



Southwestern Nicaragua

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Why Go?

Packed with attractions, the southwest offers up some of Nicaragua's hallmark vistas and adventures. Surfers have been hitting this coastline for years, drawn by perfect, uncrowded waves and chilled-back surfing encampments. Most start their trip through the region in San Juan del Sur, where you'll find better accommodations, high-octane parties and a solid selection of restaurants catering to international appetites. Beyond this are spirited fishing villages, sea-turtle nesting grounds and tough-and-true inland towns.

No trip to the southwest would be complete without a few days on Isla de Ometepe. The island itself is shaped like an infinity symbol, with bookend volcanoes dominating either side of a secluded universe where you'll discover waterfalls, wildlife, lost coves and enchanted forests. There's kayaking, swimming, hiking and biking, and many travelers extend their stay as they dive into paradise, lost in the quiet spots and friendly traveler encampments that define this island escape.

Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Café Campestre (p119)
- ➔ G&G Gourmet (p129)
- ➔ Party Wave Gigante (p122)
- ➔ Barrio Café (p128)

Best Places to Sleep

- ➔ Playa Hermosa Ecologde (p133)
- ➔ Hotel Popoyo (p123)
- ➔ La Posada Azul (p128)
- ➔ Morgan's Rock (p132)

When to Go

- ➔ November through May is the dry season. It means less verdant foliage, slightly longer days, plenty of adventure opportunities and remarkable sunsets over the curving Pacific Ocean.
- ➔ April to December is surf season, when you get big barrels and double-overhead exposure. Book ahead for surf camps during this time. Beginners may want to consider other times of the year to avoid the wave traffic.
- ➔ September to October is the peak season for sea turtle arrivals at Refugio de Vida Silvestre La Flor. If your timing is right you could see over 3000 turtles arrive on the same day!

History

Although first inhabited by the little-known Kiribisis peoples, it's the Chorotega who really left their mark on this region, most famously with the stone monoliths that are today on display beside the church in Altagracia. The Chorotega were soon overrun by the Nicaraos, however, and it was Cacique Nicarao who met Spanish conquistador Gil González on the shores of Lago de Nicaragua in 1523. The Cruz de España marks the spot where the chief famously traded over 18,000 gold pesos for a few items of the Spaniard's clothing – a trade which some say set the tone for Nica–Euro commerce for centuries to come.

With time, this narrow strip of earth became the only land crossing for the gold-rushers traveling from New York to California. Talk continues today of a 'dry canal' railroad that would carry goods between the Pacific and Lago de Nicaragua, to continue on by boat.

Rivas was the site of some stunning defeats for filibuster William Walker, whose later plans to attack San Juan del Sur were thwarted by the British in 1858. Once the railroads connected the USA's East and West Coasts, gold prospectors gave up on this route and the region slipped back into its former torpor. This was briefly disturbed in the 1979 revolution, as spirited resistance to Somoza troops turned the hills behind San Juan del Sur into bloody battlegrounds. The Isla de Ometepe was spared from such scenes and the horrors of the Contra War – possibly one reason that the island's nickname, 'the oasis of peace,' has stuck.

Getting There & Away

Rivas is the regional travel hub, and its enormous, chaotic bus lot connects the region to Granada, Masaya and the rest of the country. It's usually easier to take *colectivo* taxis to San Jorge, where the main ferry terminal to Isla de Ometepe is located. You can also get to Ometepe via ferry from Granada.

Regular buses and shuttles serve the beach towns around San Juan del Sur, though you'll likely need to arrange a taxi (or brave a bumpy ride on one of a few daily chicken buses) to access the comparatively remote beaches around Popoyo.

Rivas

Rivas has its fans – people say it's authentic and lively, with some wonderful buildings downtown. Maybe. But with the beaches, the lake and Isla de Ometepe beckoning, few travelers pause here long enough to find out.

Rivas' strategic position on the only sliver of land between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans made it an important spot back in the colonial days. Now, with all the development on the southwestern beaches and Ometepe, it is once again an important trading and transport hub.

Sights

Museo de Antropología e Historia MUSEUM (📍 2563 3708; mercado, 1c S, 1c E; US\$1; 🕒 9am–noon Mon–Sat) If you have just two hours in town, this is the place to go. Inside you'll find some moth-eaten taxidermy, a wall of myths and legends and, best of all, a well-signed (in both English and Spanish) collection of pre-Columbian artifacts, many of them recently discovered by the Santa Isabela Archaeological Project.

This Canadian-Nicaraguan team is excavating what it believes to be Cacique Nicarao's ancient capital of Quauhcapolca, just north of San Jorge. The site was occupied between AD 1000 and 1250, and the 400,000 artifacts they have uncovered there include tools, blow guns, jewelry, funeral jars and cookware, as well as a fertility-goddess complex and representations of the Aztec deity Quetzalcoatl.

The building itself, **Hacienda Ursula**, is an 18th-century architectural treasure and the site of William Walker's decisive defeat. After his troops, limping home following an embarrassing rout by the Costa Rican military, took control of the hacienda, schoolteacher Emmanuel Mongalo y Rubio set the fortress on fire. Most of Walker's men were shot or captured as they fled the burning building.

Sleeping

Most people heading for Ometepe choose to stay in San Jorge to be close by for the first ferry, or head southward to nearby San Juan del Sur for more attractive accommodations options.