

# Nicaragua

## Country Facts

**Population:** 5,891,199

**Languages:** Spanish, English, Creole and a few indigenous languages are common on the Caribbean coast

**Predominant Religions:** Roman Catholic, Protestant

**Time Zone:** Six hours behind Greenwich Mean Time

**Voltage Requirements:** 110 volts

**Telephone Codes:** ENITEL, the national phone company, maintains offices and public phones in most towns. The public phones take prepaid calling cards. There are no area codes within Nicaragua, but each municipality has its own number. You will need to dial a zero before the city code when dialing between municipalities. There are several popular cell phone service providers. International calls can be placed from ENITEL offices, but it's cheaper in Internet cafes. Operators can connect you to international phone companies if you wish to charge to a calling card. Nicaragua's country code is 505. To call Nicaragua from the United States, dial 011 then 505 then the seven-digit number.

## **Introduction:**

Despite Nicaragua's tumultuous history, the violence associated with the Sandinista revolution and Contra War has ended, leaving a peace-loving people to get on with their lives. Today, Nicaragua is politically stable and attracting an increasing number of foreign visitors and investors, in part because of low prices, proximity to international air hubs in Miami and Houston, stunning scenery, vibrant culture, and the rising global interest in ecotourism. Though Nicaragua is one of the safest countries in Central America, it is not "the next Costa Rica," as some travel agents would have you believe, but rather a unique, sometimes challenging, but rewarding destination. Knowing at least a little conversational Spanish will help a great deal during any visit.

## **Compassion in Nicaragua:**

Compassion International's work in Nicaragua began in 2002. As of 2010 more than 27,175 children participate in more than 135 child development centers. Compassion partners with churches to help them provide Nicaraguan children with the opportunity to rise above their circumstances and become all God has created them to be.

## **Cultural Information:**

- Spanish is the language of Nicaragua, but English and a number of Indian languages are spoken on the Caribbean coast.
- Nicaragua is a mixture of Spanish and ancient tribal cultures that relies heavily on interpersonal relationships and trust.
- Greetings are warm and sincere. Men will shake hands, smile and look each other in the eye as verbal greetings are exchanged. To avoid eye contact during greetings is considered suspicious behavior. Visitors from Asia, where eye contact among strangers is

thought to be disrespectful, will need to make an effort to overcome their natural tendencies to look aside.

- Women often exchange a light embrace and a peck on the cheek. Male and female associates will have a similar exchange, but only if well acquainted beforehand. Normally men and women will exchange handshakes at first introductions.
- A typical meal in Nicaragua consists of eggs or meat, beans and rice, salad (cabbage and tomatoes), tortillas and fruit in season. Most common of all Nicaraguan foods is *gallo pinto*, a blend of rice and beans, with cooking water from the beans added to color the rice. Another traditional dish is *baho* — a mix of beef, green and ripe plantains and yucca (cassava). Still another dish is *vigorón*, or yucca served with fried pork skins and coleslaw. Street vendors sell interesting drinks such as *tiste*, made from cacao and corn, and *posol con leche*, a corn and milk drink. Nicaragua boasts the best beer and rum in Central America.
- The Nicaraguan concept of time is slower and looser than the hustle and bustle in developed countries. Showing up late to meetings is commonplace.
- Nicaraguans, regardless of economic status, take great pride in their personal appearance.
- Nicaraguans go to great lengths to avoid embarrassing you or being embarrassed, which they call “having *pena*.” In conversation, Nicaraguans often talk around a sensitive subject instead of addressing it directly: This avoids the risk of creating *pena* for someone. Direct and open criticism, no matter how well-intentioned or constructive, may result in a severed relationship.
- Privacy, except in the bathroom and shower, is virtually nonexistent in Nicaraguan culture. Most Nicaraguans prefer to interact and talk with each other rather than sit alone and read, write or just think — and they may think you are strange (or depressed) for wanting to spend time alone doing these activities. In general, Nicaraguans are open and talkative, and extremely hospitable and approachable.

#### Dos and Don'ts:

- Do make a concerted effort to speak Spanish.
- Don't depend on normal transportation schedules or normal business hours on Sunday and holidays.
- Don't run for cover if you hear a noise like gunfire — firecrackers are a favorite toy of Nicaraguan children.
- Don't encourage begging by giving money to children who should be in school, especially those who show signs of a glue-sniffing habit. Seek out constructive ways to help these children.
- Don't be offended if someone refers to you by the color of your skin or your body type. A Nicaraguan who calls you *gordo* (fat), *flaco* (thin), *chele* (light skinned) or *negro* (dark-skinned) means no insult.
- Do tip traveling mariachi bands that play for you.
- Don't despair if you have trouble finding a specific location in Managua. Since the massive earthquake in the early 1970s, street addresses have been nonexistent, and

everyone gives directions based on landmarks (which occasionally move or disappear altogether).

- Do learn the points of reference used by locals in Managua: East is *arriba* (where the sun rises), toward the central mountains; west is *abajo* (where the sun sets), toward the Pacific Ocean; north is *al lago* (to the lake); and south is *a la montana* (to the mountain).

### Travel Tips

#### **Personal Safety:**

Street crime is a concern, especially in Managua. Always avoid driving after dark. You may want to register with your embassy upon arrival. In Managua, several barrios should be avoided. Ask your hotel concierge whether the area around your hotel is safe. Even the middle-class Barrio Martha Quezada and Los Robles districts near the Hotel InterContinental are not safe for walking at night — take a taxi, however short the distance. Likewise, avoid urban public buses; if you travel by bus, sit as close to the driver as possible. Also, travelers should avoid remote areas of the Caribbean's autonomous regions, where armed drug traffickers are known to operate (this includes being extra careful in Bluefields and Puerto Cabezas).

Leave at home all unnecessary credit cards, social security card, library cards and similar items you may routinely carry in your wallet. Do not take more cash than you reasonably require for that day. Use the room safe or hotel safe to secure valuables as well as additional cash. Secure cash in multiple locations – wallet, various pockets, money belts. Carry items in front pockets, not back pockets. Do not display large sums of money in public; only make visible the amount of money that approximates your purchase. Maintain a close awareness of your purse, wallet, backpack, etc. as well as the people around you. It's a good idea to keep one hand or arm in constant contact with these items especially in areas of high people traffic. Never leave items with cash in them (purse, wallet, backpack, etc.) on a bus, car, or any other location, even if the vehicle is being watched by Compassion staff or Compassion-hired contractors. Stay alert and be cautious at all times. Don't take safety & security for granted.

#### **Health:**

The best precaution is to follow these guidelines on eating and drinking: Do not drink the tap water (stick with prepackaged or boiled drinks), peel fresh fruit and raw vegetables, choose meat that is cooked thoroughly, and avoid local dairy products unless you're sure they have been properly refrigerated. Hot, freshly cooked food should be safe. Avoid food from street vendors.

Because of the presence of malaria and dengue fever, avoid mosquito bites by using a repellent containing Deet. You should also see a doctor about anti-malarial medication. Leptospirosis, a bacterial disease found in water contaminated with animal urine, is present in Nicaragua. Take care to minimize contact with standing water in rural areas. Avoid contact with animals because of the danger of rabies: If you are even nipped, consult a doctor. Prevent skin infections by disinfecting and covering even the smallest wound. Cholera is also present: A vaccine is available, but it offers only limited immunity.

There are adequate medical and dental facilities in Managua, but bring all prescription medicine needed for the trip. Use sunscreen liberally, and wear a hat.

*Disabled Advisory* – Nicaragua is not a friendly place for people with disabilities. In towns and cities, sidewalks are buckled, few street corners have wheelchair ramps and street crossings lack audio-aids for the blind. A disabled U.S. citizen runs a tour company for disabled visitors. To find out more, visit [www.accessiblenicaragua.com](http://www.accessiblenicaragua.com).

**We strongly advise you to contact the CDC ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)) or check with your personal physician for more information about your specific health needs while traveling, including any recommendations for immunizations.** *Recommendations may include anti-malarial medication, and immunizations for tetanus/diphtheria, typhoid, adult polio, Hepatitis A and B, and Yellow Fever.*

### **Money:**

Nicaragua's currency is the *cordoba*, which is divided into 100 centavos. Don't bring any foreign currency except U.S. dollars with you: It's the only freely exchanged currency. Many banks won't even accept British pounds or euros. Bills larger than a U.S. \$20 are sometimes not accepted. Banks in major cities have ATMs linked via Cirrus to international banks. Credit cards are accepted on a limited basis. A few banks will cash traveler's checks. Most cities also have legitimate, bank-sanctioned money-changers on the streets in certain areas. These transactions take place out in the open on the sidewalk and are checked by calculator. Exchange rates are usually the same as the banks, just with shorter lines.

### **Weather:**

December through February, day temperatures are in the 80s-90s F / 26-36 C, with nights in the 60s-70s F / 15-26 C (it's cooler in the mountains). March through May can be hot.

### **Dress:**

Lightweight tropical clothing is preferable, with a shawl or light jacket for cool evenings. Even the most casual restaurants expect shoes and a shirt with sleeves, except those located directly on the beach, where barefoot is the rule. Nicaraguans don't really wear suits and ties, but a simple *guayabera* button-down shirt (available in any market) will cover you for any formal occasion. You will want some light, breathable rainwear for the rainy season (June-October) and a warm jacket for the Matagalpa and other upland regions and for midwinter evenings. Bring a comfortable pair of walking shoes.

***All information taken from Weissmann Reports, the World Factbook and Compassion International.***

