. Spend a day in town to climb Cerro la Cruz and then spend a couple of days hiking in the reserve.

Give your muscles a break with a boat cruise on **Lago de Apanás** (p193) before continuing on to **San Rafael del Norte** (p187) to visit one of Nicaragua's most magnificent churches or fly through the pine forest on a zipline. On your way back to Managua call in at **Chagüitillo** (p202) to view the pre-Columbian petroglyphs.



MARIO LOPEZ/EPICORIS ©



LATITUDESTOCK - TTL/GETTY IMAGES ©

Top: Monumento Nacional Cañon de Somoto  
Bottom: Iglesia de La Recolectión, León

2  
WEEKS

## Cruising the Río San Juan

PLAN YOUR TRIP ITINERARIES

The southeast corner of Nicaragua is an unparalleled playground for nature lovers of all dispositions, boasting both comfortable eco-retreats and more strenuous adventures among lush wetlands and towering rainforests that are filled with fascinating ruins, colorful reptiles and first-class birdlife.

From **Managua** (p40) fly or bus it to **San Carlos** (p244) or pick up the ferry in Granada or Ometepe. Dedicate a morning to checking out the old Spanish fort and waterfront before taking the afternoon boat over to the enchanted archipelago of the **Islas Solentiname** (p247). Spend a night on both Isla San Fernando and Isla Mancarrón, following jungle trails to in situ petroglyphs, swimming in the clear waters and visiting local artist workshops.

From Mancarrón, charter a boat to the **Río Papaturro** (p251) in the Refugio de Vida Silvestre Los Guatuzos, stopping to spot the amazing birdlife at some of the smaller islands on the way. Hike through the thick monkey-inhabited forest or kayak in the wetlands before heading out on an alligator safari in the evening.

Next take the public boat back to San Carlos to pick up a riverboat down the Río San Juan to **Boca de Sábalo** (p252), a small river town surrounded by steamy jungle. Take a tour to a local cacao plantation and chocolate factory or simply relax on your hotel balcony and spot aquatic birds on the banks of the majestic river.

After two nights in Sabalos, continue downstream to **El Castillo** (p254), where an imposing Spanish fort looms over the rapids. Spend two days here riding horses through the rolling green hills and feasting on giant river shrimp.

The following stop is the **Refugio Bartola** (p256) biological station, with a network of trails through towering old-growth forest and kayaks to paddle up the narrow jungle-clad Río Bartola to crystal-clear swimming holes.

Continue the journey by picking up a riverboat heading downriver to **San Juan de Nicaragua** (p257), where the Río San Juan pours into the Caribbean Sea. Give yourself three days to explore the ruins of Greytown, spot manatees in hidden lagoons and head up the Río Indio into the heart of the Reserva Biológica Indio-Mafz. From San Juan fly direct back to Managua.

LARRY LARSEN / ALAMY ©



PAUL KENNEDY / GETTY IMAGES ©



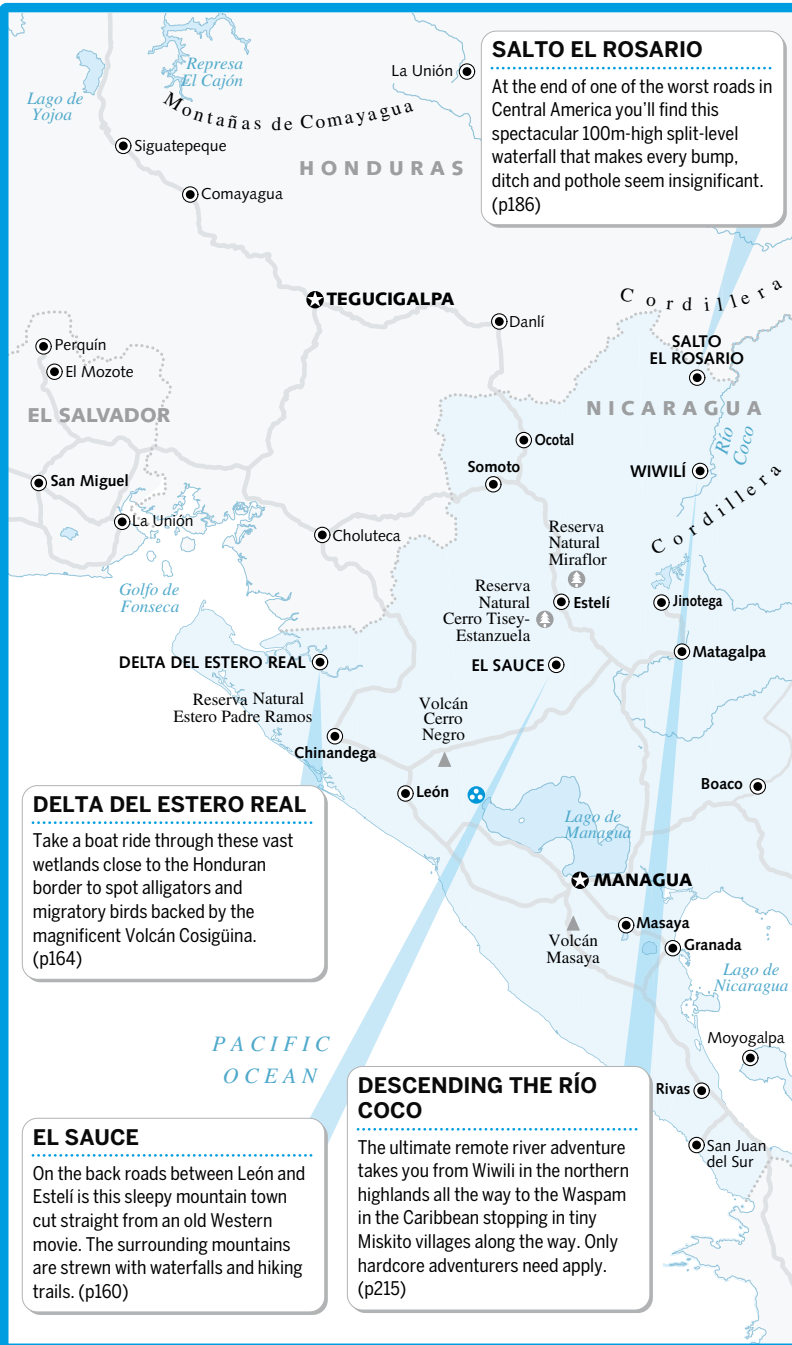
Top: El Castillo fort overlooking the Río San Juan  
Bottom: Capuchin monkeys







## Off the Beaten Track: Nicaragua



### SALTO EL ROSARIO

At the end of one of the worst roads in Central America you'll find this spectacular 100m-high split-level waterfall that makes every bump, ditch and pothole seem insignificant. (p186)

### DELTA DEL ESTERO REAL

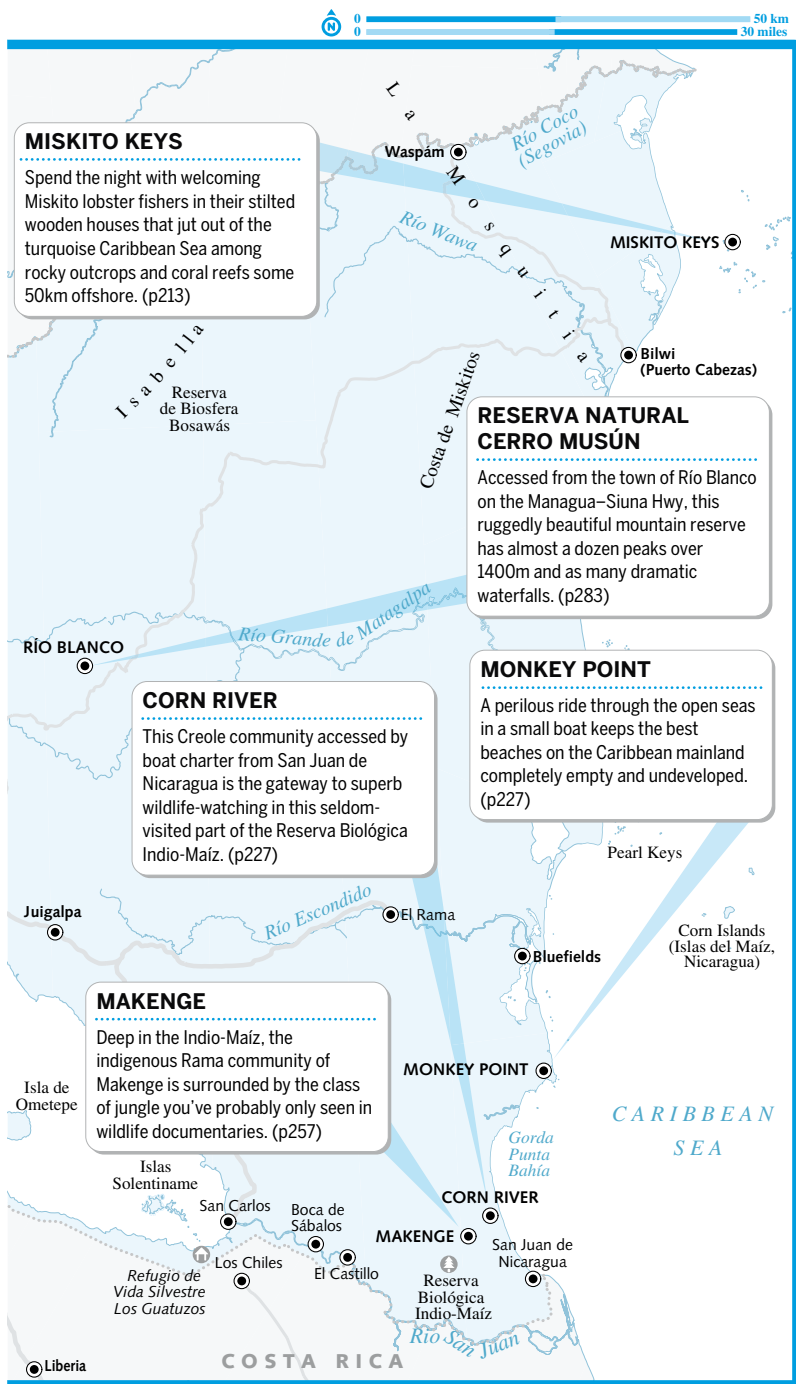
Take a boat ride through these vast wetlands close to the Honduran border to spot alligators and migratory birds backed by the magnificent Volcán Cosigüina. (p164)

### EL SAUCE

On the back roads between León and Estelí is this sleepy mountain town cut straight from an old Western movie. The surrounding mountains are strewn with waterfalls and hiking trails. (p160)

### DESCENDING THE RÍO COCO

The ultimate remote river adventure takes you from Wiwili in the northern highlands all the way to the Waspam in the Caribbean stopping in tiny Miskito villages along the way. Only hardcore adventurers need apply. (p215)



## Plan Your Trip

# Nicaragua Outdoors

Pristine, largely unpopulated and with an increasing degree of environmental protection, Nicaragua is wide open for authentic wilderness adventure without the corporate sheen. Whether it's sand-boarding down active volcanoes or a leisurely hike through orchid-scented cloud forests, in Nicaragua you are never far from a spectacular nature experience.

## Best Outdoor Experiences

### Best Wildlife-Watching

Reserva Biológica Indio-Maíz (p256), Refugio de Vida Silvestre La Flor (p137), Reserva de Biosfera Bosawás (p214) and Refugio de Vida Silvestre Los Guatuzos (p251)

### Best Volcano Climbs

Volcán Cosigüina (p168), Volcán Maderas (p123) and Volcán Telica (p159)

### Best Cloud-Forest Trek

Reserva Natural Macizos de Peñas Blancas (p201)

### Best Extreme Sports

Volcano-boarding Cerro Negro (p148), abseiling in Monumento Nacional Cañon de Somoto (p182)

### Best Diving & Snorkeling

Great Corn Island (p231), Little Corn Island (p231) and Pearl Keys (p230)

### Best Fishing

Río San Juan (p251), San Juan del Sur (p127) and Río Escondido (p224)

## Diving & Snorkeling

With 1040km of coastline, most of it untainted and underdeveloped, it's no wonder that people are interested in getting all wet.

You can dive Nicaragua's Laguna de Apoyo, cruising past underwater fumaroles and saying hello to fish not found elsewhere in the world. But the best place to dive – especially if you like cave dives – is the Corn Islands, where hammerhead sharks and 40 species of coral await.

The reefs surrounding the islands are also great for snorkeling, especially around Sally Peachie on the big island, and Otto Beach on the *islita*. For more outstanding snorkeling, head to the spectacular Pearl Keys, where you can swim among marine turtles and then rest on wonderful white-sand beaches.

## Make it Happen

Serious snorkeling enthusiasts will want to bring their own mask, snorkel and fins as rental gear varies greatly in quality and is not widely available apart from on the Corn Islands.

The following dive shops are PADI certified and offer both courses and leisure dives: Dive Little Corn (p237), Dolphin Dive (p237) and Neptune Watersports (p128).

## Hiking

Thanks to an unlikely environmental consciousness (the Nicaraguan government found time to protect dozens of wilderness areas during the turbulent 1980s) and the war, which probably did more to save the rainforests than Unesco did in most countries, there's a lot of fairly pristine forest out there to see.

Some of the most interesting and easily accessible are at Área Protegida Miraflores, Reserva Natural Macizos de Peñas Blancas and Reserva Natural Cerro Datanlí-El Diablo.

The climbs with the real cachet, however, are any of the dozens of volcanoes, including the Maribios chain, Volcán Cosigüina and the volcanoes of Isla Ometepe. And if you're into dominating nature, consider the full-day climb to the peak of Cerro Mogotón (2106m), Nicaragua's highest mountain.

## Make it Happen

Guides are usually recommended (and sometimes compulsory) for hikes in all but the best-developed natural parks and reserves, particularly for the volcanoes. Even on easy hikes, guides can almost always find things you never would. In smaller towns, ask about guides at the *alcaldía* (mayor's office), usually right on the Parque Central (central park).

Base yourself in the hiking havens of Estelí, Matagalpa or Jinotega to explore the mountains of the north. For volcanoes, the best access is from León.

There are a number of companies offering organized hikes. The following are recommended:

**Quetzaltrekkers** (p148) Nonprofit outfit in León offering high-adventure volcano climbs.

**Tree Huggers** (p173) Based in Estelí, offers hikes around Estelí including to Área Protegida Miraflores and Cañon de Somoto.

**Matagalpa Tours** (p195) Matagalpa outfit, with treks to Reserva Natural Cerro Apante, Datanlí, Peñas Blancas and other more off-the-beaten-track destinations.

## Surfing

The center of Nicaraguan surfing remains San Juan del Sur, giving rise to a wave of surf camps and strongholds spreading northward to the holy grail of Nicaraguan wave-riding, Popoyo, past flawless beach breaks, scary-fun lava point breaks and lots of barrels, when conditions are right. Playa Gigante has the greatest concentration of surf camps, where all-inclusive means room, meals and boat rides out to the best waves in the area every day. North of Popoyo, despite some excellent surfing, services are thin; surfing on the Caribbean coast is possible, but there's no infrastructure and not much information available.

The best breaks often require boats to get to, not just because they're offshore, but because housing developments along the coast block land access. To make up for it, southern Nicaragua is caressed by an almost constant offshore wind, perhaps

### HIKING GEAR CHECKLIST

Trekking for leisure is not particularly popular among Nicaraguans and quality gear is hard to find on the ground. If you plan on getting off the beaten track, make sure to bring the following:

- ➔ **Comfortable footwear** Consider both leather hiking boots for long days in the mountains and comfortable, sturdy sports sandals for treks involving river crossings.
- ➔ **Water purification tablets**
- ➔ **Lightweight sleeping bag** Believe it or not it does actually get cold in mountainous regions of Nicaragua.
- ➔ **Hammock** Indispensable for long boat rides or taking a break in the jungle high above the creepy crawlies of the forest floor.
- ➔ **Tent** If you find one in Nicaragua, it's likely to be bulky and barely waterproof. Bring a lightweight hiking model from home.



caused by the presence of Lago de Nicaragua and Lago de Managua.

## Make it Happen

Nicaragua has great waves year-round. March to November is considered the best time to surf, with the biggest waves usually in March, April and October (consistently 1m to 2m, frequently 3m to 4m). November to March is the dry season, with smaller waves (averaging under 2m) but better weather – this is the best time for beginners.

Water temperatures average around mid-20°C (mid-70°F) year-round, but from December to April an upwelling offshore means that the water's temperature can drop; consider bringing a long-sleeve wet-suit top.

You can buy, sell and rent boards in San Juan del Sur and Popoyo, but it's generally better to bring your own board (consider selling it when you leave).

Numerous surfing outfits offer everything from one-on-one instruction to week-long all-inclusive surf packages. Listings are provided in the closest city to the waves.

## Swimming

From sunny Pacific beaches to cool crater lakes, and lots of rivers and waterfalls, you'll always find places to put your bathing suit to work.

There are eight major crater lakes, with excellent swimming at Laguna de Apoyo, surrounded by lodging options, or undeveloped Laguna de Asososca, near León.

Isla de Ometepe has some excellent swimming opportunities, including the remarkable natural sand jetty at Punta Jesús María and the mineral-rich waters of La Presa Ojo de Agua.

The best beach swims are at some of the stunning coves around San Juan del

## BEST BREAKS

Here are some favorite waves, which we've listed northeast to southwest. All of these beaches are on the Pacific coast. For a comprehensive list of the best breaks pick up a map (US\$8) from [Surf Maps](http://www.surfmaps.com) ([www.surfmaps.com](http://www.surfmaps.com)).

- **Playa Aseradores** (p166) Just northeast of Chinandega, the beach is also called Boom-wavos for the powerful, hollow beach break making all that noise. There's another left five minutes offshore and plenty more waves around.
- **El Corinto** (p165) One of the best waves in the country goes almost unsurfed out there beyond Playa Paso Caballos, but it's boat access only; just north is a river-mouth break with left-breaking peaks.
- **Poneloya and Las Peñitas** (p155) Only decent surfing, but the easiest access on Nicaragua's north Pacific, just 20km from León.
- **Puerto Sandino** (p157) The stretch from Puerto Sandino to El Velero has half a dozen reef and rocky-bottomed beach breaks, including one spectacular left.
- **Playa Huehueté** (p82) Now is that golden time between when the road is paved and when the gated communities go up: check out the point, beach and river-mouth break now!
- **Playa Popoyo** (p126) This collection of sandy-floored surf lodges may be Nicaragua's next bona fide surf town, with at least four named waves: Popoyo, a right and left point break; aggressive Bus Stop; fast and rocky-floored Cobra; and the best wave in the region, Emergencias, with a left for the longboards and hollow right for short boards.
- **Playa Gigante** (p125) Accessing another handful of named waves, most of them a boat ride away, it's no wonder that surf lodges are springing up all over this beautiful beach.
- **Playa Maderas** (p135) Sometimes called Los Playones, this excellent surf spot with easy access from San Juan del Sur has a slow wave with two rights and two lefts that's perfect for beginners.

Sur and in the crystal-clear waters of the Caribbean around the Pearl Keys and the Corn Islands.

## Wildlife

Nicaragua is home to an impressive array of tropical ecosystems, each offering their own outstanding wildlife-spotting opportunities.

The best spots to see big animals is in the tropical rainforests of the Reserva Biológica Indio-Maíz and the Reserva de Biosfera Bosawás. One of the rarest ecosystems in the world is the cloud forest, a cool, misty tropical rainforest above 1200m, offering opportunities for seeing wildlife, most famously colorful quetzals and orchids. The easiest to see is at Volcán Mom-bacho, with easy access from Granada.

Nicaragua's Pacific coast is a haven for literally hundreds of thousands of nesting turtles each year, and some of their nesting sites are surprisingly accessible. In the San Juan del Sur area, you're within easy reach of Refugio de Vida Silvestre La Flor and Refugio de Vida Silvestre Río Escalante

### BEST BIRDING SPOTS

- ➔ **Islas Solentiname** (p247) Tiny islands with Nicaragua's highest concentration of birdlife including tiger herons and flocks of roseate spoonbills.
- ➔ **Boca de Sábalo** (p252) Pick your spot along the river and observe a fantastic array of waterfowl and rainforest species without moving a muscle.
- ➔ **Área Protegida Mirafior** (p177) Accessible cloud forest boasting quetzals and toucans.
- ➔ **Refugio de Vida Silvestre Los Guatuzos** (p251) Immense wetlands home to around 400 bird species.

Chacocente. There's more turtle action further north at Reserva Natural Volcán Cosigüina.

Birders will also be drawn to Nicaragua's sweet-water wetlands and jungle-lined rivers, which offer outstanding birding opportunities.

# Regions at a Glance

Stretching from the sizzling Pacific with its colonial treasures, smoking volcanoes and superb surf beaches to the crystalline Caribbean with its indigenous communities and islands that groove to an altogether different tune, Nicaragua's geographical diversity is topped only by the range of cultures living within its boundaries.

The country is crowned in the north by spectacular mountain ranges covered in a patchwork of small farms, coffee plantations and cloud forest that offer great hiking and bird-watching opportunities. In the south you'll find the largest freshwater lake in Central America, with more outdoor activities than you could dream of cramming into your itinerary, wetlands brimming with birdlife and the virgin rainforests of the magnificent Río San Juan.



## Managua

History  
Nightlife  
Culture

### Walking the Town

Managua is a twist-ed, toiled, visceral hive of activity. Just bopping through town can be fun. Spin through the crumbling areas around the Plaza de la Revolución before walking up to the volcano's rim at Loma de Tiscapa.

### Where Wild Grows

This town knows how to party. And while you'll definitely want to keep your senses about you, a diesel-charged night in the rock-roarious lounges and dance-halls along Carretera a Masaya is a rite of passage.

### Dig Deep

This is the cultural fulcrum of a nation. The university offers great guerrilla learning opportunities, and there are museums and cultural houses, street artists and underground poets.

p40



## Masaya & Los Pueblos Blancos

Shopping  
Culture  
Outdoors

### Crafts Central

Masaya has the best crafts market in all of Nicaragua. Beyond its Technicolor stalls, you'll find unique artisan workshops in the compact and neat little villages throughout this region.

### Cultural Encounters

This region allows for broad-faced encounters with locals. Take the time to volunteer or learn Spanish and you'll experience the place on a whole new level.

### From the Fire & the Deep

Volcán Masaya offers great hiking trips, never-ending vistas and the all-too-real chance of being blown to smithereens in a pyroclastic burst of light. Southward, you'll come across the unrelenting beauty of Laguna de Apoyo.

p65



## Granada

History  
Eating  
Walking

### From the Pirate's Cup

Granada's history is as complex as it gets. This fleeting imprint is evidenced on nearly every corner. You'll see it in the city's architecture, its festivals, art and living culture.

### A Gastronomer's Delight

The city's vibrant restaurant scene will keep foodies busy for several hours each day. There's fusion, mind-blowing local steaks and experimental spots that cater to travelers of all palates.

### Move

A city of movement, age-old grace and continued evolution, Granada is the place to walk till you drop. If that fails, head out by launch to explore a mythical island archipelago with monkey islands, fortresses and birds aplenty.

p83



## South-western Nicaragua

Surf  
Beauty  
Wilderness

### Charge It!

You don't get better surf at many other places in the world. After you hit dawn patrol at legendary spots like Playas Hermosa and Ma deras, you can chill out in your beach-front hammock paradise.

### Islands in the Stream

Isla de Ometepe is a paradise lost. Get here now to discover petroglyphs, climb volcanoes, kayak to lost coves and chill out in cool travelers' enclaves on the edge of the wild.

### Go Beyond

There are lost beaches, tough-and-ready inland towns, unique windows into rural Nicaraguan life, and wild-life preserves where turtles arrive by the thousands and birds of paradise caw madly from the forest canopy.

p105



## León & North-western Nicaragua

History  
Volcanoes  
Outdoors

### Revolutionary Roots

León is where the revolution was televised. And to this day, fiery rhetoric flows from this intellectual powerhouse. The partying here ain't bad either...

### The Rim of Fire

The fire theme continues down below and up above in the large nature preserves that encircle massive volcanoes, forgotten islets and wide-open spaces of the interior. Come sunset, the sun lights up the Pacific night.

### Explorers Club

Head north and you get further from the tourist track and closer to the wild. There are volcanoes that seldom see a climber and estuaries whose dreadlocked fingers only see a human wake once in a blue moon.

p138



## Northern Highlands

Nature  
Adventure  
Coffee

### Pristine Forests

Nature lovers will have no shortage of opportunities to spot nesting quetzals, toucans and boisterous howler monkeys among the region's swaths of precious cloud forest.

### Authentic Adventure

Whether it's a mountainous trek to a hidden waterfall or tubing through an ancient canyon, the northern region offers unlimited opportunity for off-the-beaten path adventure.

### Coffee Culture

The shade-grown plantations of northern Nicaragua produce classic gourmet coffees. Get into the fields and see where it comes from or go one step better and pick some beans yourself.

p169





## Caribbean Coast

Beaches  
Food  
Culture

### Pristine Shores

Romantic tropical islands with turquoise-fringed white-sand beaches shaded by coconut palms anyone?

While you may find such idyllic beauty elsewhere, you won't find them as empty or undeveloped as these.

### Home-Style Cooking

The coast has delicious seafood, most famously in its signature dish 'run-down'. But *costeño* cooking goes way beyond fresh lobster, so grab a glass of seaweed punch and follow your nose to the wonderful unsigned bakeries.

### Original Rhythms

Big on culture, the Caribbean coast's maypole rhythms and Miskito pop provide the soundtrack for performances by Nicaragua's best dancers.



## San Carlos, Islas Solentiname & the Río San Juan

Wildlife  
Outdoors  
Art

### Bird-Watching

The remote Islas Solentiname is a haven for migratory waterbirds, and the Río San Juan is home to a grand variety of both aquatic and rainforest species.

### Aquatic Adventures

The Río San Juan department is the ultimate boating playground, with kayak and canoe adventures, or alligator-spotting motorboat safaris.

### A Community of Artists

A visit to the isolated island workshops and studios offers fascinating insights into the Primitivist paintings and bright balsa carvings from the Islas Solentiname.

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