



# San Carlos, Islas Solentiname & the Río San Juan

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## Why Go?

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 where the monkeys howl, 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 travelers simply pass through on their way 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.

## When to Go

- Dry season in the Río San Juan runs from February to April, with more sunshine and shrinking pools of water concentrating migratory waterfowl in Los Guatuzos.
- In June, you'll find the best bird watching in the jungles around Boca de Sábalos.
- Around mid-September, top anglers descend on the Río San Juan for the Torneo Internacional de Pesca and it becomes possible to hook huge tarpon in the Caribbean Sea at the mouth of the Río Indio.
- In October, there is the best bird watching in San Miguelito, and dancers and artists from all over the country descend on San Carlos for Río San Juan's biggest party – the Carnaval Acuático.

## 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 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.

When the gold fever took hold in North America in the 1800s, 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 continuing upriver to Lago de Nicaragua, where voyagers traveled overland to an awaiting steamship on the Pacific.

After the Panama Canal was built in 1914, dashing hopes for a local version, Greytown (by then reincorporated into Nicaragua as San Juan del Norte) reverted to a sleepy outpost at the end of a rarely transited jungle river.

## Getting There & Away

The Río San Juan is an international entry point to Nicaragua with both boats and buses linking San Carlos with Los Chiles in Costa Rica.

La Costeña operates twice weekly flights between San Carlos and Managua via Ometepe. You can also arrive in San Carlos and San Miguelito by bus from Managua, Juigalpa and El Rama.

All other destinations in this section are only accessible by boat from San Carlos. Things can get cramped, damp and cold. Layer accordingly.

## San Carlos

The capital of the isolated Río San Juan department is the gateway to some of Nicaragua's most compelling countryside, but is itself a curious place with a bit of an identity crisis. During the day it is a busy international port filled with herds of travelers in transit, which explains the bustling and festive *malecón* (waterfront) lined with restaurants. But when night falls, and the

magnificent views disappear with the setting sun, it reverts to a rather lackluster small town where gossiping is the main form of entertainment.

Most travelers burn their San Carlos hours by exploring the old Spanish fortress, planning river and island adventures, stocking up on córdobas and checking emails one last time before they drop off-grid for a while.

## Sights

San Carlos is less a tourist destination and more a place to wait for your ship, or *panga* (small motorboat), to come in, but there is beauty here – particularly on the grounds of **Centro Cultural José Coronel Urtecho**, which is set within the crumbling walls of **Fortaleza de San Carlos** (☉9am-5pm) **FREE**. It's no El Castillo, but it was built in 1724 and has amazing lake and Río San Juan views from several lookout points linked by garden trails. The cultural center has some interesting displays on local culture, biology and history. It even has a map of the Nicaraguan canal that never was, c 1791. There's another old **Spanish observation post**, with cannons, at Restaurant Mirador.

### Mirador

VIEWPOINT

(contiguo Restaurante Mirador) A charming old Spanish observation post complete with cannons and panoramic views. To reach it, head up the staircase at the far end of the *malecón*.

### Malecón

WATERFRONT


The social heart of the town, this waterfront promenade overlooks both the lake and river and is always busy with children playing and couples taking a stroll.



## Activities

### Fundación del Río

ECOTOUR

(☎2583-0035; [www.fundaciondelrio.org](http://www.fundaciondelrio.org); El Proyec-to)  A non-profit organization staffed by an enthusiastic young crew that arranges visits to Mancarroncito in the Archipiélago de Solentiname and La Quebracha nature reserve near Boca de Sábalos. In dry weather it also organizes an excellent multiday trip for bird enthusiasts into the forests around Boca de Sábalos to spot the rare *lapa verde* when it is nesting.

The organization accepts volunteers with skills in developing social and environmental projects.