

Nicaragua

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Isla de Ometepe** Scramble to the summits of the two volcanoes that join to make this majestic island (p503)
- **Corn Islands** Snack on coconuts and swim crystal-clear waters – this unspoiled place is so Caribbean it's almost a joke (p516)
- **Granada & León** Savor the delights of these cultured colonial towns, easily reached from Managua (p488) and (p480)
- **Río San Juan** Board a riverboat to explore this picturesque watercourse, home to abundant birdlife and an unexpected fortress (p511)
- **Matagalpa & Estelí** Discover the hard-working highlands in these earthy, open cities, coffee and cowboy country respectively (p469) and (p474)
- **Off the beaten track** Bargain with local fishermen to take you boating in the intriguing Miskito area of Laguna de Perlas (p515)

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 129,494 sq km (approximately Greece/New York State)
- **ATMs** Widespread in major towns
- **Budget** US\$15-25 per day
- **Capital** Managua
- **Costs** Hostel in León US\$4-6, bottle of beer US\$0.70, 3hr bus ride US\$2.50, lunch US\$1.50
- **Country Code** ☎ 505
- **Electricity** 110V AC, 60Hz (same as USA)
- **Famous for** Sandinistas, volcanoes
- **Head of State** President Daniel Ortega Saavedra
- **Languages** Spanish, English
- **Money** US\$1 = C\$18.50 (córdobas)
- **Phrases** Nicas (Nicaraguan guys and gals), vos (you), *tuanis* (right on)
- **Population** 5,142,100
- **Time** GMT minus 6 hours, no daylight saving
- **Visas** Nearly all need only a valid passport



TRAVEL HINTS

Figure out your cash situation for popular spots such as the Corn Islands (no ATM) and Ometepe (Visa only). US dollars are accepted everywhere. Exchange córdobas before leaving.

OVERLAND ROUTES

Nicaragua's border with Honduras can be crossed at Las Manos–El Espino (p479) and Guasaule (p488). Costa Rica can be reached via Sapoa (p502) or by boat via San Carlos (p509).

To the new generation of travelers, Nicaragua represents booming beach breaks, volcano hiking, thrilling island paradises, and laid-back colonial towns, so it seems that the message – ‘the civil war finished decades ago people!’ – has finally gotten across to an audience who had it pegged as a trouble spot. In fact, it’s now the safest country in Central America, and a surprisingly easy place to travel around.

Yet the iconic images of idealistic young people giving their lives for a dream of liberty have never quite disappeared, and Nicaragua remains a land where people, whatever their beliefs, tend to go beyond cheap chatter. A place of poets and artists, of opinions both well-informed and cheerily imparted. Despite the landscape being extra well-endowed with natural beauty, it is the Nicaraguans themselves who remain their country’s chief asset.

Nicaragua boasts both a Pacific and a Caribbean coast, and these two sides of the country differ in myriad ways. In the west of the country you can zip between colonial cities on good paved roads, while in the east is an enormous wilderness that, a couple of golden Caribbean paradises apart, won’t be touristy any time this century.

CURRENT EVENTS

After 16 years in opposition, the leftist FSLN (Sandinista) party returned to political power in January 2007, ending a long neoliberal period that had, significant advances in the tourism sector notwithstanding, failed to kickstart the country’s economy. However, the left had been far from united behind President Daniel Ortega, a father of the revolution but these days considered by many on both sides of the political fence to be a power-hungry crackpot.

The early days of his current presidency were a flurry of activity, with Nicaragua’s energy crisis seemingly solved via a deal with Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez, Ortega pledging to maintain good relations with the USA (then jeopardizing that by announcing a meaningless goodwill treaty with Iran), and afterwards taking some rather antiparliamentary legislative steps. One thing is certain; life with Ortega won’t be dull.

HISTORY

Early History

Fascinatingly, the earliest traces of human habitation in Nicaragua are some 6000-year-old footprints found near the banks of Lago de Managua, within the area occupied by the present-day capital.

At the site, you can see the squelches made as these early Nicaraguans headed lakewards, perhaps migrating.

Nicaragua was home to several indigenous groups, including the ancestors of today’s Rama who live on the Caribbean coast, and the Chorotegas and Nicaoraos, on the Pacific side. The latter spoke a form of Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs. Many Nicaraguan places retain their Nahuatl names.

European Arrival

The indigenous inhabitants’ first contact with Europeans was in 1502, when Columbus sailed down Nicaragua’s Caribbean coast.

The next exploratory mission, led by Gil González de Ávila, came north from the Spanish settlement at Panama, arriving in 1522. It found a chieftain, Cacique Nicaoro, governing the southern shores of Lago de Nicaragua and the tribe of the same name. The Spaniards thus named the region Nicaragua.

Two years later the Spanish were back to colonize, led this time by Francisco Fernández de Córdoba, who founded the cities of Granada and León in 1524. Both were established near indigenous settlements whose inhabitants were subjugated and put to work. Attempts at founding a similar city near Managua were resisted; the indigenous settlement was destroyed as punishment.

Colonial Settlement

The gold that had initially attracted the Spaniards soon gave out, but Granada and León remained. Granada, on Lago de Nicaragua, became a comparatively rich colonial city, its wealth due not only to surrounding agriculture but also to its importance as a trading center. The navigable Río San Juan, flowing out of the lake, gave Granada a direct shipping connection to the Caribbean and thus Europe. With its wealthy business class, Granada eventually became the center for the Conservative Party, favoring traditional values of monarchy and ecclesiastical authority.

Originally founded on Lago de Managua, León was destroyed by earthquake in 1610 and a new city established some 30km northwest. It was poorer than Granada, but the Spanish made it the capital of the colonial province.

León in time became the center for radical clerics and intellectuals, who formed the Liberal Party and supported the unification of Central America and reforms based on those of the French and American revolutions.

The difference in wealth between the two cities, and the political supremacy of León, led to conflicts that raged into the 1850s, at times erupting into outright civil war. The continual fighting between them stopped only when the capital was moved to the neutral location of Managua in 1857.

While the Spanish were settling the Pacific lowlands, the English were the dominant influence on the Caribbean side of Nicaragua. English, French and Dutch pirates plying the Caribbean established settlements and attacked the east coast in the 17th century, at times even penetrating to Granada via the Río San Juan.

Early Independence

Along with the rest of Central America, Nicaragua gained independence from Spain in 1821, was briefly part of Mexico, was then incorporated into the new Central American Federation, and finally achieved complete independence in 1838. The cities of León and Granada continued to feud.

After independence, the Liberals and Conservatives weren’t the only groups vying for power. With the Spanish out of the picture, Britain and the USA both became interested in Nicaragua and its strategically important

passage from Lago de Nicaragua to the Caribbean. Both countries wanted to build an interoceanic canal through Central America, and Nicaragua looked the likeliest spot.

In 1848 the British seized the Caribbean port of San Juan del Norte, at the mouth of the Río San Juan, and renamed it Greytown. Meanwhile, the California gold rush had added fire to the quest for an Atlantic–Pacific passage, and prospectors were transported to America’s west coast via the Río San Juan and a Pacific steamer service.

The Late 19th Century

In 1857 the Liberals, disgraced after inviting William Walker (see below) into the country, lost power to the Conservatives and were unable to regain it for the next 36 years. In the same year, the capital was transferred to Managua, then little more than a village between the two cities, in an attempt to quell the rivalry between Granada and León.

In 1860 the British signed a treaty ceding the Caribbean region to the now-independent governments of Honduras and Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan section remained an autonomous region until the 1890s.

Zelaya’s Coup & US Intervention

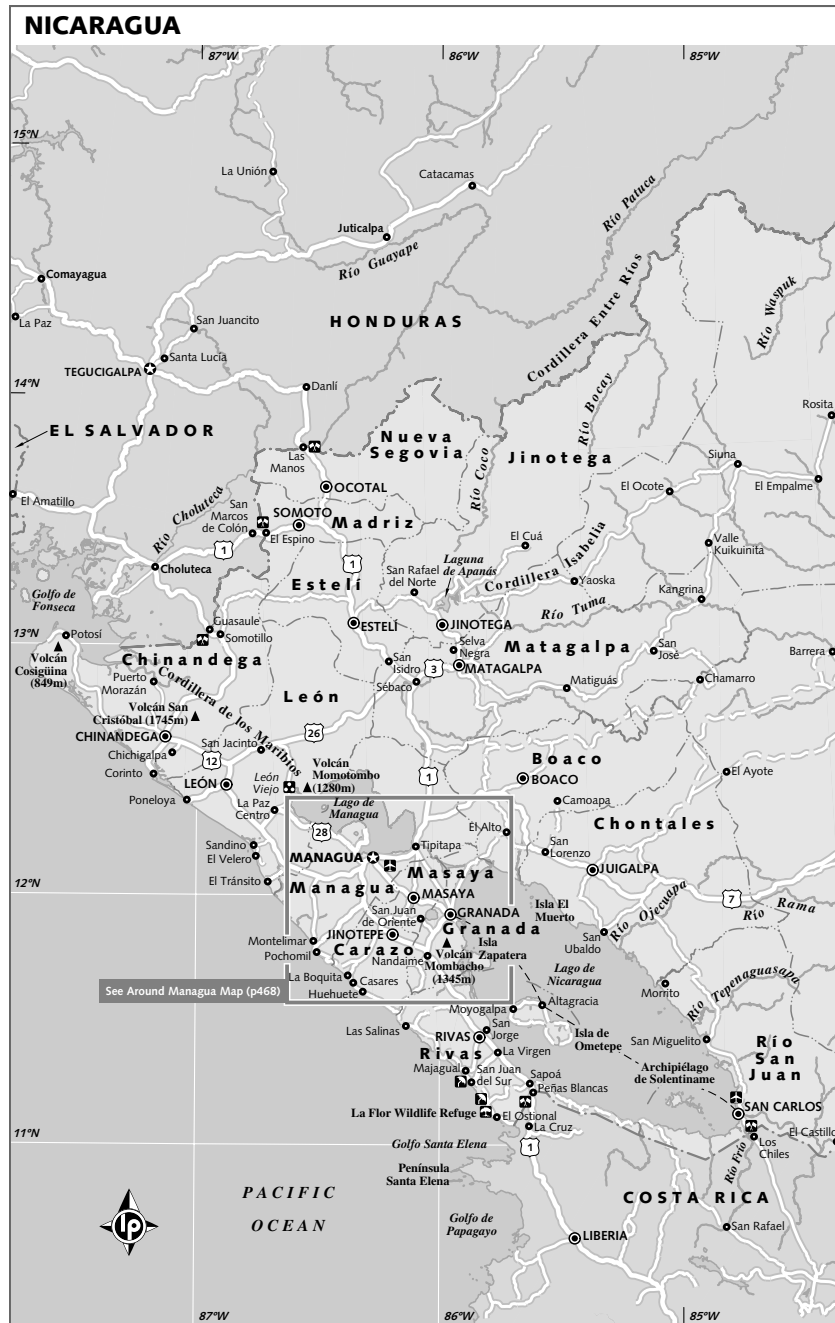
In 1893 a Liberal general named José Santos Zelaya deposed the Conservative president and became dictator. Zelaya soon antagonized the US by seeking a canal deal with Germany and Japan. Encouraged by Washington, which

DOING THINGS THE WILLIAM WALKER WAY

Latin America’s turbulent history is littered with colorful characters, but there were few messiah complexes bigger than that of William Walker, an American adventurer who directed and starred in *Conquistador 2*, more than three centuries after Cortés took the New World by storm with the original hit. He started his one-man mission in 1853, leading a small party to attack Mexico, where he declared himself president of ‘independent’ Sonora before being ignominiously driven out.

In 1855 the Liberals of León asked Walker to help them seize power from Granada’s Conservatives. Walker entered Nicaragua with 56 followers, attacked Granada and prevailed. Instead of ceding it to his employers, he soon had himself elected president of Nicaragua (in ‘free and fair elections’ no doubt), and the US recognized his government. He then reinstated slavery, declared English the country’s official language, mortgaged the entire nation to fund personal borrowing, and invaded Costa Rica, announcing his intention to control the whole of Central America. This was a step too far, and those nations united to drive him out. Walker fled Granada, leaving the city afloat, and was forced to return to the USA.

Not easily put off, he landed with a small army at Greytown six months later, only to be arrested and deported by the US Navy. He tried again in 1860; this time the British Navy captured him and turned him over to the Hondurans, who ended his adventures with a volley of rifle fire in 1860. His grave is in Trujillo’s Old Cemetery (see p403).



sought to monopolize a transisthmian canal in Panama, the Conservatives rebelled in 1909. After Zelaya ordered the execution of two US mercenaries accused of aiding the Conservatives, the American government forced his resignation. In 1912 the US responded to another rebellion, this time against the corrupt Conservative administration, by sending 2500 marines to Nicaragua.

For most of the next two decades the US dominated politics in Nicaragua, installing presidents it favored and ousting those it didn't (sound familiar?), using its marines as persuasion. In 1914 the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty was signed, granting the US exclusive canal rights in Nicaragua; America actually had no intention of building such a canal, but wanted to ensure that no one else did.

In 1925 a new cycle of violence began with a Conservative coup. The marines were withdrawn, but as political turmoil ensued, they returned the following year.

Sandino & the Somoza Era

The Conservative regime was opposed by a group of Liberal rebels including Augusto C Sandino, who eventually became leader of a long-term rebel campaign resisting US involvement. When the marines headed home in 1933, the enemy became the new US-trained Guardia Nacional, whose aim was to put down resistance by Sandino's guerrillas. This military force was led by Anastasio Somoza García.

In February 1934 Somoza engineered the assassination of Sandino by inviting him to dinner for a peace conference. Sandino headed down from the mountains for the meal, which went well until the national guardsmen that were his lift back to the airport gunned him down. Somoza, with his main enemy out of the way, then set his sights on supreme power. Overthrowing Liberal president Sacasa a couple of years later, he established himself as president in 1937, founding a family dynasty that was to rule for four decades.

After creating a new constitution to grant himself more power, Somoza García ruled Nicaragua as an internationally notorious dictator for the next 20 years, sometimes as president, at other times behind a puppet president. He amassed huge personal wealth by corrupt means (the Somoza landholdings attained were the size of El Salvador). Of course, the majority of Nicaraguans remained entrenched in poverty.

Somoza supported the USA (the CIA used Nicaragua as a launchpad for both the 1954 overthrow of Guatemalan leader Colon Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán and the 1961 invasion of Cuba) and was in turn supported by the US government.

After his assassination in León in 1956 (p483), Somoza was succeeded by his elder son, Luis Somoza Debayle, and the Somoza family, with the help of the Guardia Nacional, continued to rule Nicaragua. In 1967 Luis died, and his younger brother, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, assumed control.

Rising Opposition

In 1961 Carlos Fonseca Amador, a prominent figure in the student movement that had opposed the Somoza regime in the 1950s, joined forces with Colonel Santos López (an old fighting partner of Sandino's), and other activists to form the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front), or FSLN.

On December 23, 1972, at around midnight, an earthquake devastated Managua, leveling over 250 city blocks, killing over 6000 people and leaving 300,000 homeless. As international aid poured in, the money was diverted to Anastasio Somoza and his associates, while the people who needed it suffered and died. This obvious abuse dramatically increased opposition to Somoza among all classes of society. Wealthy businesspeople also turned against Somoza as they saw their own ventures being eclipsed by the Somoza family's corrupt empire.

By 1974 opposition was widespread. Two groups were widely recognized – the FSLN (Sandinistas), led by Carlos Fonseca, and the Unión Democrática de Liberación, led by Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, popular owner and editor of the Managua newspaper *La Prensa*, which had long printed articles critical of the Somoza regime.

In December 1974 the FSLN kidnapped several leading members of the Somoza regime, gaining ransoms and the freeing of political prisoners in exchange for the release of the hostages. The Somoza government responded with a campaign of systematic killings over the following 2½ years. Fonseca was killed in a skirmish in 1976.

Revolution & the FSLN

The last straw for the Nicaraguan public was the assassination in January 1978 of

Chamorro. Violence erupted and a general strike was declared. Business interests united with moderate factions in the Frente Amplio Opositor (FAO; Broad Opposition Front) and unsuccessfully attempted to negotiate an end to the Somoza dictatorship.

In August 1978 the FSLN occupied the Palacio Nacional and took over 2000 hostages, demanding freedom for 60 imprisoned Sandinistas. The government acceded, and the hostages were released. Nevertheless, the revolt spread, with spontaneous uprisings in many major towns. The Guardia Nacional responded swiftly and ruthlessly, shelling those cities and exterminating thousands.

The FAO, having exhausted its negotiating efforts, threw in its lot with the Sandinistas, whom they now perceived as the only viable means to oust the dictatorship. This broad alliance formed a revolutionary government provisionally based in San José, Costa Rica, which gained recognition from some Latin American and European governments and military support in the form of arms shipments. Thus the FSLN was well prepared to launch its final offensive in June 1979. The revolutionary forces took city after city, with the support of thousands of civilians. On July 17, as the Sandinistas were preparing to enter Managua, Somoza resigned the presidency and fled the country. (He was assassinated by Sandinista agents a year later in Asunción, Paraguay.) The Sandinistas marched victorious into Managua on July 19, 1979.

They inherited a shambles. Poverty, homelessness, illiteracy and staggeringly inadequate health care were just a few of the widespread problems. An estimated 50,000 people had been killed in the revolutionary struggle, and perhaps 150,000 more left homeless.

The FSLN and prominent anti-Somoza moderates (including Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, widow of the martyred Pedro Joaquín Chamorro) set up a five-member junta to administer the country. The constitution was suspended, the national congress dissolved and the Guardia Nacional replaced by the Sandinista People's Army.

However, the alliance between moderates and the FSLN didn't last long. In April 1980 Chamorro and the one other moderate resigned from the ruling junta when it became clear that the FSLN intended to dominate the Council of State, which was being set up to serve as the nation's interim legislature. The

junta thus was reduced from five members to three, with revolutionary commander Daniel Ortega Saavedra appointed coordinator.

Trying to salvage what it could of its influence over the country, the US (under President Jimmy Carter) authorized US\$75 million in emergency aid to the Sandinista-led government. However, by late 1980 it was becoming concerned about the increasing numbers of Soviet and Cuban advisors in Nicaragua and allegations that the Sandinistas were beginning to provide arms to leftist rebels in El Salvador.

The Contra War

After Ronald Reagan became US president in January 1981, relations between Nicaragua and the US took a turn for the worse. Reagan suspended all aid to Nicaragua and began funding the counterrevolutionary military groups known as Contras, operating out of Honduras and eventually out of Costa Rica as well. Most of the original Contras were ex-soldiers of Somoza's Guardia Nacional, but as time passed, their ranks filled with disaffected local people.

The Contra war escalated throughout the 1980s. As US money flowed to the Contras, their numbers grew to over 15,000 fighters. Honduras was heavily militarized, with large-scale US-Honduran maneuvers threatening an invasion of Nicaragua. The Sandinistas responded by instituting conscription and building an army that eventually numbered 95,000. Soviet and Cuban military and economic aid poured in, reaching US\$700 million in 1987. A CIA scheme to mine Nicaragua's harbors was revealed in 1984 and resulted in a judgment against the US by the International Court of Justice.

Elections in November 1984 were boycotted by leading non-Sandinistas, who complained of sweeping FSLN control of the nation's media. (In fact, the Chamorro family's *La Prensa* acknowledged receiving CIA funding for publishing anti-Sandinista views, while still operating freely. This publishing freedom was finally curtailed as the Contra war escalated, a state of emergency was declared and censorship was implemented.) Daniel Ortega was elected president with 63% of the vote, and the FSLN won 61 of the 96 seats in the new National Assembly.

In May 1985 the USA initiated a trade embargo of Nicaragua and pressured other

countries to do the same. The embargo lasted for the next five years and helped to strangle Nicaragua's economy.

After the US Congress rejected further military aid for the Contras in 1985, the Reagan administration secretly continued funding them through a scheme in which the CIA illegally sold weapons to Iran and diverted the proceeds to the Contras. When the details leaked out, the infamous 'Iran-Contra Affair' blew up.

After many failed peace initiatives, the Costa Rican president, Oscar Arias Sánchez, finally came up with an accord that was signed in August 1987 by the leaders of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Honduras. Though a great stride forward (Arias won the Nobel Prize), it proved difficult to implement, as participating nations failed to follow through on their commitments, while the US took measures that seemed intentionally aimed at undermining the peace process.

The 1990 Election

By the late 1980s the Nicaraguan economy was again desperate. Civil war, the US trade embargo, and the inefficiencies of a Soviet-style centralized economy had produced hyperinflation, falling production and rising unemployment. As it became clear that the US Congress was preparing to grant the Contras further aid, Daniel Ortega called elections that he expected would give the Sandinistas a popular mandate to govern.

The FSLN, however, underestimated the disillusionment and fatigue of the Nicaraguan people. Economic problems and the daily grind had eclipsed the dramatic accomplishments of the Sandinistas' early years: redistributing Somoza lands to small farming cooperatives, reducing illiteracy from 50% to 13%, eliminating polio through a massive immunization program and reducing the rate of infant mortality by a third.

The Unión Nacional Opositora (UNO), a broad coalition of 14 political parties opposing the Sandinista government, was formed in 1989. UNO presidential candidate Violeta Barrios de Chamorro had the backing and financing of the US, which had promised to lift the embargo and give hundreds of millions of dollars in economic aid to Nicaragua if UNO won. With such bribes in place, the UNO handily took the elections of February 25, 1990, gaining 55% of the presidential votes

and 51 of the 110 seats in the National Assembly, compared with the FSLN's 39. Ortega had plenty of grounds for complaint, but, to his credit, in the end he went quietly, perhaps avoiding further conflict.

Politics in the '90s

Chamorro took office in April 1990. The Contras stopped fighting at the end of June with a symbolic and heavily publicized turning-in of their weapons. The US trade embargo was lifted, and US and other foreign aid began to pour in.

She faced a tricky balancing act in trying to reunify the country and satisfy all interests. The promised economic recovery was slow in coming; growth was sluggish, and unemployment remained stubbornly high. Nevertheless, in 1996, when Nicaragua went to the polls again, the people rejected the FSLN's Ortega and opted for former Managua mayor Arnoldo Alemán of the PLC, a center-right liberal alliance.

Alemán's achievements included investing heavily in infrastructure and reducing the size of the army by a factor of 10, but his administration was plagued by scandal, as corruption soared and Alemán amassed a personal fortune from the state's coffers. Meanwhile, however, the Sandinistas had their own image problems, as the ever-present Ortega was accused by his stepdaughter of sexual abuse. In a gesture of mutual self-preservation, Ortega and Alemán struck a sordid little deal, popularly known as *el pacto* (the pact), aimed at nullifying the threat of the opposition, pulling the teeth of anticorruption watchdogs and guaranteeing Alemán immunity from further investigation.

Sandinista diehards felt betrayed by Ortega's underhanded dealings, but many still believed in their party, and Ortega remained an important figure.

Currents in the New Millennium

With scandals gripping the country, the 2001 elections were heavily monitored. Enrique Bolaños, vice-president under Alemán, ran on a platform reminding Nicaraguans of the hardships endured under the Sandinistas. Ortega, reinvented himself and declared his the party of 'peace and love,' complete with pink posters and flower-covered banners.

Voters turned out in record numbers (96%) and elected the 73-year-old Bolaños

by a small margin. After 11 years of trying to make a comeback, it was Ortega's third defeat, although he again had a point when he complained of US intervention – the George W Bush government had promised 'dire consequences' for Nicaragua if Ortega were elected. They had also invited Bolaños to hand out US-donated food and pressured a third candidate to leave the race.

Bolaños took office pledging to clean up the country's corrupt government, a policy which was odds with his party. Although he managed to have Alemán stripped of his immunity, wily Arnoldo (sentenced to 20 years in prison), has, at press time, still not been finally convicted and is under house arrest pending an appeal, confidently predicting his own return to the presidency in 2011. Worse for Bolaños, in 2003 he himself was implicated in the ongoing corruption investigation.

The combination of his own party's distrust, and the general failure of the much-vaunted 'neoliberal' reforms he had proposed (although he had significant successes in the tourism sector) saw Bolaños become something of a lame-duck president and the stage was set for a return to the left in the November 2006 elections. Ortega, however, had become something of an embarrassment to large sections of his former support base, and many set their hopes on popular Herty Lewites, a former Sandinista who rapidly became an acceptable candidate for a broad spectrum of Nicaraguan society. However, when he died of a heart attack just four months before the election, the race was left open for Ortega to finally reclaim what he regarded as his birthright. He did so, with only 38% of the popular vote. Taking office in January 2007, he proclaimed a new era of leftist Latin American unity, leaving the USA and some international investors a little jumpy.

THE CULTURE The National Psyche

Nicaraguans are a proud people and vocal about their views. Opinions differ over whether the Sandinista years were a failure or a success, but one thing they established was the unhindered exchange of information – in the press and on the streets. Nicas (Nicaraguans) love to debate, and if you spend time chatting you'll learn more about the current political scene than you ever would reading a paper (or guidebook!). Nicaraguans rightly

have a lot of respect for their artistic, literary and cultural history, and are never afraid to cheerily big-up local achievements.

While there are plenty of regional attitudes – on the Caribbean coast many feel little affinity with the rest of the country, and the Granada/León rivalry goes back centuries – Nicaraguans get on surprisingly well with each other given their turbulent recent history. One thing they all seem to have in common is an almost comical disdain for their southern neighbor Costa Rica.

Lifestyle

It's not easy to generalize about Nicaraguan lifestyle. Observing the well-dressed crowds in Managua's trendy shopping malls, you might assume they are a westernized, urban, wealthy elite. Some are, but probing a little more you'll find that a good number are impoverished single parents from the country on a once-a-year trip to buy their children toys that they can barely afford.

Some 50% of Nicaraguans live below the poverty line, and huge numbers move to Nicaragua's capital of Managua, Costa Rica, or the US in order to get work. This has put a great strain on the traditional family structure; it's common for young parents to leave their children to be brought up by relatives while they send money home for their upbringing and education.

While traditional conservative values are still strong in some areas, these were shattered

by the revolution in other parts of the country. The Sandinista ideal considered women as absolute equals in all aspects of society, and Nicaragua is still well ahead of the game in this respect. Predictably, attitudes to homosexuality differ according to where and whom you ask.

People

Nicaragua has the lowest population density in Central America, around 33 per sq km. Mestizos, of mixed Spanish and indigenous ancestry, form the majority, with 69% of the population; Spanish and other whites comprise 17%, blacks 9% and indigenous people 5%.

The great majority of the population lives in the Pacific lowland belt. The Caribbean region is sparsely populated; it makes up half the country's land area but has only 12% of its population. This zone includes the Sumos and Ramas, and the Miskitos, all of whom have their own language. English is also spoken on this coast.

Nicaragua is a nation of young people: 72% of the population is under 30 years old, and 40% is under 15. The population is 54% urban.

ARTS

Nicaragua is a bright star in the firmament of Latin American literature, and poetry is the country's most important and beloved art. Rubén 'Darío' (1867–1916), a poet who lived in León, is one of the most renowned authors in the Spanish language, and his writings have inspired literary movements and trends throughout the Latin world.

Three outstanding writers emerged soon after Darío, and their works are still popular: Azarías Pallais (1884–1954), Salomón de la Selva (1893–1959) and Alfonso Cortés (1893–1969). In the 1930s the experimental 'Vanguardia' movement came on the scene, led by José Coronel Urtecho, Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Joaquín Cuadra Pasos and Manolo Cuadra. Most importantly, the work of all these poets is widely read and quoted by the populace. A number of leading personalities in the Sandinista leadership, including Sergio Ramírez, Rosario Murillo and Ernesto Cardenal, made literary contributions as well as political ones.

Cardenal, in fact, was responsible for a whole new style of Nicaraguan art when he

FEVER PITCH

When you hear someone talk about 'El Presidente,' they may not be referring to the country's leader, but to former Montreal Expos pitcher Denis Martínez, a Nicaraguan legend in the national sport, *beisbol*, which pushes soccer into a distant second place. Ever since US marines introduced it in the early 20th century, Nicaraguans have been fanatical about it, and the Nicaraguans playing in the US and Mexican leagues are closely followed. There's a local league too; Managua attracts crowds of 20,000 or more to see its Bóer club play against the three other major league teams: Masaya, León and Chinandega (teams vary depending on who can raise the annual registration fee). Check www.lnpb.net for fixtures.

harnessed the talents of the local population of the Solentiname archipelago. The result, a distinctive, colorful, primitivist style of painting, is famous worldwide.

The Caribbean coast, with its distinct culture, has its own art forms, too. In Bluefields, the calypso-influenced *palo de mayo* (maypole), is a widely popular musical genre.

RELIGION

Catholicism is the dominant religion in Nicaragua, claiming some 73% of the population, but large bites of the theological cake have been taken in recent years by evangelical Protestant sects, who claim almost one in six of the population these days. The importance of religious issues is high – a recent ban on abortion (even to save the mother's life) was ratified by most of parliament, including Daniel Ortega, an avowed atheist who has now found God (some say for votes).

ENVIRONMENT

The Land

Nicaragua, comprising 129,494 sq km, is the largest country in Central America. It is bordered on the north by Honduras, the south by Costa Rica, the east by the Caribbean Sea and the west by the Pacific Ocean.

The country has three distinct geographical regions.

PACIFIC LOWLANDS

The western coastal region is a broad, hot, fertile lowland plain broken by 11 major volcanoes. Some of the tallest are San Cristóbal (1745m), northeast of Chinandega; Concepción (1610m), on Isla de Ometepe in Lago de Nicaragua; and Mombacho (1345m), near Granada.

The fertile volcanic soil and the hot climate, with its distinct rainy and dry seasons, make this the most productive agricultural area in the country. It holds the country's major population centers.

Also in the area are Lago de Nicaragua, the largest lake in Central America, studded with over 400 islands, and the smaller Lago de Managua.

NORTH-CENTRAL MOUNTAINS

The north-central region, with its high mountains and valleys, is cooler than the Pacific lowlands and also very fertile. About 25% of the country's agriculture is concentrated here,

including most coffee production. The highest point in the country, Pico Mogotón (2438m), is near the Honduran border, in the region around Ocotal.

CARIBBEAN COAST

The Caribbean ('Atlantic') region occupies about half of Nicaragua's area. The 541km coastline is broken by many large lagoons and deltas. Twenty-three rivers flow from the central mountains into the Caribbean, including the Río Coco (685km), Nicaragua's longest river, and the Río San Juan (199km), which flows from Lago de Nicaragua. These define much of the borders with Honduras and Costa Rica respectively. The Caribbean region gets an immense amount of rainfall. It is sparsely populated and covered by tropical rain forest. The largest towns are Bluefields and Bilwi (Puerto Cabezas), both coastal ports. Several small islands, including the much-visited Corn Islands, lie off the Caribbean coast, surrounded by coral reefs.

Wildlife

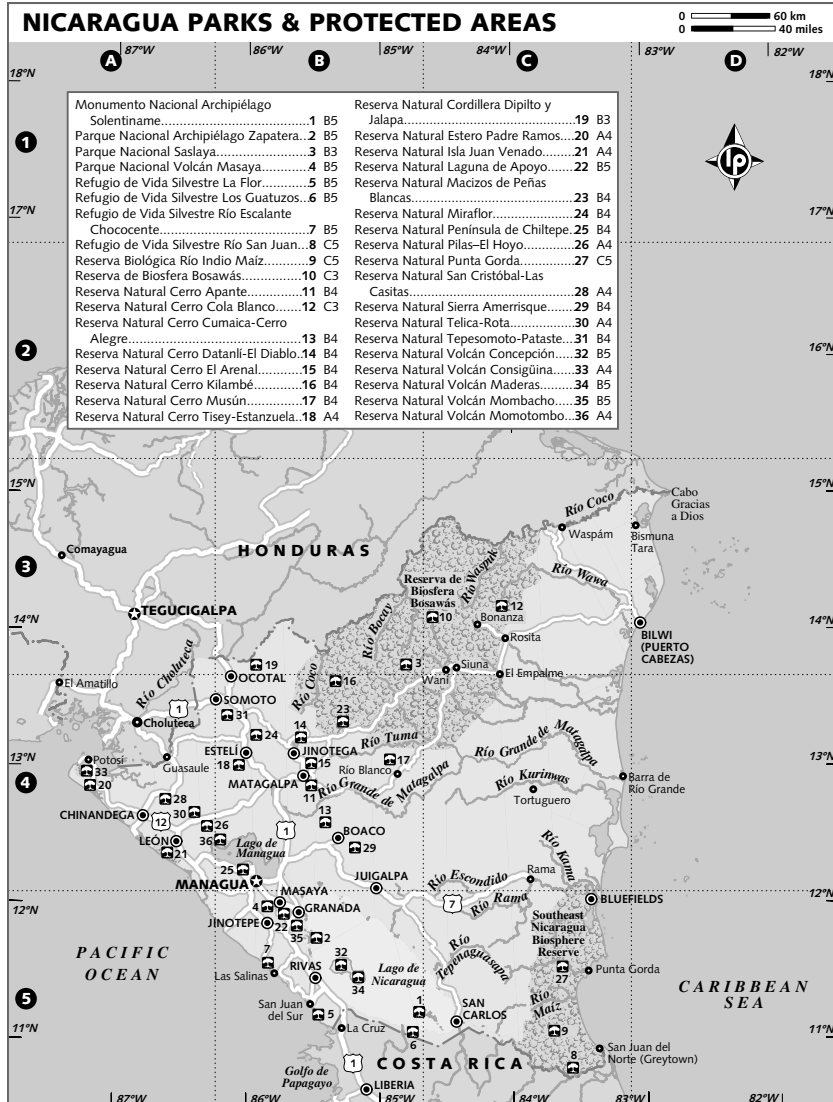
Boasting the highest percentage of forest of any Central American country, combined with the lowest population density, Nicaragua is one of the most biologically diverse regions in the Americas.

ANIMALS

Three species of sea turtle make their annual nesting grounds along the extensive undeveloped beaches of Nicaragua's Pacific coast and on islands off the Caribbean coast. Other reptiles and amphibians found in Nicaragua include green iguanas, black iguanas, and numerous species of lizards and caymans.

The country has a wealth of birdlife, from tropical species resident in a variety of forest environments to waterbirds on the lakes and rivers, and migrants passing between North and South America. Urracas (white-throated magpie jays) are found throughout the country, but scissor-tailed flycatchers, scarlet macaws and the colorful national bird, the guarda barranco (blue-crowned motmot), may be more difficult to spot.

Mantled howler monkeys are easy to see and hear in the private reserve of Selva Negra north of Matagalpa and around the volcanoes of Ometepe, but Nicaragua also hosts Geoffrey's spider monkeys and white-faced capuchin monkeys.



Among the more curious aquatic species are the sharks of Lago de Nicaragua. A member of the bull shark family, *Carcharhinus leucas* is the world's only known shark species that can pass between saltwater and freshwater. These were once in great abundance in the lake; today, owing to massive overfishing, they are rarely seen.

PLANTS

Nicaragua's plant life is at least as diverse as its animal life. The various ecosystems, ranging from dry tropical forest to cloud forest to rainforest, provide fertile territory for botanical exploration. Tree varieties include tamarind, kapok, frangipani and *palo de sal*, which adapts to its high-salinity coastal environment

by excreting salt crystals. Orchids, including the nocturnally blooming *huele de noche*, flourish in the cloud forests of Mombacho and Miraflor.

National Parks & Protected Areas

The government has assigned protected status to approximately 18% of Nicaraguan territory, comprising 76 different areas whose level of protection varies significantly. Enforcement is a tough task, but Marena (Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources) does a sterling job and has offices in most towns that can provide some level of information for the visitor. The following are just a small sample of the country's biodiversity:

Parque Nacional Volcán Masaya This active volcano near Masaya also has 20km of hiking trails. (See p498.)

Refugio de Vida Silvestre La Flor A beach south of San Juan del Sur that's one of the best places to observe nesting sea turtles. (See p503.)

Reserva Biológica Río Indio Maíz A reserve near El Castillo in the south with 264,000 hectares of virgin tropical humid forest. (See p512.)

Reserva de Biosfera Bosawás Unexplored and rather inaccessible, this vast expanse of virgin cloud forest lies in the northeast. (See p480.)

Reserva Natural Isla Juan Venado A long, narrow barrier island near León with an ecosystem rich in amphibians, reptiles and migratory birdlife. (See p486.)

Reserva Natural Volcán Mombacho A wildlife-rich volcano not far from Granada. (See p494.)

Environmental Issues

Like its neighbors on the Central American isthmus, Nicaragua is beset by grave environmental problems. High on the list is the rapid loss of its forests, which are cleared at the rate of some 150,000 hectares a year, leading to erosion, loss of soil quality and disappearance of species. Pesticides from the resultant ranches then invade the water table and ultimately the food chain. Nicaragua's two major lakes are also both heavily polluted.

While the much-hyped interoceanic canal may well never happen, environmentalists are equally wary of an alternative plan – the dry canal, which would be a high-speed railroad to transport shipping containers from ocean to ocean.

Nevertheless, there is some hope. Strict new laws have improved protection of endangered species and environments, and drastically ramped-up punishments for offenders. The Nicaraguan government is well aware that

ecotourism is likely to become a real bonanza for the country – as ever, the environment's best chance of salvation is to pay its own way.

TRANSPORTATION

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Nicaragua's main airport is Managua (MGA; p466). There are daily direct flights to an ever-increasing number of US cities, including Miami, Dallas and Houston, as well as services to San Salvador, San José, Tegucigalpa, and, with stops, other Latin American destinations. Iberia connects to Spain and Europe via its Miami hub.

It's always worth checking flight prices to San José, Costa Rica, as they can be substantially cheaper.

Boat

The Costa Rican border station at Los Chiles is reachable by boat from San Carlos up the Río Frio (see p509). It's an easy, straightforward crossing.

Bus

There are extensive international bus services from Managua to the other Central American nations. See p466 for details. Although more time-consuming, it's cheaper to take a local bus to the border, cross and take an onward bus on the other side. All of the border crossings in the country have abundant onward connections. See p445 for cross-references to the border crossings.

GETTING AROUND

Air

Nicaragua's major carrier is **La Costeña** (☎ 263 1228; jcaballero@lacostena.com.ni). Also reliable is **Atlantic Airlines** (☎ 222 3037; www.atlanticairlines.com.ni), which has fewer routes. Fares are generally identical.

DEPARTURE TAX

Anyone flying out of the country must pay a US\$25 international departure tax, usually included in your ticket price. Domestic departure tax is US\$2. To leave the country overland, it costs US\$2, and to enter by air or land costs US\$5.

Boat

Boats are the only form of transport in some parts of Nicaragua, particularly on the Caribbean side of the country, where rivers are the main highways. There are several scheduled routes on Lago de Nicaragua, including one from Granada to Ometepe and on to San Carlos. From San Carlos, public boats travel down the Río San Juan to El Castillo and San Juan del Norte, and also across to the Solentiname archipelago.

Bus

Buses travel to destinations all over the western half of the country and to some points east as well (the Caribbean coast generally lacks accessible roads). Intercity buses – most of which are former US school buses – are reliable, frequent, cheap and crowded. There are also express minibuses between major cities. Bus services usually start very early in the morning and finish in the late afternoon. See p467 for specific routes and fares to and from the capital.

Car & Motorcycle

The roads in western Nicaragua are generally good between major towns. Get off the beaten track a little, and the quality deteriorates sharply. There are no particularly unusual traffic regulations, and Managua driving is the only experience likely to get your pulse racing.

Renting a car is common, and is neither complicated nor expensive. Be sure to confirm kilometer allowances, though. Often-times rentals include unlimited kilometers and cost, on average, US\$25 to US\$35 per day for a small economy car. There are several car-rental agencies in Managua; see p467 for details.

Hitchhiking

Hitchhiking is a common and accepted practice in Nicaragua. It's polite to offer a little money when you're given a ride.

Taxi

Shared taxis operate in all the major towns. They're not metered, so be sure to negotiate the fare before getting in. Most towns have a set fare, usually US\$0.50 per person or so; more in Managua. You can also often negotiate quite a fair price to use taxis to travel between cities.

MANAGUA

pop 910,000 (Managua city)

Nicaragua's lakeside capital and largest city literally had its heart ripped out in 1972 by a quake that destroyed its old center, leaving Managua as a sprawling series of widespread suburbs, with shopping malls rather than central plazas as centers of community life.

But it's only heartless in a geographical sense. While it lacks the colonial charms of León or Granada, it's a pulsating, occasionally chaotic medley of rich and poor, traditional and westernized, and can be truly fascinating. Plus, its spread-out nature (best glimpsed while speeding around corners, chatty cab-driver gesticulating with both hands) means that there's plenty of drooping tropical greenery and little crowding. There are also a couple of standout sights, and plenty of big-city amenities.

Managua spreads across the southern shore of Lago de Managua, known to indigenous inhabitants as Xolotlán. Other lakes fill the craters of old volcanoes within and near the city.

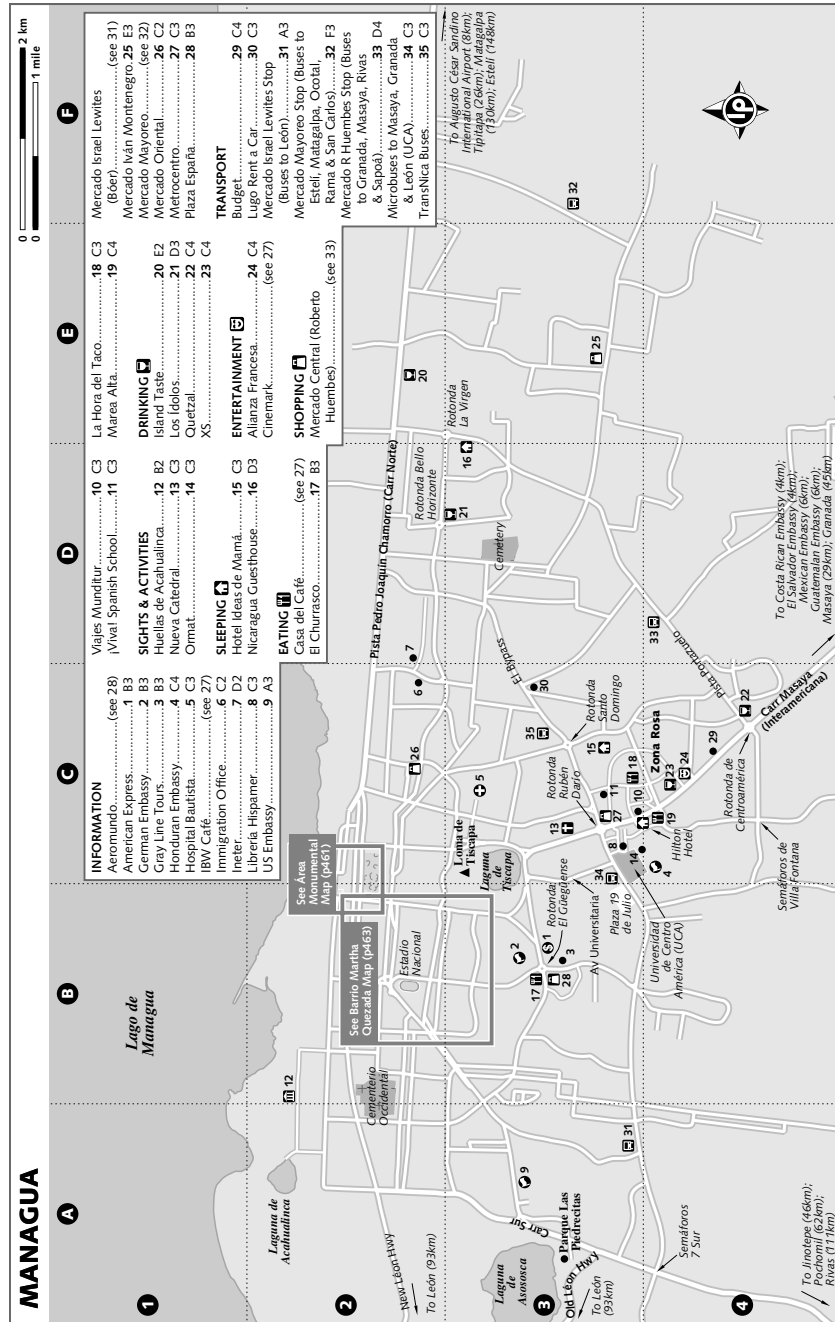
More than one in five Nicaraguans lives in or around the capital, which is the national center for commerce, manufacturing, higher education and government. Only 50m above sea level, it is always hot and humid: daytime temperatures hover around 32°C year-round.

HISTORY

At the time of the Spanish conquest, Managua was an indigenous lakeshore settlement whose inhabitants practiced agriculture, hunting and fishing. These early Managuans put up a vigorous resistance to the Spanish, who responded by destroying their city. Managua subsequently remained a village until the mid-19th century.

The city rose out of obscurity in 1857 after conflicts between liberal León and conservative Granada repeatedly erupted into civil war. Lying midway between the two, Managua was chosen as a compromise capital; the Nicaraguan equivalent of Ottawa, Canberra or Brasilia.

Since then, a series of natural disasters has thrashed the city. The colonial center was destroyed by earthquake in March 1931, and burned down five years later. It was completely rebuilt, only to be razed again by an even more devastating earthquake in 1972.



GETTING INTO TOWN

From the Airport

Augusto César Sandino international airport is 11km east of Managua, right on the Interamericana. Taxis at the airport charge up to US\$15 for the ride into town, while street taxis charge US\$3 to US\$5, a little more for two or three passengers. To pay the normal fare, just cross the road outside the airport and hail any moving cab. Buses also run along this road to Mercado Roberto Huembes (US\$0.15), from which buses depart for all parts of town. In the reverse direction, from Mercado Huembes catch one of the frequent buses heading for Tipitapa and get off at the airport. Many of Managua's accommodations offer transfers to and from the airport, usually costing US\$10 to US\$20.

From the Bus Stations

The Tica Bus station is in **Barrio Martha Quezada**. Across the street is Transportes El Sol, while King Quality buses arrive nearby. From any of these locations, it's a few blocks to most of Managua's budget accommodations. TransNica buses arrive near Metrocentro, in the commercial center of town.

Long-distance buses arrive at the city's major markets. Buses from southern destinations and the Costa Rican border arrive at the Mercado Roberto Huembes; buses from León and the border with Honduras go to Mercado Israel Lewites (Bóer); and buses from Matagalpa, Estelí and other northern destinations, including the Honduran border, arrive at Mercado Mayoreo, as do services from San Carlos and Rama. From the stations it's best to take a taxi into town (US\$0.70 to US\$2).

When geologists found the downtown area riddled with faults, the decision was made to leave the site behind. The new Managua is decentralized, with markets, shopping centers and residential districts built on the outskirts, with no real center.

ORIENTATION

Managua's spread-out collection of barrios sits on the southern shore of Lago de Managua (Xolotlán). The former center on the lake-shore is now largely derelict, having been left vacant after the 1972 quake, but has several visitor attractions. South of here, the Tiscapa hill and crater lake is the city's main landmark. To its west is the pyramidal Crown Plaza hotel and the Barrio Martha Quezada, home of much of the city's budget accommodation, while to the south is a thriving commercial zone running along the Interamericana (Interamerican Hwy, also known as here called Carr Masaya.

Managua's central market, Mercado Roberto Huembes, lies 2km east of Metrocentro; other major markets (and adjacent bus stations) are at the western (Bóer), northern (Oriental, confusingly) and eastern (Mayoreo) ends of town.

Like other Nicaraguan cities and towns, Managua has few street signs, and only the

major roads are named. Large buildings, *rotondas* (traffic circles) and traffic lights serve as de facto points of reference, and locations are described in terms of their direction and distance, usually in blocks, from these points.

In addition, a special system is used for the cardinal points, whereby *al lago* (to the lake) means 'north' while *a la montaña* (to the mountains) means 'south.' *Arriba* (up) is 'east' and *abajo* (down) is 'west,' both derived from the sun's movement. Thus: '*del Ticabus, una cuadra al lago y dos arriba*' ('from the Tica bus station, one block toward the lake and two blocks up').

INFORMATION Bookstores

Liberia Hispamer (Map p458; ☎ 278 1210) A block west of Metrocentro, and near the UCA, this excellent bookstore offers the nation's best selection of Nicaraguan and Latin American literature and history, as well as a treasure-trove of Spanish-language titles. It also has local news and arts periodicals. There are other branches, but this is the biggest and best.

Cultural Centers

Centro Cultural Managua (Map p461; ☎ 222 5291) One block south of Plaza de la República in the Area Monumental, Managua's cultural center (once a smart hotel) has changing art exhibits, concerts and dances. Handicrafts fairs are held the first Saturday of each month.

Emergency

Ambulance (Cruz Roja or Red Cross; ☎ 128)

Fire (☎ 115)

Police (☎ 249 5714, for emergency 118)

Immigration

Immigration office (Migración; Map p458; ☎ 244 3989; www.migracion.gob.ni; ☎ 8am-11:30am, 1-3pm Mon-Fri) Stays can be extended for up to three months for US\$25 per month. The office is 200m north of the Tenderi traffic signal near the Ciudad Jardín area. There's a US\$1.50-per-day fine for overstaying your allotted period.

Internet Access

There are numerous internet cafés throughout Managua. Convenient ones:

Cyber at Center (Map p463; Av Monumental; per hr US\$1)

IBW Café (Map p458; per hr US\$1.60; ☎ 8:30am-8pm) In Metrocentro, this space-age internet café has air-con and finger-snap quick access.

Plaza Inter (Map p463; per hr US\$2; ☎ 10am-10pm) On ground floor, offers plush seats and high-speed connections.

Medical Services

Pharmacies, found all over Managua, are usually open until 10pm.

Hospital Bautista (Map p458; ☎ 249 7070, 249 7277) About 1km east of Crowne Plaza hotel, this is Managua's best hospital. Some staff speak English.

Money

There are numerous ATMs in Managua. Many are Visa/Plus only, but those operated by Bapro and Banco de América Central (BAC) also take MasterCard/Cirrus and Amex. Handy locations include the airport, Plaza Inter, and Metrocentro, as well as Esso service stations on the eastern edge of Barrio Martha Quezada and elsewhere.

Finding a bank in Managua to change US dollars is no problem; if they're closed, street-corner 'coyotes' will also change dollars at more or less the official rate; they're often found at Plaza España (Map p458). Merchants throughout the country gladly accept US dollars.

Any major bank in Managua will change traveler's checks, as will (for Amex checks) **American Express** (Map p458; ☎ 266 4050; Viajes Atlántida office; ☎ 8:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat), one block east of Rotonda El Güegüense. You can change euros at the airport and at a slowly growing number of banks.

Post

Palacio de Correos (Map p461; ☎ 124; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) Two blocks west of Plaza de la República is the main post office. An Express Mail office is also here.

Telephone

Enitel is adjacent to the post office. Handier are the numerous internet cafés from which cheap international calls can be made.

Tourist Information

Intur (Nicaraguan Institute of Tourism; www.visitnicaragua.com); airport office (☎ 263 3176; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat & Sun); main office (Map p463; ☎ 254 5191; ☎ 8am-12:30pm & 1:30-5pm Mon-Fri) Has helpful maps, listings and brochures. The airport office, open longer hours, gives advice by phone. The main office is one block south and one west of Hotel Crowne Plaza. Intur's Managua map is also useful, but you might find the ones given out in some hotels more useful.

Travel Agencies

Aeromundo (Map p458; ☎ 266 8725; aeromundo@ibw.com.ni) In Plaza España, offers airline ticketing, auto reservations and visa processing.

Viajes Munditur (Map p458; ☎ 267 0047; www.viajesmunditur.com; Carr Masaya Km 4.5) Opposite the Hilton Hotel, and just south of Metrocentro, these guys can book flights and all the rest.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Managua's not as dangerous as it looks, but crime has risen in the last few years, and it's the place in Nicaragua where you are most likely to have problems. Except in the upmarket areas, always take a taxi after dark, and to the Área Monumental even during daylight hours. Barrio Martha Quezada has its share of incidents, mostly on its northern edge and between it and Plaza Inter; take a southerly route if heading in that direction.

Managua is spread out and gets pretty hot, so drink plenty of water and remember that a dollar and a bit will buy you a cab fare to nearly anywhere in town.

SIGHTS

Área Monumental

What was once the heart of Nicaragua's capital is an eerie, evocative zone of monuments and ruined buildings (Map p458) that have largely been untouched since an earthquake leveled the area in 1972. Bits are being rehabilitated, but funds are still too short (and the likelihood

of another quake too high) to comprehensively restore the area. It's an intriguing spot to visit, but take care when walking around here, and use taxis if you don't feel safe.

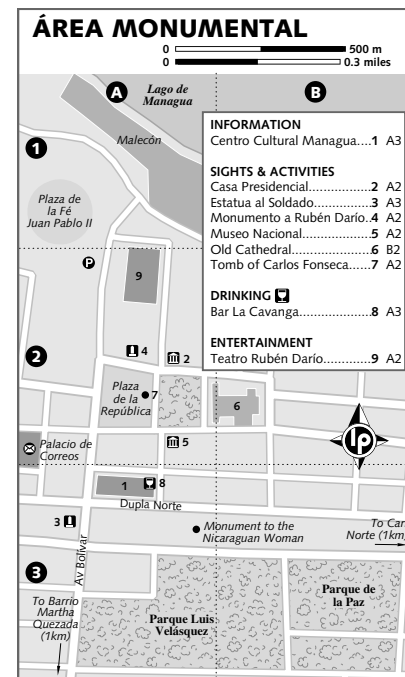
Dotted with mango trees and flamboyans, **Plaza de la República** marks the center of the zone. On the eastern side rests the tomb of Sandinista commander Carlos Fonseca, while a tackily impressive fountain dances to Strauss waltzes at 6pm (water pressure allowing). The area's most emotive ruin is the still-impressive old **cathedral**. Built in 1929, the imposing shell of the neoclassical edifice is still beautiful, and houses frescoes and sculpted angels, but is closed to the public. Every visiting head of state gets brought here, in the hope that they'll write out a check for the restoration on the spot.

Across from the cathedral is the **Museo Nacional** (Map p461; ☎ 222 3845; admission US\$2; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat & Sun). Set around two leafy courtyards, the museum is well presented, and includes an excellent selection of pre-Hispanic ceramics, a geological overview, and some fine contemporary Nicaraguan art. Another display exhibits a range of elaborate animal-headed grinding stones, reflecting the traditional importance of maize in indigenous society. It's worth visiting, and a tranquil break from city life. Admission includes an optional guided tour.

Opposite the Palacio Nacional is the shiny new **Casa Presidencial**, the offices of Nicaragua's chief executive. Directly south of the plaza is the old Grand Hotel, now the **Centro Cultural Managua** (see p459). On the lake side of the Plaza de la República, the **Monumento a Rubén Darío** pays homage to Nicaragua's foremost poet, whose likeness adorns the 100-córdoba note. Toward the lake is the oblong **Teatro Rubén Darío** (see p466). The theater faces the **Malecón**, a promenade looking over the heavily polluted (don't swim) Lago de Managua. It's a popular spot on Sundays, when kiosks serve beer and snacks.

Near here is the newly inaugurated open-air theater overlooking the **Plaza de la Fé Juan Pablo II**, scene of notable public ceremonies and independence celebrations.

The unabashedly political **Estatua al Soldado** stands on the west side of Av Bolívar, diagonally across from the Centro Cultural. 'Workers and campesinos onward till the end,' reads the inscription below a bronze giant, who holds a pickaxe and an assault rifle bear-



ing the Sandinista colors. As if in response, **Parque de la Paz** three blocks east proclaims an end to conflict. It was here that the weapons from the 1980s conflict were gathered to be destroyed and buried, and it is still possible to glimpse twisted gun barrels sticking out of the concrete that encircles a burned-out tank. Behind the monument, a handful of abandoned buildings occupied by squatters reinforces the general air of neglect.

Huellas de Acahualinca

These ancient **footprints** (Map p458; ☎ 266 5774; admission US\$2, photography fee US\$1.35; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat) are Managua's most fascinating attraction, and highly recommended for the glimpse of a long-vanished human past that it affords. Buried 4m deep under compacted volcanic material, the tracks were discovered by quarrying workmen in 1874. There are 12 sets of human footprints (men, women and children) that have been dated to some 6000 to 7000 years ago; they pace in one direction, toward the lake. The lack of returning footprints has led to theories that the tracks represent a migration rather than a routine fishing or

foraging trip, but the slow, steady pace probably rules out flight. A further excavated area shows the prints continuing nearby. There are also tracks of deer and *mapache* (a type of raccoon) present. The small museum has ceramics and human remains of a similar age – the footprints indicate that these people weren't dissimilar in size to today's Nicaraguans. The entry fee includes an optional guided tour in Spanish or English that's worth taking.

The neighborhood around here is a little sketchy, and you are well advised to take a taxi to the door.

Loma de Tiscapa

It's well worth climbing this hill (Map p458; admission free; ☒ 8am–8pm) that rises behind the Crowne Plaza hotel. It's a short stroll up the road, and perfectly safe, as the path is guarded. There are great views down over the Tiscapa crater lake below, as well as over the rest of the city. Here too is the lugubrious silhouette of Sandino, visible from all around town. The hilltop was once the site of Somoza's presidential palace and it was here that Sandino was executed.

A couple of beat-up tanks gifted to the dictator by Mussolini are on display. What looks like a wrecked car park was once a notoriously brutal prison. There's also a canopy tour here (see below).

Nueva Catedral

South of Tiscapa along the road to the Rotonda Rubén Darío is another Managua landmark, the new **cathedral** (Map p458; ☎ 278 4232), a curious building studded with dozens of domes that help provide structural support during earthquakes and represent the 63 churches in the Managua diocese. Inside the monumental entrance is a strikingly colorful postmodern interior with a nice shrine on the northwest side.

ACTIVITIES

Atop the Loma de Tiscapa hill, some enterprising locals have set up **Canopy Tiscapa** (☎ 840 1277, 893 5017; US\$11.50), a short but spectacular three-platform, 1400m jaunt around the crater lake, a lot of fun for the views.

COURSES

Viva! Spanish School (Map p458; ☎ 270 2339; www.vivaspanshhschool.com) This school offers intensive Spanish courses for US\$125 a week (US\$185

for a couple) and can arrange flexible home-stays. It's two blocks south of the FNI building, just east of Metrocentro.

TOURS

Gray Line Tours (Map p458; ☎ 268 2412; www.graylinenicaragua.com) Just south of Rotonda El Güegüense, this operator offers half-day tours of the capital with English-speaking guides for US\$35 per person (minimum two), which includes entrance fees.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The **Festival de Santo Domingo** (August 1–10) is Managua's main fiesta and features a carnival, sporting events, a horse parade, cockfights and more. A procession with music and dancers takes the statue of the saint to its shrine, culminating in fireworks.

May Day (May 1), the anniversary of the 1979 **Sandinista revolution** (July 19) and **Independence Day** (September 15) are also celebrated with gusto in Managua.

SLEEPING

Barrio Martha Quezada, a compact residential district west of the Crowne Plaza hotel, has many cheap guesthouses and places to eat. Budget travelers have always tended to congregate here, not least for its proximity to the Tica international bus station. Like in the U2 song, the streets have no name, so directions following are given in relation to the Tica Bus terminal.

Barrio Martha Quezada

Don't believe touts at the Tica Bus station who will lead you to some dive, insisting that it is, in fact, one of the places listed here! These places are all on Map p463.

Guest House Santos (☎ 222 3713; r per person US\$5) Just northwest of the Tica Bus station, the rooms here are neither particularly clean nor well maintained. Nevertheless, it's a popular backpacker social spot – a good place to meet other travelers – and has rooms that are OK for the price, with bathroom and fan.

Hospedaje El Ensueño (☎ 228 1078; s/d US\$6/8) A guidebook cliché is 'better than it looks from outside'; well, this is worse than it looks from outside. The bright and breezy exterior gives no hint of the gloomy rooms, some of which have shared bathroom. Nonetheless, it's good value, and sold by its cute enclosed balcony on the street.



Hospedaje El Molinito (☎ 222 2013; r per person US\$6) Very handy for Tica buses, this is a place you can't help liking. The friendly owner has your best interests at heart; the simple rooms are comfortable, and have OK bathrooms, fans, and cable TV (except the singles). Overflow rooms have external bathroom. It's secure – would you climb that razorwire?

Comidas Sara (☎ 865 8933; r per person US\$10; ☐ ☒) Right next to Tica Bus, this cheerfully chaotic spot guarantees a warm welcome. Three attractive rooms with air-con sharing OK bathrooms; and there are improvements underway all the time. You'll feel more part of the family than a guest, and they'll wake you up to make sure you get that early bus.

Casa Gabrinma (☎ 222 6650; r per person US\$10) Just southeast of Tica Bus, this Catalan-owned spot is welcoming and has decent rooms, which have up to eight beds (ask for a group price). There's more space in the bathrooms than in the rooms themselves, but there's a narrow garden area to stretch out in, as well as an inviting front lounge area with books available for browsing.

Casa Vanegas (☎ 222 4043; casavanegas@cablenet.com.ni, s/d with bathroom US\$10/12; ☒ ☐) At the east end of the Tica Bus block, this excellent choice has spotless rooms with cable TV, a small patio, drinks, snacks, and a spacious lounge with internet access (per hour US\$1). It's run by a welcoming family and has laundry service. A top option.

Posada de Ruth (☎ 222 4051; s/d with fan US\$10/12, with air-con US\$20/22; ☒ ☐) Across from Shannon Bar, this cheerful and hospitable choice offers bright, renovated rooms in a family house with speedy on-site internet as a well-earned bonus.

Other options:
Hospedaje Meza (☎ 222 2046; s/d US\$4/8) A place to save your córdobas for beer. Rather cheerless rooms, despite the murals, and those pallet beds look familiar – which prison movie was it? Actually, some rooms are better than others.

Casa Azul (☎ 813 4003; r per person US\$6) A flop east from Tica Bus, it's grungy with dark rooms but otherwise OK with laid-back management.

Hospedaje El Dorado (☎ 222 6012; r per person US\$6; ☐) Has smallish, dark rooms but you'll enjoy the welcome and the rocking chairs.

For a few córdobas more, you'll find more spacious and comfortable accommodations.

Hotel Jardín de Italia (☎ 222 7967; www.jardin.deitalia.com; s/d with fan US\$15/30, with air-con US\$25/40; (P) (☺) (♿)) With an efficient, well-run feel and a peaceful, sunny hammocked patio, this makes a sound choice for a tranquil stay. Rooms are comfy, tidy and homey, and have decent bathrooms. The matrimoniales are particularly good, with a big beast of a double bed. The air-con rooms are the same as the fanned ones; it just costs more if you turn the unit on.

Hotel Los Cisneros (☎ 222 7373; www.hotelloscisneros.com; s/d with fan US\$25/35, with air-con US\$35/50; (P) (☺) (♿)) Something of a retreat from any Managua cares, this excellent, warmly welcoming option is run by a cheerful local family. The rooms are apartments, with comfortable beds, kitchen, bathroom, an airy lounge room with rocking chairs, and an outside hammock. All this surrounds a peaceable courtyard full of plants and shaded by mango trees.

Mansión Teodolinda (☎ 228 1050; www.teodolinda.com; Crowne Plaza 2c al sur, 2c abajo; s/d US\$75/86; (P) (☺) (♿)) A significant step up in quality, this endearing boutique hotel has numerous lovely touches, a pretty pool and an excellent restaurant, and is close to some appealing nightlife options.

Bus travelers en route can stay at the **Tica Bus station** (☎ 222 6094; s/d with fan US\$12/20, with air-con US\$25/33; (☺) (♿)) itself, which has smart, renovated rooms within the spick-and-span terminal. Internet access was being planned at time of research.

Elsewhere in Managua

Nicaragua Guesthouse (Map p458; ☎ 249 8963; oscar.3701@tmx.com.ni; r US\$13, r with air-con US\$25; (☺) (♿)) In a tranquil leafy barrio in the eastern part of the city, and a short hop from the airport, this peaceful spot makes an excellent choice. Rooms are comfortable, with fan and bathroom, and the owner is very solicitous. You've also got the lively nightlife of Bello Horizonte just down the road. It's two blocks south and 2½ blocks west of Rotonda de la Virgen.

Hotel Ideas de Mamá (Map p458; ☎ 278 2908; www.hotelideasdemama.com; Rotonda Santo Domingo 5c sur, 2½c abajo; r with shared bathroom per person US\$12, s/d with air-con US\$35/45; (☺) (♿)) This is a lovely choice, with clean fan-cooled rooms with shared bathroom, and very attractive air-con choices with cable TV. Both rates include breakfast, the

latter also gives you free internet and transport around town.

EATING

Barrio Martha Quezada

This area (Map p463) boasts a number of good cheap eateries frequented by budget travelers.

Cafetín Mirna (Map p463; breakfast dishes US\$1-1.50; ☎ 6:30am-3pm Mon-Fri, to 11am Sat & Sun) Avocado colored, reliable, welcoming, and run by a local family, this is a top option for breakfast. From traditional *gallo pinto* (a common meal of blended rice and beans) to fluffy pancakes, eggs, fresh juices, and weak but tasty coffee, there's something for all. There's also a lunch buffet weekdays.

Comidas Sara (Map p463; dishes US\$1.70-4; ☎ 4pm-late) There are two places of this name (one is listed under Sleeping), run by sisters, who are daughters of the friendly matriarch Sara herself, who still keeps a grandmotherly eye on things. They are famous for their chicken and mango curry, and also do a great Spanish omelet as well as other traveler-friendly fare. We aren't choose which of the tiny places we like more – we'll leave that up to you.

Bar Los Chepes (Map p463; dishes US\$2-3; ☎ 3-11pm) This unassuming unsigned spot is little more than a few outdoor tables and a friendly boss. It's a fine place to sit with a cold beer of an evening, but it also serves large plates of food – stewed meat or pieces of fish – for a couple of dollars. The quantity is definitely better than the quality, but it's a good deal nonetheless.

There are a number of lunchtime buffets: **Buffete #2** (Map p463; lunch US\$2-4; ☎ 11:30am-3pm Mon-Sat) Why are the streets eerily quiet at lunchtime? Because everyone is here, enjoying food of excellent quality for a pittance, at this unsigned restaurant (the owners are still thinking up a name) a little northeast of Tica Bus. It's so good that they've had to build a second comedor in what was the mechanics' workshop opposite.

Doña Pilar (Map p463; dishes US\$2-4; ☎ 6-9pm Mon-Sat) Get mouthwatering *típico* (regional) fare at this popular evening *fritanga* (sidewalk BBQ). Chicken or enchiladas are served with *gallo pinto*, chopped pickled cabbage and plantain chips. On Sunday, Doña Pilar prepares a big tub of *baho* (plantain and beef stew), which is a tasty local favorite (noon to 2pm only).

La Cazuela (Map p463; dishes US\$2-12; ☎ 8am-10pm) An enduringly popular choice, this place has

a large menu suitable for every budget. It specializes in seafood, which is OK but not what you can find on the coast. You're sure to find something that appeals, however, and the overall quality is high. You are what you eat, so think twice (or not...) about the brain and testicle soup.

Licuaados Ananda (Map p463; mains US\$1.20-3, lunch buffet US\$2.20; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Sat) This outdoor vegetarian restaurant overlooks lush gardens near the Montoya statue west of Martha Quezada. As well as a fabulous array of *licuaados* (sweet fruit juice blends), it has a decent if unarousing lunch buffet (11am to 3pm) and other snacks.

For other food options try: **Comida a la Vista** (Map p463; lunch US\$5-5; ☎ 11:30am-3pm Mon-Sat) Another excellent noontide choice, but get there early for maximum choice; has vegetarian options. **Cafetín Tonalli** (Map p463; dishes US\$2-6; ☎ 7am-3pm Mon-Sat) Yogurt, herbal tea and inviting lunches, in the lovely garden at the back of this pleasant café. There's also an attached bakery, run by a women's co-op.

Elsewhere in Managua

All the usual overpriced, mediocre fast-food franchises can be found at Plaza Inter and Metrocentro. The latter also houses **Casa del Café** (Map p458; ☎ 271 9535; light meals US\$2.50-5; (♿)), which, in spite of its location in the mall, is a pleasant place to sip cappuccino or nibble on decadent brownies. It's got wi-fi access.

La Hora del Taco (Map p458; Hilton Hotel 1c arriba; dishes US\$1.70-6; ☎ noon-midnight) In the trendy backstreets southeast of Metrocentro, this upbeat orange spot has an airy upstairs lounge and dining area and some seriously good, stylishly presented Mexican food at fairly córdoba-stretching prices.

Marea Alta (Map p458; ☎ 276 2459; Hilton Hotel 1c abajo; mains US\$6-15) Bad news first: it's set in a group of tasteless neon-signed bar-restaurants behind the Hilton Hotel, and the waiters wear sailor suits. But the seafood is truly excellent; with delicate fish *carpaccios* a suitable warm-up for mixed platters of grilled prawns, squid, and fish or tasty steamed black clams. Service (aye-aye sir) is excellent and most seating is outside on the covered terrace.

El Churrasco (Map p458; Rotonda El Güegüense; steaks US\$11-17) Blow the budget on a meaty meal here. Despite being located on a busy rotonda (traffic circle), there's little traffic noise, and the atmosphere is boosted by unobtrusive live

music. There's polite service, and a wide range of steaks as well as a decent (for Nicaragua) choice of overpriced wines.

DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

Managua is far and away the country's nightlife capital. There are three particularly interesting zones: the Zona Rosa around Carr Masaya where there are several *discotecas*, the area around the Intur office, and Bello Horizonte, where there's a cluster of boisterous bars. There's no real gay or lesbian scene here.

Shannon Bar (Map p463; ☎ 4pm-2am) There's bottled Guinness, darts and quiet corners at this low-key Irish pub in Barrio Martha Quezada. It's a popular meeting point for travelers and locals.

Bar La Curva (Map p463; Av Bolívar) Featuring live music at 10pm weekends, this open-air bar, with its mellow globe lights and tropical ambience, oozes a laid-back vibe. It's just south of the Crowne Plaza. There are several other choices around here, including Fresh Hill (Map p463) tucked off the road in a garden setting.

Los Ídolos (Map p458; ☎ 249 0517; Rotonda Bello Horizonte; med pizzas US\$4-7) The centerpiece of the boisterous Bello Horizonte scene, this cracking bar is always lively with folk downing pizzas and crates of beer. The jukebox competes for attention against the mariachi hordes: smiling assassins who will make or break your night.

Two blocks east of the Tica Bus station, Bar Goussen (Map p463) is a buzzy local bar and a great spot for a couple of cold ones. And that's not just lazy journalistic cliché – the beer (US\$0.65) comes out of the fridge at Arctic temperatures. Sit at a table or perch at the long green bar and chat to the sociable barrio locals.

Live Music

La Casa de los Mejía Godoy (Map p463; ☎ 222 6110; www.losmejiaagodoy.org; Costado Oeste de Plaza Inter; cover US\$4-10) Revolutionary-era singers Carlos and Luis Enrique Mejía Godoy and other artists perform their famous Nicaraguan folk songs at their new venue opposite the Crowne Plaza hotel. It's an appealing, thatched space with friendly staff. There's live music from Thursday to Saturday; for the bigger-name concerts, it's wise to drop in the day before to buy your ticket.

Bar La Cavanga (Map p461; ☎ 228 1098; Centro Cultural Managua; cover US\$4; 🍷 from 9:30pm Thu-Sat) Right in the middle of what was once central Managua but was devastated by the 1972 earthquake, this '50s-era gem stages live folk and jazz shows. It's a lot of fun, and very atmospheric, but it's definitely a place to take a taxi to.

Discotecas

Quetzal (Map p458; ☎ 277 0890) Near Rotonda de Centroamérica, Quetzal has been going strong for years, with one of the city's largest and liveliest dance floors. Salsa, merengue and *cumbia* (Colombian dance tunes) are in heavy rotation at this cavernous club.

XS (Map p458; ☎ 277 3806; Carr Masaya Km 4.5; 🍷 Wed-Sat) This happy shiny modern club, one of several in this zone, draws plenty of beautiful young Managuans with its curious blend of danceable music.

Island Taste (Map p458; ☎ 240 0010) On weekends the Caribbean crowd packs the floor to *soca* (defined by fast beats and calypso-like undertones) and reggae grooves at this spot on Km 6.5 of the Carr Norte.

ENTERTAINMENT

Theater & Cinemas

Alianza Francesa (Map p458) One block north of the Mexican embassy, with indie films screened once or twice weekly. Check www.clickmanagua.com (actividades/cine alternativa) for show times.

Cinema Plaza Inter (Map p463; ☎ 225 5090; top fl, Plaza Inter; tickets US\$2.80)

Cinemark (Map p458; ☎ 271 9037; Metrocentro; tickets US\$2.80)

Teatro Rubén Darío (Map p461; ☎ 222 7426; www.trrubendario.gob.ni) This theater hosts high-quality plays, concerts, and exhibitions by national and visiting artists.

Sport

Estadio Nacional (Map p463; tickets around US\$1.50-5) Managua's Bóer baseball team faces its first-division rivals from October to April at this stadium, just northwest of Barrio Martha Quezada. Weekend games start at 4pm, weekday games at 6pm. Check www.lnbp.net for schedules.

Estadio Cranshaw (Map p463; tickets around US\$1.50-3.50) Professional soccer is played at this stadium, adjacent to the Estadio Nacional, from September to April. Games are at 3pm Sunday.

SHOPPING

Almost anything can be found in the huge, chaotic Mercado Central (Map p458), commonly known as Mercado Roberto Huembes. A large section is devoted to *artesanías* (handicrafts) from around the country. Scores of vendors display hammocks from Tipitapa and pottery from San Juan del Oriente, as well as woodwork, leather bags and rocking chairs. Take bus 119 from Plaza España and watch your valuables. The other major markets, well located around town, stock mostly food and household items.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

The airport is small and manageable, with a modern international section and a quaint domestic terminal alongside. In the international section there's an all-card ATM, car hire, and a post office with internet access. See p459 for transport details.

La Costeña (☎ 263 2142) and **Atlantic Airlines** (☎ 233 2791) both have offices in the airport. Often you can show up and book a flight out for the same afternoon, but it's wise to call ahead and make a reservation (no credit card needed). Always book your return flight when you arrive at your destination.

The two airlines charge the same fares; La Costeña has more departures. One-way fares are 60% to 65% of the return fare. The following prices are samples of round-trip fares on common routes.

Bluefields US\$127; six Monday to Saturday, four Sunday

Corn Islands US\$164; four daily

Puerto Cabezas US\$149; four Monday to Saturday, three Sunday

San Carlos US\$116; twice daily Monday to Friday, daily weekends

Bus

INTERNATIONAL

International buses are run by **Tica Bus** (Map p463; ☎ 222 6094; www.ticabus.com), **King Quality** (Map p463; ☎ 222 3065; www.kingqualityca.com), **Trans-Nica** (Map p458; ☎ 270 3133; www.transnica.com) and **Transportes El Sol** (Map p463; ☎ 222 7785), all with daily departures to other Central American destinations.

Principal international bus departures:

San José, Costa Rica Tica Bus (US\$12.50; 9hr; 6am, 7am, noon; US\$17 *ejecutivo* around noon); King Quality (US\$19; 9hr; 1:30pm); TransNica (US\$12.50; 9hr; 5:30am, 7am, 10am; US\$25 *ejecutivo*; 8hr; noon)

Panama City Tica Bus (6am & 7am) Services to San José connect with onward service to Panama City (US\$37.50 total), a further 18 hour journey.

Tegucigalpa, Honduras King Quality (US\$28; 8hr; 5:30am, 10:30am); Tica Bus (US\$20; 7-8hr; 5am, 2pm) Tica Bus' morning service continues to San Pedro Sula (US\$28)

San Salvador, El Salvador Tica Bus (US\$25; 11hr, 5am; US\$30 *ejecutivo* around noon); Transportes El Sol (US\$27; 11 hr; 6am); King Quality (US\$33; 10hr; 3:30am, 5:30am, 10:30am)

Guatemala City King Quality (US\$60; 17 hours; 2:30am, 3:30am) Also, Tica Bus' 5am service to San Salvador continues on next day to Guatemala City (US\$36; another 5hr).

DOMESTIC

Intercity buses depart from the city's major markets (see Map p458). Buses heading for southwestern destinations and the Costa Rican border depart from Mercado Roberto Huembes; for León and the border with Honduras from **Mercado Israel Lewites (Bóer)** (☎ 265 2152); and for Matagalpa, Estelí and other northern destinations, including the Honduran border, as well as Rama, for the Caribbean coast, and San Carlos, from **Mercado Mayoreo** (☎ 233 4235).

On the routes to Granada, León, Rivas and a few other large towns, there are additional services in minibuses (minivans). These are quicker and more comfortable. Microbuses for León, Masaya, and Granada depart from their corresponding bus stations.

Particularly at Mercado Roberto Huembes, aggressive touts will accost you and find you a seat on a bus to your destination in exchange for a few córdobas. In any case, you're better off simply talking to the bus conductors who are constantly bawling out their destination.

Main destinations include the following.

Estelí (US\$2.25; 2¼hr; almost half-hourly 3:30am-6pm; US\$3 express services; 2hr; 5:45am to 5:45pm; Mercado Mayoreo)

Granada *ordinarios* (US\$0.65; 1hr; every 15min 5am-10pm; Mercado R Huembes); *microbuses* (US\$1; 45min; every 20min 5:40am-8pm; UCA)

León *expresos* (US\$1; 1¼hr; every 30min); *ordinarios* (US\$0.80; 2¼hr; every 20min 6:30am to 5pm via old highway; Mercado Bóer); *microbuses* (US\$1.25; 1¼hr; depart when full; UCA)

Masaya *microbuses* (US\$0.70; 30min; every 20min; UCA); *ordinarios* (US\$0.35; 40min; every 25min; Mercado R Huembes)

Matagalpa (US\$3 express; 2hr; hourly; US\$2.15 regular, 2½ hr, every 30min 5:30am-6pm; Mercado Mayoreo)

Ocotal (US\$3.70; 3½hr; roughly hourly 5:10am-5:15pm; Mercado Mayoreo)

Rama (US\$8.30; 5-6hr; 6 daily; Mercado Mayoreo) **Rivas** *ordinarios* (US\$1.10; 2¼hr; every 25mins 4am to 6:30pm); *expresos* (US\$2.20; 1½ hr.; 10 daily); *microbuses* (US\$1.55; 1¼hr; every 30min 5am to 6:45pm) All depart from Mercado R Huembes.

San Carlos (US\$8.30; 8-10hr; 6 daily; Mercado Mayoreo)

San Juan del Sur (US\$3.30; 2¼hr; 2 daily; Mercado R Huembes) Otherwise change in Rivas or jump off a Sapoá-bound bus at the San Juan junction and wait for a connection.

Sapoá (Costa Rican border) (US\$3.30; 2hr; half-hourly 6am to 5pm; Mercado R Huembes)

GETTING AROUND

Bus

Local buses are frequent and crowded; watch your pockets. Buses do not generally stop en route – look for the nearest bus shelter. The fare is US\$0.25.

Useful routes include the following.

109 Plaza de la República to Mercado Roberto Huembes, stopping en route at Plaza Inter.

110 Mercado Bóer to Mercado Mayoreo, via the UCA, Metrocentro, Rotonda de Centroamérica, Mercado R Huembes and Mercado Iván Montenegro.

116 Montoya statue, Plaza Inter, Mercado Oriental, Rotonda Bello Horizonte.

118 From Parque Las Piedrecitas, heads down Carr Sur, then east, passing by the Mercado Israel Lewites (Bóer), Rotonda El Güegüense (Plaza España), Plaza Inter and Mercado Oriental on its way to Mercado Mayoreo.

119 From Lindavista to Mercado R Huembes, with stops at Rotonda El Güegüense and the UCA.

Car

The usual multinationals compete with a few local operators. It's significantly more expensive to hire a car at the airport. Most operators will deliver cars to where you are staying in Managua. Lower-priced operators include: **Budget** (Map p458; ☎ 266 6226; www.budget.com.ni; Montoya 1c abajo) Competitive rates and good service.

Dollar Rent a Car (Map p463; ☎ 266 3620; www.dollar.com.ni) Weekly rates start at US\$160/119 in high/low season. Office in Hotel Crowne Plaza.

Lugo Rent-a-Car (Map p458; ☎ 266 5240; www.lugorentacar.com.ni; Casa del Obrero 5c sur, 3 abajo) High-season rates from US\$20.

Taxi

Finding a cab in Managua is never a problem; drivers honk as they pass to signal their availability. Drivers pick up additional passengers along the way, so you can hail a taxi even if it's occupied. Around the bus stations and at

night do not get into a cab that has more than one person in it.

Taxis are not metered and fares should be agreed on before you get in; locals always vigorously renegotiate the fare. The standard rate for a short ride is about US\$1 to US\$1.50 (20 to 30 córdobas) per person; longer journeys right across town should not exceed US\$2.50 per person. Fares go up a little after dark.

AROUND MANAGUA

LAGUNAS DE XILOÁ & APOYEQUE

Half a dozen *lagunas*, or volcanic crater lakes, lie near Managua's city limits. Of these, the best for swimming is **Laguna de Xiloá**, on the

Península de Chiltepe, about 20km northwest of Managua off the road to León. Xiloá is also suitable for diving; its clear waters provide the habitat for at least 15 endemic aquatic species. Though crowded on weekends, the *laguna* remains quite peaceful during the week. There are a few food kiosks, though you can still see the damage from Hurricane Mitch. You pay US\$1 per person to enter the area. To get here, take bus 110 from Managua's UCA bus station (p467) to Ciudad Sandino, where you can catch an onward bus to the lagoons.

A contrast to developed Xiloá is picturesque **Laguna de Apoyeque**, set deep within a steep 500m-high volcanic crater; small alligators bask beside its sulfurous waters. It's a strenuous 40-minute scramble-hike from Xiloá.



TIPITAPA

This rural town 21km east of Managua is mostly visited for its *aguas termales* (hot springs). The **complex** (entry US\$0.55) consists of three pools of varying temperatures (the hot one, is), gardens and sauna. There's also a restaurant here doing fish plates (US\$2.80). It makes a relaxing day trip from the city. Buses depart regularly from Managua's Mercado R Huembes.

POCHOMIL & PACIFIC BEACHES

A famous Nicaraguan vacation spot, **Pochomil** is a gorgeous swimming beach on the Pacific coast 62km from Managua. The promenade is stocked with bars, restaurants, and a few hotels which, the place having been eclipsed by San Juan del Sur in recent years, are usually fairly empty (Easter apart). The restaurant owners fight (sometimes literally) for your custom. The beach is wide, sandy and good for swimming or sunning; the sunsets are fabulous.

Dozens of thatched-roof restaurants prepare fresh seafood, each charging roughly the same. Red snapper costs US\$6 and lobster is US\$8.

If you want to stay, **Hotel Altamar** (☎ 269 9204; r with fan/air-con US\$15/25; (P) ♿) is a bright, cheery place with hammocks and a variety of mediocre rooms that accommodate up to three people. The restaurant, with lovely views, has moderate prices and tasty seafood.

The fishing village of **Masachapa** is just 2km north of Pochomil. While the beach here isn't as inviting, it feels more real and is significantly cheaper. **Hospedaje Bar Flipper** (☎ 269 7509; r US\$6), where the road branches off toward Pochomil, has concrete boxes with adequate beds, fans and basic bathrooms.

There's great surfing in these parts; the best breaks are north of Montelimar (where the resort complex has a Visa ATM) at **Playa Los Cardones**. Here, overpriced but enticing **Los Cardones Surf Lodge** (☎ 618 7314; www.loscardones.com; s/d/tr incl all meals US\$82/113/138; (P)) rents boards (US\$15 per day), gives surf lessons (US\$10 per hour) and offers day use of their facilities (US\$10 per person, redeemable in beer or food). It also offers accommodations in ecofriendly (powerless) cabañas. There's plenty for nonsurfers, including turtle-watching and horse riding.

Buses from Managua's Mercado Bóer go to Masachapa and Pochomil (US\$1.10, 1½ hours) every 40 minutes from 7am to 5:30pm. For Los Cardones, get a San Cayetano-bound bus from the same station. Jump off at California and walk, hitch, or organize a lift the last 15km.

NORTHERN NICARAGUA

Cooler than the coastal lowlands, the mountainous region just south of Honduras is cowboy country, with luminous cloud formations and crisp, chilly nights. The departments of Matagalpa, Estelí, Jinotega and Madriz compose this highland region, rich with coffee, tobacco and livestock.

Estelí is the principal town between Managua and the Honduran border, and the Miraflores Nature Reserve lies just northeast of it. South of Estelí, a turnoff at Sébaco (Route 3) leads to the pleasant mountain towns of Matagalpa and Jinotega, and several private reserves and coffee plantations that make for intriguing visits.

Torn apart by Hurricane Mitch in 1998, the area has since bounced back. Fair-trade coffee buyers, as well as various investments in education and infrastructure by foreign aid groups and governments has given the region a sound basis for the future.

MATAGALPA

pop 80,230

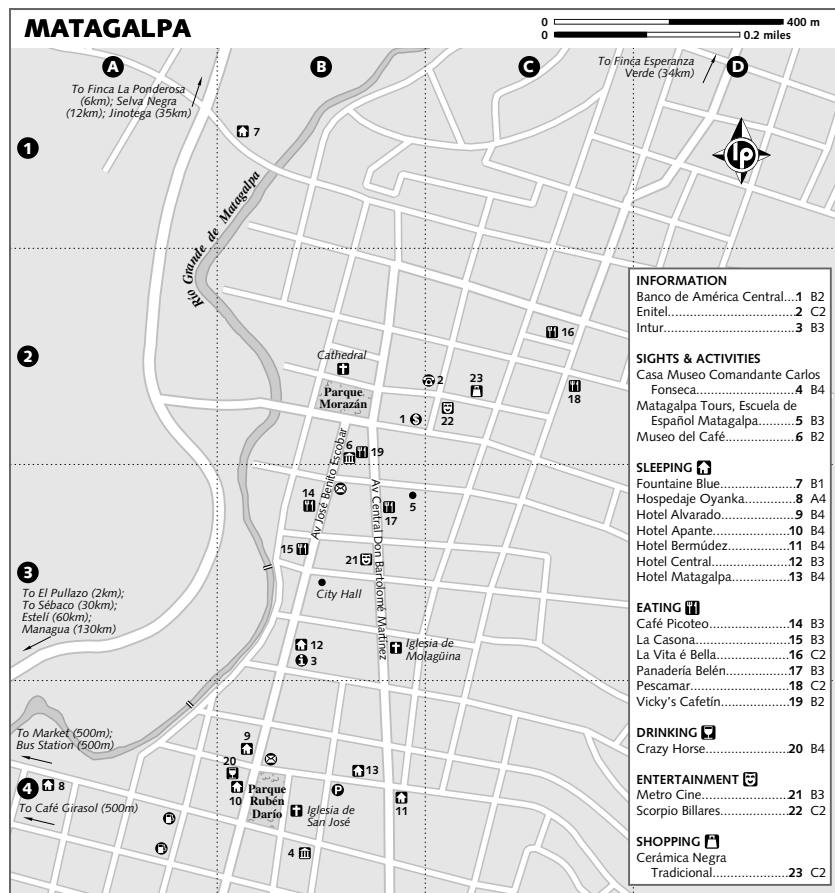
The coffee capital of Matagalpa (682m) is blessed with a refreshing climate that comes as delicious relief after the sweaty lowlands. Surrounded by lovely green mountains, it's a bustling, unkempt but prosperous town spread unevenly over hilly terrain. Though tiny here, the Río Grande de Matagalpa is the nation's second-longest river, flowing all the way to the Caribbean.

Spanish conquistadors found several indigenous communities coexisting here, including the Molagüina, whose tongue-twisting Nahuatl name for the town, Matlatlcallipan (House of Nets), became Matagalpa.

Matagalpa makes a good destination with its down-to-earth ways, friendly people, proximity to cloud-forest reserves, and selection of great places to stay.

Orientation

Bordered on its western edge by the river, Matagalpa's central zone lies between two principal plazas, Parque Morazán on the north side and Parque Rubén Darío to the south. The municipal cathedral faces Morazán; budget accommodations are concentrated around Darío. Ten blocks west of the latter you'll find the market and bus station. The main street,



Av José Benito Escobar, runs between the two parques, while roughly parallel Av Central Don Bartolomé Martínez, named after local *indigena* who became president, also runs from Parque Morazán. Confusingly, locals tend to refer to the former as Av Central, and the latter as Av de los Bancos.

Information

There are numerous cybercafés dotted through the center. One, Cyber Molaguiña, is famous for its coffee and juices, but was closed and due to change location at research time.

Banco de América Central (BAC) With Visa/Plus/MC/Cirrus/Amex ATM, a block east of Parque Morazán.

Enitel A block east of the cathedral; public phones are prevalent.

Intur (☎ 612 7060; ☎ 9am-5pm) Just off the main drag, it's run by friendly staff who can suggest activities in the area, including visits to nearby *fincas* (farms). Closed for lunch.

Post office One block or so south of Parque Morazán.

Sights

Matagalpa's **cathedral** is one of several 19th-century churches that grace the city. Its interior is fairly unadorned, apart from the ornate plasterwork in the vaults of the central nave. Just down from here, the **Museo del Café** (Av Escobar; admission free; ☎ 9am-12:30pm & 2-6pm) has a bit of everything Matagalpan – local history, archaeology, culture – and does indeed include some information about coffee, with cups of the local brew to try. The friendly staff can also organize tours in the surrounding

area and are generous with providing you with information.

Matagalpa is known throughout Nicaragua as the birthplace of Carlos Fonseca, a martyr of the Sandinista revolution. His home has been converted to a museum, the **Casa Museo Comandante Carlos Fonseca**, but at the time of research it wasn't open to the public.

Activities & Tours

There's heaps to do in the surrounding area (see p472). You can learn more from Intur or the Museo del Café. A charitable setup that accepts volunteers, Café Girasol, two blocks southwest of the main bus station right by the main river bridge, sells detailed leaflets for a number of **self-guided walks** in the Matagalpa area (US\$1.40). They vary in difficulty and length, from four to eight hours.

Matagalpa Tours (☎ 772 0108, 647 4680; www.matagalpatours.com; ☎ Mon-Fri & Sat morning, always contactable by cell phone) is a well-run, English-speaking setup that offers a wide range of excursions in Matagalpa and the surrounding hills. These range from day hikes in the Cerro Apante dry forest or Cerro El Arenal wet forest to tours of abandoned gold mines, coffee plantations, and even El Castillo del Cacao, a local operation producing organic chocolate in a range of sinful flavors. Excursions are cheaper the more people go. For two, think US\$15 each for a couple of hours, US\$25 for a half-day and US\$50 for a whole day.

Courses

Escuela de Español Matagalpa (☎ 772 0108, 654 4824; www.matagalpa.info) Run out of the same office as Matagalpa Tours, this has a flexible program of classes for different abilities and requirements. Packages including homestay or hotel accommodations and excursions cost from US\$160 for a 15-hour week.

Festivals & Events

Don't bother with a lovey-dovey candlelit dinner on February 14 when you could be here for the boisterous partying to celebrate the anniversary of Matagalpa achieving city status. The city's **annual festival** is held during the week of September 24, in honor of its patron saint, La Virgen de la Merced (Our Lady of Mercy). The **Festival de Polkas, Mazurcas y Jamaquillos** livens up the closing weekend celebration with traditional dances from Nicaragua's five northern departments.

Sleeping

The least expensive places are near Parque Rubén Darío.

Hotel Bermúdez (☎ 612 5660; s/d US\$2.20/4.40) This offers a motherly welcome and rooms that are clean and decent, if a little run-down. Most have their own cold-water bathroom; all are different, with those at the front quite a bit lighter. The mattresses also vary substantially in quality.

Hotel Matagalpa (☎ 772 3834; r with/without bathroom US\$6/4) One block east of the park, the friendly and secure Matagalpa is a favorite among travelers. In spite of thin walls, the fan-cooled rooms offer decent value for the money. You'll need healthy lungs to summon the boss down the long front corridor.

Hospedaje Oyanka (☎ 772 0057; s/d US\$3.80/6.60) This clean and cheap flophouse is located behind a little café halfway between the bus station and Parque Rubén Darío. The rooms are OK for the price and share clean bathrooms. Turn left out of the bus station and follow this road; it bends to the right and the place is just ahead on your right.

Hotel Apante (☎ 772 6890; Av Escobar; s/d US\$5/8, with bathroom US\$7/10, with cable TV & air-con US\$12/15; ☎) Bang on Parque Rubén Darío and with plenty of bang for your buck; with a wide choice of value-packed rooms, this place is tops. If you've been traveling a while, you'll weep at how good the showers are. Some rooms have views over the hills but these also suffer from disco noise at weekends. The doorbell is around the corner to your left.

Hotel Alvarado (☎ 772 2830; Av Escobar; s/d US\$7.20/13.90) This appealing and courteous central pad has spacious, clean and attractive rooms with bathroom, cable TV, and fans. There's also a small common balcony that's a nice place to sit and watch the street. If there's nobody about, ask in the pharmacy below.

Hotel Central (☎ 772 3140; Av Escobar; s/d US\$10/13.90) It's tough to beat this great place on the main street. The modern rooms are very comfortable with cable TV, good bathroom and fan. There are numerous appealing decorative touches, and the place is spotless, friendly and professional.

Fontaine Blue (☎ 772 2733; d with/without bathroom US\$21/15) Another heartwarmingly good Matagalpa sleep-spot, with modern, comfortable rooms with big beds and cable TV. The owner is exceptionally benevolent, and a simple but apparently bottomless breakfast is included

DAY TRIPPING AROUND MATAGALPA

Fincas & Ecologies

There are several *fincas* (farms) to visit in the Matagalpa area, giving you the chance to check out the coffee plantations, as well as explore the forested hills. Most famous is **Selva Negra** (☎ 612 5713; www.selvanegra.com; dm/d/cottages US\$10/30/50-150; 📍), founded in the 1880s by German immigrants who came at the invitation of the Nicaraguan government to grow coffee. Over half the estate is protected rain forest, covered by a network of trails – be warned, the higher ones are very tough, steep scrambles – where you can see howler monkeys, ocelots, and quetzals. You can stay here – the Bavarian-style cottages are the most appealing option – or just visit, in which case you pay US\$1.35, redeemable at the café-restaurant. Selva Negra is a slow 12km north of Matagalpa; take any Jinotega bus and get off at the signed turnoff, marked by an old military tank. From there it's a pleasant 2km walk.

Six kilometers north of Matagalpa is the peaceful **Finca La Ponderosa** (☎ 772 2951), an organic coffee farm. The friendly family that run it will show you round, taking you through the labor-intensive coffee-making process. There are forest trails, a swimming hole under a waterfall, horseback rides, plus food and accommodations available. This is one of several properties on the agricultural tourism Coffee Route – you can book and get more details at Intur or the Museo del Café in Matagalpa.

Thirty-five kilometers east of Matagalpa on the edge of the cloud forest, **Finca Esperanza Verde** (☎ 772 5003; www.fincaesperanzaverde.org; camping per person US\$6, s/d US\$30/45; 📍) is a delightfully remote and relaxing ecolodge with accommodations high on both comfort and romance. You can hike three short forest trails here; day visitors pay US\$1.10. From Matagalpa's northern bus station, get off the Pancasan-bound bus at Yucul; it's an hour's uphill walk from here.

in the rates. Just across the bridge that leads to the Jinotega highway.

Eating

Vicky's Cafetín (breakfast US\$1.50) Just down from Parque Morazán, Vicky's serves breakfast, snacks and sweet treats under a breezy pavilion. *Raspados* – crushed tropical fruit over shaved ice – are a popular dessert.

Panadería Belén (snacks US\$0.60-2.50; 🕒 8am-6pm) The Belén is a decent little café and bakery that comes into its own at weekends, when it serves deliciously greasy *nacatamales* (banana leaf-wrapped bundles of cornmeal, pork, vegetables and herbs).

Café Picoteo (☎ 772 6000; dishes US\$2-3; 🕒 10am-10pm) This place is a cozy local hangout serving espresso and cappuccino, as well as a variety of snacks – pizzas, tacos and burgers. Behind the café is a popular local bar; a good place for a beer but it comes with very laid-back service.

La Casona (☎ 772 3901; Av Escobar; mains US\$2-4, lunch US\$2.40) Both bar and restaurant, this spot has an ample buffet lunch, and a pleasant rear patio down the stairs. The food isn't remarkable – roast chicken is the main choice, but it's a popular spot, and gets particularly convivial

on Friday and Saturday nights, when there's live music out the back.

El Pullazo (☎ 772 3935; Carr Managua Km 125; dishes US\$4; 🕒 11am-11pm) On the road south, about 2km from the center, this place is in a slow building process – you'll likely see the wires in the ceiling for some time to come. No matter, there are just three dishes: chargrilled chicken or pork, and beef; the eponymous *pullazo* (marinated beef fillet), served with *güirila* (green corn tortilla); and *gallo pinto*. It's delicious, and remarkably good value for the high quality involved. Cab fare to here is US\$1.50 to US\$2.50. There's a *discoteca* just up the road if you want to make a night of it.

Pescamar (☎ 772 3548; dishes US\$4-6; 🕒 noon-9pm) Sizable servings of fish and seafood in a spacious restaurant northeast of the center. The prawn salad is particularly good if you're a mayonnaise fan. The service, however, is almost comically grumpy.

La Vita é Bella (☎ 772 5476; pasta dishes from US\$4; 🕒 1-10pm Tue-Sun) Difficult to find but worth the search, this hidden gem, located on a narrow lane, serves up tasty Italian and vegetarian specialties in an intimate setting. Closed for holidays at time of research, but locals assure it's as good as ever.

Drinking & Entertainment

La Casona is a good spot for a few drinks. One block east of Parque Morazán, Scorpio Billares is the place to impress the local teens with your pool skills. There are heaps of tables, paid for by time.

Crazy Horse (🕒 11am-1am) Half a block west of Parque Rubén Darío, this easygoing bar is fairly upmarket for a Nicaraguan drinking spot. With wagon wheels and saddles imparting a cowboy theme and plenty of tequila and cocktails lubricating the throats as the evening gets on, it does the job just fine.

Metro Cinema (Av Martíne; tickets US\$1.20) The town's cinema screens Hollywood hits thrice daily for a pittance.

Shopping

Matagalpa is known for its fine black pottery, and some pieces are small enough to easily stow in a backpack. Workshops are scattered throughout town, including one in the center of Parque Rubén Darío.

Cerámica Negra Tradicional, two blocks east of the cathedral, displays the work of Doña Ernestina Rodríguez, including jewelry and tiny tea sets.

Getting There & Away

The main **bus station** (☎ 772 4659) is about 1km west of Parque Darío. It's known as Cotran Sur; another minor bus station at the other end of town serves local destinations.

Estelí (US\$1.40; 1½hr; every 30min 5:15am to 5:45pm)

Jinotega (US\$1.35; 1¼-2hr; every 30min 5am to 6pm)

Journey time depends on how the bus copes with the hill.

León (US\$2.75; 2½hr; 6am) Alternatively take any Estelí-bound bus and transfer at San Isidro.

Managua (US\$3 express, 2hr, hourly 5:20am to 5:20pm; US\$2.15 regular, 2½hr, every 30min 3:35am to 6pm)

Masaya (US\$2.55; 3hr; 2pm & 3:30pm)

JINOTEGA

pop 41,130

Aptly nicknamed City of Mists, Jinotega is a quiet town set in a fertile kilometer-high valley in a mountainous coffee-growing region. Murals on the plaza testify to the heavy fighting that took place here and in the surrounding areas during the war years; the town was also massively flooded in the wake of Hurricane Mitch in 1998. The regular mists add a beauty to the town but also can make it cold.

The steep drive up from Matagalpa is one of the most scenic in the country and rea-

son enough for a visit to Jinotega. Colorful roadside stands along the potholed road sell flowers and big bundles of carrots, beets and cabbages.

There's an **Intur office** (☎ 782 4552; jinotega@intur.gob.ni) at the southeast corner of Parque Central, while opposite the Hotel Rosa is a **municipal tourist office** (www.jinotega.com) that offers tours and can arrange guides.

Sights

Though unremarkable from the outside, the **church** has a fine white interior bristling with saints; it's an impressive collection of religious art. The most famous statue is the Cristo Negro, a black Christ reminiscent of the more renowned one at Esquipulas in Guatemala.

Across the plaza from the church, a pair of fading **murals** on the walls of the old Somoza jail (now a youth center) serve as reminders of the revolutionary years. A monument to Sandinista leader Carlos Fonseca rests amid the tall trees of Jinotega's charming central plaza.

Sleeping

Hotel Rosa (☎ 782 2472; r per person US\$1.60-2.80) Run by a gloriously feisty old matriarch, this appealing but very dilapidated old building is about the cheapest spot in town. The rooms, which share bathroom facilities, are dark and musty. The more expensive ones have better beds, but none of them is really honeymoon quality. It's one block east of the park.

Hotel Central (☎ 782 2063; Calle Central; r with shared bathroom per person US\$3.30, s/d with bathroom US\$9.50/12.20) Right by the Esso station (the standard local landmark) in the heart of town, this is a friendly spot with various choices of room. The swish en suite pads have TV, hot water and a fan, and are fairly bright. The cheaper rooms are gradually being made over.

Hotel Bosawás (☎ 829 0884; r per person US\$5) This welcoming place is a real budget gem and offers excellent value for your córdoba. The rooms are bright and inviting, with polished floorboards. The whole joint, including the shared bathrooms, is absolutely spotless. There's also a good family room with bathroom and cable TV (US\$17). The hotel is three blocks north of the church.

Hotel Sollentuna Hem (☎ 782 2324; s with/without bathroom US\$11/8, d/tr with bathroom US\$16/20; 📍) It's

another favorite among travelers; two blocks east, 4½ blocks north of the central plaza. This pleasant hotel (named after a barrio of Stockholm) has hospitable management, and dark but clean rooms which range from cozy singles to roomier doubles with decent beds, cable TV, bathroom and hot water.

Eating & Drinking

There are a few street-food stalls around the park, and *fritangas* fire up around town in the evenings. For more elaborate meals, head to La Colmena, just off Calle Central.

Soda El Tico (☎ 782 2059; buffet lunch US\$2; ☎ 7:30am-10pm; ☒) This gleaming spot wipes all the buffet competitors off the map. Some days it seems that the whole town comes here for lunch. There's a little patio, work from local artists on the walls, and a good choice of steaming plates. It even serves beer. Get there before 1:30pm. There's a simpler branch near the southern bus station.

Cafetín Trebol (dishes US\$1-2.20) This unassuming little café on the central park has a small menu consisting mostly of tacos, fried chicken and hamburgers, but it also serves decent breakfasts and refreshing *raspados*.

Sopas Coyote's Bar (dishes US\$1-3) Just off Calle Central, corner the corner from Soda El Tico, this friendly little spot serves a decent *comida corriente* (mixed plate) and is also a fine spot for a bit of liquid refreshment.

Getting There & Away

There are two bus stations. Northbound buses depart from the main market beside the highway east of town. The **bus station** (☎ 632 4530) for Matagalpa, Estelí and Managua buses sits near the town's southern entrance.

Estelí (US\$2.20; 1½hr; 5 daily)

Managua (express US\$3.90; 3½ hr; 10 daily; *ordinario* US\$2.80, every 30min) Both via Matagalpa.

Matagalpa (US\$1.35; 1½hr; every 30min 5am-6pm)

ESTELÍ

pop 90,290

A place of amazing sunsets and bristling with cowboy hats, Estelí is the center of an agriculturally rich highland valley and is capital of the department of the same name. Tobacco, grains, sesame and other crops, as well as live-stock and cheese, are produced in the surrounding area. Unpretentious, nontouristy and very Nicaraguan, Estelí makes a great place to visit.

Partly because of its strategic location on the road to Honduras, Estelí saw heavy fighting during the revolution – it was bombed in April 1979 and severely damaged – and afterward the town has remained one of the Sandinistas' strongest support bases.

Many *internacionalistas* (volunteers from all over the world who contributed to rebuilding the country) arrived here during the Sandinista years, contributing their efforts to the farming collectives established in the region.

Orientation

The Interamericana Hwy runs north-south along the eastern side of the town; both bus stations are on the highway.

Typically, Estelí utilizes a street numbering system, and every block is clearly signed. The intersection of Av Central and Calle Transversal is the center of the system. Calles (streets) ascend in number north and south of Calle Transversal; avenidas (avenues) ascend east and west of Av Central. Streets and avenues are suffixed 'NE' (northeast), 'SO' (southwest) etc, according to which quadrant of town they belong to.

Information

Banco America Central (BAC; cnr Calle Transversal & Av 1 SO) All-card-friendly ATM.

Compucenter (Calle Transversal; per hr US\$0.60) One of dozens of internet places; also has cheap international phone calls.

Entel Two blocks east of post office.

Intur (☎ 713 6799; esteli@intur.gob.ni; Calle 2a NE)

Friendly tourist office with a range of brochures as well as books to browse.

Post office (cnr Calle Transversal & Av Central)

UCA Mirafior (☎ 713 2971; Av 5a NE; ☎ 8am-1pm, 2-5:30pm) This is the place to go if you're planning a jaunt into the Mirafior reserve. Just north of Calle 9a NE, it's inside the large yard on your right as you enter.

Sights

Galería de Héroes y Mártires (☎ 713 3753; emayorga70@yahoo.com; Av 1a NE; entry by donation; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) This is an emotive place to visit, a gallery dedicated to the memory of the town's fallen revolutionaries. The photos of the young men and women who gave their lives are displayed around the single room, and there are various articles and reminiscences dotted among the photos (many translated). The small cabinet of clothes is heart-wrenching. The gallery is



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LOCAL VOICES: A MOTHER REMEMBERS THE WAR

Guillermo Meta Montenegro is the director of the Gallery of Heroes and Martyrs in Estelí (p474).

- **Did you lose a son or daughter in the Revolution?** My two sons. They died within a week of each other. April 1979.
- **How old were they?** Seventeen and 14. Well, 14 when he went to the mountain. He turned 15 before he died.
- **How have things changed since those days?** For the poor, the last 16 years (1990–2006) have been worse than the war. The war was bloody, but at least what food there was, was shared. The liberals have withheld resources from rural Nicaragua. It's difficult for us mothers to see hard-won liberties taken away.
- **So you are pleased that Ortega is back?** The Sandinistas are the party of the poor. Who else do we have?
- **What do you hope of the new government?** Three things. Health, education and work. People died to bring us these. And places to live – but no handouts. Small subsidies or loans to help people buy land, but no handouts. That's what sank us last time.
- **And the USA?** I accept that they didn't want this government to be elected; now they have to accept that the Nicaraguan people wanted it.
- **Is tourism important?** Very important. In this museum, for example, the worms are eating the photos of our martyrs because we have no money for picture frames. Tourism can help that.
- **What about American tourists?** (Laughs) They are more than welcome. The people are not responsible for the sins of their leaders. Where would we Nicaraguans be were that the case?
As told to Andy Symington

run by mothers of the martyrs, and they are the ones who make a visit here so compelling. They are more than willing to share their own stories, providing insight into the struggles that many Nicaraguans experienced (see the boxed text, above). Entry to the gallery is by donation; please be as generous as you can – already many of the photos have been eaten away for want of money for framing.

The 1823 **cathedral** is worth a wander, and murals surrounding the parque central are also interesting.

One of Estelí's most refreshing attractions, **Salto Estanzuela** is a pretty 36m waterfall that forms a deep pool ideal for swimming, and lies outside the city. The road to the falls starts about 1km south of town, just past the hospital, and heads southwest to the community of Estanzuela. This road can be cautiously reached by car or taxi, or take a 6:30am or 1:30pm truck from the market, returning about 1½ hours later. Otherwise, it makes a fine walk, about an hour from town. Bring food and water.

The mountains surrounding the town are very impressive.

Courses

Estelí has a large selection of Spanish language schools, a holdover from its days as a haven for *internacionalistas*. As well as those listed below, ask at the Galería de Héroes y Mártires to see if these mothers of fallen revolutionaries have recommended giving classes.

Cenac Spanish School (☎ 713 2025; www.ibw.com.ni/~cenac; Interamericana Hwy) Homestay plus 20 hours of intensive Spanish costs US\$140. It's near Calle 13a.

Escuela Horizonte (☎ 713 4117; www.ibw.com.ni/u/horizont; Av 2 btwn Calles 9 & 10 SE) Gets students involved in the community. Classes cost US\$165 per week, for 20 hours of instruction with homestay and scheduled activities.

Spanish School Güegüense (☎ 713 7580; sacuanjochespanishschool@yahoo.fr; Barrio Primero de Mayo s/n) Six blocks east and one block south of the Shell station, this offers field trips and homestays. Profits go to charitable causes.

Sleeping

Several inexpensive guesthouses lie along Av Central, several blocks south of the center, in a characterful shopping district.

Hospedaje San Ramón (☎ 714 0970; Av Central btwn Calles 7a & 8a SE; s/d US\$2.20/3.30) The San Ramón has dark and very basic (four walls, door, bed) rooms behind a shop. Friendly owners, but that's about it. Nonpartners should get two singles unless you want to become partners by accident.

Hospedaje Chepito (☎ 713 3784; Av Central btwn Calles 8a & 9a SE; s/d US\$2.40/3.50) A friendly place with nine adequate rooms with a bit of ventilation, and a simple courtyard. It's still not one to show your parents photos of, though.

Hospedaje San Francisco (☎ 713 3787; Av Central btwn Calles 7a & 8a SE; s/d US\$2.40/3.90) On the same block as the San Ramón, accommodations here range from narrow, airless rooms to ones with tiny vents over the door and extravagant wallpaper.

Hospedaje Sacuanjoche (☎ 713 2482; Av 1a btwn Calles 2a & 3a SE; s/d US\$4/8) This tranquil place has seen better days but has rooms that are cozy and well kept, all with small bathrooms. It's a fine budget choice. Breakfast, served in the aging front dining room, is available for US\$1.20.

Hotel Nicarao (☎ 713 2490; Av Central; s/d US\$10/12, with bathroom US\$15/20) Popular with travelers and also central, this family-run affair is set back from the street around a leafy garden. It makes a fine spot to lounge around or meet other travelers, but it's not quite the value it once was. There's an internet café at the front of the building.

Hotel El Mesón (☎ 713 2655; cnr Av 1a & Calle 3a NE; s/d with fan US\$13.50/21; P) This spot has reasonable rooms, with warm showers and cable TV, set around a leafy courtyard. It's pretty good value, although the slightest noise seems to echo through the compound like a gunshot. Ask for a blanket, as it can get chilly at night.

Eating

Licuaños Ananda (Calle Transversal; juices US\$0.45; ☎ 8am–7pm Mon–Sat, 9am–5pm Sun) Set in a garden around an empty swimming pool, this guru-inspired setup has excellent juices and snacks such as veggie burgers (US\$0.90). It's east of Av Central.

Koma Rica (Calle 1a NE; dishes US\$1–3) This is a popular spot for lunch but really comes into its own in the early evening, when the streetside *fritanga* fires up, and salivating locals queue for the delicious empanadas and brochettes sizzling in the night air.

Tacos Mexicanos Beverly (☎ 713 0009; Av 2a NE; dishes US\$2–5; ☎ 5:30–11:30pm Tue–Sun) Just southeast of the cathedral, this cheery spot is a fine spot for generous servings of tacos, burritos, döner kebabs, and more. There's an open-air patio and kitschy Mexican decor.

Rincon Pinareño (Av 1a SE; dishes US\$2–6; ☎ 8:30am–9pm) This popular local place serves excellent, juicy Cuban sandwiches, among other dishes, and also has a selection of cigars. The nicest place to sit is the upstairs terrace.

Vuela Vuela (☎ 713 3830; cnr Calle 3a & Av 1a NE; mains US\$7–11) It's worth a splashout at this, Estelí's best restaurant, not least because it runs as a charitable concern for children from broken homes. There's a short but quality menu served in an attractive setting. Meat is what stands out, and the steaks are superbly tender, with tasty sauces. The attached hotel, Los Arcos, is also recommendable (doubles US\$45).

La Casita (☎ 7:30am–6:30pm Tue–Sat, 9am–6pm Sun) Two kilometers south of town along the Interamericana Hwy, La Casita sits on the lush grounds of Finca Las Nubes. In addition to the best coffee in town, the menu includes fresh baked breads, cheeses, juices and homemade yogurts. A US\$0.60 taxi ride will get you there, and it's well worth the trip. Be sure to take a walk around the grounds when you go and greet the geese.

Casa Italia (Av 1a SE near Calle 3a SE; mains US\$3–6; ☎ noon–9:30pm Tue–Sat, 5–9:30pm Sun) This curious little gardened place has a welcoming boss and is recommended for its very tasty, authentic pasta and pizza dishes. Kick off your meal with a plate of antipasti.

Cohifer (☎ 713 3414; Av 2a NE; mains US\$4–7) With an appealing terrace dining area screened from the street by plants, this is a fine hangout for a drink, or to enjoy the wide range of Nicaraguan dishes. The house specialty, *lomo de costilla*, is a steak platter (served on a sizzling grill) that could feed two.

Drinking & Entertainment

Cafetin Las Brasas (Calle 2a NO) Delightfully dark and seedy, Las Brasas, just off Parque Central, serves food but earns its stripes as a drinking den. Try the back if the front doesn't appeal. It's a lively and local evening hangout.

El Rincón Legal (Av 1a NO; ☎ 6pm–late) North of Calle 9a, this is an excellent Sandinista bar, with all the posters, murals and slogans you'd expect. There's occasionally live music.

Studio 54 (Interamericana Hwy) The city's most popular *discoteca* is one of several on the Interamericana; this has plenty of space, a pool table, and a lively dance floor.

Cinema Estelí (Calle 1a NE; admission US\$2.20) On the south of Parque Central, this quaint single-screener shows a Hollywood hit nightly.

Shopping

Artesanía Nicaragüense (Calle Transversal) Diagonally opposite the Casa de Cultura, this has a good selection of pottery, embroidery and crafted leather items (starting at US\$5).

For leather goods and cowboy attire, also check out the shops along Av 1a NO and Av Central.

Getting There & Away

Near each other in the south of town on the Interamericana, Estelí's two bus terminals, Cotran Norte and **Cotran Sur** (☎ 713 6162) serve destinations to the north and south respectively.

Buses from Cotran Norte:

Jinotega (US\$2; 3hr; 5 daily 6am-4pm)

León (US\$2.25; 2½hr; 3 daily) Alternatively, take the Matagalpa bus and change at San Isidro.

Ocotal (US\$1; 2hr; hourly 6am-6pm) For border crossing at Las Manos.

Somoto (US\$1.30; 1½hr; every 30min 5:30am-6pm) For border crossing at El Espino.

From Cotran Sur:

León (US\$2.70; 2hr; 1 express daily 6:45am) Other services from Cotran Norte.

Managua (US\$2.25; 2½hr; almost half-hourly 3:30am to 6pm; some express services, US\$3, 2hr)

Matagalpa (US\$1.40; 1¾hr; every 30min 5:20am to 4:50pm)

RESERVA NATURAL MIRAFLORES

Enticing Miraflores, some 30km northeast of Estelí, is an expanse of private land that is community managed and has been declared a nature reserve. It's predominantly farmland, covering three climatic zones from dry to wet, stretching from 800m to 1450m.

Miraflores is a great place to get away from it all, immerse yourself in the lifestyle of traditional coffee-growing communities, and do some low-key walking, bird-watching or horse riding. There are also several volunteer projects that you can get involved with. There is no central town; *fincas* are scattered widely across the area, and around several small community hubs.

As there's no tourist information available once you're there, it's highly advisable to visit the reserve office in Estelí before you head out. UCA Miraflores (see p474) promotes sustainable agriculture among the resident communities, who grow coffee, vegetables and flowers and raise livestock. They have also developed an ecotourism structure, which it is hoped will provide alternative livelihoods.

Sights & Activities

This isn't the place for epic hiking, but there are several interesting walks in the area, which appeal more for the chance to chat to local farmers than for the likelihood of spotting rare fauna, although birds are in great supply. There are also plenty of swimming holes and waterfalls (blessed relief from the sometimes intense heat). You can see coffee being produced, or visit an orchid farm. Taking a guide is the best way to find your way around. Locals sometimes charge US\$0.25 to US\$1 for crossing their land.

Guides (official charge is US\$17 per day for up to five people) can be arranged at UCA Miraflores in Estelí or by some of the accommodations places. They can take you around on foot or horseback (horses US\$4 to US\$7 per person per day); be firm about what you want to see, whether it be birds, forest, coffee plantations or archaeological sights. You can read descriptions of various possible routes on the website www.miraflores-uca.com.

Sleeping & Eating

There are several accommodations in Miraflores, mostly staying with local coffee-growing families. Some need to be booked and paid for with UCA Miraflores in Estelí in advance (they'll give you a voucher), while other places also accept walk-ins. All the accommodations are very basic, with bucket showers and shared rooms in rough huts. Official UCA prices are US\$13 per person, where you'll usually be sharing the house with the family, or US\$17 for 'cabañas', which are usually separate. Rates include simple but delicious traditional local meals. Camping is available at many places for US\$1.10 per day.

Some of the many places:

Finca Fuente de Vida A half-hour walk from La Rampla; has hammocks and offers horses and guides. Vegetarian food available.

Posada la Soñada (Corina Picado) Coffee-country cabins with fireplace, tasty food, and a warm welcome.

Marlon Villareyna Switched-on to travelers, with horses and guiding available and a friendly laid-back atmosphere. In Sontule.

Getting There & Away

There are bus services from Estelí's Cotran Norte to various parts of the reserve (around US\$0.80 for all destinations). The daily bus to Sontule, in the northwest of the region, is at 2:15pm (two hours), returning at 8:10am. For El Coyolito (one hour), in the lower southwestern zone, buses leave at 5:45am and 12:45pm, returning at 8:20am and 3:45pm. Buses for Yali run through the eastern side of the area, passing La Rampla and Puertas Azules, leaving at 6am (this one leaves from Cotran Sur, though), noon and 3:30pm, and taking about two hours. It passes back through La Rampla at about 7am, 11:30am and 4:15pm.

OCOTAL

pop 34,190

Most travelers spend about seven minutes here on their way to Honduras, and Ocotal is in some ways all the better for that. Sitting at the base of the Sierra de Dipilto, Nicaragua's highest mountain range, it's a place of gruff courtesy where nothing is done in too much of a hurry and the blokes are more Marlboro man than metrosexual. For a slice of authentic northern Nicaragua, you could do a lot worse than stop off here for a day or two.

The lovely plaza is a small botanic garden, with many local and imported plants and trees carefully labeled. On the east side of it, the church has one old and one modern tower, while three blocks west, a rather kitsch monument to St Francis offers a vantage point over the town and hills.

The bus station is beside the highway at the south end of town. Banpro, a block west

and two blocks north of the plaza, has an ATM catering to Visa/Plus and Cirrus/MasterCard users.

Ocotal's major fiesta is the **Festival de La Virgen de la Asunción** in mid-August, when its ranching genre show off their horsemanship through the streets.

Sleeping & Eating

Hospedaje Segovia (☎ 732 2617; r per person US\$1.90) Two blocks north of the NW corner of the park, this is on a busy shopping street and is just about decent, although your back won't thank you for making it sleep on these beds.

Hospedaje Francis (☎ 732 0554; r per person US\$2.75) This quiet, clean and simple option with shared bathrooms is pretty much the best of Ocotal's cheap lodgings. Rooms are dark and a bit poky, but fine for this price. It's secure and family-run. Head two blocks south from the SW corner of the square, and half a block west.

Hospedaje Llamarada del Bosque (☎ 732 3469; Parque Central; small s/d US\$5.50/11, larger s/d US\$8.30/16.60; ☐) Bestowing a smiling welcome on visitors, this newly opened spot makes a fine place to lay your head. The rooms have new beds, fans, TV, and a good hot-water bathroom. It's spotless, and there's a small garden – mind you, who needs it with the botanic fantasy of a main square just opposite?

Llamarada del Bosque (☎ 732 2643; lunch US\$1.60) At the southwest corner of the central park, this friendly eatery offers several delicious stews in its lunch buffet, and has patio seating as well as the front *comedor* (basic and cheap eatery).

La Yunta (☎ 732 2180; dishes US\$2.60-7) One block west and three blocks south of the park, cowboyish La Yunta serves Nicaraguan dishes on a pleasant outdoor patio. There's also cold beer in iced glasses and the raised dance floor gets busy on weekend evenings.

GETTING TO TEGUCIGALPA, HONDURAS

Of the two routes in this area north to Honduras, the shorter one goes through Ocotal and on to the border crossing at Las Manos. From there, it's 132km (2½ hours by bus) to **Tegucigalpa** (p340). Las Manos is a major crossing, open 24 hours, although there's only bus service from 6am to 6pm.

The alternative route goes through the town of Somoto, crossing the border at El Espino, and passes through the Honduran village of San Marcos de Colón on its way to **Choluteca** (p435). Going this way, you could reach the Salvadoran border in three hours (plus waiting time for connection). El Espino is open from 6am to about 10pm daily.

See p436 or p436 for information on crossing the border from Honduras.

DIY ADVENTURES IN THE RAAN

The North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN) is the vast northeastern province of Nicaragua and fertile ground for exploration. While some parts are most easily accessed from the Caribbean side (see boxed text, p520) you can also head into the region from the Matagalpa and Jinotega areas. The great jewel of the region is the **Reserva de Biosfera Bosawás**, a protected area that forms part of the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor. Access is tough, and travel is easiest done by river. **Wiwilí**, on the Río Coco, is one possible point – it's a mountain town 90km north of Jinotega and from there you can arrange boats and guides – essential in this region, which still has landmines and antisocial characters left over from the Contra War. Another road leads from Jinotega to El Cuá, inside the reserve area. From here you can head on San José de Bocay, where you'll find a ranger station, walking opportunities, and, perhaps, a guide to the semimythical caves of **Belén de Tunowalan**, 50km northeast.

Getting There & Away

All buses depart from the **bus station** (☎ 732 3304), 1km south of Parque Central. Border-bound buses also stop to pick up passengers by the Shell station at the north end of town. A taxi anywhere in town costs US\$0.35 (7 córdobas).

Estelí (US\$1.40; 2hr; roughly hourly 4:45am–6pm)
Managua expresses also stop here (US\$1.70, 1¼hr).

Las Manos (Honduran border) (US\$0.75; 1hr; hourly 5am to 4:40pm)

Managua (US\$3.70; 3½hr; roughly hourly 4am to 3:30pm)

Somoto (US\$0.75; 1½hr; hourly from 5:45am to 6:30pm)

SOMOTO

pop 18,130

This sleepy spot is just 20km from the Honduran border at El Espino, and is a quiet, appealing mountain town that is renowned for baking some of the country's best *rosquillas* (ring-shaped cheese and corn biscuits). The Spaniards founded the spot in the 16th century, and the charming colonial church on the plaza is one of the nation's oldest, dating from 1671.

Reached from a turnoff from the El Espino road some 15km north of town, El Cañon de Somoto, also known as Namancambre, is a spectacular 2.5km-long gorge that remained a well-guarded *campesino* secret until its recent 'discovery.' It's a difficult scramble along its bottom, best accomplished with a guide, organized via **Marena** (☎ 722 2431), a block and a half south of the church in Somoto.

There are many places to stay in Somoto, but it's tough to beat **Hotel Panamericano** (☎ 722 2355; rper person with/without bathroom US\$10/3), on the plaza. It has very basic cells with shared hot-water bathrooms or pretty decent en suite rooms with TV. Look at a few, as they are all different.

The hotel can set you up with a canyon guide.

Somoto's bus station is located on the Interamericana Hwy, a short walk from the center of town. Buses depart hourly for the border (US\$0.35, 40 minutes) until 4:15pm, and every 40 minutes for Estelí (US\$1, two hours) with the last bus at 4pm. Buses bound for Managua (US\$3.30, 4½ hours) depart roughly hourly; there are some express services that cost slightly more and shave half an hour off the journey.

LEÓN & NORTHWESTERN NICARAGUA

The most volcanic region in Central America, northwestern Nicaragua is dominated by the Cordillera de los Maribios, a chain of 10 volcanoes, some active, paralleling the Pacific coast from the northwestern shores of Lago de Managua to the Gulf of Fonseca. Momotombo (1280m), the southernmost volcano, towers over Lago de Managua; Cosigüina, the cordillera's northern endpoint, forms a peninsula that juts into the gulf. These volcanoes rise out of hot, agriculturally rich lowlands, where maize, sugarcane, rice and cotton are grown. The region was devastated in 1998 by Hurricane Mitch, but has recovered strongly.

LEÓN

pop 139,430

Long Nicaragua's capital and still principal totem of its artistic, religious, and revolutionary history, proud León is one of Nicaragua's two legendary colonial jewels. A faded romance pervades its eave-shaded streets, where,

as the evening approaches, friends and family pull rocking chairs to the street to chew the fat or watch the languorous town life drift by. León's favorite son is Rubén Darío, the famed national poet, who is buried here in the city's centerpiece, the noble 18th-century cathedral, the largest in Central America. Although León's charms are subtler than those you might experience in Granada, for many this is the quintessential city of Nicaragua – real and down-to-earth, but deeply connected to the past.

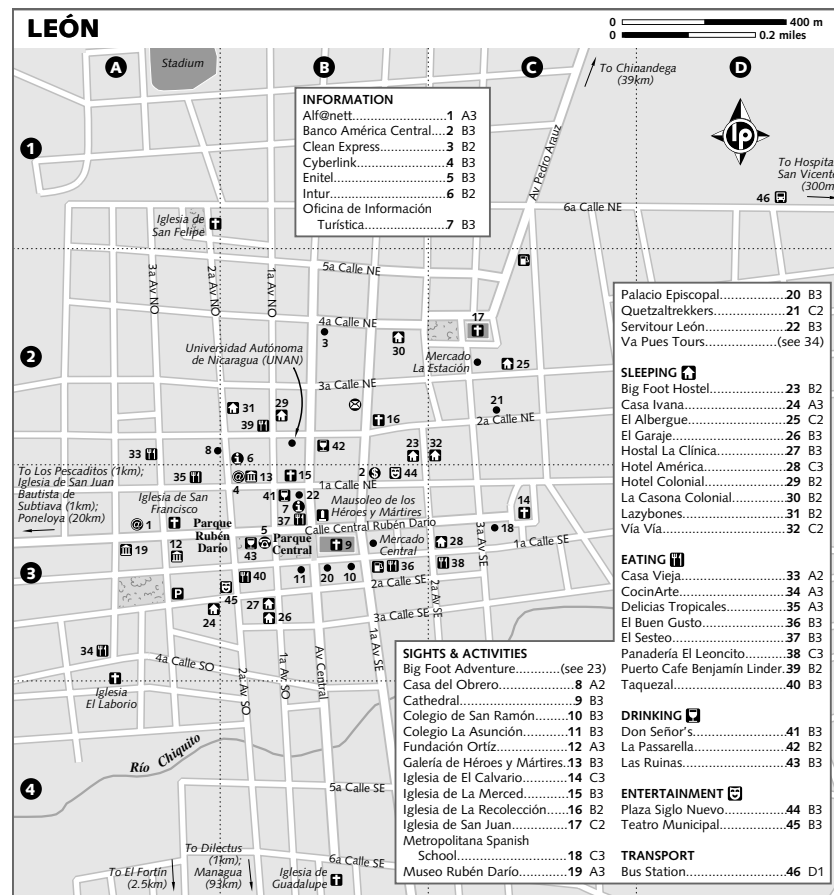
History

León was originally founded in 1524 by Francisco Fernández de Córdoba at the site of the indigenous village of Imabite, near the foot

of Volcán Momotombo (p487). In 1610 the volcanic activity triggered an earthquake that destroyed the old city. It was rebuilt near the existing indigenous capital, Subtiava, where it remains.

León was the nation's capital from the colonial period until Managua took over the role in 1857; this, combined with its role as the ecclesiastical center for both Nicaragua and Costa Rica, means that it preserves a legacy of many fine churches and colonial buildings. The Universidad Autónoma de Nicaragua, Nicaragua's first university, was founded here in 1912.

Traditionally León has been the most politically progressive of Nicaraguan cities. During the revolution, virtually the entire town fought against Somoza. Dramatic



murals around town serve as reminders of that period, though many are fading. The city remains a strong Sandinista heartland.

Orientation

Av Central and Calle Central Rubén Darío intersect at the northeast corner of Parque Central, forming northeast, northwest, southeast and southwest quadrants. Calles ascend numerically as they go north or south of Calle Central; avenidas ascend east or west of Av Central. However, the Leonese rarely use this system when giving directions; instead, they prefer the old reliable '2½ blocks east of the Shell station.' The bus station is on the northeastern outskirts of town. The old indigenous town of Subtiava is a western suburb.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

There are dozens of places to get online (per hour US\$0.60 to US\$1), including:

Alf@nett (Calle Central) Opposite Museo Rubén Darío; good connection.

CyberLink (cnr 1a Calle NO & 2a Av NO)

LAUNDRY

Most budget hotels have laundry service or a washtub.

Clean Express (cnr 4a Calle NE & Av Central; ☎ 7:30am-7:30pm) Has self-service machines and will do pricey service washes (US\$4 to US\$6).

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital San Vicente (☎ 311 6990) Beyond the bus station, this is the largest hospital in the region, set in a noble old building.

MONEY

Banco América Central (BAC; 1a Calle NE) Has an all-card ATM giving US dollars or córdobas, and changes traveler's checks.

POST

Post office (1a Av NE) Opposite the Iglesia de La Recolectión.

TELEPHONE

Enitel Publictel phones are found outside this office just off the northwest corner of Parque Central. Nearly all internet places offer cheap international phone calls.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Intur (☎ 311 3682; 2a Av NO; ☎ 8am-12:30pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) Helpful staff, and knowledgeable about the area.

Oficina de Información Turística (☎ 311 3528; Av Central; ☎ 8:30am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun) Just north of the cathedral, this enthusiastic office gives out good information, maps and brochures.

Sights

CHURCHES & PLAZAS

León's **cathedral** is the largest in Central America. Construction began in 1747 and went on for over 100 years. According to local legend, the city's leaders feared their original grandiose design for the structure would be turned down by Spanish imperial authorities, so they submitted a more modest but bogus set of plans.

The fairly sober façade – more triumph-of-the-will neoclassicism than fluttering cherubs – fronts an interior that is a pantheon of Nicaraguan culture. It's a high-vaulted, light and unornamented space. The tomb of Rubén Darío, León's favorite son, is on one side of the altar, guarded by a sorrowful lion. Nearby rest the tombs of Alfonso Cortés (1893-1969) and Salomón de la Selva (1893-1959), also important literary figures. Also buried here is Miguel de Larreynaga, the pioneer of the Central American independence movement whose bespectacled face adorns the 10 córdoba note.

Around the church, you'll find the Stations of the Cross by Antonio Sarria, considered masterpieces of colonial art. They are looking a bit worn these days; indeed a restoration project for the whole building wouldn't go amiss. This would be a major investment; readers?

On the south side of the cathedral you'll find the **Colegio La Asunción** (1a Calle SO), the first theological college in Nicaragua; the attractive **Palacio Episcopal** (Bishop's Palace; 1a Calle SE); and the **Colegio de San Ramón** (1a Calle SE), where Larreynaga was educated.

Three blocks north of the cathedral, the 18th-century **Iglesia de La Recolectión** (1a Av NE) has a magnificent yellow baroque façade, with carved vines wound around stone pillars, and symbols in bas-relief medallions depicting the Passion. The **Iglesia de El Calvario** (Calle Central), another 18th-century building, stands at the east end of Calle Central. Its facade, between a pair of red-brick bell towers, displays biblical scenes; enter the building to admire its slender wood columns and ceiling decorated with harvest motifs. Other colonial churches worth visiting include **Iglesia de La Merced** (1a Calle NE) and **Iglesia de San Juan** (3a Av SE).

JUSTICE FROM A WAITER'S HANDS

A key moment in revolutionary history is represented by the image of a pistol and a letter in a mural just off the park. The letter, signed by the poet and journalist Rigoberto López Pérez, declares his intention to assassinate Anastasio Somoza García, patriarch of the Somoza's four-decade dynasty. The house where he carried out his plan, the **Casa del Obrero**, is on 2a Av NO. On September 21, 1956, López Pérez, dressed as a waiter to gain entry to a party for dignitaries, fired the fatal shots; Somoza was flown to a military hospital in Panama, where he later died. López Pérez was killed on the scene and became a national hero. The plaque outside the house says his act marked the 'beginning of the end' of the Somoza dictatorship.

About 1km west of the central plaza is the church of **San Juan Bautista de Subtiava** (13 Av SO), the oldest intact church in León. Built in the first decade of the 18th century and restored (with Spanish support) in the 1990s, it features a typical arched timber roof upon which is affixed an extraordinary sun icon, said to have been a device to attract the indigenous community to worship. The exquisite filigreed altar demonstrates fine woodworking skills. The church stands near the center of the indigenous village of Subtiava, which occupied the area long before the Spaniards arrived.

MUSEUMS & MONUMENTS

Rubén Darío, born on January 18, 1867, is esteemed worldwide as one of Latin America's greatest poets. As the poet most committed to the introduction of 19th-century modernism, he had a major influence on the literature of his time and is a national hero of immense status. The house where he grew up, three blocks west of the plaza, is now the **Museo Rubén Darío** (Calle Central; admission free; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sat, 9am-noon Sun), with a selection of his possessions and writings that succeeds in bringing the man to life.

Nearby, **Fundación Ortiz** (3a Av SO; admission free; ☎ 11am-6:30pm Tue-Sun) is an artistic treasure-trove set in two attractive colonial buildings on opposite sides of the street. There's an impressive selection of European masters and a quite stunning assembly of Latin American art, including pre-Columbian ceramics and contemporary Nicaraguan painting. Look out for the work of the excellent Armando Morales, whose shadowy figures seem to echo the topography and vulnerability of the nation. This is Nicaragua's finest art gallery by a huge margin.

Another worthwhile visit is to the moving **Galería de Héroes y Mártires** (1a Calle NO; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat), just west of 1a Av NO. Run by mothers of FSLN veterans and fallen heroes, the gal-

lery has photos of over 300 young men and women from the León area who died fighting the Somoza dictatorship and the US-backed Contras. Do chat to one of the mothers; they are more than happy to share their experiences and opinions.

Courses

The **Metropolitana Spanish School** (☎ 311 1235; www.metropolitana-ss.com; Iglesia el Calvario ½ c abajo) offers classes, activities and homestay (US\$115/195 for a 20-hour week without/with homestay).

Tours

There are many operators offering excursions to León Viejo, surf trips, tours of the Flor de Caña distillery at Chichigalpa, hiking up volcanoes, and even 'surfing' down them again...

Big Foot Adventure (www.bigfootadventure.com) At Big Foot hostel; runs daily volcano boarding trips (US\$23) to Cerro Negro, protective suits supplied.

Quetzaltrekkers (☎ 311 6695; www.quezaltrekkers.com; 2a Calle NE) This volunteer-run set-up offers recommended volcano hikes (US\$17 to US\$56) to several different spots. All profits go to help León street kids. Bookings also at Vía Vía hostel.

Servitour León (☎ 311 1927) Runs a range of trips, including excursions to León Viejo (US\$25, minimum two). It also hires (expensive) bikes. Half a block north of the cathedral.

Va Poes Tours (☎ 315 4099; www.vapues.com) In the CocinArte restaurant; comprehensive range of tours, including party nights. Can also arrange Spanish classes.

Festivals & Events

León is famous for its fiestas:

La Gritería Chiquita (August 14) is held prior to the Day of the Assumption of Mary. This celebration began in 1947 after an erupting Cerro Negro was stopped after a priest vowed to initiate a preliminary *gritería* (shouting), similar to December's but changing the response to *¡la asunción de María!* ('The ascension of Mary!').

Día de la Virgen de Merced (September 24) is León's saint's day, solemnly observed with religious processions through the streets of the city. The preceding day is more festive: revelers don a bull-shaped armature lined with fireworks, called the *toro encohetado*, then charge at panick-stricken onlookers as the rockets fly.

Día de la Purísima Concepción (December 7) is a warm-up for the Día de la Concepción de María (December 8), celebrated throughout Nicaragua. It is the occasion for the *gritería*, in which groups wander around calling on any house that displays an altar and shouting, *¿Quién causa tanta alegría?* ('Who causes so much joy?') to receive the response, *¡La concepción de María!* ('The conception of Mary!'). The household then offers the callers traditional treats such as honey-dipped plantain slices and seasonal fruits.

Sleeping

Via Vía (☎ 311 6142; www.viaviacafé.com; 2a Av NE; dm/s/d US\$3.30/8/12) An original León backpacker spot and a likable choice, this is set around a lush garden courtyard. The dormitory is comfortable enough, with mostly single beds, but it's right by the bar, and very noisy. However, the laid-back atmosphere here is great, the management friendly and socially aware, the restaurant serves tasty Nicaraguan cuisine (slowly), and the convivial bar has a pool table and events.

Casa Ivana (☎ 311 4423; 2a Calle SO; s/d US\$5.50/7) Centrally located beside the Teatro Municipal, Casa Ivana is a typical Leonese home. The rooms are neat and simple, but the owners are very grudging hosts.

Hostal La Clínica (☎ 311 2031; 1a Av SO; dm US\$3.90, d with/without bathroom US\$8.90/7.80) Popular with a good mix of travelers and overseen by a much-loved old *abuela*, this family-run spot has squawking parrots and small, colorful rooms with rather uncomfortable beds.

Big Foot Hostel (2a Av NE; www.bigfootadventure.com; dm/d US\$4/10) This popular place is right opposite Via Vía, so you can easily pick and choose; the vibe in each will appeal to different folk. This has better dorm accommodations and a very relaxing courtyard-café space. There's a good kitchen you can use, and cracking service-with-a-smile. However, don't expect to fit more than one (big) foot at a time in the so-called swimming pool.

El Albergue (☎ 894 1787; Petronic ½ cuadra abajo; dm/d US\$4/12) A very relaxed Nicaraguan-run hostel offering a tranquil, no-frills atmosphere. The spacious rooms have comfy beds and colorful sheets; the dorm beds are narrow, with foam mattresses. There's use of a simple kitchen,

a bar, and plenty of rocking chairs to chill out. Tours available and discounts offered to volunteers.

El Garaje (☎ 311 4195; pgambo_7@hotmail.com; 1a Av SO; s/d US\$8/10, with bathroom US\$10/12) For peace and quiet and an intimate atmosphere, this curiously appealing conversion of the friendly owner's garage does the trick. There are just three rooms – two share a bathroom between them, and small areas to sit. It's spotlessly clean, very secure and extremely helpful – a real home from home. Breakfast included. 11pm curfew.

Lazybones (☎ 311 3472; www.lazybonesleon.com; 2a Av NO; dm US\$6, r with/without bathroom US\$22/15; ☎ ☎) This newly opened backpacker palace is quite a treat on the eyes, set around a lengthy courtyard with murals and hammocks. The rooms are excellent, with firm beds, and the dorms are appealing and comfortable. There's a lovely pool and café area out the back, internet, pool table, and more facilities, as well as relaxed management.

Hotel América (☎ 311 5533; rgalloa@yahoo.com; 1a Calle SE; s/d with bathroom US\$10/16) This fading but characterful mansion seems a fitting place from which to appreciate León's timeworn colonial glories. It's got very genial owners, spacious (almost too big), clean rooms with fan, and rocking chairs.

La Casona Colonial (☎ 311 3178; Parque San Juan ½ abajo; s/d US\$15/20) Gently relaxing, this lovely, character-filled place makes a highly appealing choice. The dark, fan-cooled rooms have noble old furnishings, including beds you have to clamber up on to. There are also gardens, books, soft chairs, sympathetic management, and total peace and quiet.

Hotel Colonial (☎ 311 2279; 1a Av NO) Two and a half blocks north of the plaza, the Colonial is a charming old hotel that was closed for a complete makeover at time of research.

Eating

Near Mercado Central, **El Buen Gusto** (☎ 311 6617; ☎ 10am-10pm) offers home-cooked *comida corriente* for under US\$1. **Panadería El Leoncito** (☎ 311 1270), just east, has a good selection of fresh-baked breads and pastries.

Delicias Tropicales (1a Calle NO; juices US\$0.50) This simple family-run spot does great fresh juices and daily Nica specials such as *gallo pinto* at tables in a secluded patio space.

Puerto Café Benjamín Linder (☎ 311 0548; 1a Av & 2a Calle NO; light meals US\$1.50-3; ☎ 10am-11pm Mon-

Sat) This breezy nonprofit café has a beautiful olden-times interior and a large mural depicting the life of Ben Linder, an American volunteer in Nicaragua who contributed much to the region before dying at the hands of Contras in 1987. It's a fine place for salads, toasted sandwiches, coffee or *comida corriente*.

CocínArte (☎ 315 4099; mains US\$2-4; ☎ 11am-10pm) This place wins rave reports from travelers for its delicious vegetarian food and fresh juices. It's opposite Iglesia El Laborío.

Casa Vieja (☎ 311 3701; 3a Av NO; meals US\$3-6) Romantic, peaceful and cordial, this attractive spot has a stylish colonial feel and attracts an eclectic mix of people for coffee and snacks, or big, value-packed salads, and tasty *churrasco*.

El Sesteo (Calle Central; dishes US\$3-7; ☎ 11am-10pm) A León institution, this is a pricy but pleasant café on the plaza by the cathedral, fabulous for people-watching over a drink or well-prepared regional favorites such as *chancho con yuca* (fried pork, yuca and pickled cabbage).

Taquezal (☎ 311 7282; 2a Av SO; dishes US\$4-7) This huge, handsome, upmarket but relaxed restaurant-bar has loads of tables of smart Leonese both young and old, drawn by the pleasant ambience and traditional cuisine. It merges seamlessly into a lively, late-opening bar as the plates get cleared away.

In Subtiava, one block south and 1½ blocks west of Iglesia San Juan Bautista, Los Pescaditos is a popular, moderately priced seafood restaurant whose basic décor gives few hints of its excellent quality.

Drinking & Discotecas

Don Señor's (☎ 311 1212; 1a Calle NO; disco cover US\$1.10) One block north of the plaza, this place is more than just a hot nightspot – it's three. There's a disco upstairs, a relaxed bar with tables overlooking the street downstairs, and a restaurant-pub called El Alamo around the corner which has a great upstairs terrace.

Las Ruinas (Calle Central) An essential León experience, this cavernous ruined building offers fried chicken by day and a brilliantly local, divey atmosphere by night. There are heaps of tables and a big dance floor where young Leonese strut their stuff.

La Passarella (cnr Av Central & 2a Calle NE) With a thatched lean-to for upstairs seating, and a large garden with banana palms, this is a great spot for a beer and chat. There's a pool table and jukebox – it also does a daily meal (US\$1.20) and decent *variados* (US\$3 to US\$4).

Entertainment

Teatro Municipal (2a Av SO) The impressively preserved Teatro Municipal is León's premier venue for music, dance and theater, and most touring ensembles perform here.

Plaza Siglo Nuevo (1a Calle NE; tickets US\$2.20) León's cinema shows mostly American films.

Getting There & Around

León's chaotic **bus station** (☎ 311 3909; 6a Calle NE) is 1km northeast of the center. You can take a microbus to Managua (US\$1.25, 1¼ hours) or Chinandega (US\$1, 45 minutes). These depart continuously from the left side of the main platform, as they fill up.

Chinandega (US\$0.70; 1½hr; every 15min 4:30am-6pm)

Estelí (US\$2.25; 2½hr; 5:20am-12:45pm) Alternatively, take bus to San Isidro (more than hourly) and change there.

Managua (Mercado Bóer) expresos (US\$1; 1¼hr; every 30min); ordinarios (US\$0.80; 2¼hr; every 20min 5am-6:30pm via old hwy)

Matagalpa (US\$2.75; 2½hr; 5am & 3pm) Alternatively take bus to San Isidro (more than hourly) and change there.

Local buses and pickup trucks (US\$0.10) leave from the Mercado Central for Subtiava, the bus terminal, and the Managua highway. Taxis around town are inexpensive (US\$0.35 for a one-person ride).

AROUND LEÓN

Poneloya & Las Peñitas Beaches

Long, inviting beaches lie just 20km west of León. **Poneloya** and its southern extension, **Las Peñitas**, are separated by a rock formation that offers a fine vantage point. Swimming is good – safest at the southern end of Las Peñitas – but be very wary of the currents, which have claimed many lives over the years, and of submerged rocks. Crowds descend here on weekends and holidays, but during the week these darkish sand beaches are practically deserted, apart from the glorious coasting pelicans. You can easily visit as a day trip from León, but the relaxed atmosphere will likely entice you to stay.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are several places along Las Peñitas beach. A landmark here is the excellent **Hotel Suyapa Beach** (☎ 317 0217; www.suyapabeach.com; r with/without air-con US\$25/21; ☎ ☎), with recently remodeled rooms with great mattresses and views, a swimming pool, and also a decent

beachside restaurant (dishes US\$5 to US\$17), which offers a few special dishes that require advance ordering.

A couple of hundred meters south of here, **Oasis** (☎ 839 5344; www.oasislaspenitas.com; dm/s/d US\$6/12/15) has sullen staff but offers budget beachside lodging, hammocks, and simple meals. It also rents surfboards (US\$8 per day) and body boards (US\$5 per day). The rooms are spacious with OK bathrooms.

Between the two, low-key **Mi Casita** (☎ 849 6467; seafood US\$7-8, r US\$15) has rooms that are too dark for this price, but offers very tasty, well-priced seafood, cold beer, and smiley service.

Barca de Oro (☎ 317 0275; www.barcadeoro.com; d with/without bathroom US\$15/10, with air-con US\$25; ♿) is at the end of the road. It's on the rivermouth rather than the ocean, but it's a great place with clean, attractive rooms, popular with backpackers. The bouncy, ecologically minded boss can organize turtle-watching, trips to Juan Venado, and volunteer opportunities for looking after the turtles. There are also kayaks and well-priced meals at its outdoor restaurant.

Poneloya, 2km north, has four places to stay. **Hotel Lacayo** (☎ 887 6747; r per person US\$2.80) is very run-down and basic but has character and is right on the beach. The currents are very dangerous just here. **Hotel La Posada** (☎ 317 1378; r with fan/air-con US\$10/15; ♿) is right opposite. The rooms are significantly better, although no bargain. Both these places, and other spots, offer relatively inexpensive seafood meals and cheaper *comida corriente*.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses leave hourly from El Mercadito in Subtiava, one block north and one block west of Iglesia de San Juan Bautista. They stop first

in Poneloya, then head down to Las Peñitas (US\$0.55, 45 minutes). Day-trippers take note: the last bus returns at 6:40pm. The return bus may take you all the way into León center. A taxi from León should cost around US\$8 to US\$10.

Reserva Natural Isla Juan Venado

This reserve, south of Las Peñitas, is a long, narrow barrier island extending 22km to Salinas Grandes. The narrow island encloses a network of mangrove-lined estuaries, forming an ecosystem that sustains a variety of migratory birds, reptiles and amphibians, as well as vast squadrons of mosquitoes. It is a nesting area for olive ridley and leatherback turtles between July and January. Hotels in Las Peñitas can organize tours, but you can arrange them yourself at the visitors center there, where rangers will put you in touch with local guides, who can show you the island by boat for US\$30 to US\$50.

Playa El Velero

Another 40km down the coast, and most easily accessed via the workaday port of Puerto Sandino, is the long sandy crescent of **El Velero** beach. If you're looking for hammocks, beach bars and budget accommodations, it will disappoint; if the beach itself is your goal (and the surf can be great here) you could visit for the day or stay at the depressing **centro turístico** (☎ 312 2270; cabañas with bathroom & air-con US\$41; ♿ Wed-Sun; ♿) with overpriced cabins and a sporadically open restaurant-bar. Demand a discount. From León, take a Puerto Sandino bus and get off at the gas station, from which sporadic pickup trucks run hourly to El Velero (US\$0.50). It'll cost you a couple of coins to enter the beach complex.

CHARGE IT! – NICARAGUA'S TOP SURF SPOTS

- **Las Salinas/Playa Popoyo** has guaranteed large left and right point breaks and several surf camps; respect the locals. Get a bus from Rivas (p499) to Las Salinas.
- Several excellent breaks can be found in the **Playa Los Cardones** area (p469), including a right rivermouth at Quizala.
- There are several waves within a few kilometers of **Playa El Velero** (above), both left and right beach and reef breaks.
- **Playa Madera** (p502) has slowish medium waves; it can get crowded but is easy to reach and reliable.
- There's a loud hollow beach break at **Playa Aserradores** (opposite) and others are nearby.

EXPLORE MORE AROUND LEÓN

The area northwest of León offers fertile ground for exploration, with surfing, rum and volcanoes to tempt you.

- In the heart of the volcano corridor, **San Jacinto** is base camp for assaults on three volcanoes: Telica, Rota and Santa Clara. Nearby, **Los Hervideros de San Jacinto** are a network of hot springs and boiling mud pools. Local kids will show you around for a few córdobas. To get there take any Estelí- or San Isidro-bound bus and exit at San Jacinto – about 25km from León.
- Up the main highway from León, you reach **Chichigalpa**, home of the Flor de Caña distillery and the Ingenio San Antonio, the largest sugar mill in Central America.
- About 15km further is **Chinandega**, where cotton and sugarcane are the principal crops. **Intur** (☎ 341 1935; chinandega@intur.gob.ni; ☎ 8:30am-12:30pm & 2-5:30pm Mon-Fri) has an office three blocks east of Parque Central, and there's plenty of budget accommodations in town. Chinandega is the jumping-off point for some great beaches. **Playa Aserradores** is one – with a good choice of places to eat and stay, but keen travelers can push on further up the coast to some superb, just-about-unspoiled beaches and fishing communities.
- Beyond stretches the remote **Cosigüina península**, dominated by the volcano of the same name. Now only 850m, it was once a mighty 3km high, until it erupted with awesome violence in 1835. It's a hot three-hour climb to the top, where you gaze down over a huge crater lake and out over the Salvadoran and Honduran gulf islands to the north. You can sleep over at the El Rosario ranger station, near one of the trailheads. Speak to Intur in Chinandega for a guided trip.

León Viejo

At the foot of Volcán Momotombo are the remains of the original colonial provincial capital, **León Viejo** (admission US\$2, photography US\$1.40; ☎ 8am-5pm). Founded in 1524, Old León was abandoned less than a century later and soon destroyed by earthquake and subsequently completely buried under layers of ash from Momotombo.

It was not until 1967 that its location was finally discovered on the shore of Lago de Managua. Excavations have revealed a large plaza, a cathedral, church, and monastery, as well as private dwellings.

The headless remains of Francisco Fernández de Córdoba, founder of both León and Granada, were found buried alongside those of the jealous first governor, Pedrarias Dávila, who had him beheaded. The skeleton of the bishop Antonio de Valdivieso, assassinated in 1550 for his defense of indigenous rights, has also been identified here.

The indigenous community (which numbered many thousands) was treated abominably; a statue commemorates those killed by dogs set loose in a horrific public spectacle.

While the ruins and discoveries are archaeological fascinating, many visitors are

disappointed. All that remains of most buildings is a foundation wall about 0.3m (1 ft) high. The highlight, though, is the fabulous volcano view from what was once the city's fortress. Entry to the site includes a guided tour in Spanish, which basically repeats what is written (in English also) on the information panels.

You can take a tour here from León, or, cheaper, get a cab (US\$15 to US\$20 for a round-trip with an hour at the site). If coming by vehicle, the turnoff is 3km east of La Paz Centro on the León-Managua highway (Rte 28). From there it's a 15km drive along a partially cobblestoned road. Frequent León-Managua buses pass through La Paz Centro, from which buses leave hourly for Puerto Momotombo.

Volcán Momotombo

Baptism of volcanoes is an ancient custom dating back to the beginning of the [Spanish] conquest. All of Nicaragua's craters were thus sanctified, except Momotombo, whence no priest sent to plant the cross was ever seen to return

Ephraim Squier

GETTING TO HONDURAS

The Guasale border, 60km northeast of Chinandega, is the principal road crossing between Nicaragua and Honduras. It's open 24 hours, but buses run 6am to 6pm. Crossing is painless. There are buses from **Chinandega** to the border (US\$1.10, 1¼ hours, half-hourly). On the Honduran side of the border onward buses run regularly to **Choluteca**.

See p436 for information on crossing the border from Honduras.

The perfect cone of Momotombo is a symbol of Nicaragua and rises 1280m over the north-west shore of Lago de Managua. Momotombito, its Mini-Me, pokes from the water nearby. The subject of notable poems by Rubén Darío and Victor Hugo, the volcano, whose name means 'great boiling peak,' has erupted 14 times since the 16th century, when the Spanish began keeping track.

A geothermal plant on the volcano's south slopes supplies some 10% of Nicaragua's electrical power. Permits from the power company **Ormat** (☎ 270 5622; Centro Finarca, off Carr Masaya, Managua) are required to enter the area; otherwise **Ecotours Nicaragua** (☎ 222 2752; turismo@cablenet.com.ni) offer trips that climb partway by truck and continue on foot for two hours over a lava-strewn landscape to the crater. Fees are US\$70 per person, with a minimum of two. The trip leaves Managua at 8am, returning at 7:30pm. The Ormat office is a block west of Sandy's, a well-known landmark.

GRANADA & THE MASAYA REGION

This geographically rich area boasts a number of Nicaragua's most vaunted attractions, including the spellbinding colonial town of Granada and the handicraft center of Masaya. The area is also rich in biodiversity. Wildlife abounds on the flanks of Volcán Mombacho, and Parque Nacional Volcán Masaya is one of the country's most visibly active craters. Lush tropical forest surrounds the banks of the crystalline Laguna de Apoyo, and Las Isletas on Lago de Nicaragua make for another fine swim setting.

Just west of Granada, the Pueblos Blancos (White Villages) of Catarina, San Juan de Oriente and Niquinohomo stand amid a highland coffee-growing region rich in pre-Columbian traditions. These charming towns are an excellent place to observe some of Nicaragua's most beautiful craftwork in the making.

GRANADA

pop 79,420

The goose that laid Nicaraguan tourism's golden egg is beguiling Granada, whose restored colonial glories render it a high point of many travelers' time in Central America. The carved colonial portals, elegant churches, and fine plaza, as well as its location on Lago de Nicaragua, have enchanted visitors for centuries since the city was founded in 1524.

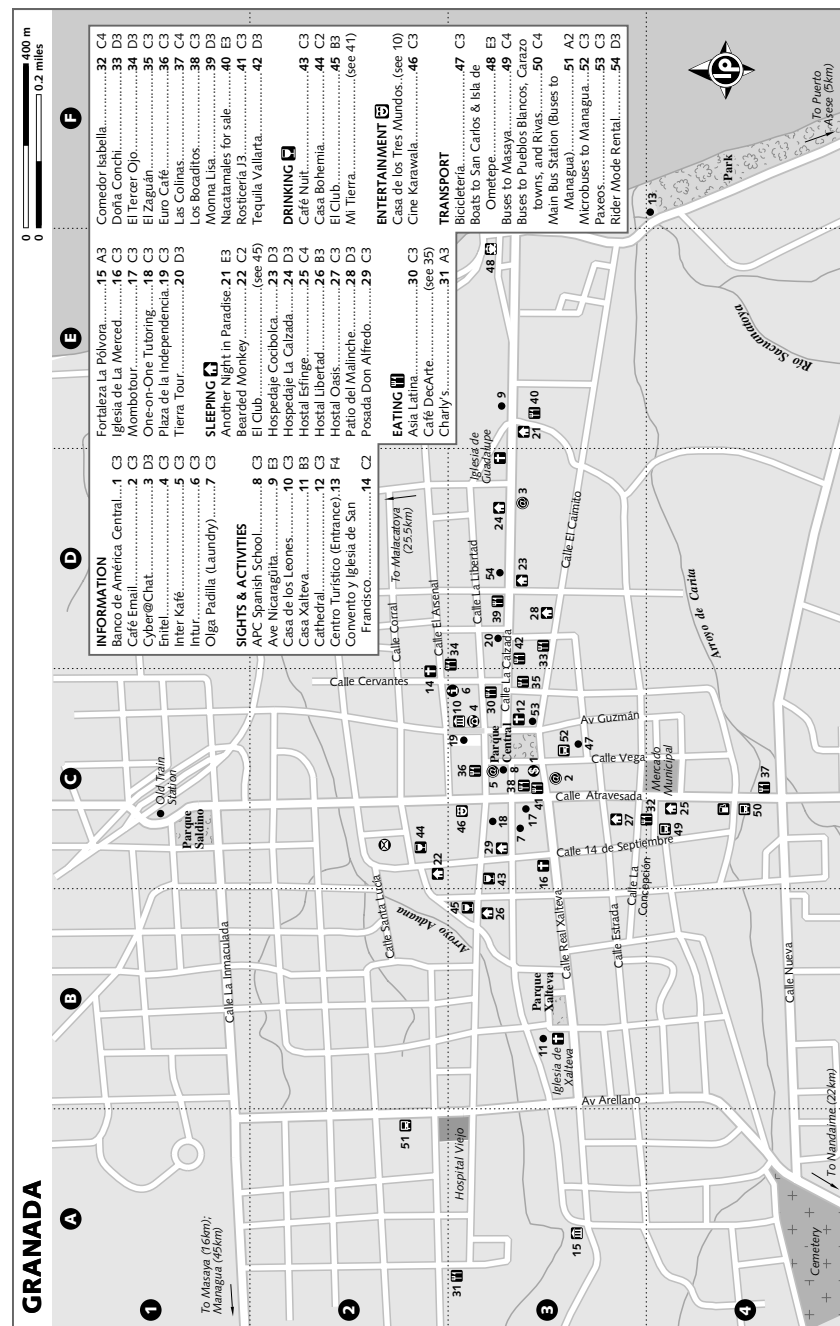
With the sun-dappled colors of its adobe buildings making the streets an absolute joy to stroll, and Nicaragua's best selection of places to stay and eat, Granada is the sort of place where you can while away a lot of time, and its proximity to sprinkled islets on Lago de Nicaragua and to two major volcanoes only increases your options.

Tourism is having a significant impact here, both positive and negative. Expats buying up colonial homes are driving prices out of reach of locals, who are forced further out, leaving the picturesque center a little lifeless. Try to be conscious of spreading your money around here, patronizing local- and not just foreign-owned businesses.

History

Nicknamed 'the Great Sultan' in reference to its Moorish namesake across the Atlantic, Granada is Nicaragua's oldest colonial city. Founded in 1524 by Francisco Fernández de Córdoba, it stands at the foot of Volcán Mombacho on the northwestern shore of Lago de Nicaragua. With access to the Caribbean Sea via the lake and the Río San Juan, Granada soon became a rich and important trade center and remained so into the 19th century. This same Caribbean passage made Granada an easy target for English and French buccaners, who sacked the city three times between its founding and 1685. Captain Henry Morgan, incredibly, made his way back to Jamaica with half a million pounds in 1665.

Conservative Granada was ever-locked in bitter rivalry with liberal León, which erupted into full-blown civil war in the 1850s. To



gain the upper hand, the Leonese contracted filibuster William Walker (p447), who conquered Granada and ruled from here. Fleeing in 1856, he had the city torched, leaving only the infamous placard, 'Here was Granada.' In more recent times, an expensive restoration program has given a new glow to its bright colonial charms.

Orientation

The cathedral and plaza (Parque Central) in front of it form the center of the city, built on a grid pattern. The neoclassical market, built in 1890, is three blocks to the south.

Calle La Calzada, one of Granada's prettiest and most touristified streets, runs eastward from the plaza for 1km to the city dock, where boats leave for Ometepe and San Carlos. South of the dock, a lakefront park area extends 3km toward Puerto Asese, where day cruises depart to the Las Isletas lake islands.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

There are internet places all over town. Most charge around US\$0.60 to US\$1 per hour.

Café E-mail (Calle Xalteva) Near Parque Central; cheap calls from air-con booth.

Cyber@Chat (Calle La Calzada) Opposite Hospedaje La Calzada.

Inter Kafé (Calle La Libertad) Near Parque Central and fast.

LAUNDRY

Several of the sleeping options do laundry, as does **Olga Padilla** (☎ 552 6532; Calle Consulado; ☎ 7am-7pm), two blocks west of the cathedral.

MONEY

Banco de América Central (BAC; Calle Libertad) One of several all-card-friendly ATMs; it also gives cash advances and cashes traveler's checks.

POST

Post office (☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Two blocks north and one block west of Cine Karawala.

TELEPHONE

Enitel (Av Guzmán) Across from the plaza's northeast corner, includes a Sprint phone for collect calls.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Intur (☎ 552 6858; granada@intur.gob.ni; Calle Arsenal; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-12:30pm Sat & Sun) Across from the San Francisco church. Distributes a good map of the city's historic buildings.

Sights & Activities

Granada has some excellent attractions, but perhaps its greatest joy is to be found in simply strolling around, admiring the restored colonial buildings lining its streets. It's a photographers' paradise, particularly at dawn and dusk.

CITY CENTER

The **Parque Central** with its mango and malinche trees is a pleasant shady spot, bossed by the **cathedral**, which was built in the early 20th century upon the foundations of an earlier church. The well-kept interior contains four chapels; a dozen stained-glass panels are set into the dome. To its north is the **Plaza de la Independencia**, at the center of which stands a monumental obelisk dedicated to the heroes of the 1821 struggle for independence.

On the east side of this plaza is the Casa de los Leones, named for the carved lions on the fabulous stone portal, the only part remaining from the original structure, destroyed in the blaze set by Walker in 1856. Renovated by the **Casa de los Tres Mundos Foundation** (☎ 552 4176; www.c3mundos.org.ni; admission US\$1.10; ☎ 8am-6pm), it now functions as a residence and workspace for international artists whose pieces are presented here. The building houses galleries, a concert hall, a library and a café.

Just northeast, the striking light-blue façade of the **Convento y Iglesia de San Francisco** (Calle Cervantes) fronts a complex that was initiated in 1585. The structure was burned to the ground by William Walker in 1856 and rebuilt in 1867-68. It houses the city's must-see **museum** (admission US\$2; ☎ 8:30am-5:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat & Sun). The front section is devoted to religious art of the colonial period, but the undisputed highlight are the sombre basalt sculptures carved by the Chorotega inhabitants of Isla Zapatera between AD 800 and 1200. Admission includes a bilingual guided tour.

Iglesia de La Merced, four blocks west of Parque Central, is the most beautiful of Granada's churches. Completed in 1539, it was sacked by pirates in 1655 and damaged by Leonese forces in 1854, then restored in 1862. It has a baroque façade and an elaborate interior. Ask the caretaker for permission to climb the bell tower (admission US\$1) for a view of the city.

Eight blocks west of the plaza, **Fortaleza La Pólvora** (admission by donation; ☎ 8am-5pm), a military garrison built in 1749, was used by Somoza forces to interrogate and execute opponents. There are displays of art and weaponry, but

the best feature is the view down over town to Lago de Nicaragua.

LAGO DE NICARAGUA

On the lake, the **Centro Turístico** (admission per person/car US\$0.10/0.90) is a 2km stretch of restaurants, picnic areas and playgrounds, all shaded by mango trees. Though people do swim here, the water is polluted. Boats depart for day trips to Las Isletas from restaurants at the southern end of the beach, or from the Puerto Asese dock (see p494).

Courses

Granada is a popular spot for learning Spanish and there are many schools and private teachers.

APC Spanish Schools (☎ 552 4203; www.apc-spanish-schools.com; Parque Central) Conversation-based courses in this friendly place on the square by Hotel Alhambra.

Ave Nicaragüita (☎ 552 8538; www.avenicaraguita.com; Calle La Calzada) Based in the old Red Cross building. Offer a wide variety of interesting options, including some where you move around different parts of Nicaragua as you take your course.

Casa Xalteva (☎ 552 2436; www.casaxalteva.com; Calle Xalteva) Not-for-profit setup; your payment funds social programs. Tuition is US\$135 per week, homestay US\$77.

One-on-One Tutoring (☎ 552 6771; www.1on1-tutoring.net; Calle La Calzada) Flexible and rigorous, with teachers changing over every hour. Homestays with meals cost US\$70 per week, classes two hours daily for five days is US\$50; four hours is US\$95.

Tours

Picturesque horse-drawn carriages hang out in Parque Central; an hour's ride around town costs around US\$10 for up to five people and comes with some eloquent commentary in Spanish.

The classic lake circuit heads to Las Isletas (p494). Other popular excursions include Volcán Mombacho and tours of Granada itself.

Operators include the following.

Tierra Tour (☎ 552 8723; www.tierratour.com; Calle La Calzada; 3hr trip US\$12-15, 6hr US\$22-25) Recommended operator offering wide range of trips: Las Isletas, the Masaya region, hiking on Volcán Mombacho, canopy tours, kayaking and more.

Mombotour (☎ 552 4548; www.mombotour.com; Calle Atravesada) Leads excellent canopy tours down Volcán Mombacho starting at US\$35. They also have bird-watching excursions, coffee tours, and kayaking in Lago de Nicaragua.

Festivals & Events

Fiestas de Agosto (third week of August) is Granada celebration of the Assumption of Mary, with fireworks, concerts, bullspurs, and horse parades by the lakefront. **Inmaculada Concepción** (also known as 'Purísimas' – November 28 to December 7) sees neighborhoods bear elaborate floats through the streets in honor of Granada's patron, the Virgen Concepción de María. People arrive blowing conch shells to drive the demons away.

Sleeping

Granada has a huge choice of inviting accommodations, although it's not so cheap.

Hostal Esfinge (☎ 552 4826; Calle Atravesada; dm US\$3.30, s/d US\$6.60/10, with bathroom US\$10/13.90; ☎) An old-style ambience pervades this gorgeous historic building in the boisterous market zone. It's a good deal; rooms come off a large courtyard space, and guests have access to kitchen, washtub and Ping Pong. It's run with gracious courtesy, and monkey business is not appreciated.

Hospedaje La Calzada (☎ 668 8816; guesthouse-lacalzada@yahoo.com; Calle La Calzada; s/d US\$8.30/11, with bathroom US\$11/12.90) With a good location, dignified La Calzada is run by a benevolent family and features simple, clean rooms with thin mattresses, and use of a kitchen, Ping-Pong table and washtub.

Hostal Libertad (☎ 552 4017; hospedaje_lalibertad@yahoo.com; Calle La Libertad; dm/r US\$6/20; ☎ ☎) Having the shower in the dorm means sleeping-in is a noisy business, but the comfy courtyard hammocks offer plenty of opportunity to doze later. With breakfast and free internet included, it's a good deal. There are also air-con rooms available in a nearby annex.

Bearded Monkey (☎ 552 4028; www.thebearded-monkey.com; Calle 14 de Septiembre; dm/s/d US\$6/9/17; ☎) Busy and perennially popular, this is a center of Granada's backpacker social scene. Set around a pleasant garden, which functions as a café-bar, the hostel offers OK dorms and plenty of facilities – free internet, nightly films, and tours, but no kitchen. If they are full, crash on a hammock (US\$4), but you won't get much privacy. For sale at time of research.

Hostal Oasis (☎ 552 8006; www.nicaraguahostel.com; Calle Estrada; dm US\$7, d with/without bathroom US\$28/19; ☎ ☎ ☎) This popular hostel has top-notch facilities, with a petite but pretty swimming pool, free internet access, and a free phone call home (unless you're Danish) each day. The airy dorms are pretty good value, but the private rooms are small and cramped.

Hospedaje Cocibolca (☎ 552 7223; carlosgomez00@hotmail.com; s/d/tr with bathroom US\$13/15/21; 📺) Convenient, friendly and traveler-savvy, this is a long-appreciated Granada option. Clean and well-maintained rooms have fan and decent bathroom – go for an upstairs room for breezes and gazing over the rooftops; guests can use the kitchen, and there's internet and a book exchange.

Posada Don Alfredo (☎ 552 4455; alfredpaulbaganz@hotmail.com; Calle 14 de Septiembre; r US\$20-28, with bathroom US\$35, with air-con US\$40; 📺) The disordered, homey colonial elegance of this lovely old building has a real appeal for those who prefer to pay for character than facilities. The rooms, which mostly share bathrooms, vary widely, but nearly all are very spacious.

El Club (☎ 552 4245; www.elclub-nicaragua.com; Calle La Libertad; s/d US\$40/51; 📺) For party people, having a pad in the town's best nightclub is the ultimate in decadence. Decorated in great minimalist style, the rooms, which include duplexes that could sleep two couples, are short on natural light but high on style and comfort. Just be aware that at weekends, the fiesta is in full swing until 2am right outside your door.

Patio del Malinche (☎ 552 2235; www.patiodelmalinche.com; Calle El Caimito; s/d US\$57/67; 📺 📺) A welcoming Catalan couple run this noble and lovingly restored colonial home that is one of Granada's most appealing places to stay. The personal attention makes it feel more like a guesthouse than a hotel, but it has excellent facilities too, including wireless internet, and unadorned, comfortable rooms that surround the appealing pool. Delicious, massive breakfasts (included) are a highlight.

Eating

Stop in Parque Central for icy fruit juices and *vigorón* (yucca steamed and topped with *chicharrón* – fried pork rind – and cabbage salad; US\$1), a Granada specialty. Around the corner from the Hotel Granada, a family home sells piping-hot *nacatamales* (US\$0.55) from Friday to Sunday. Check the website of **Building New Hope** (www.buildingnewhope.org) for the new location of Café Chavalos, a project which takes kids off the streets and teaches them to run a sophisticated restaurant. The organization also welcomes volunteers.

Los Bocaditos (dishes US\$1.50-6, 📺 8am-10pm) This cheery local spot has decent Nicaraguan breakfasts, sandwiches and a fine lunchtime buffet at low prices.

Euro Café (☎ 552 2146; Parque Central; snacks US\$2-3; 📺 7:30am-9pm) At one corner of Parque Central, this has really excellent coffee, an airy patio, salads, hummus, and a sizable collection of books for sale (they'll buy yours if they are decent).

Café DecArte (☎ 552 6461; Calle La Calzada; snacks US\$2-4; 📺 11am-4pm Wed-Mon) Set in a bright and seductive courtyard with tinkling fountain, this is a great spot for gourmet pitta-bread sandwiches, juices, and tasty desserts. So far so good, but in the evening (6pm to 10pm) it transforms itself into a mediocre pasta restaurant – why?

Rosticería J3 (cnr Calles Xalteva & Atravesada; roast chicken US\$2) Inside a mini-mall, this is an indefatigably cheery place that serves up big plates of roast chicken.

El Tercer Ojo (☎ 552 6541; Calle Arsenal; dishes US\$2-6; 📺 11am-11pm Tue-Sun) Relax in comfort at this popular new-age hangout by the San Francisco church. With an eclectic range of cuisine, including daily specials, great salads, and many vegetarian choices, there's something for anyone, and it comes at a very fair price.

Tequila Vallarta (☎ 552 8488; Calle La Calzada; mains US\$3-7) Great fresh salsa and corn chips are just the garnish to what is an excellent and authentic Mexican restaurant with attentive service and a well-stocked bar. The dishes come out generously proportioned, and the sauces spicy.

Asia Latina (☎ 552 4672; cnr Calle La Libertad & Cervantes; mains US\$4-7) Cozy and welcoming, this has restaurant tables and a lounge area and serves very reasonable approximations of mostly Thai food in a soothing ambience.

Las Colinas (Calle Atravesada; mains US\$4-8) This legendary local spot has no frills, with its dirt floor and unpretentious fittings. But it draws all sorts for its delicious and low-priced *guapote* drawn straight from the lake. It's easiest reached by taxi.

Charly's (☎ 552 2942; mains US\$4-8; 📺 Wed-Mon) In a village-like barrio that few travelers see, this idiosyncratic German bar-restaurant is worth the trip out here (get a taxi at night). Reasons to come: the draft beer, the tasty Swabian specialties such as *maultaschen*, and the peaceful atmosphere. If you order several days in advance, groups can enjoy delicious marinated game dishes, including *tepezcuintle* (paca, a large forest-dwelling rodent). There are also air-con rooms available (US\$30). It's four blocks west of Hospital Viejo.

Doña Conchi (Calle El Caimito; mains US\$5-12; 📺 closed Tue) This classy and romantic spot has very appealing seating both indoors and in a lovely garden. The cuisine is fairly sophisticated, with Spanish influences; it's a top venue for dinner with someone you want to impress.

El Zaguán (☎ 552 2522; steaks US\$11-13) This place, on the street running at the back of the cathedral, is pricey, but is a strong candidate for having Nicaragua's most sublime steaks. They're not huge, but are grilled over wood and are butter-tender (don't dare order them well done!). The setting is stylishly colonial and service very professional. Opposite is the house where Garibaldi stayed for a few weeks in 1851.

Other worthwhile eat spots include the following:

Comedor Isabella (Calle La Concepción; lunch US\$2) Cheap and tasty lunch buffet with plenty of choice near the market.

Monna Lisa (☎ 820 0474; Calle La Calzada; meals US\$3-8) Pretty much the best of the pizza options.

Drinking & Discotecas

By the lake are *discotecas*, packed with young locals at weekends. They are fun but volatile, and you should definitely get a cab down here at night.

Café Nuit (Calle La Libertad; 📺 Wed-Mon) Featuring live music nightly (US\$0.55 cover charge), Café Nuit is set back from the street in a lush outdoor courtyard, with round tables beneath the palms. There's a cheery mix of Nicas and foreigners who come here, socializing under the stars.

El Club (Calle La Libertad; 📺 10am-midnight, to 2am Fri & Sat) Hold the back page, it's a stylish club with staff that haven't disappeared up their own backsides! Contemporary but comfortable, the modish front bar gives way to an appealing palmy courtyard where smart food is also served. The place really takes off on Friday and Saturday nights, with decent DJs and plenty of tequila guzzled.

Mi Tierra (cnr Calles Xalteva & Atravesada) Local in character, this upstairs bar bends around a small shopping arcade. It's very typical but also offbeat, with popular Latino and reggae-ton hits enjoyed by all, from grumpy grandpas to the local transvestite crew. Fridays are quiet but Saturdays kick off.

Casa Bohemia (Calle Corral) You can chat rather than shout at this mellow spot around the corner from the Bearded Monkey. The low-

lit front bar has plenty of stools and a loyal population of Granada volunteers; there's also a pretty courtyard and pool table out the back. Don't confuse with the mediocre hotel bar of the same name.

Entertainment

Casa de los Tres Mundos (☎ 552 4176; www.c3mundos.org.ni; Plaza Independencia) In addition to hosting visiting artists and writers, this venue stages concerts and plays throughout the month. Stop in or visit its website to see what's on.

Bearded Monkey (tickets US\$1) This backpacker place screens two decent films every evening.

Cine Karawala (Calle Atravesada) Shows Hollywood (mostly Western) films at weekends.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Boats leave from the **dock** (ticket office ☎ 552 4605) at the east end of Calle La Calzada, departing for Altagracia on Isla de Ometepe (US\$1.50, three hours) on Monday and Thursday at 3pm and on Saturday at 11am. The boats continue on to San Carlos at the south end of Lago de Nicaragua, arriving around 14 hours later (US\$3). These return on Tuesday and Friday, departing from San Carlos at 3pm, and from Altagracia at around 1am.

BUS

For Managua (US\$1, 45 minutes, every 20 minutes), minibuses depart half a block south of the park from 5am to 7pm, and then pass through the park and west up Calle Libertad (handy for several accommodations) collecting passengers; in Managua they arrive at the UCA stop. Buses depart from the main bus station on the west side of town and go to Managua's Mercado Roberto Huembes (US\$0.80, one hour, every 20 minutes until 8pm).

Either mode of transportation will also stop on the highway at the entrance to Masaya; buses for Masaya itself (US\$0.30, 30 minutes) leave from a point two blocks west of the market.

From one block south of the market, buses depart for the following destinations:

Carazo towns & Pueblos Blancos (US\$0.40-0.80; 45min; every 30min until 6pm)

Peñas Blancas (Costa Rican border) Change in Rivas (p499) to a border-bound service.

Rivas (US\$1; 1½hr; 8 daily until 3.10pm)

TAXI & TRANSFERS

Taxis to other destinations are relatively cheap if you bargain a little. Sample fares include Masaya (US\$5 to US\$8), and San Jorge (for Ometepe; US\$15 to US\$25).

Paxeos (☎ 552 8291; www.paxeos.com; in juice bar on Parque Central) runs an air-con minibus shuttle service to and from Managua airport. It costs US\$15 per person; if you are two or more, you can beat this price in a taxi.

Getting Around

The Bearded Monkey hostel rents bikes (US\$5 per day) as does Biciclería (US\$9), half a block south of the park, and Tierra Tour.

Rider Mode Rental (☎ 813 2545; Calle La Calzada) rents well-kept motorbikes for US\$20 (125cc) to US\$30 (250cc) a day.

A taxi ride anywhere in central Granada costs US\$0.55 for one, and a little more for each additional person.

AROUND GRANADA**Las Isletas & Isla Zapatera**

Just offshore from Granada, Las Isletas are a group of some 350 diminutive islands formed 10,000 years ago by an erupting Volcán Mombacho. Divided by narrow channels, they are memorably scenic and easily reached by motorboat. Many are inhabited (by traditional fishing families and now by Nicaragua's super-wealthy), and some have hotels and restaurants. There's a proliferation of birdlife throughout, with egrets, herons and cranes particularly numerous around sunrise and sunset.

Most tour companies run daily trips to the islets, or you can arrange it yourself at the southern end of the Centro Turístico, or from Puerto Asese, 2km further south. A covered boat holding up to 12 people costs about US\$15 per hour. You can arrange to be dropped off on an island and picked up later. At **Puerto Asese** itself, there's a deck restaurant by the harbor from which you can watch birds flitting among lilies or gaze at distant volcanic peaks.

On Isla San Pablo, a half-hour boat ride out, you can visit **El Castillo**, a small fort built in 1784 to guard against British incursions. Its rooftop observation deck affords great views of both Granada and Mombacho.

Hotel Isleta La Ceiba (☎ 266 1694; www.nicaraoalake.com.ni; 📶 📶), on Isla La Ceiba, offers a package including a cabin, three meals, drinks,

water sports and a round-trip boat ride from Puerto Asese for US\$55 per person.

Beyond Las Isletas is the much larger Isla Zapatera, centerpiece of the national park of the same name. Two hours away by motorboat from Granada, this island is one of Nicaragua's most important archaeological areas, though the giant pre-Columbian stone statues have been moved to museums. Tombs and rock carvings remain on adjacent Isla El Muerto. The cheapest way to get there is by tour from Granada.

Reserva Natural Volcán Mombacho

Mombacho's jagged peaks – the highest is 1345m – stand guard over Granada. The slopes of the volcano form an island of biodiversity; vegetation and wildlife vary with altitude, and above 800m the volcano becomes a cloud forest where ferns, mosses and bromeliads cling to the trees. Still higher, the landscape transforms to dwarf forest. The moisture-rich environment of the lower slopes is perfect for the cultivation of coffee.

The last recorded major activity was in 1570, when a massive tremor caused the wall of Mombacho's crater to collapse, draining the lagoon it held and washing away an indigenous village of 400 inhabitants. The volcano is still definitely active and sends up a smoke ring now and then to keep people edgy.

The reserve is managed by **Fundación Cobi-bolca** (☎ 552 5858; www.mombacho.org; admission US\$9; 🕒 8am–5pm Thu–Sun), which maintains a biological research station and trains guides. Any Nandaime-bound bus can drop you at the reserve entrance, from where it's a steep 2km hike to an information center, from which park rangers can drive you up in a 4WD 'ecomobile' (departures 8:30am, 10am, 1pm and 3pm) to the biological station. Otherwise, many Granada tour operators run day trips to the reserve for US\$20 to US\$30 per person.

From the station at 1150m, where there's also a café-restaurant and shop, a 1km self-guided trail traverses the cloud forest. Much tougher and much more interesting is the 4km, four-hour Sendero El Puma, which climbs sharply and runs along the edge of the crater for a while. You need a guide for this walk.

For US\$30 per person (prebooking essential), you can stay at the hostel here, sleeping in a clean, communal dorm. The price includes dinner, breakfast, transport to the reserve from Granada, and a spooky guided

night walk where you'll spot crawlies galore. The money helps maintain the reserve, and it's a highly recommended experience.

Canopy Tours Mombacho (☎ 267 8256; tour US\$30 per person), up the road from the parking lot of the official reserve entrance, offers a canopy tour adventure, involving 16 platforms over the 1700m course. Granada tour operators including the affiliated Mombotour offer return trips from town.

Laguna de Apoyo

Set in a picturesque valley brimming with wildlife, the lovely Apoyo crater lake is another one of Nicaragua's many natural wonders. Dry tropical rain forest along the surrounding slopes contains much biodiversity – turquoise-browed motmot and montezuma oropendola (large, brightly plumed birds famed – by birders – for their bizarre singing) inhabit the region, along with some 60 species of bat, and howler monkeys dwell in the treetops. The pristine waters of the lagoon are great for swimming and diving.

The diversity of the region also extends to humans, and you'll see a mix of rustic houses and opulent mansions. Although the spot is a natural reserve, protection is inadequate, so do your bit by patronizing low-impact businesses in the increasingly touristy development here.

In a bucolic setting on the wooded banks of the lake, the nonprofit **Proyecto Ecológico** (☎ 882 3992; www.gaianicaragua.org) research station offers fairly intensive Spanish courses (US\$190 for a 25-hour week, including bed and board). There's a lodge here, but if students prefer they can live with local families in the area.

Lodging for nonstudents is available in the large ranch-style home or in adjacent **cabins** (dm US\$7.50, s/d without bathroom US\$16/19, d with bathroom US\$25). The kitchen (which you can use) prepares tasty set meals. Bicycles and kayaks can be rented, and PADI-approved divers can join expeditions to research the lake's endemic fishes.

There's an increasing number of other places to stay and eat. Two popular sleeping choices are affiliated to hostels in Granada, which offer transportation. The **Monkey Hut** (☎ 887 3546; www.thebeardedmonkey.com; dm/s/d US\$10/18/25; 📶) is a lovely house overlooking the lake. Entrance for the day costs US\$6 (waived for overnight guests), and includes use of canoes, inner tubes, assorted sporting equipment and the kitchen. Don't forget to bring your own food.

Shuttles depart from the Bearded Monkey in Granada on Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 10:30am, returning at 6pm (US\$1 each way).

Friendly Hospedaje Crater's Edge (☎ 895 3202; www.craters-edge.com; dm US\$10, r US\$20–37; 📶) is associated with the Oasis hostel in Granada (minibus at 10am and 4pm daily, US\$3 round-trip). There's a variety of breezy, spacious rooms with or without bathroom, and a secure dorm looking out over the lake, where you'll find kayaks, tubes, and a bar. There's also a restaurant.

The lake is most easily accessed by public transport from Masaya. Every half-hour, buses run to the crater rim (US\$0.25, 25 minutes), but only three (6:30am, 11:30am, 4:30pm) descend the further 2km to the lake.

Pueblos Blancos

The mountainous coffee-growing region between the Managua–Masaya highway and the Interamericana Hwy is dotted with pretty villages, so named for their typically white-stuccoed homes with brightly painted doors and window frames.

Pottery making is the main activity in **San Juan de Oriente**. You can shop at the Cooperativa Quetzalcóatl or at a number of workshops along the main road. Ask vendors if you can take a peek at the potters at work.

The gorgeous nearby village of **Catarina** is known for its *mirador* (lookout), which offers sweeping views of Laguna de Apoyo, Lago de Nicaragua and the city of Granada. The town offers appealing places to stay, including **Hospedaje Auro** (☎ 558 0045; r per person US\$2.80), which is a bargain for such a clean, cheery flophouse.

Augusto Sandino was born and raised in **Niquinohomo**, aptly translated as 'Valley of the Warriors.' His boyhood home, in the house opposite the northwest corner of the main plaza, is now a library, with a small display on the man's life.

Buses to these villages (US\$0.70, 30 minutes, every 20 minutes until 5pm) leave regularly from one block south of the market in Granada.

Carazo Towns

Southwest of the Pueblos Blancos, in Carazo department, **San Marcos** and the 'twin cities' of **Jinotepe** and **Diriamba** are set in a citrus- and coffee-cultivation area. The three towns celebrate a distinctive religious and folklore

ritual known as ‘Toro Guaco,’ in which the Nicarao town of Jinotepe and Diriamba, its Chorotega rival before the European conquest, commemorate their relationship. Jinotepe’s patron is Santiago (St James), whose day is July 25; Diriamba’s is San Sebastián (January 20). These two towns, along with San Marcos, carry out ceremonial visits to each other, livened up with striking costumes and masks displayed in dances, mock battles and plays satirizing their Spanish invaders. The pantomime figure of ‘El Güegüense’ is a symbol of Nicaraguan identity.

Buses to Diriamba, Jinotepe and San Marcos depart from one block south of the market in Granada (US\$0.75, 45 minutes, every hour until 6pm). There are extremely frequent departures from Masaya and Managua as well.

MASAYA

Pop 92,600

This appealing working-class city between Managua and Granada is famous across the country as being Nicaragua’s epicenter of *artesanías* and is a great place to buy gifts and souvenirs. The fabulous products crafted in characterful workshops around town are united in the memorable central market.

In 2000, Masaya was an epicenter of another kind, as a series of earthquakes destroyed much of the city’s center. Hundreds of old adobe buildings collapsed, and the restoration is very much a work in progress.

Many visit Masaya on day trips, but it makes a highly appealing place to stay, with the welcoming locals and the adjacent volcano enticing one to linger.

Orientation & Information

Masaya is just 29km southeast of Managua, with Granada another 16km down the road. The city sits at the edge of the Masaya crater lake, beyond which rises Volcán Masaya (see p498).

Banco de América Central Has an all-card ATM and will change traveler’s checks.

Cyber King (Av Delgado; per hr US\$0.55) One of several central internet spots.

DHL office (Mercado Viejo) When you realize you’ve bought more than you can carry.

Enitel For international calls. Facing Parque 17 de Octubre.

Intur (☎ 522 7615; masaya@intur.gob.ni; Banpro ½ al sur; ☎ 8am-12:30pm & 1:30-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-12:30pm Sat) Half a block south of Mercado Viejo.

Post office (Mercado Viejo)

Sights

MARKETS & WORKSHOPS

Masaya’s famous *artesanías* can be found in many places around town. The most concentrated area is in the original market, the fabulous **Mercado Viejo**, restored to its former glory after destruction in the Revolution. It’s quite a sight, girt by an ornate carved basalt wall punctured with numerous carved portals and complete with turrets. Here you will find a variety of stalls selling excellent-quality cotton hammocks, colorful basketry and woven mats, wood carvings, marimbas, carved and painted gourds, paintings, ceramics and pottery, coral jewelry and leatherwork. It’s touristy, but competition keeps prices fair. Many vendors speak English, and they’re not at all pushy. Thursday nights feature live music here.

Much more local in character, the **Mercado Municipal Ernesto Fernández**, 500m east of the old market, also has some *artesanías* for sale, as well as *comedores* (basic, cheap eateries) and standard market goods. The market has a particularly large selection of leather sandals and stuffed reptiles and amphibians.

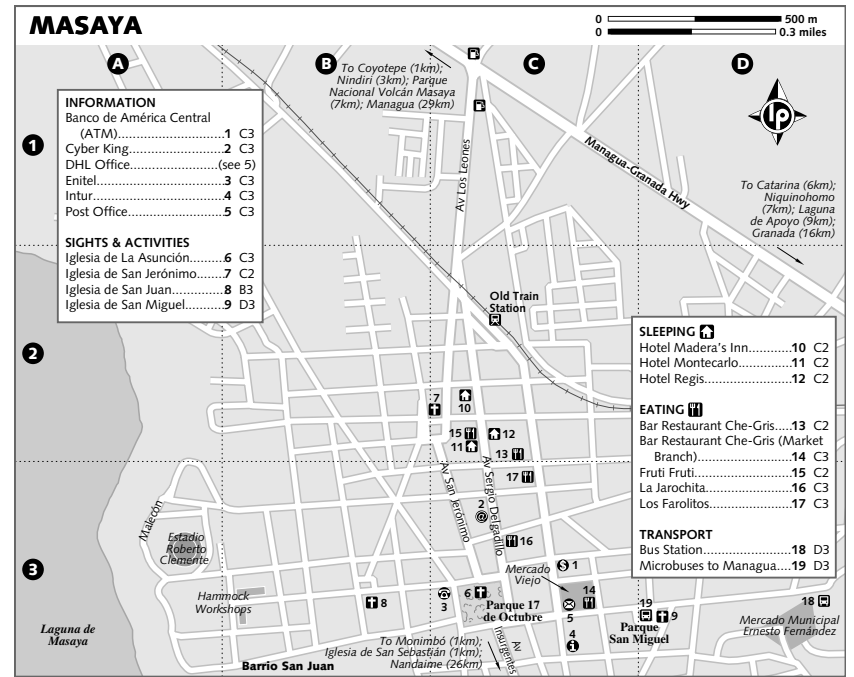
Near the Malecón on the lake is **Barrio San Juan**, famous for its hammocks and *tapices* (woven straw canvases portraying rural scenes); it’s fun to stroll around the workshops here. Even more so is **Monimbó** (an indigenous suburb), the heart of which is around the Iglesia de San Sebastián about 1km south of the main plaza. Intur can give you a map showing the many workshops scattered throughout this barrio. People will invite you into their homes to show you how the shoes, saddles, baskets, wood carvings and other crafts are made.

CHURCHES & PLAZAS

Many of Masaya’s historic churches suffered significant damage in the earthquake of July 2000. Worst hit was the city’s symbolic **Iglesia de San Jerónimo**, on the northern side of town between two plazas, though it remains open to visitors as rebuilding goes on. The Spanish government has earmarked funds for the reconstruction of the early-19th-century **Iglesia de La Asunción**, on the main plaza, Parque 17 de Octubre. Other churches worth seeing include **San Miguel**, **San Juan** and **San Sebastián**, the last of which is in the Monimbó section of town.

COYOTEPE

The century-old **fortress** (admission US\$0.60; ☎ 8am-6pm) of Coyotepe stands on a hill north



of town overlooking the Managua–Granada highway. Here was the last stand of Benjamin Zeledón, the 1912 hero of resistance to US intervention. During the revolution of 1979, Somoza’s Guardia Nacional fired mortars on Masaya from here but were eventually overrun during the Sandinistas’ final push to victory. From Masaya, get any Managua-bound bus to the bottom of the hill, from where it’s a 1km hike to the top. A taxi is the soft option. Even those not fond of exploring old forts will enjoy the panoramic view of the entire region.

Festivals & Events

The **Día de San Jerónimo** (September 30) is so popular it now encompasses nearly three months of partying. Festivities kick off on September 20 when the patron saint, in the form of a bearded campesino called ‘Tata Chombó’ (also known as the ‘Doctor of the Poor’), is taken from his usual perch on the San Jerónimo church altar. September 30 and October 7 are the main procession days, when the saint is borne on a flowery platform down to La Asunción and back home again.

The festival continues each Sunday through November, with fireworks, marimbas and vibrant parades.

Other big festivals include the **Día de San Lázaro**, a week before Palm Sunday, which includes a procession of costumed dogs.

Sleeping

Hotel Regis (☎ 522 2300; Av Sergio Delgado; r per person US\$4.15) Three and a half blocks north of the main plaza, likable Hotel Regis offers tidy rooms with fan alongside a pleasant courtyard, at the end of which are several spick-and-span bathrooms. The elderly couple who run the place are especially helpful and glad to impart their abundant knowledge of the town.

Hotel Montecarlo (☎ 522 2927; Av Sergio Delgado; d US\$10) In a converted home across the street from Regis, the clean, comfortable, and welcoming Montecarlo offers a range of rooms that are pretty good value (for two people) with decent shared bathrooms. Survey more than one before choosing.

Hotel Madera’s Inn (☎ 522 5825; maderasinn@yahoo.com; Av Sergio Delgado; d US\$15-20, with breakfast & air-con

US\$30; ☺) This congenial, family-run hotel makes a colorful, homey base. The utmost is done to welcome travelers, and there's a range of rooms, all gleamingly clean and good value. There are several areas for lounging, and plenty of help planning your trip in the area.

Eating

There are several spots to eat in the Mercado Viejo, from no-frills *comedores* to more up-market choices. In the evening, snack stands serve cheap eats in the park.

Fruti Fruti (Av Sergio Delgadillo) By the Montecarlo hotel is this refreshing option that serves rather excellent smoothies to beat the summer heat.

Los Farolitos (☎ 522 0297; Av El Progreso; meals US\$1.50-3) Value is the key word at this enjoyable, well-run local lunching spot. The daily special is usually delicious, and costs a mere 25 córdobas – what more can you say?

La Jarochita (Av Sergio Delgadillo; dishes US\$2-3) A block north of the main plaza, La Jarochita prepares good Mexican fare such as tacos and enchiladas. It's a colorful, characterful place; grab yourself a table on the small terrace if you can.

Bar Restaurant Che-Gris (mains US\$3-6) Around the corner from Hotel Regis, this popular spot has a selection of meat, seafood and vegetarian meals; a *comida corriente* is US\$2. Even more appealing is the other location inside the Mercado Viejo, where good service and people-watching tables make it a winner.

Drinking & Nightlife

Masaya has lively nightlife, with popular bars in and around the park, and *discoteca* action at the *malecón* (pier or jetty). On Av Sergio Delgadillo, near the budget hotels, are a couple of cheesy but enjoyable bar-restaurants.

Getting There & Away

Buses arrive and depart from the eastern side of the Mercado Municipal Ernesto Fernández. There are departures for Managua (US\$0.45, 45 minutes, every 20 minutes from 4:30am to 5pm) and Granada (US\$0.45, 40 minutes, every 25 minutes from 5am to 6pm). Microbuses to Managua (US\$0.70, 30 minutes, frequent) run from Parque San Miguel, one block east of the Mercado Viejo. From the main road, there are frequent microbuses and buses to both Managua and Granada. A taxi to Granada should cost no more than US\$5 to US\$7.

PARQUE NACIONAL VOLCÁN MASAYA

Described by the Spaniards as the gates of hell, the craters that comprise Volcán Masaya National Park are the most easily accessible active volcanoes in the country. The park consists of a pair of volcanoes, Masaya and Nindirí, which together comprise five craters. Of these, Cráter Santiago is still quite active, often smoking and steaming and, in 2001, giving some visitors a very close shave with a light shower of superheated rocks.

The summit of Volcán Masaya (632m), the easternmost volcano, offers you a wonderful view of the surrounding countryside, including the Laguna de Masaya and the town of Masaya beyond. The park has several marked hiking trails, many of which require a **guide** (US\$0.55 per group plus tip). These include the lava tunnels of Tzinancanostoc and El Comalito, a small steam-emitting volcanic cone. You purchase tickets for these tours at the visitors center.

The **park entrance** (☎ 522 5415; admission US\$4; ☺ 9am-4:45pm) is just 6km from Masaya on the Managua highway. You can get there on any Managua-bound bus from either Masaya or Granada. The staff will furnish you with a map and guide; 1.5km from the entrance is the visitors center, museum and butterfly garden. From there it's 5km up to the **Plaza de Oviedo**, a clearing by the rim of the crater named after the 16th-century Spanish monk who, suspecting that the bubbling lava was pure gold, descended to the crater with a plastic bag and a pooper-scooper and came back alive. Here, the smell of sulfur is strong, and it's easy to imagine Lucifer lurking in the depths below.

There's no public transportation, but you may be able to hitch a ride; tour operators in Granada and Masaya (speak with Intur) are another option.

A FIERY PAST

According to legend, pre-Hispanic inhabitants of the area would throw young women into the boiling lava at the bottom of the crater to appease Chacitique, the goddess of fire, and skeletons of these human sacrifices have been found in nearby lava tunnels. A cross overlooking Cráter Santiago is said to have been placed there in the 16th century by the Spanish, who hoped to exorcise the demons who dwelled within.

SOUTHWESTERN NICARAGUA

Continuing south toward the Costa Rican border, the largest settlement is Rivas, from whose lake port, San Jorge, ferries head to Isla de Ometepe. Further down the Interamericana Hwy at La Virgen is the turnoff for San Juan del Sur, a popular beach resort and the jumping-off point for a string of fabulous Pacific beaches as well as being a major turtle-nesting zone.

This isthmus of land, only 20km wide at one point, is all that separates Lago de Nicaragua, and hence the Caribbean, from the Pacific.

RIVAS

pop 27,650

The crossroad town of Rivas is a departmental capital and center of a flourishing agricultural region where maize, beans, rice, sugarcane and tobacco are grown. Although most travelers only pass by here on their way to Isla de Ometepe and San Juan del Sur, Rivas is worth investigating: it's quite an attractive colonial town, and has a down-to-earth authenticity that can be quite refreshing after the gringo-heavy scene at the nearby beaches.

Ometepe only has a Visa/Plus ATM, so grab your cash here in Rivas if that doesn't do it for you. There are oodles of cybercafés charging around US\$0.80 per hour.

BAC Three blocks west and one north of the park; changes traveler's checks, gives no-fee cash advances on credit cards, and has an all-card ATM.

Intur (☎ 563 4914; rivass@intur.gob.ni; ☺ 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) Half a block west of the Texaco station on the Interamericana Hwy.

Sights

Investigate the **church** on Parque Central for its curious artworks, among which is a fresco in the cupola showing a battle at sea, with communism, Protestantism and secularism as burning hulks, and Catholicism as a victorious ship entering the harbor. Also worth visiting is the enthusiastically run **Museo de Antropología** (admission US\$1; ☺ 9am-noon & 2-5pm), set in a fabulous historic mansion four blocks northwest of the main plaza. Best on show is the collection of pre-Columbian ceramics and stonework found in the Rivas province.

Sleeping & Eating

Hospedaje Internacional (☎ 563 3652; r per person US\$4, with bathroom US\$10) There are several cheap places lining the Interamericana near the Texaco station. This is about the best of them, with accommodating staff, and a variety of fan-cooled rooms – those with bathroom and TV are significantly better.

Hospedaje Lidia (☎ 563 3477; r per person US\$4.40, with bathroom US\$8.80) Opposite Intur, this amiable, family-run operation offers the nicest budget lodging in town, with well-scrubbed rooms and a good attitude. The only gripe is the rather uncomfortable beds. A tasty traditional breakfast is available.

Soda Rayuela (mains US\$2-5) A step up in quality from most of the typical eating choices in town, this place has excellent local food and Mexican-influenced dishes such as *tacos el pastor* (pork kebab-style meat served on a tortilla). You'll come across it a block north and one east of Parque Central.

If you're just here to catch a bus, grab a plate of food at the market stalls beside the open lot where the buses pull in.

Getting There & Around

Rivas' **bus terminal** (☎ 453 4333) is adjacent to the market, about 10 blocks west of the Interamericana. Buses also stop at the Texaco station on the highway before leaving town, and Managua–Peñas Blancas express services also pick up and drop off on the highway. You can travel between the two locations by taxi or by cycle cab (from US\$0.40).

Intercity buses from Rivas include the following:

Granada (US\$1.10; 1½hr; 7 daily) You can also take a Managua bus and change at Nandaimé.

Managua (US\$1.50; 2½hr; every 25min 4:30am-6pm)

San Juan del Sur (US\$0.80; 45min; every 30min 6am-6pm)

Sapoa/Peñas Blancas (Costa Rica) (US\$0.50; 45min; every 30min 5am-6pm)

If going to San Jorge for the Ometepe ferry, there's no need to go into Rivas; buses leave every 30 minutes from the Shell station on the highway (US\$0.20). Taxis for the trip cost about US\$1 per person. Shared taxis are also available to San Juan del Sur for US\$3.30 per person.

From Rivas, there are also daily buses north to Las Salinas, a bumpy 1½-hour ride (US\$1). The reward: the great surfing at nearby Playa Popoyo.

SAN JORGE

This relaxed spot, 6km east of Rivas, is where most travelers head to cross over to Isla de Ometepe. The center of town is 1km from the ferry dock, by which stretches a beach with plenty of places to eat seafood with magnificent views across the lake to Ometepe. There are also several places to stay.

See p508 for details of the boat crossing to Ometepe.

SAN JUAN DEL SUR

pop 9860

Set on a horseshoe-shaped bay framed by picturesque cliffs, San Juan del Sur is Nicaragua's main beach resort, and tourism is rapidly replacing fishing as the town's *raison d'être*. The charms it offers to a burgeoning population of expats and backpackers are easy to identify: surfing, fishing and simply *being* – watching the Pacific sunset from a hammock, rum in hand is a great stress antidote. It's a fun place; travelers looking for a lively party scene or some mellow tanning-time will love it here, but if you're looking for culture or local ambience, you may find the place vacuous and gringofied.

Information

San Juan has no Intur office, but Casa Oro hostel and Big Wave Dave's usually have local newsletters, events guides and maps. There are slowish internet places on every block (about US\$1 per hour); most also offer cheap international calls. A useful website with maps and information is www.sanjuandelsurguide.com.

Banco de América Central (BAC) All-card-friendly ATM located in the Hotel Casa Blanca on the beachside strip.

El Gato Negro (☎ 828 5534; www.elgatonegronica.com; ☹ 7am-3pm) This café and bookshop has an excellent selection of English-language books for sale, including a comprehensive selection of tough-to-find tomes on Nicaragua. It's not a book exchange, although the boss might buy books from you if they're interesting and in good condition.

Gaby's Laundromat Opposite Hospedaje Eleonora, this offers laundry service as well as breakfasts and massages.

Hospital Opposite the Texaco station at the entrance to town.

Post office/Enitel phone center (☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon & 1-5pm Sat & Sun) At the southern end of the beachfront drive.

Sights & Activities

Apart from the attractive church on the plaza, the main sight here is the **beach**, a wide and

attractive stretch of sand whose southern end is the fishing port. Even better beaches, though, are to be found nearby (p502).

There are numerous operators offering everything from deep-sea fishing to ziplane tours; this is just a selection of what's available:

Arena Caliente (☎ 815 3247; www.arenacaliente.com) One-stop shop for all your surfing needs. Board rental, surf lessons, plus transport to the best breaks in the region.

Casa Oro (☎ 568 2415; www.casaoro.com) Hires surfboards for US\$8 to US\$10 per day, runs a daily shuttle to Majagual and Maderas (US\$5.50 round-trip), and can arrange fishing excursions and horse-riding trips in the hills behind town. It also offers nightly trips in season to see turtles nesting and hatching at Refugio de Vida Silvestre La Flor (see p503) for US\$25 per head including park entry fee.

Scuba Shack (www.scubashack-nicaragua.com) On the beachfront, these plungers offer PADI courses, guided dives and equipment hire.

Courses

There are several low-key Spanish schools and private teachers in town offering hourly rates and weekly courses. Check the noticeboards in hotels and cafés around town for contacts.

Nicaspanish Language School (☎ 832 4668; www.nicaspanish.com) A block east of the park, this is a popular choice for Spanish classes.

San Juan del Sur Spanish School (☎ 568 2115; www.sjdspspanish.com) On the beach, this is another well-established choice. As do others, it offers immersion courses and cultural activities.

Sleeping

There's a huge choice of accommodations, and you tend to get less value for money than in the rest of Nicaragua. At Easter and other Nicaraguan holiday times, prices rise significantly from those listed here.

Hospedaje Eleonora (☎ 568 2191; r per person with/without bathroom US\$5/3.30) There are several choices on the market street right near where the buses pull in. This clean and blameless choice is one of the cheaper options.

Hotel Beach Fun/Casa 28 (☎ 568 2441; r per person US\$5) Breezy and simple, this surfer favorite is a block back from the beach. Surrounding a dirt courtyard, livable rooms are clean enough, but the mattresses waved the white flag long ago. Rooms share a central shower.

Hotel Estrella (☎ 568 2210; r per person US\$5) This historic hotel on the beach strip has seen a

few changes in San Juan since it opened in the '20s. While it was probably once quite elegant, it's now a pretty basic budget flop-house, with graffiti on the paper-thin walls. However, some rooms have little balconies, there's a nice lounge area, a book exchange, and a beautiful café out front.

Casa Oro (☎ 568 2415; www.casaoro.com; dm US\$5-6, r with/without bathroom US\$18/12) Deservedly popular and always heavily booked, this well-run hostel is in an appealing old building which is gradually being restored to its former glories. The cheaper dorms open onto the convivial but noisy courtyard area; it's well worth paying the extra dollar for one of the lovely upstairs rooms, which have more space, more peace and quiet, and their own bathroom. There are also good private rooms available. Facilities include lockers and use of the kitchen. A block west and one south of the bus stop.

Hotel Joxi (☎ 568 2438; r per person US\$13; ☹ ☹) Half a block back from the beach, this makes a sound choice, with fairly comfortable air-con rooms with bathroom and cable TV. Try for upstairs, where there's a pleasant balcony area; the downstairs rooms are a little dark and depressing. The restaurant is OK.

Hostal La Marimba (☎ 568 2491; mb100980@hotmail.com; dm/s/d US\$6/12/18) Calm and quiet, this has plenty of relaxing appeal in a secure family home with a friendly hound onboard. The dorm room has thin mattresses but is clean and acceptable; guests can use the kitchen and get a front door key. All private rooms have a spotless bathroom.

Hospedaje Elizabeth (☎ 568 2270; r per person US\$5, d with bathroom US\$15) Opposite the market, this friendly guesthouse has a lively social scene and rooms varying in size and comfort; breezy upstairs rooms facing the ocean are best.

Rebecca's Inn (☎ 675 1048; martha_urcuyo@yahoo.es; d/tr US\$15/18; ☹ ☹) This enticingly tranquil option just west of Parque Central has an owner who rightly prides herself on the cleanliness of the place. The rooms are comfortable, with shared bathroom; try for room 1, with more natural light. There's also a family room with optional air-con (US\$20 to US\$28).

Hospedaje Nicaragua (☎ 568 2134; r with/without bathroom US\$20/15) Half a block north of the bus stop, this is no longer as cheap as it once was, but is still a cheerful, extremely clean spot that won't disappoint. Given the small price differential, you'd be well advised to go for one of the upstairs rooms, which have good

bathroom, a tiny balcony, and are lighter and breezier. Solo travelers might be able to wheedle a few dollars off the room price.

Eating

There's a long row of similar restaurants along the beachfront that offer ocean breezes and fish, seafood and chicken plates for US\$4 to US\$10. The least expensive place to eat is San Juan's market, with a string of neat little kitchens, all serving hearty local fare.

Cafetin El Faro (snacks US\$0.50-1.50; ☹ 7am-9pm) Behind the church, this bakery and café is run by the local youth center and offers an inviting shady spot to kick back and wonder about your friends beavering away back home.

El Gato Negro (☎ 828 5534) What's that smell? It's proper coffee, organically grown, roasted on the bar in front of you, and turned out to perfection by the polished espresso machine. Fabulous. Add to that salads, sandwiches, breakfasts, and a huge selection of books for sale and it's no wonder you'll have to fight for a table.

Big Wave Dave's (dishes US\$4-9) This attractively decorated gringo parlor has famous breakfasts (US\$2 to US\$5) – the all-in-one sandwich will well and truly set you up for the day – as well as drinks specials and hearty portions of American-influenced cuisine, with salads, spicy pastas, and steaks. It's half a block back from El Timón on the beach.

El Timón (☎ 568 2243; dishes US\$5-10) Just about the most upmarket of the beach restaurants, this excellent choice has professional service and delicious seafood; the *pulpo al vapor* (steamed octopus with a tasty garlicky sauce) is highly recommended. Remember that the menu prices don't include tip or tax, so it'll be another 25% on top.

El Colibrí (☎ 863 8612; mains US\$8-10) It's expensive but you may just deserve it. Airy and romantic, this labor of love is tucked away behind the church away from the beachfront scene. Dishes are served on appealing wooden plates, and daily specials always point the way to satisfaction. All the food is well prepared and presented, and there's plenty of vegetarian choice.

Two other eateries:

Chicken Lady (roast chicken US\$2.50; ☹ 4-9pm) Delicious roast chicken sold from a green and yellow house on the west side of Parque Central.

Pizzeria San Juan (☎ 568 2295; pizzas US\$4-6;

☹ 5-10pm) This is the best pizza place in town.

No contest. It's got a pleasant courtyard out the back too.

GETTING TO SAN JOSÉ, COSTA RICA

Just 45 minutes from Rivas, the border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica at **Sapoá** is the only road crossing between the two. It's quite busy, full of trucks and buses, as well as enthusiastic 'helpers.' There's about 1km to cross – pedicabs will whisk you along. There are plenty of moneychangers – go for one with an official badge – and a bank with ATM on the Costa Rican side.

The border station (Nicaragua side) at **Peñas Blancas** is open 24 hours but is best crossed during daylight hours. There's an **Intur office** (☎ 854 0711; 🕒 8am–9pm Mon–Fri, to 5pm Sat & Sun). As well as the normal US\$2 fee for leaving Nicaragua, you pay an extra US\$1 to the local community.

Entering Costa Rica is free; you technically have to show an onward ticket but this is rarely enforced. If it is, you'll have to buy a San José–Managua bus ticket from one of the bus companies outside.

There are frequent buses on both sides on to San José and Managua. See p589 for information on crossing the border from Costa Rica.

Drinking

Iguana Bar (🍷 Fri–Tue) The most consistently lively night-time option, this beachside joint fills up with a cheerful crowd of Nicaraguans and gringos banging back the rum as if prohibition started tomorrow.

Otangani (🍷 Thu–Sun) San Juan del Sur's only disco, Otangani has the all the trimmings – colored lights, smoke and extensive lounge space. It's at the northern end of the main strip; be alert walking home.

Two blocks back from the beach from Hotel Estrella, Republika is an enticing little spot with a polished wood ceiling, streetside tables, and friendly staff. As well as the usual, you can suck on a hookah if it takes your fancy.

Getting There & Around

Buses arrive and depart beside the market, two blocks from the beach. *Expresos* to Managua (US\$2.80, two hours) depart at 5am, 6am and 7am daily. Buses for Rivas (US\$0.60, 45 minutes), with connections to Managua and the border, depart every 30 minutes; services from 3:30am to 7pm. You can also get a taxi to Rivas (US\$2 to US\$5 depending on your persuasive powers). See opposite for routes to area beaches.

You can rent bikes at Rebecca's, Hotel Nina, Hospedaje Elizabeth and Casa Oro (p500) for US\$5 a day.

AROUND SAN JUAN DEL SUR

There are some fabulous beaches both south and north of San Juan del Sur. The majority are still pretty unspoiled, but it's definitely not undiscovered territory any more. However, these stretches of sand haven't succumbed quite yet, and are still mighty appealing places

to pop into for a little bit of pleasant surfing or swimming. There's no public transportation to these beaches.

North of San Juan del Sur

Some 7km north of San Juan del Sur, **Playa Marsella** is a spectacularly beautiful beach with good snorkeling and an OK estuary break. Be sure to watch the currents here. There's little shade, but you can always kick back with a cool drink at the upmarket beach resort complex.

At **Bahía Majagual**, 12km north of San Juan del Sur, there's a sheltered beach that's great for swimming. With a stunning setting, the popular lodge here was closed at time of research, probably pending development into an upmarket resort. This may render the beach private – make inquiries in San Juan before setting out.

The finest surf beach in the area, **Playa Madera** (Los Playones) is a short walk south of here. With sumptuous white sand, and slowish left and right breaks that hollow out as the tide rises, it can get pretty crowded offshore, but is nevertheless one of the country's best surf spots, with something for both experts and beginners. You can stay here at the basic but well-loved **Madera Surf Camp** (camping or hammock per person US\$2, r per person US\$4). Staff serve simple meals, and it's tough to imagine a more laid-back spot.

South of San Juan del Sur

The first beach to the south is **Playa El Remanso**, where caves and tidal pools can be explored. While you can walk the 7km from San Juan del Sur, the route is notorious for muggings, so you're much better with wheels or a keel.

Further south – half an hour's walk between each – from Remanso are Playas Tamarindo and Hermosa, with smallish but consistent beach breaks.

Beyond Playa Yanqui, with a gated resort community, is **Playa El Coco**, a fabulous beach ringed by postcard-worthy cliffs. Here, on a hill, **Casa Canada** (☎ 877 9590; s/d US\$10/15) offers simple rooms, great views, and very tasty food.

Getting To/From the Beaches

There are two daily buses heading to Rivas via all the northern beaches, with departures at 6:45am and 12:45pm (US\$1.50). Three daily buses head south to the Remanso turnoff, Playa El Coco, Reserva la Flor, and El Ostional (US\$1). Check the timetables, as they vary frequently. There are fixed rates for taxi trips from San Juan to the beaches, which vary from US\$10 to US\$30.

The nicest way to reach a beach is by boat. A **water taxi** (☎ 877 9255) leaves San Juan daily at 11am to Majagual, stopping at the beaches along the way (US\$8 return). Book your ticket at the kiosk opposite Hotel Estrella. You can also take it to the southern beaches if there's enough demand.

Casa Oro run a daily shuttle to Majagual and Madera beaches (US\$5.50 return), which gives you plenty of time to enjoy the sand and surf.

Refugio de Vida Silvestre La Flor

Playa La Flor is one of the world's principal nesting areas for olive ridley and leatherback turtles. The ungainly beasts lay their eggs here at night between July and January; most spectacular are the amazing *arribadas*, when thousands of olive ridleys arrive together, packing the beaches. The eggs start hatching a month and a half after laying.

The reserve, which is 20km south of San Juan del Sur along a shocking road, is managed by **Fundación Cocibolca** (☎ 277 1681; admission US\$12), who have been aided in their efforts by strong new pro-environmental legislation, which offers the turtles much more substantial protection than before.

The park guards sell soft drinks, but bring your own insect repellent and food – it may be a long night of waiting. You can camp here, but they charge an extortionate US\$30 per tent; you might prefer to stay at Playa El Coco, about a half-hour walk north (opposite).

Casa Oro (p500) offers popular daily trips to the reserve from San Juan del Sur, the easy option. Unfortunately, the level of protection of turtle rights on these trips leaves much to be desired. We can't stress strongly enough that appropriate behavior on turtle tours, with the laying mothers and clueless babies extremely vulnerable, is your absolute responsibility. Distance and respect (strictly no camera flashes or flashlights) are vital to their welfare.

ISLA DE OMETEPE

pop 35,000

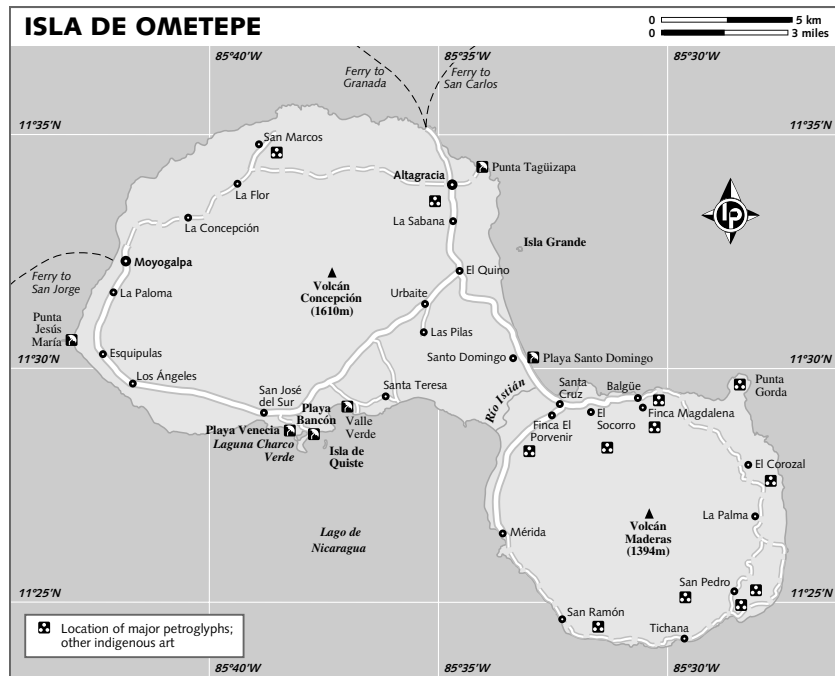
Ometepe is the sort of place that belongs in fairytales or fantasy novels; an island formed by twin volcanoes rising out of a lake. The ecological jewel that is Ometepe sees plenty of visitors these days but is still very unspoiled, a rough-and-ready sort of place with shocking roads and sleeping places whose charm lies in location and relaxation potential rather than state-of-the-art facilities. The island is a must, whether you plan to lounge on the beach, chat to plantain pickers, or tackle a steep volcano climb.

The two large volcanoes are Concepción, which rises 1610m above the lake in an almost perfect cone, and Maderas (1394m). Lava flows created an isthmus between them, creating the island, whose name means 'between two hills' in Nahuatl. Brooding Concepción is still active: its last major eruption was in 1957.

Ometepe is dotted by small coastal settlements where people live by fishing and farming – plantains, citrus, maize, and other crops all flourish in the volcanic soil. Parts of the island are still covered in primary forest, which harbors abundant wildlife, including howler monkeys and green parrots. The gorgeous blue-tailed birds seen everywhere on the island are called urracas (white-throated magpie jays).

Ometepe is famous for its ancient **stone statues** and **petroglyphs** depicting humans, animals, birds and geometric shapes. These remnants of Chorotega settlement have been found all over the island, but they are most densely clustered along the northern side of Volcán Maderas, between Santa Cruz and La Palma.

Both volcanoes are circled by roads, which connect along the isthmus. Between



Moyogalpa and Altigracia the road is paved; however, the rest of the roads are rough and rocky. Between San Ramón and Balgüe it's abominable.

The island's two major settlements, Altigracia and Moyogalpa, both offer accommodations and restaurants, but to experience the true charms of Ometepe, travel further out: Charco Verde, Playa Santo Domingo, Balgüe and Mérida all offer lovely settings amid the island's rich biodiversity.

The bank in Moyogalpa has a Visa-friendly ATM; this is the only cash machine on the island. Some hotels accept credit cards, and traveler's checks can be exchanged at the bank, but if in doubt, make sure you bring plenty of money – people often stay here much longer than they planned!

ACTIVITIES

Ometepe is great for hiking, exploring and swimming. However, the terrain is rough, signage minimal and trails hard to follow. Even independent travelers are well advised to hire an inexpensive guide (see opposite), particularly for going up the volcanoes.

Both of the volcanoes are climbable. **Maderas** is the more accessible of the two, a tough, muddy scramble through cloud forest to the crater, where there's a greenish lake below, best reached with the help of a rope (your guide will have one). It's about eight hours there and back. There are several routes to the top; the trails leaving from Finca Magdalena, Mérida, San Ramón, and El Porvenir are the most used.

Concepción is a pretty serious 10- to 12-hour hike, the last bit up steep and slippery volcanic scree. Be prepared for intense heat (sun, not lava), and also for chills at the summit. The two main trails leave from points near Altigracia and Moyogalpa.

The downside is that both summits are often wreathed in cloud, but you get some great views on the way up; indeed, many people only ascend to the cloud line – these make excellent half-day hikes offering a chance to enter the deep forest, see monkeys and birds, and admire the vistas. On the Maderas side, there are also several trails to see petroglyphs. The **petroglyphs** near the hotel of El Porvenir are a 45-minute horseback ride from Santo

Domingo; ask hotel staffers for directions. Others are found at El Socorro, Finca Magdalena and El Corozal. On the south side of Maderas, a 35m-high waterfall is located a couple hours' hike above San Ramón.

There are great **beaches** and swimming spots all around the island; check out Punta Jesús María, a nice swimming and picnic spot 5.5km south of Moyogalpa; Playa Venecia, 12km southeast of Moyogalpa; the Isla de Quiste, a beautiful islet not far from Charco Verde; and Punta Tagüizapa, 2km east of Altigracia. The most popular beach, **Playa Santo Domingo**, is on the isthmus connecting the two volcanoes, and has plenty of places to stay and eat.

Many of the sleeping options have horses, bikes or kayaks to hire at reasonable rates.

TOURS

Inexpensive local guides are highly recommended for hikes, for safety (people have perished fairly regularly climbing here), to increase your chances of spotting wildlife, and for enhanced insight into the island's culture. Guides basically live off your tips, so be generous. Any hotel can arrange a guide, as can the following:

Exploring Ometepe (☎ 647 5179; ometepeisland@hotmail.com) Just up from the dock in Moyogalpa. The best for volcano climbs. Excellent information and professional bilingual guides.

Ometepe Tours (☎ 569 4242) Another good setup, with an office by the ferry terminal in San Jorge and one in Moyogalpa.

MOYOGALPA

pop 3940

Catching the ferry from San Jorge, you'll arrive in Moyogalpa, the larger of the island's two main villages. While it's not a pretty place, it can make a good base, with plenty of accommodations choices and easy access to transport and guides to explore the rest of the island.

The **Sala Arqueológica Ometepe** (admission US\$1; ☎ 8am-9pm) is worth a visit. The small museum, 3½ blocks from the dock, displays a decent little collection of pre-Columbian pieces, including funerary urns carved with bat, snake and frog motifs. Entry includes a guided tour.

The Sala offers internet access, as does Arcía, two blocks up from the dock on the right. On the same block, Banco Pro Credit has a Visa/Plus ATM; at time of research,

this was the only cash machine on the island. There's a Publitel phone in front of the Enitel office, two blocks up from the dock and two blocks south.

Sleeping

Hospedaje Central/El Indio Viejo (☎ 569 4262; dm US\$2.60, s/d US\$7.30/8.40) This popular travelers' haunt three blocks up from the dock and one block south has clean, basic accommodations in a courtyard behind a colorful restaurant. If eating, go for the excellent fish plates rather than the sad sandwiches or cabbage-stuffed 'burritos.'

Hotel Bahía (☎ 569 4116; r per person US\$3.30) On the main street opposite the petrol station, the family-run Bahía is secure and offers somewhat dingy rooms at a low price.

Hotelito y Restaurante Ali (☎ 569 4196; r per person US\$5, with bathroom US\$6) Two blocks up the main road from the ferry terminal, the friendly Aly/Ali has a peaceful central patio with hammocks, trees and lots of plants. It offers a range of clean and comfortable rooms and good food.

Arenas Negras (☎ 833 6167; s/d/tr US\$8/10/15) This sound budget choice is just up from the ferry dock, opposite the Hotel Ometepetl. Compact but colorful rooms have an adequate little bathroom and a fan, and there's a café which sees few customers but is a fine place to sit and play cards.

Hotel Ometepetl (☎ 569 4276, ometepetling@hotmail.com; d with fan/air-con US\$15/25; ☎ ☎ ☎) While objectively it's hardly a luxury option, the Ometepetl is the Ritz of Moyogalpa. The decent, air-con doubles are OK value, and backed up by helpful service and a pleasant porch and restaurant. There's a pool, but it was dry at last look. There are tempting prices on rooms for groups.

Eating & Drinking

Casa Familiar (fish dishes US\$3-4) Of the many lodgings that serve meals (two blocks up from the dock and half a block south), Casa Familiar has a pleasant little *rancho* (thatched-roof café) with exceptionally well-prepared lake fish.

Los Ranchitos (☎ 569 4112; mains US\$2-7) Two blocks up from the dock and half a block south, thatched Los Ranchitos is popular for its warmhearted service and big portions of both local dishes and surprisingly tasty pizza. There's also a couple of rooms out the back (US\$6 per person).

Yogi's (☎ 827 3549; dishes US\$2-4; ☎ 8am-9pm) Named after the owners' handsome black dog, this hospitable place knows how to treat a traveler, with truly excellent sandwiches, burgers, and breakfasts as well as internet access, cheap phone calls, and big-screen movies in the peaceful courtyard space. It's half a block south of Hospedaje Central; just holler out if the front door's shut.

Hotel Bahía (☎ 569 4116) This hotel has a back bar opposite the petrol station in the center of town. It offers highly enjoyable no-frills drinking at plastic tables set out beside the roadside.

Discoteca Cocibolca (cover weekends US\$0.80) Opposite Hospedaje Central, this is a quiet bar with surly staff most of the week but turns up the sound and opens up the courtyard area at weekends. Friday is 'ladies' night.'

ALTAGRACIA

pop 2770

Not a great deal goes down in sleepy Altagracia, an attractive town at the other end of the paved road from busier Moyogalpa. It's a handy base for climbing Concepción. There's a dock 2km from town from where ferries run to Granada and San Carlos.

There's not much to see in town except for the fine ancient **stone statues** beside the church near the pretty parque central, and the **Museo de Ometepe** (admission US\$1; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Sat), which displays an assortment of archaeological, geological and cultural artifacts. Most interesting is a wall painting depicting the legend of Chico Largo, an angular farmer who heads a mythical community underneath the lake.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Castillo (☎ 552 8744; hotelcastillo@hotmail.com; r per person US\$3, s/d with bathroom US\$6/10, with air-con & breakfast US\$20/30; ☎ ☎) A couple of blocks south of the park, the popular Castillo has quiet, airy rooms that are pretty decent for this price and surround a thatched, hammocked courtyard. There's a good bar and restaurant and helpful management.

Hospedaje Kencho (☎ 552 8772; r per person US\$3) Shabby but sympathetically run, this has bare quarters with clean shared bathrooms. The restaurant is decent value and a low-key spot for a cool drink and chat.

Hotel Central (☎ 552 8770; r per person US\$3.50, with bathroom US\$4.50, cabins per person US\$7) Near the Castillo, this is a solid all-rounder offering smiley staff and decent cool rooms with good

bathrooms and OK beds. The round cabins are a great deal. It also rents bikes and can arrange guides. Book here for El Porvenir or the attractively upmarket Las Kabañas at Playa Santo Domingo.

There are several hearty *fritangas* and other budget eating options around Parque Central.

CHARCO VERDE & PLAYA VENECIA

On the south side of Concepción and 10km from Moyogalpa, this zone of beautiful beaches and forests of abundant wildlife is a fine place to visit or stay. The **Reserva Charco Verde** (admission US\$0.25) has a hiking trail through the woods; you'll likely see monkeys. The lovely Playa Bancón looks across at the swimmable **Isla de Quiste**, a prime camping spot. Ask one of the hotels for boat service across.

There are three places to stay here, run by members of the same family. Bookings are often necessary. The **Hotel Finca Playa Venecia** (☎ 887 0191; fincavenecia@yahoo.es; d/tr with bathroom US\$12/15, cabin US\$25-35; ☎ ☎) is extremely well run and overlooks the beach. There's a variety of appealing cabins available (you'll pay some US\$10 more if you want to use the air-con), simpler rooms with bathroom, and a sociable thatched restaurant. You can arrange all sorts of activities here, and the hotel rents bikes (US\$1 per hour) and horses (US\$5 per hour with guide).

Right next door, **Hospedaje Chico Largo** (dm US\$3.50, r per person US\$6; ☎) is a handsome building with a wraparound veranda and honking geese. There are dorm beds, OK rooms and you can also camp on the lawn (US\$2 per person).

A hundred meters east of these, **Hotel Charco Verde** (☎ 887 9302; www.charcoverde.com.ni; r per person with bathroom US\$7, cabins US\$35-45; ☎ ☎) has modern cabins – ask for a lake view – and characterful old rooms – sleep upstairs. Trees surround the grounds, and it's a short walk from there to the lagoon.

A few kilometers beyond here, **Tesoro del Pirata** (☎ 820 2259; dm US\$4, r with bathroom & air-con US\$30; ☎ ☎) is an away-from-it-all spot on a sheltered beach. It's a cordial place with a thatched restaurant and OK clean rooms that aren't as good value as the dorms. There's a rowboat and kayak available; you can also go out on fishing trips. It's 1km off the paved road some 14km from Moyogalpa.

SANTO DOMINGO

With a fabulous beach and many of the choicest accommodations, the little community of Santo Domingo, on the island's waist between the volcanoes, is where many people head.

Two kilometers west of Santo Domingo, you'll see signs for the **Ojo de Agua** (admission US\$1) waterhole. Keep left along the muddy road and after 20 minutes you'll reach the picturesque swimming hole, which has a kiosk selling drinks. It's a relaxing place, and good to chat to locals, who lug elaborate picnics down the trail.

Finca Santo Domingo (☎ 552 8787; hotel-santo-domingo@yahoo.com; r with fan US\$18-23, with air-con US\$25-30; ☎ ☎ ☎) is an immensely appealing option, with rooms where waves will lull you to sleep, and a strandside restaurant-bar that's a great spot. The rooms in the main building are more appealing than the darkish cabins on the other side of the road. There are horses and bikes, as well as a short but cheap zipline tour opposite.

Also here, **Hospedaje Buena Vista** (r with/without bathroom US\$10/8) is a great budget choice, with a genial boss and appealing fan-cooled rooms, with plenty of hammocks around to loll about in. There's a cheap spot to eat next door.

There are other places to stay nearby, including a couple of more upmarket options.

SANTA CRUZ & BALGÜE

Beyond Santo Domingo, the road divides at Santa Cruz, with the left fork heading to Balgüe, and the right to Mérida. There's a restaurant at the junction, a cheap and worthy *comedor* just down the Balgüe road, and down the Mérida road (1km in total) a cracking place to stay. **El Porvenir** (☎ 855 1426 or via Hotel Central in Altagracia; r per person US\$7) is set in an outstandingly beautiful location on a hilltop with superb views and no noise, and is perhaps the island's supreme spot for relaxation. The simple rooms have sturdy wooden beds, bathroom, and porch and are set around a lovely flowery garden. There's a restaurant, petroglyphs just below, and walking paths, including one that ascends Maderas.

From the junction, 1km toward Balgüe will bring you to **El Zopilote** (www.ometeppezopilote.com; hammocks US\$1.25, dm US\$2, r per person US\$6), a laid-back ecological farm. Facilities are very basic, but it's a welcoming place with great views and a convivial atmosphere. The trail is signposted to the right off the road.

LAGO DE NICARAGUA (COCIBOLCA)

Massive Lago de Nicaragua, also known by its indigenous name, Cocibolca (sweet sea), was the spiritual heart of precolonial Nicaragua and is Central America's largest lake. Among its treasures are the twin volcanoes of Ometepe island, and the Solentiname archipelago, revered by artists both ancient and modern.

The statistics (8624 sq km, 177km long, 58km wide) may not allow you to imagine just how big it is, but ride a boat across it and you'll soon appreciate its dimensions; it can be difficult not to believe you are in mid-ocean.

Though the lake actually drains to the Caribbean, via the Río San Juan, it is separated from the Pacific by only 20km. It's home to many remarkable aquatic species, including freshwater sawfish and tarpon and some 20 varieties of cichlids. It also contains rare freshwater bull sharks, though scientists have concluded that these creatures are not a distinct species but rather migrate up the Río San Juan from the Caribbean. Although they are big – about 3m long – the sharks are rarely seen, and their numbers have greatly decreased, owing to their wholesale butchering during the Somoza years (as many as 20,000 a year were slaughtered for sale to foreign markets). An excellent description of this rare species and its sometimes mythical relationship to local communities can be found in *Savage Shore*, by Edward Marriot (p521).

Pablo Antonio Cuadra's *Cantos de Cifar*, one of the most famous works of contemporary Nicaraguan literature, is another book to describe the lake and its communities.

Evidence of ancient human habitation on the lake's 400 islands is abundant. Over 360 of these are in the group called Las Isletas (p494), just offshore from Granada. Zapatera, the second-largest island in the lake, is just to the south of this group. Solentiname archipelago (p510), near the south end of the lake, has 36 islands, while magnificent Ometepe fulfilled an ancient Nahuatl prophecy of finding twin volcanoes in a freshwater sea.

Travelers looking to climb Maderas might also opt to stay beyond Balgüe at **Finca Magdalena** (☎ 880 2041; www.fincamagdalen.com; hammock US\$1.25, dm/s US\$2/2.50, d US\$7-8; P). With gorgeous views over the hillside, the old farmhouse is set on an organic coffee plantation and offers rustic accommodations as well as more modern cabañas (US\$30 to US\$40) and camping facilities. Tasty, fresh-cooked meals are available and within the grounds are various petroglyphs.

MÉRIDA & SAN RAMÓN

On the other side of Maderas lies the beautiful, wind-swept shoreline of Mérida, a spread-out town with some 1800 inhabitants in it and the surrounding area. Further south, San Ramón is a simple agricultural village, typical of the Maderas side of the island. Beyond here, the road degenerates even further but passes through some friendly and fascinatingly isolated plantain-farming communities before emerging at Balgüe.

There are several appealing places to stay around Mérida and San Ramón. All have (or can arrange) horses or bikes to hire. The northernmost, **Playa Volcán** (☎ 871 8303; www.playavolcan.tk; hammock or camp site US\$1, dm US\$1.50; P) is signposted from the main road. The accommodations are in very simple huts – you're probably more comfy in a hammock – but it's a friendly place with a communal vibe.

On the main road south of town, **Hacienda Mérida** (☎ 868 8973; www.lasuerte.org; campsite per person US\$1.50, dm US\$3-4, r per person US\$6; P) was a former ranch of the Somoza family. It's now a popular traveler's R&R spot. The rooms are clean, and shared bathrooms are well maintained. The buffet dinners are very toothsome, and you can rent kayaks, climb a steep path up Maderas volcano, or just laze by the water, where there's a jetty just perfect for lounging.

Not far past here, **Hotel Omaja** (☎ 855 7656; dm US\$5-10, r with fan/air-con US\$25/50; P) is a very attractive hillside hotel with excellent cabins offering fabulous views. The dorm accommodations are clean and good, and you even get warm showers. The restaurant is also recommended.

Just beyond, **Monkey's Island Hotel** (☎ 844 1529; monkeyislandjactinto@hotmail.com; dm US\$2.50, r with bathroom US\$8; P) is run with pride by a hospitable local family. Simple but immensely inviting, it sits on a breezy spur with the beach

below. There are plenty of rocking chairs to lounge in; the concrete-floored rooms with bathroom offer plenty of value, while the simpler shareable rooms are basic but more than adequate. You can also camp here (US\$1.50). Delicious no-frills meals (US\$1 to US\$2.50) are available.

On a hillside in San Ramón is **Estación Biológica de Ometepe** (☎ 883 1107; lasuerte@safari.net; dm US\$10, cabañas US\$25, ste US\$65-80; P), a center for research in tropical ecology designed to house international university groups. It's a big grassy compound with a jetty and appealing rooms shaded by wide hammocked verandas. There are very tasty meals. Book ahead.

From the center, you can climb 3km (four hours return) to the fabulous waterfall of **Cascada San Ramón** (admission US\$3, guests free); this is also a popular route up Volcán Maderas.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The fastest and most popular way of reaching the island is via San Jorge near Rivas, from where boats make the 15km crossing to Moyogalpa on Ometepe.

There are two types of boat: car/passenger ferries (1st/2nd class US\$3.30/2.20) and fairly basic *lanchas* (small motorboats; US\$1.60). The crossing, which takes just over an hour, can be fairly rough, particularly in the afternoon. The ferries are significantly more comfortable – 1st class has a bar and air-conditioned lounge, but the grungy *lancha* crossing can be quite an experience; if you don't fancy sliding around on deck as the tub pitches in the swell, get there early and grab a seat. Your bags may well get wet, so wrap important stuff up in plastic, or stick your whole pack in a potato sack.

You can purchase tickets on board, or (for ferry departures only) at the ticket office. There are 11 daily departures each way.

San Jorge–Moyogalpa ferry (7:45am, noon, 2:30pm, 4:30pm, 5:30pm); *lancha* (9am, 9:30am, 10:30am, 11:30am, 1:30pm, 3:30pm)

Moyogalpa–San Jorge ferry (6am, 7am, 9am, 12:30pm, 1:30pm, 4pm); *lancha* (5:30am, 6:30am, 6:45am, 10am, 11:30am)

The boat from Granada to San Carlos, near the Costa Rican border, departs on Monday and Thursday at 2pm. It arrives in Altagracia (US\$1.50) about four hours later and takes off for the 10-hour trip to San Carlos (US\$2.50) at

7pm. The returning boat departs San Carlos at 2pm Tuesday and Friday, calling at Altagracia between 11pm and 1am. Travelers are urged to buy tickets ahead of departure time at the dockside ticket offices.

GETTING AROUND

The cheapest way to get around the island is by using the rickety buses, which follow schedules in an erratic but dogged manner. There's hourly service from Moyogalpa to Altagracia via the paved road (US\$0.60, 45 minutes). This route passes the turnoff to the Maderas side of the island.

From Moyogalpa, there are two daily buses to Balgüe (US\$1.25, two hours), leaving at 10:30am and 3:30pm. To Mérida (US\$1.40, two to three hours), services leave at 8:15am, 2:30pm and 3:30pm. From Altagracia, buses head to Balgüe at 4:30am, 9:30am, 11:30am, 1:30pm and 5pm, and to Mérida at 10:30am, 4pm and 5:30pm. For Santo Domingo (US\$1), you can catch either a Mérida or a Balgüe bus. It's also easy to hike or hitch from the turnoff from the paved road.

There are around 30 taxis on the island, either comfortable minibuses or harder pickup trucks. They are most easily picked up by the dock in Moyogalpa, and will take you just about anywhere on the island. Expect to pay US\$15 to US\$20 one-way to Playa Santo Domingo, US\$30 to Balgüe or Mérida, and US\$8 to Altagracia. If you're just going somewhere for the day, it's sensible to pre-arrange your return ride with the driver at a set time.

To explore on your own, it's possible to rent a no-frills Suzuki jeep in Moyogalpa at Hotel Ometepetl (US\$40 for 12 hours). Comercial Arcía, two blocks south of the church, has reasonable bike rentals at US\$0.75 an hour. Motorcycle rental is sporadically offered, but the poor condition of the roads means it can cost US\$30 to US\$35 for a day's rental. Ask at Exploring Ometepe.

SAN CARLOS & AROUND

The steamy riverside town of San Carlos is an important hub for river transport, and launchpad for a number of highly appealing attractions including the Solentiname archipelago, several wildlife reserves, and the fabulously unlikely Spanish castle at El Castillo.

SAN CARLOS

River ports are always intriguing places and hot swampy San Carlos is no exception. Standing on the southeastern corner of Lago de Nicaragua, it's the place to go to catch a boat down the Río San Juan, over to Costa Rica, or across to the artists' archipelago, Solentiname.

There's not a great deal to do in town except explore what remains of the **old fortress**, built in 1793 by the Spanish to keep invading forces from entering the lake and gaining access to Granada's wealth. The ruins lie just above Parque Central and have a few uninformative wildlife panels. In July and August a plague of insects descends upon the port, and movement about the town becomes highly unpleasant; do as locals do and stay indoors in the evening until about 9pm, when the beasts are tucked up in bed. The town's main **fiesta** is on November 4.

The excellent **Intur office** (☎ 583 0301; riosanjuan@intur.gob.ni; ☎ 8am-noon & 1:30-5pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-12:30pm Sat & Sun) is helpful, enthusiastic, and full of suggestions about things to do in the area. There are a few internet places in town, including one on the corner down from Hotel Carellys (per hour US\$0.90).

All sleeping options in San Carlos suffer from frequent power and water cuts. There are a couple of cheap *hospedajes* near the boat dock. Better is friendly **Hospedaje Peña** (☎ 583 0298; r per person US\$1.65), a block west of the Intur office, with basic rooms with shared bathroom. A block east of the boat dock, **Hotel San Carlos** (☎ 583 0265; r per person US\$5) has a balcony overlooking the water and spacious clean

GETTING TO COSTA RICA BY BOAT

From San Carlos you can take a small boat up the Río Frio to the Costa Rican border station at **Los Chiles** (US\$6.60, 1½ hours). Boats depart at 10:30am, 1:30pm and 4pm Monday to Saturday, and 12:30pm Sunday (return journeys 1pm and 4pm Monday to Saturday with extra services if demand is high, 4pm Sunday). Before departing, be sure to get your US\$2 exit stamp at the San Carlos immigration office a block west of the dock. The office is open from 8am to 5pm daily.

See p583 for information on crossing the border from Costa Rica.

rooms. Up a step is gruff **Hotel Carelhy's** (☎ 583 0389; r per person US\$12), which has breezy rooms with comfy beds and good bathrooms. **Hotel Leyko** (☎ 583 0354; d with/without bathroom US\$15/10, with air-con US\$40; 📶 🚿) is the best in town, with a variety of clean rooms and cabins, some with air-con.

A gastronomic tour–bar crawl of San Carlos should include:

El Granadino (lunches US\$2–3, mains US\$5–6) Comfortably the town's best restaurant, with high ceilings, sizzling steaks, fair prices, great service, and a big Sandinista mural. It's half a block east of Intur.

El Mirador (mains US\$4–7) Set in an old Spanish bastion southwest of Intur, it has a terrace and real cannons at your disposal.

Kaoma (mains US\$2–6.50) Surly service but a great upstairs wooden deck. Lively on weekend nights. It's southwest of Intur, on the waterfront.

Mirasol (mains US\$3–6) Weatherbeaten wooden deck with a top location on stilts over the water at the western end of the riverfront. Attractive but uncomfortable furniture, reasonably priced beef, pork, chicken and fish.

Getting There & Away

The airline **La Costeña** (☎ 583 0271), opposite the post office, has flights from Managua (US\$116 return, twice daily Monday to Friday, daily Saturday and Sunday) to San Carlos's grass strip, 3km north of town. You should be able to find your way around the airport; ask if you get lost. A taxi into town costs US\$0.55. Confirm your return flight in San Carlos as soon as you arrive; it's easy to get stranded as there are only 12 seats on the plane and they are often block-booked by tour companies.

There are six daily direct services between San Carlos and Managua's Mercado Mayoreo terminal (US\$8.30, eight hours). The stretch between San Carlos and Juigalpa is Nicaragua's worst major road; it's a very uncomfortable ride. In the wet season, this trip may take several hours longer or not be possible at all.

Boats leave from Granada for San Carlos (1st/2nd class US\$6/3, 16 hours, 2pm Monday and Thursday) via Altigracia on Isla de Ometepe and San Miguelito, heading back 3pm Tuesday and Friday.

San Carlos is the western terminal of the San Juan riverway. There are six to seven departures Monday to Friday (two on Saturday and Sunday) to El Castillo (US\$3.50, 2½ hours) via Boca de Sábalos (US\$3, two hours). The 10:30am departure is a fast boat that does the trip in 1½ hours.

For San Juan del Norte, at the mouth of the river on the Caribbean coast, boats depart at 6am Tuesday, Thursday and Friday (US\$14.40, 10 to 14 hours). They stop for bathroom stops and food along the way. Boats return at 4:30am Thursday, Saturday and Sunday.

ARCHIPIÉLAGO DE SOLENTINAME

Isolated Solentiname Archipelago, in the southern part of Lago de Nicaragua, is a traditional haven for artists and a fascinating place to visit. Ernesto Cardenal, the versatile artist-poet-monk who was minister of culture during the Sandinista years, set up a communal society here for craftspeople, poets and painters, inspired by the principles of liberation theology. A distinctive school of colorful primitivist painting arose out of these revolutionary-era workshops and has become world-famous.

Solentiname comprises 36 islands; the largest are Mancarrón, San Fernando (also called Isla Elvis Chavarría) and Venada (Isla Donald Guevara). The first two have the principal facilities for travelers. **Mancarrón** also has the islands' most famous sight, the thatched church that was the spiritual and communal center of Cardenal's community. Near here is an interesting archaeological exhibition – San Fernando also has a worthwhile museum.

There are many **petroglyphs** scattered around the island, which make appealing destinations for hikes – there are also caves to explore on San Fernando. Fishing is good around here, and Zapote has great bird-watching possibilities. Otherwise, the islands are just great for taking it easy.

Hotel Mancarrón (☎ 583 0083; r per person US\$8), near the church in Mancarrón, offers plenty of value in spacious rooms with bathroom and fan. The management are helpful and can offer plenty of information on what to see, and there's a good restaurant.

Hospedaje Buen Amigo (r per person US\$12) on the island of Mancarrón is a cute place to stay, with comfy and colorful rooms with shared bathroom, and local artists whittling away outside. The price of lodging includes two meals per day.

Albergue Celentiname (☎ 506 377 4299, 583 0083 in San Carlos; r per person US\$20, cabin with bathroom per person US\$25), situated on a lovely point on San Fernando island, has appealing cabañas in a lovely garden setting. Rates include three meals per day. Guests have access to the fine

WETLAND WANDERINGS

Another great spot to visit in this vicinity is the Refugio de Vida Silvestre Los Guatuzos, a fabulous wetland zone that abuts the Costa Rican border and was once a minefield (it's safe now!) – a fact that ironically ensured the region remained inviolate. There are public boats to Río Papaturro on Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday from San Carlos leaving at 7am (US\$3.90, four hours), returning Monday, Tuesday and Thursday at 6am. It docks near the **Centro Ecológico Los Guatuzos** (☎ 583 0139; dm US\$11), which is a research station offering dorm accommodations for students and travelers. It runs walking and boating tours, and will lend you wellies for exploring on your own. As well as the abundant bird and animal life, there's a cayman reserve and butterfly farm to visit.

It's also reasonably easy to get here from the Solentiname archipelago. Wherever you arrive from, bring plenty of insect repellent!

porch, kayaks and a rowboat. Guided fishing trips are offered.

Getting to Solentiname takes a bit of advance planning as boats don't leave every day. Boats leave Mancarrón for San Carlos at 4:30am on Tuesday and Friday, and return at noon on the same days (US\$1.60, three hours). Otherwise you can charter a boat from San Carlos for the trip (US\$100), or take a day trip from San Carlos to the islands (US\$14) – these leave from the dock by the El Ranchón restaurant at 9:30am. Some boats heading for Papaturro also stop in the archipelago – check with Intur in San Carlos (p509) for schedules.

RÍO SAN JUAN

The river that makes Nicaraguan hearts stir with pride flows 199km from Lago de Nicaragua to the Caribbean. For much of its length, the river forms the border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica, and has been a frequent source of tensions between the two nations.

A trip on the San Juan is a fabulous experience – it's an avian paradise, and you may well spot caymans sunning themselves on logs. These creatures will likely face eviction should Nicaragua's grand plans of a transisthmian canal ever come to fruition.

Boca de Sábalos

The friendly town of Boca de Sábalos is the first major settlement downstream from San Carlos. It's lively and sociable, always with a few people hanging around keen to strike up a conversation. There's a couple of cheap but decent **alojamientos** (basic places to stay) here (ask for Katiana or Clarissa) as well as **Sábalos Lodge** (☎ 583 0046; www.sabaloslodge.com; r US\$11, cabins US\$30), which has a range of rustic cabañas, forest trails where you'll see monkeys, and kayaks

and bikes available. **Hotel Sábalos** (☎ 894 9377; www.hotelsabalos.com.ni; r per person incl breakfast US\$15), with a wooden veranda right on the water, also appeals – it'll cost you a córdoba to get rowed across here from the dock.

El Castillo

About one-third of the way from the lake to the ocean is El Castillo (pop 1200), a fortress built by the Spanish in 1675 at a strategic bend in the river to try to halt the passage of pirates heading for the fabled gold of Granada. It's an utterly memorable spot, with the unlikely castle looking over the lively rapids below.

Bitter battles were fought at El Castillo against flotillas of assailants. In 1762 the British and their Miskito allies attacked the fort, but Spanish forces, led by the daughter of their fallen commander, managed to hold off the invaders. The fort was besieged and briefly held by a British force in 1780 – a young Horatio Nelson was among their numbers – but the ill-equipped expedition succumbed to dysentery and once again had to retreat. The **fort** (admission US\$2, camera US\$1.35; 🕒 8am–noon & 1–5pm) offers top views and has decent displays on its turbulent history. Admission includes a well-informed guided tour.

Right opposite the dock, a **tourist office** (📞 8–11am & 2–5pm Mon–Sat) gives information in the area and offers a well-organized system of guided excursions in the area (see the boxed text, p512). A couple of doors along, Soda Carolina offers unreliable internet access.

SLEEPING & EATING

Of the three budget places on the main path near the dock, **Hospedaje Universal** (r per person US\$3.30) is the better, with small, spare rooms and tiny windows opening onto the river.

EXPLORING THE RÍO SAN JUAN

Helped by an NGO, the Río San Juan area has developed a substantial ecotourism structure. A few kilometers downriver from El Castillo, the **Reserva Biológica Río Indio Maíz** is administered by Marena. From the Bartola lodge, there's a two-hour walking trail into the reserve; a more complex one leads from the Aguas Frescas station further downstream. You can book trips from El Castillo that include a guide and transport for US\$55 to US\$65 per person; other excursions include night alligator-spotting jaunts (US\$40), a trip to see typical *campesino* villages (US\$8), and horse rides (US\$10), perhaps to the Costa Rican border. There are also several other places to stay along the riverbank, including the Bartola reserve.

If you're really loving those riverboats, you might consider taking one all the way to **San Juan del Norte** on the Caribbean coast, a trip of some 12 hours from San Carlos (see p510). Here there are a couple of gruff hotels (US\$5 to US\$10 per person) – and, better, homestays for around US\$4 per person. You can visit the ruins of old Greytown in a boat and, if you're lucky, find a cargo boat heading for **Bluefields** or, more likely, to nearby Costa Rica. Otherwise, it's back up the ol' river again.

Just off the main footpath beyond here, **Hotel Richardson** (☎ 552 8825; r per person US\$10) is a laid-back spot with good beds in cramped rooms with bathroom, murals, and a pleasant patio area, where a relaxed breakfast (included) is served.

Albergue El Castillo (☎ 892 0174; r per person with breakfast US\$15) is a large homely wooden building that looms over the center of town. While the price is high considering you have to share a bathroom, the rooms (which offer character but not luxury) open onto a fabulous veranda with great views.

Heading a couple of hundred meters left from the dock, you'll reach the new **Hotel Victoria** (☎ 583 0188; hotelvictoria01@yahoo.es; r per person US\$15), a well-run place with wood-lined rooms with new bathrooms and hot water. You might get your towel folded in a heron shape if the staff are in the mood. Breakfast is included in the price, and there's a terrace bar-restaurant.

Be sure to try *camarones* (river shrimps) while in town. These bad bastards are massive, with pincers that could castrate a bull. There are several places to eat along the riverside walkway. **Soda Vanessa** (dishes US\$1-6) has a fabulous open *comedor* right on the rapids and offers great food, from low-priced *comida corriente* to exceedingly tastily prepared *camarones*.

Getting There & Around

Pangas (small motorboats) depart San Carlos for El Castillo (US\$3.50, 2½ hours) via Boca de Sábalo (two hours) six to seven times daily (but only twice at weekends). Boats return

at 5am, 5:20am (fast boat taking 1½ hours), 6am, 7am, 11am and 2pm. The trip takes three hours back to San Carlos; to get the afternoon flight to Managua you'll need to leave at 7am. On Saturdays there are only departures from El Castillo at 5am and 7am, on Sundays only at 6am and 2pm.

CARIBBEAN COAST

Nicaragua's Caribbean coast is a very distinct part of the country, and can feel like another nation. A remote rainy region scored by dozens of rivers and swathed in tropical forest, it comprises more than half the country but much of it is virtually untouched by travelers; a veritable wilderness.

As well as being geographically and climatically distinct, the region also has a very different ethnic makeup. The Miskitos (indigenous people), who give their name to Moskitia (or Mosquitia), or 'the Mosquito Coast,' today number around 70,000 and live both here and in Honduras, while the Sumo and Rama tribes, black Creoles brought from other parts of the Caribbean by the British, and other groups are also present. The races have mingled a good deal over the centuries.

Much of this coastline was never colonized by Spain. In the 18th century, leaders of the Moskitia area requested that it be made a British protectorate, as a defense against the Spanish. It remained British for over a century, with a capital at Bluefields, where the Miskito kings were crowned in the Protestant church.

The British signed the Moskitia over to the Nicaraguan government in 1859. The region retained its autonomy until 1894, when it was brought under direct Nicaraguan government control. The English language and the Protestant religion brought by British missionaries persist as important aspects of the regional culture. Timber, shrimp and lobster are key exports.

The steamy coast gets much more rain than the Pacific and inland regions: anywhere between 330cm and 635cm annually. Even during the March to May 'dry' season, rain is possible any time.

As well as the port of Bluefields, and the fabulous Corn Islands, there are numerous appealing destinations along this coastline, from isolated Miskito fishing communities to golden sand-fringed islets, and remote rivers. If you're a fan of getting off the beaten track, this is the spot for you.

MANAGUA TO THE CARIBBEAN

While many travelers choose to fly to the Caribbean from Managua, it's relatively easy these days to travel by land and water there. From Managua a good paved road leads to the important port town of **El Rama**, from where fast boats zip down to Bluefields. Piece of cake really, and a lovely river trip, plus you could schedule a stop in the delightful colonial town of **Juigalpa** along the way – check out the fine collection of pre-Columbian basalt idols in the museum.

From Managua, six daily express buses head from the Mercado Mayoreo to Rama (US\$8.30, five hours) via Juigalpa (2½ hours), the first leaving at 7am. The *panga* dock in Rama is near the bus station, and boats leave every hour or so when full to Bluefields (US\$9.50, 1½ hours), a speedy downriver jaunt. Slower boats run on Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, and sometimes Sunday (US\$3, 4½ hours). A slow car ferry does this trip on

Monday, Wednesday and Friday (US\$8.35, cars US\$22.30, eight hours); the Friday trip continues to Big Corn Island.

Rama isn't as seedy as it was, but it was pretty damn seedy. **Hospedaje García** (r US\$7.80) is a block west and south of the bus station. It offers spacious, basic rooms that don't seem to be rented out by the hour. **Restaurante Expreso** (mains US\$2-5) is a mighty cheerful open-air restaurant that does steak, seafood, and beer just as they should be.

BLUEFIELDS

pop 38,620

The Caribbean side of Central America is very different to the Pacific side, and Bluefields, with its slow pace, ready smiles, decayed tropical charm, and slightly sketchy underbelly, is quintessential. Named after the Dutch pirate, Blewfeldt, who made a base here in the mid-17th century, the town ranks in these parts as a metropolis, and is definitely worth getting to know, even if you're en route to the Corn Islands. It has a fascinating mix of ethnic groups, a lively nightlife scene, and one of Nicaragua's most humming festivals.

Bluefields was destroyed by Hurricane Juana (Joan) in 1988 but has been rebuilt (including its beautiful bayside Moravian church). The town's economy is based on shrimp, lobster and deepwater fish; the main cargo port is across the bay at Bluff.

Bluefields is not a particularly safe place; if you go out after dark, always take a taxi.

Orientation & Information

Most of Bluefields' commerce, *hospedajes* and restaurants are found in the blocks between Parque Reyes and the Caribbean. The airport is about 3km south of town.

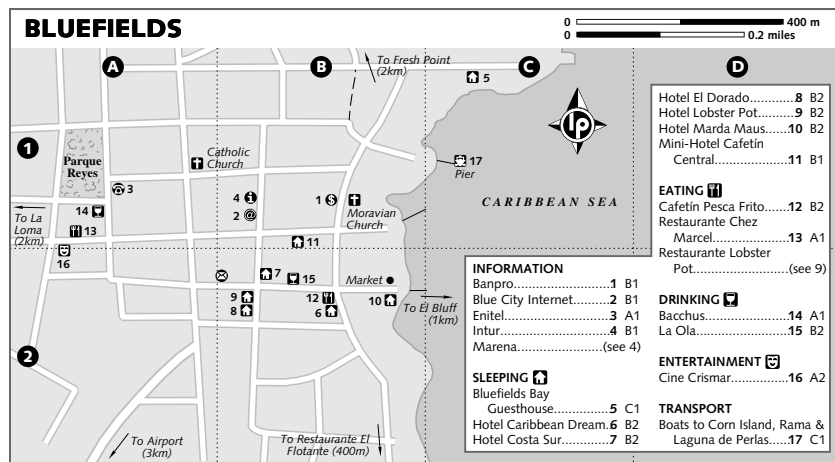
Many of the shops in the center change dollars; look for the sign.

Banpro This has a Visa/Plus/Cirrus/MasterCard/Amex ATM. It's opposite the Moravian church.

CELEBRATING AROUND THE MAYPOLE

Never afraid to kick up its heels on Friday night, Bluefields really pushes the boat out for its annual May fiesta, **Palo de Mayo**. Deriving in part from traditional British maypole celebrations, it's a riotous party that celebrates fertility (and, in many cases, puts it to the test).

Bluefields's 30 neighborhoods each put on a procession, with gaudy floats, sexy dancers, and screechingly loud music. These go on for four weeks leading up to the culmination on May 31. The centerpiece of events is the *palo* itself, a tall maypole hung with fruits and wrapped in ribbons.



Blue City Internet (per hr US\$0.70) Just down from the Intur office, this is one of many central internet spots.

Enitel On the southeast corner of Parque Reyes.

Intur (☎ 822 0221; bluefields@intur.gob.ni; ☎ 8am–noon & 1:30–5pm) A block west of the Moravian church. There's a Marena (national parks service) office two doors down.

Post office Southeast of the park.

Sights & Activities

The town's most striking building is the **Moravian church**, a lovely building with characteristic stained glass. Although it dated from 1849, what you see now is an exact replica of the original, flattened by vengeful Hurricane Juana (Joan).

Bluefields is the jumping-off point for any number of intriguing and untouristed spots. You could ask at the Marena office about the Cerro Silva and Punta Gorda **natural reserves**, or head on down to the port to try to find a fisherman who'll take you across to the island of **Rama Key**, 15km away with a population of indigenous Rama, who have their own language and distinct social systems.

Sleeping

Many of Bluefields's cheaper lodging options cater to prostitutes and their clients. Vaguely seedy characters also inhabit them; solo female travelers might want to upgrade to somewhere else.

If you're traveling on the morning *lanchar* to the Corn Islands, you can theoretically sleep free on board. It's not comfortable, but there's

a cheerful scene, with islanders cooking and chatting.

Hotel El Dorado (☎ 822 1435; r US\$8.30) This hospitable choice is one of several budget lodgings on this street, but there's more sleeping and less whoring done here than most. The rooms are clean and OK for this price; some are lighter and airier than others.

Mini-Hotel Cafetin Central (☎ 572 2362; s/d with bathroom US\$11/25; ☎) At the rear of a lively café, the Central offers very neat, if cramped, rooms with tiny bathroom, cable TV and phone. The doubles have air-con; couples can also kip down in a single for a couple of dollars more than the solo rate.

Hotel Marda Maus (☎ 822 2429; r US\$15) Opposite the market, and 50m into a vaguely dodgy zone, Maus feels secure and is a good standby. Well-kept rooms have bathroom, cable TV and fans.

Hotel Caribbean Dream (☎ 822 0107; r US\$20–25; ☎) This professional and reliable option is set in a pretty green house two blocks south of the Moravian church. The rooms are uninteresting but clean, and well-equipped, with good hot-water bathrooms. Somewhat more spacious ones cost US\$5 more. Security is good.

Bluefields Bay Guesthouse (☎ 822 2143; krieb@hotmaill.com; s/d with bathroom US\$28/45; ☎) The nicest accommodations lie a block north of the pier. The guesthouse has spacious, comfy rooms, all with hot water and air-con, and there's a cozy common area with book exchange. Breakfast is included in the excellent bayside restaurant.

Eating

Bluefields is a rewarding place to eat, with tasty coconut milk-based Caribbean dishes and superfresh prawns and lobster for much less than you'd pay elsewhere in Nicaragua. There's very good street food around the intersection half a block east of the post office.

Cafetin Pesca Frito (mains US\$4–5) This noble and likeable local spot makes a great place for a drink or a cheap meal. It's got bags of character and is sympathetically run; the generously proportioned dishes range from morning *gallo pinto* to heaped plates of fish and chicken. You can also enjoy cheap lobster (US\$6.50).

Restaurante El Flotante (meals US\$4–8) South of the Moravian church where the bayside street meets the water, El Flotante has dining on a covered patio with a marvelous view of the bay.

La Loma (mains US\$3–6; ☎ 11am–1am) Set on a hill overlooking the city, this pleasant thatched open-air restaurant has a wide range of seafood dishes, with especially good lobster. It becomes one of Bluefields's best nightspots once the washing-up's done.

Restaurante Chez Marcel (☎ 822 2347; most dishes US\$6–10; ☎) This attractive air-con restaurant is a step up in quality from most, but fairly reasonably priced. There's a wide range of fish and meat dishes (but no Caribbean specialties); the chef's salad with beef strips and crumbled cheese is a tasty way to start. The service, from bow-tied waiters, is high-quality and scarily speedy.

Drinking & Entertainment

Bluefields has vibrant nightlife, with the beer and rum flowing very liberally. Hot spots change often, but you'll hear the bass pumping from wherever's in fashion from blocks away. Late at night, it's wise to take a taxi.

Bacchus (☎ Thu–Sun) A very popular central *discoteca* that has a seedy but strangely appealing feel and very loud music.

Excellent La Ola sells ice-creams downstairs, but the top floor is cooler, with local chatter at tables groaning under the weight of rum and beer bottles. There's balcony seating, swift service, and the rattle of rain on the iron roof. Food is available too.

Unsigned Fresh Point is a pleasant bar, 2km north of town, set on the water with a large dance floor and a lush outdoor area of palm trees and picnic tables.

La Loma (left) is perhaps Bluefields's most enjoyable weekend experience, as the open floor space in this place transforms into a vibrant *discoteca*.

New Cine Crismar has nightly sessions at 7pm and 8:30pm. It shows Hollywood releases but seem to be a few months behind the rest of Nicaragua.

Getting There & Away

La Costeña (☎ 822 2500) and **Atlantic Airlines** (☎ 822 1299) fly daily between Managua and Bluefields (US\$82/127 one-way/round-trip, six daily Monday to Saturday, four Sunday). There's a Costeña flight from Bluefields to Puerto Cabezas at 12:10pm Monday, Wednesday and Friday. A taxi to the airport costs US\$0.55 per person.

It's quite easy these days to get from Managua to Bluefields by road and boat. See p513 for details. In the return direction, *pangas* head up to Rama as they fill, but it's best early in the morning. The slow boats return at 5am Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, and the ferry at 3am Sunday.

See Laguna de Perlas (p516) and Corn Island (p519) for details on getting to these destinations.

LAGUNA DE PERLAS

The Laguna de Perlas (Pearl Lagoon), formed where the Río Kurinwa meets the sea about 80km north of Bluefields, is about 50km long and very wide in places. Miskitos living in the villages around the lagoon make a living from the abundant fish, shrimp and lobster. One can spend a few relaxing days in this peaceful multiethnic community talking to locals, observing aquatic birdlife and visiting nearby indigenous villages. Within hiking distance is **Awás**, the best swimming beach in the area. **Enitel** (☎ 822 2355; ☎ 8am–noon & 2–5pm Mon–Fri) has a local office. There are a couple of places set up to organize guides for hiking, fishing, or boat trips, including to the Pearl Keys, a group of idyllic Caribbean islets offshore whose ownership is currently under dispute.

Sleeping & Eating

There are several budget choices; **Green Lodge B&B** (☎ 572 0507; r per person US\$4) is more than just a pleasant guesthouse – manager Wesley is a knowledgeable source of information on local history and culture. The rooms (which share bathrooms) vary, and there's a peaceful

patio with hammocks. Moving up a level, **Casa Blanca** (☎ 572 0508; s/d US\$15/20) is a lively household with cheery hosts. Double rooms have screened windows and woodwork crafted in the proprietors' own shop. The kitchen serves creatively seasoned meals. To get there, turn left as you leave the dock and follow the signs.

Getting There & Away

Pangas leave Bluefields for Laguna de Perlas (US\$10, one hour) every morning between 7am and 8am and later as they fill. The last boat back leaves between noon and 3pm; show up early to reserve a place, then be patient.

CORN ISLANDS

Once a haven for buccaneers, the world-apart Corn Islands are now low-key vacation spots in an isolated corner of the Caribbean. The two isles – Big and Little Corn – retain all the magic associated with the Caribbean – clear turquoise water, white sandy beaches fringed with coconut palms, excellent fishing, coral reefs and an unhurried, peaceful pace of life – without the crass development of better-known ‘paradises.’ Little Corn in particular lives up to this, with no cars or many other trappings of urban life.

Big Corn, 70km off the coast of Bluefields, measures about 6 sq km; its diminutive sister to the northeast is only 1.6 sq km (you can walk end to end in an hour). Most people on the islands are of British West Indian descent and speak English. Almost all live on the larger island, making a living from fishing, particularly lobster.

While the security situation on Little Corn is good now that there's a permanent police presence, Big Corn has had its share of problems; several travelers (and locals) have been mugged at knife- or gun-point on this island, which is a staging post for drug deals. Don't stay in rock-bottom accommodations, carry a flashlight, and always get a cab at night. If exploring the island off-road, take a guide.

Big Corn Island

pop 5930

Big Corn has heaps to offer, with a wide range of accommodations, fabulous beaches, diving and hiking opportunities. The main township is Brig Bay, where boats arrive. The airport is a 15-minute walk (if you cut across the runway). There are plenty of lodging options in and

around Brig Bay, but the best beaches are further south at Picnic Center or on the east side of the island at Long Bay. Taxis are US\$0.80 per person regardless of distance traveled.

A 10-minute stroll from the dock, **Nautilus** (☎ 575 5077; www.divebigcorn.com) offer all sorts of aquatic activities, including diving (US\$55 for two guided dives, US\$250 for the PADI Open Water), snorkeling tours (US\$15), fishing (US\$60), and trips in a glass-bottomed *panga* (US\$15). There's also hiking, horse riding and massages available; there's also accommodations and a café-restaurant available.

SLEEPING

Hotel Creole (☎ 848 4862; r per person US\$8.30) North of the town dock, the unsigned Creole offers friendly service, with clean and cozy accommodations. Most rooms feature bathroom, and you can relax on the spacious porch.

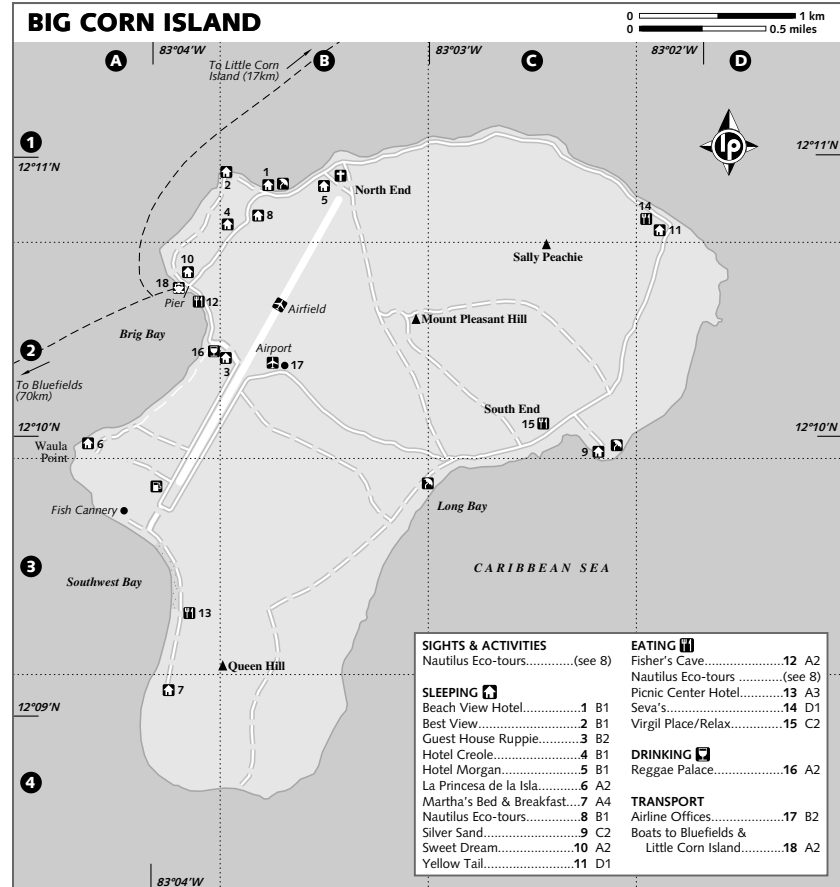
Yellow Tail (☎ 575 5059; r US\$10) Just east of Seva's restaurant, this has just one lovely cabin on offer in a lovely part of the island. The friendly owner rents snorkels and can also take you out on guided trips.

Beach View Hotel (☎ 575 5062; r US\$10-35; 🏠) A great budget choice, this appealing aquamarine spot is right on the water a 15-minute walk from the dock. The charismatic owner likes travelers who can look after themselves, and offers peaceful rooms with bathroom, some with air-con and stylish décor. Those upstairs are much nicer – a very good deal – and enjoy plenty of breezy terrace space with the sea at your feet.

Nautilus Eco-tours (☎ 575 5077; www.divebigcorn.com; small/regular d US\$10/15) Right by its diving school and restaurant, the Nautilus offers rooms in this characterful old house. They share a good bathroom, and guests have access to a large, sunny living room and a kitchen. Rooms are US\$5 cheaper if you do some diving with the outfit. There's also a two-roomed house available for rental at the northern end of Long Bay (US\$50).

Sweet Dream (☎ 575 5195; r with/without bathroom US\$20/15, with air-con US\$25; 🏠) Right by the boat dock, this laid-back and smiley spot wins the ‘cleanest spot on the island’ award outright; the tiled rooms and hallways positively gleam. The rooms are fine value, the bathrooms modern, and the terrace offers views out over the water. There's also tasty food available.

Silver Sand (☎ 636 5199; r US\$15-20; 🏠) At a palm-studded point on the north end of lovely



Long Bay, rustic cabins sit just a stone's throw from the water's edge. The friendly owners will let you camp for a small fee, or string up a hammock somewhere.

Best View (☎ 575 5082; r US\$20-25) This cheerfully painted spot offers excellent rooms with good modern bathrooms. Eschew the darkish one by the front door and upgrade to the 25-buck jobs with views, cable TV, and even a fridge in some cases. The upstairs ones have even better views over the water. All have good modern bathrooms.

La Princesa de la Isla (☎ 854 2403; www.laprincesa.de.la.isla.com; r US\$45; 🏠) Secluded at Waula Point, La Princesa is a highly characterful choice, with lovingly decorated stone-and-timber rooms with shell showerheads. You are pay-

ing for charisma here rather than televisions and minibars; it's better value for two people. The location is fabulous, with good snorkeling right in front, and the sound of the waves to lull you to sleep. You can pre-order excellent home-style Italian meals, served in an intimate lounge or on an open-air terrace.

Martha's Bed & Breakfast (☎ 835 5930; d/tr US\$50/60; 🏠) This is the most appealing of three mid-range choices on one of the most beautiful beaches of the island. Run by a warm-hearted Caribbean family, it offers cozy, caringly decorated rooms looking over the garden or toward the sea. They have cable TV, round-the-clock electricity and good bathrooms. Breakfast is included and served in the beach-side restaurant.

Also check out:

Guest House Ruppie (☎ 575 5162; r US\$8.30) In Brig Bay, this low-key and friendly guesthouse offers simple, clean rooms. But on weekends the Reggae Palace nearby won't let you sleep much at weekends.

Hotel Morgan (☎ 575 5502; d with/without bathroom US\$35/15; ♿) Suburban feel with two rooms sharing a bathroom at the north end of Brig Bay, with porch and rocker looking out over the sea. Has a good restaurant.

EATING

Virgil Place/Relax (dishes US\$1-3) As well as ice-creams and tasty juices, this spot in the northeast of the island serves cheap *comida corriente*, tacos and fried chicken. It's got tables out front where you can watch the 'busy' road.

Nautilus (☎ 575 5077; mains US\$4-7; ☎ 8am-9pm) A real blessing for the traveler weary of fried chicken, this spot prepares great breakfasts (US\$2.50 to US\$5), some truly inspired salads (US\$3 to US\$6), pizzas (US\$10), coconut curries, and many other dishes of both local and international flavor. There's sometimes live music here too, and there's a shop selling appealing locally produced handicrafts.

Seva's (breakfast US\$2, mains US\$4-8) This simple but welcoming spot at the northeast tip of the island has hearty breakfasts and good seafood dishes that depend heavily on availability – try your luck on the day. There's a breezy (well, it was blowing a gale when we visited, anyway) terrace looking over the water.

Fisher's Cave (dishes US\$5-10) With a fabulous terrace overlooking the harbor, and enclosed tanks with fish and turtles to gaze at below, this is an appealing choice just by the dock. The food is fairly island standard – seafood, fried fish and chicken, but it's well priced. If you order the day before, you can enjoy a *rondón* (beef, coconut and plantain stew) that feeds three to four (US\$15).

Picnic Center Hotel (mains US\$5-13) The spacious thatched bar and restaurant of this hotel is a popular spot on the beach at Southwest Bay. Although the lobster dishes are overpriced, the *pescado a la caribeña* is an excellent deal, coming smothered in a creamy coconut sauce. Also a fine spot for a couple of cold beers.

DRINKING

The spot that really gets going on the island is Reggae Palace, a sweaty weekend nightspot in Brig Bay, with a strong local character. Several of the spots mentioned in Eating earlier are also fine places for a drink or three.

Little Corn Island

pop 700

This tiny, enchanting *isleta* is a real unspoiled gem, a rough and ready Caribbean paradise with deserted palm-fringed white-sand beaches interspersed with rocky coves lining the eastern shore and plenty of simple budget lodgings that'll cook you up fresh fish in their own sweet time. Take a deep breath, relax, and... has a week gone by already?

Right by the dock, the recommended **Dive Little Corn** (☎ 823 1154; www.divelittlecorn.com) offers guided dives, PADI courses, and also rents snorkel gear (US\$5 per day). It also gives out a very handy map of the island too and staff are happy to help you out with information. Farm Peace & Love can arrange guided horseback circuits of the island – you can book these at the dive shop too.

SLEEPING & EATING

The three cheapest sleeping spots are all in a row on Cocal Beach, a 10-minute walk from the dock; just wander on over and see which of them takes your fancy.

Cool Spot/Grace's (☎ 853 8179; s/d US\$5/8, d with bathroom US\$10) The central one of the three, this offers decent, colorfully painted huts at a good price. Shared showers are of the bucket variety. There's food available and a relaxed atmosphere.

Sweet Breeze/Elsa's (☎ 623 4060, 857 0023; r per person US\$5) A longtime favorite with backpackers, Elsa offers cramped, dark rooms right on the beach; some are nicer than others – try for one with a mosquito net. There's excellent food available, and electric light until 9pm.

Sunrise Paradise (☎ 657 0806; cabañas with/without bathroom US\$15/12) More upmarket than its neighbors, this has clean-swept cabins with reasonable beds on wooden frames and little porches. Abundant windows ensure fine evening breezes; the bathrooms are adequate, and there's a thatched bar-restaurant.

Ensueños (dm US\$5, d with/without bathroom US\$25/15) On a good beach in the far north of the island, this quirky and charming spot has visionary grotto-like cabañas, offbeat driftwood sculptures, and a relaxed, palmy, feel. All the cabins are different, and there's a communal one with mattresses and hammocks. There's good snorkeling offshore. Food is sometimes available, but you'll need to be very persuasive.

Derek's Place (www.dereksplace.littlecorn.com; 2-/4-person hut US\$25/40) In a lovely grassy spot near

the northeastern tip of the island, this offers immensely appealing raised cabins with palm roof and a swinging hammock by the door. It's very relaxed and rustically stylish. If you're staying here, there are tasty meals available, as well as evening bonfires. There are also bikes available for guests only.

Casa Iguana (www.casaiguana.com; cabañas US\$25, casitas US\$55, apt US\$80; ☎) At the southern end of the island, this popular spot should be booked ahead by email. Set among trees with the beach just below, it offers simple cabins with shared bathrooms, much nicer *casitas* (bungalows) with bathroom, and an apartment with kitchenette and hot water. Most have a great deck facing toward the sea. It feels overpriced, but is undeniably a lovely spot. Breakfast is available, and convivial two-course dinners (US\$9) are served at a communal table; if you want a romantic meal for two, eat elsewhere. Someone from the lodge meets all incoming *pangas*, so you can ask about whether there's a vacancy on the off-chance.

Hotel Los Delfines (☎ 836 2013; hotelosdelfines@hotmail.com; s/d US\$35/40; ♿ ☎) Turn right from the boat dock and you'll soon come to this comfortable hotel, with large, attractive, air-con rooms with a little porch, hot showers, and cable TV. Management are welcoming, and there's a dive school as well as a good bar-restaurant with great sunset views.

Farm Peace & Love (www.farmpeaceandlove.com; d/tr/cottage US\$50/60/75; 3-course meal US\$15) At the top end of the island, right by the beach, this makes a cracking spot to stay or eat. Book 24 hours in advance (via the dive shop by the dock) for top-quality Italian cooking; reservations are also recommended for the charming rooms with comfortable beds and abundant books, and for the self-contained cottage. If you're staying here, they'll pick you up in a boat from the dock.

Miss Marta's/Sweet Oasis (mains US\$5-7) One of several no-frills places offering fresh seafood and chicken dishes, this is a reliable choice with a charismatic owner. There's also a bar where you can chat to locals. Turn right from the dock.

Habana Libre/El Cubano (mains US\$7-10) Very near the dock, this is one of the best places to eat on the island. Plates of lobster, prawns, or fish are pricey but well-prepared. There are a couple of intriguing Cuban specialties that need to be ordered in advance.

Getting There & Around

There are three to four daily flights between Managua and Big Corn Island run by **La Costeña** (☎ 575 5131) and **Atlantic Airlines** (☎ 575 5055) in small planes (US\$106/164 one-way/round-trip, one hour). Most of those flights stop in Bluefields, where a ticket to Corn Island runs at US\$60 one way.

Two *lanchas* run between Bluefields and Corn Island (US\$9, nine hours), leaving at 6am Wednesday and Saturday, returning the following day at 9am. The rough boat crossing leaves many travelers wishing they'd packed seasickness pills or shelled out for the plane. The trip can take significantly longer if the sea is rough. You should book the ticket the day before.

Still uncomfortable, although stabler, the old Greek Islands ferry known as **Ferry 1** (info ☎ 277 0970) leaves Bluefields for Big Corn Island at 6pm Fridays, arriving at 6am Saturday morning (US\$8.40). It returns at 6am Sunday, arriving in Bluefields at 10pm.

From Big Corn to Little Corn, a *panga* makes the bumpy journey (US\$6, 30 minutes) at 10am and 4:30pm, returning from the small island at 7am and 2pm. Boat service is conveniently coordinated with the daily flights. The crossing can be rough; for less pain, sit in the rear.

BILWI (PUERTO CABEZAS)

pop 39,430

Bilwi, on the northeast coast of Nicaragua, is the capital of the North Atlantic region (RAAN) and still normally known as Puerto Cabezas.

It's still an important Caribbean port, but the main interest here is the local inhabitants. It's a great place to learn about Miskito culture; the **Asociación de Mujeres Indígenas de la Costa Atlántica** (Amica; ☎ 792 2219; asociacionamica@yahoo.es) arranges personalized excursions to traditional fishing communities, including transportation, food and lodging with local families, and opportunities to learn local crafts or do volunteer work. The office is a block and a half south of the stadium. BanPro, a block north of the stadium, has an all-card-friendly ATM. There are several internet places around.

Be a little careful in Bilwi; there's plenty of cocaine smuggling going on, and some fairly shifty characters hanging out on street corners.

EXPLORE MORE OF THE CARIBBEAN COAST

The Caribbean coast offers a world of opportunities for no-frills watery adventures:

- Try to persuade a lobster fisherman to take you with him to the **Miskito Keys**, a biological reserve of fabulous islets, coral reefs and stilt houses 50km from Puerto Cabezas. Talk to Marena in town for more info.
- Investigate the **Río Coco**, heart of Miskito country, which runs along the Honduran border. Waspám, the main settlement, is reachable by plane from Managua or bus from Bilwi.
- Head down the Río San Juan to the Caribbean at **San Juan del Norte**, explore the ruins of old **Greytown**, then try to make your way up the coast to Bluefields in a boat.

Sleeping & Eating

Tininiska (☎ 792 2381; dm US\$5) Part of a small Miskito museum and craft center a block south of the Moravian church, this place (the name means ‘hummingbird’) is really appealing, with roomy dorms, and very decent shared bathrooms. It has the best budget accommodations in town, featuring clean single rooms with shared bathroom.

Hotel El Pelicano (☎ 792 2336; s/d US\$9/12) Two blocks east of Parque Central, this comfortable spot has simple rooms with fan, and a vibrant porch with sea views and rockers (chairs not musicians). The owner is helpful and hospitable.

Hotel Pérez (☎ 792 2362; r with bathroom US\$20; 📺 📶 🚰) This homey hotel, half a block from the *alcaldía* (town hall), offers secure rooms and plenty of upstairs deck space to stretch out with a book.

Kabu Payaska (☎ 792 2318; dishes US\$2-10; 🕒 11am-midnight) The best restaurant is Kabu Payaska (the name means ‘sea breeze’ in Miskito), about 2km north of town overlooking the area’s best beach. The views and relaxed thatched ambience make it worth stopping for a beer, if not a plate of fish or lobster (slow service). Get a cab here at any time.

Getting There & Away

There are four to five daily flights from Managua run by La Costeña and Atlantic Airlines (US\$149 return, one hour and 20 minutes). La Costeña also flies thrice weekly to Bluefields and Minas. Tickets are sold at the airport, 2km north of town (taxi US\$1).

It’s a tough slog in a bus to Managua (US\$16, 24 hours) – there are two daily services. The bus station is 2km west of town.

For information on getting here from Honduras, see p432.

NICARAGUA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATIONS

Most budget options are in family-operated *hospedajes*. Usual costs are US\$3 to US\$5 per person for a minimally furnished room, with shared facilities and fans. You’ll pay between US\$5 and US\$10 for your own bathroom. A room for one often costs the same as a room for two. Spending US\$8 to US\$15 per person will yield substantial upgrades in space and comfort; accommodations in this price category are widely available. Adding air-con usually doubles the price. With a few exceptions, upmarket accommodations are on offer only in Granada and Managua. A growing number of hostels, some quite luxurious, offer dorm-style accommodations for US\$3 to US\$7 per person.

ACTIVITIES

Nicaragua is becoming an increasingly popular destination for active tourism, with kayaking on Lago de Nicaragua (p491), volcano surfing (p483), and zipline tours (p495) all available and well-subscribed.

Diving & Snorkeling

Reefs full of marine life near Little and Big Corn Islands (p516) offer outstanding

opportunities for snorkelers and divers (with equipment rental and guided dives available on both islands). There’s also diving at Laguna de Apoyo (p495) and San Juan del Sur (p500).

Hiking

There are several enticing opportunities for hiking in forest reserves rich in wildlife, with the biologically varied heights of Volcán Mombacho (p494), or the area around Matagalpa (p472) particularly appealing. Fit walkers will want to bag a couple of the country’s many volcanoes: one of the two on Ometepe (p503), for example, or one of the several in the northwest of the country (see the boxed text, p487). Guides are recommended for most hikes; this is also a way to put something back into the local community and to learn far more than you would otherwise have done.

Surfing

Surfing is huge right now in Nicaragua, with prime spots right up and down the Pacific coast, many only reachable by boat. San Juan del Sur (p500) is the jumping-off point for several decent beaches; check the box, p486, for some other great waves. News travels fast on the surf grapevine, and surf camps are springing up left, right, and center: keep your ear to the ground. Even remote spots are becoming more crowded – be considerate to locals anywhere you go.

BOOKS

Books on Nicaragua tend to focus on its political history. There are numerous titles.

A Twilight Struggle: American Power and Nicaragua, 1977–1990, by Robert Kagan, is an insider’s view of the debate that raged within various branches of the US government on how to respond to the Nicaraguan revolution.

Culture and Politics in Nicaragua, by Steven White, is a fascinating interview and related material on the link between literature and revolution in Nicaragua.

The Death of Ben Linder, by Joan Kruckewitt, is the compelling story of the US volunteer who died at the hands of Contras while working on a rural development project in the country. His death is framed by the turbulent political events of the time.

Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua, by Roger

Lancaster, is a brilliant ethnographic study of the effects of political events on the Nicaraguan family. Lancaster’s work explores issues of sexuality, racism and gender identity – topics often overlooked when discussing the revolution.

The Country Under My Skin: A Memoir of Love and War, by Gioconda Belli, is a memoir from one of Nicaragua’s most esteemed writers detailing her – at times – harrowing involvement in the revolution.

Savage Shore: Life and Death with Nicaragua’s Last Shark Hunters, by Edward Marriott, is a fascinating portrait of Nicaragua’s once-prevalent freshwater shark, and its relationship to the communities that feared and revered it.

Poetry lies at the core of Nicaraguan culture and is thus worth getting to know.

Poets of Nicaragua: A Bilingual Anthology, 1918–1979, translated by Stephen White, presents a good overview of Nicaragua’s greatest 20th-century poets.

Prosas Profanas, by Rubén Darío – for those whose Spanish is up to it – is a slim volume by the country’s celebrated poet.

The Birth of the Sun: Selected Poems, by Pablo Antonio Cuadra, is a judicious selection from the work of Nicaragua’s outstanding contemporary writer, in Spanish and English.

BUSINESS HOURS

Business and government hours are 8am to noon and 2pm to 5pm weekdays. Many businesses, including most Intur offices, are also open 8am to noon Saturday. Banks are generally open 8:30am to 5pm.

CLIMATE

Nicaragua has two distinct seasons, the timing of which varies from coast to coast. The Caribbean coast is best visited from mid-January to April, when skies are more likely to be dry and sunny. Hurricane season runs from September to November. The most pleasant time to visit the Pacific or central regions is early in the dry season (December and January), when temperatures are cooler and the foliage still lush. For climate charts see p723.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Although there’s less tourist crime in Nicaragua than in other central American countries, it pays to be careful. Increasing violence in Managua make it the least safe of Nicaragua’s

BOOK ACCOMMODATIONS ONLINE

For more accommodations reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at www.lonelyplanet.com. You’ll find the true, insider lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

cities, while the whole Caribbean coast, including the Corn Islands, can be sketchy – it's a big drug-trafficking area and armed robberies of locals and tourists are not unknown.

But you're unlikely to have problems. Get taxis at night, don't make drunken scenes in public, and keep an eye on your things in buses and markets.

While crime is unlikely to affect you, poverty is a fact of life that you'll confront on a daily basis. Nicaragua is a poor country. You'll be approached regularly in some areas by street kids asking for money but they are rarely insistent.

Biting insects are a menace, particularly on the Caribbean coast – take plenty of high-grade repellent.

Strong currents and riptides at Pacific beaches cause dozens of swimmers to drown each year. Lifeguards and rescue facilities are uncommon enough to warrant extreme caution when approaching the waves.

DISABLED TRAVELERS

For those with special needs, travel in Nicaragua should be carefully planned. Where they exist, sidewalks are narrow and uneven. Outside the business-class hotels of Managua, accommodations provide little if any concession to those with limited mobility. Taking a tour (p726) is a common solution.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Embassies & Consulates in Nicaragua

These are all in Managua. Get a full list from the tourist office or phone book.

Costa Rica (☎ 276 1352; infembcr@cablenet.com.ni; Calle Prado Ecuestre 304, Las Colinas)

Denmark (☎ 268 0250; mgaambu@um.dk) From Rotonda El Güegüense, one block west, two blocks north.

El Salvador (☎ 276 0712; Av del Campo 142, Las Colinas)

France (Map p463; ☎ 222 6210; fax 228 1057) One and a half blocks west of El Carmen church.

Germany (Map p458; ☎ 266 3918) From Rotonda El Güegüense, 1½ blocks north.

Guatemala (☎ 279 9609; fax 279 9610; Carr Masaya Km 11.5) There is also a consulate in León.

Honduras (Map p458; ☎ 278 3043; embhonduras@ideay.com.ni; Gimnasio Hércules 1c sur & ½ c arriba)

Italy (Map p463; ☎ 266 6486; italdipl@tmx.com.ni) From the Montoya statue one block north.

Mexico (☎ 278 4919; embamex@cablenet.com.ni; Carr Masaya Km 4.5) One block east.

Panama (Map p463; ☎ 266 2224; embdpma@yahoo.com; No 93 Colonia Mántica) From the main fire station, head one block west.

USA (Map p458; ☎ 266 6010; chowmj@pd.state.gov; Carr Sur Km 4.5)

Nicaraguan Embassies & Consulates Abroad

See www.cancilleria.gob.ni/embajadas for a full list. See other Central American countries in this book for details of Nicaraguan missions there.

Canada See the USA.

Denmark (☎ 3 555 4870; www.emb-nicaragua.dk; Kastelsvej 7, København) Also serves Finland and Ireland.

France (☎ 1 4405 9042; embanifr@free.fr; 34 Ave Bugeaud, 75116 Paris)

Germany (☎ 30 206 4380; embajada.berlin@embanic.de; Joachim-Karnatzallee 45, Berlin) Also serves Switzerland.

Ireland See Danish embassy.

Italy (☎ 6 841 3471; Via Brescia 16, Roma)

Mexico (☎ 5 540 5625; embanic@prodigy.net.mx; Prado de Norte 470, Mexico DF)

Netherlands (☎ 70 322 5063; embajada@embanic.nl; Laan Copes Van Cetterburch 84, 2585GD Den Haag)

Spain (☎ 915 555 510; embanicesp@embanicespana.e.telefonica.net; Paseo Castellana 127, Madrid)

Sweden (☎ 468 667 1754; embajada.nicaragua@telia.com; Sandhamnasgatan 40-6 TR, Stockholm) Also serves Norway.

UK (☎ 171 938 2373; embaniclondon@btconnect.com; 58 Kensington Church St, London)

USA (☎ 202-939 6531; www.embanic.org; 1627 New Hampshire Ave NW, Washington, DC 20009) Also services Canada.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Every town and village throws an annual festival for its patron saint. National holidays and major celebrations include the following:

New Year's Day January 1

Semana Santa (Holy Week) Thursday, Friday and Saturday before Easter Sunday, March or April.

Labor Day May 1

Palo de Mayo Riotous celebrations in Bluefields throughout May.

San Juan Bautista Numerous towns including Estelí and San Juan del Sur on June 24.

Virgen del Carmen San Juan del Sur on July 16.

Liberation Day Commemorated by Sandinistas with parades and speeches on July 19.

Santa Ana Chinandega and Isla de Ometepe on July 26.

Santo Domingo Managua on 1-10 August.

Virgen de la Asunción Granada, Juigalpa and Ocotol on August 15.

Independence Day Two-day national holiday on September 14-15.

Virgen La Merced Matagalpa and León on September 24.

San Jerónimo Masaya on September 30.

Día de los Muertos All Souls' Day, November 2.

La Purísima Immaculate Conception. Huge in León on December 8.

Navidad Christmas, December 25.

FOOD & DRINK

Food

A variety of restaurants can be found around Managua, serving some good, if pricy, international cuisine. Outside the capital city, only León, Granada and San Juan del Sur offer European or specifically vegetarian fare. Vegetarians will find plenty to eat among the buffet-style *comedores* that are popular at noon.

The most typical (and inexpensive) fare can usually be found in street stands and market stalls. Local favorites include: *gallo pinto* (a blend of rice and beans often served with eggs for breakfast); *nacatamales* (banana leaf-wrapped bundles of cornmeal, pork, vegetables and herbs, traditionally served on weekends); *quesillos* (soft cheese and onions folded in a tortilla); and *vigorón* (yucca steamed and topped with *chicharrón* – fried pork rind – and cabbage salad).

In the evenings, *fritangas* open up on street corners, at door fronts, and around the central plazas to grill meat alongside a variety of fried treats. Try a hearty plate of *tajadas* – plantains thinly sliced lengthwise, served as a base for grilled beef or chicken and cabbage salad. A weekend treat is *baho*, a 'stew' of beef, various types of plantains and yucca steamed together for hours in a giant banana leaf-lined pot.

Drinks

Bottled water and *gaseosas* (soft drinks) are found nearly everywhere in Nicaragua. Many restaurants serve fresh *jugos* (juices) and *refrescos*, made from local fruits, herbs and seeds blended with water and sugar and poured over crushed ice.

These can be a delightful treat and an opportunity to sample unusual fruits such as *pithaya*, a purple cactus fruit; tamarindo, from the tamarind tree; and *chía*, a mucilaginous seed usually blended with lemon. *Tiste* is a traditional drink made from cocoa beans and corn.

In spite of the importance of coffee farming instant is what is most commonly served. The major two Nicaraguan beers are delicious

Toña and Victoria. Rum is also produced in Nicaragua; the major brand is the tasty Flor de Caña, basis of the *macuá*, a tasty cocktail produced with guava and orange juices that is being promoted as the nation's national drink.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

A Nicaraguan statute forbids homosexual activity, but in reality the law is rarely enforced, except in cases involving a minor. Still, gay travelers should generally avoid public displays of affection.

For information on the gay community in Nicaragua, contact **Fundación Xochiquetzal** (☎ 249 0585; xochiquetzal@alfanumeric.com.ni), a gay and lesbian advocacy group. The biggest gay scenes are in Granada and Managua.

INTERNET ACCESS

There are internet cafés absolutely everywhere, charging US\$0.40 to US\$1.20 per hour. Wireless internet access (wi-fi) is becoming fairly common in larger cities.

INTERNET RESOURCES

IBW Internet Gateway (www.ibw.com.ni, in Spanish)

A reasonable portal site.

Intur (www.intur.gob.ni) Good tourist board website.

La Prensa (www.laprensa.com.ni, in Spanish) Nicaragua's leading newspaper.

Lanic (www.lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/nicaragua) University of Texas' outstanding collection of links relating to the country.

Marena (www.marena.gob.ni) Copious info in Spanish on national parks and reserves.

Nica Times (www.nicatimes.net) Online edition with good articles.

Nicaliving (www.nicaliving.com) Expat network and forum.

Nicaragua Network (www.nicanet.org) Extensive information about current labor and environmental issues, as well as news on the political situation.

Thorn Tree (<http://thorntree.lonelyplanet.com>) Popular travelers' forum with plenty of advice.

ViaNica (www.vianica.com) Private tour company with a very informative website.

MAPS

Intur produces reasonable country and regional maps with enlarged sections of the most visited zones. **Ineter** (☎ 249 2768), opposite the Immigration office in Managua, has topographic maps covering the whole country.

MEDIA

The leading daily newspapers are the conservative *La Prensa*, owned by the Chamorro family, and *El Nuevo Diario*, run by a break-away faction of the Sandinistas. Look for the fortnightly *Nica Times*, which has eight pages of good English content covering a copy of the Costa Rican *Tico Times*. Intur also distributes other free English-language tourist magazines.

MONEY

The national currency is the córdoba, though you will often hear prices quoted in US dollars. The córdoba is divided into 100 centavos. Bills are in denominations of 10, 20, 50, 100 and 500 córdobas. Coins are issued in 25, 50-centavo and 1- and 5-córdoba denominations. *Peso* is a slang term for the currency.

The Nicaraguan government devalues the córdoba by 6% annually against the US dollar in order to maintain stable relative prices despite local inflation.

It is often difficult to get change for 500-córdoba notes, so break them into smaller bills when you can. Note that Nicaraguan córdobas cannot readily be changed in any other country. Once you cross the border, they're good only as souvenirs.

In better restaurants, the 15% tax and 10% 'voluntary' tip is often added to the bill. You should tip all guides.

Credit & Debit Cards

Automatic teller machines (ATMs) are the way to go in most of Nicaragua. There are branches of Banpro and Banco América Central (BAC) in all major towns – these take Visa/Plus, MasterCard/Cirrus, Amex, and Diners debit and credit cards. There are many more ATMs that take Visa only. You'll also find ATMs in petrol stations and shopping arcades.

All over Nicaragua, moderately priced hotels and restaurants will accept Visa and MasterCard. However, they will usually add about 5% to the bill for doing so. Most banks will provide cash advances on credit cards.

Traveler's checks are the way of the past. You can exchange them in many banks, but be prepared to queue.

Exchange Rates

The table following shows currency exchange rates at the time this book went to press.

Country	Unit	Córdobas (C\$)
Australia	A\$1	15.90
Canada	C\$1	17.50
euro zone	€1	25.20
Japan	¥100	15.10
New Zealand	NZ\$1	14.50
UK	UK£1	37.20
USA	US\$1	18.50

POST

Postal services, and increasingly phone and fax services, are handled by Correos de Nicaragua. Airmail letters to the USA/Europe cost US\$0.50/0.65 and take at least a week to arrive.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Traveling sensitively in Nicaragua means being mindful of the environment around you. Try to patronize local businesses and industries, and spend your money where it will go directly to the people working for it.

SHOPPING

Distinctive Nicaraguan handicrafts include cotton hammocks, ceramics, woodwork, textile arts, basketry, carved and painted gourds, and leatherwork.

Masaya, 29km from Managua, is the country's principal *artesanía* center, with two major crafts markets. Its old market building has been restored and is devoted entirely to quality work; the main market for everyday items houses a major crafts section as well. In Managua, the Mercado Central (also known as Mercado Roberto Huembes) contains a substantial *artesanías* department but the selection is not as vast as Masaya's.

Alternatively, you can go to the places where handicrafts are produced, see how they're made and buy them there. San Juan de Oriente, La Paz Centro and Somoto are known for their fine ceramics. The Monimbó neighborhood of Masaya is a center of production for leather goods, woodwork, embroidery and toys.

Art aficionados can purchase canvases created in the unique primitivist style of the islands of Solentiname. The best places to buy the paintings are from the artists who live there.

STUDYING

Nicaragua is a very popular place to learn some Spanish. Granada and Estelí have the

biggest choice, while there are also reputable schools in Managua, León, San Juan del Sur, and Laguna de Apoyo. See the individual towns for details.

Most schools charge between US\$150 and US\$200 per week for 20 hours of instruction (four hours per day, weekdays), including room and board with a local family. Excursions to lakes, volcanoes, beaches and cultural and historic sites, as well as meetings with community organizations, may be included in the package. The weekly price is often lower for students who commit to longer stays.

TELEPHONE

When calling between cities in Nicaragua, dial ☎ 0 before the seven-digit number; there are no area codes. To call Nicaragua from abroad, use the international code (☎ 505) before the number.

The best places to make phone calls are the numerous internet cafés that offer booths or handsets connected to an online phone service. Quality is usually OK, and it can cost as little as US\$0.15 a minute to phone the USA, or US\$0.30 to phone Europe.

To use a payphone, purchase a phonecard from a *pulperia* (corner store). You can also make calls (or send faxes) from the post office or Enitel.

Cell phones have taken off in a big way in Nicaragua but are still quite expensive. However, you can easily buy a SIM card to fit in your own phone and buy charge vouchers at *pulperías*.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The tourist board **Intur** (www.intur.gob.ni) has a helpful office in nearly every major town, and also at the airport and Costa Rican border. To email a branch, just add the town name to the front of the website address above (eg granada@intur.gob.ni). The environmental ministry **Marena** (☎ 263 2830; www.marena.gob.ni) also has offices everywhere that can provide some information on local national parks and reserves.

TOURS

The following operators provide a wide selection of tours all over the country:

Careli Tours (☎ 278 6919; www.carelitours.com)

Gray Line (☎ 266 6134; www.graylinenicaragua.com)

Tours Nicaragua (☎ 228 7063; www.nvmundo.com/toursnicaragua)

VISAS

Visitors from most countries can enter without a visa, as long as they have a passport valid for at least the next six months. You must pay US\$5 to enter the country and will be granted either a 90-day (most) or 30-day stay.

Among those who do require a visa are citizens of India and China. Check the website www.cancilleria.gob.ni for up-to-date details in all cases, as this information is always vulnerable to change.

Stays can be extended for up to three months. See p460 for details of the immigration office in Managua, where you can apply for a visa extension. Alternatively, you could head out of the country to Costa Rica or Honduras for 72 hours and re-enter.

VOLUNTEERING

Volunteer opportunities in Nicaragua are very common. Check at local hostels, Spanish schools, or at the *alcaldía*, or arrange it with an organization in your home country before setting off. Among the many choices:

Barca de Oro Can arrange turtle-oriented projects (p486).

Building New Hope (☎ 552 7113; www.buildingnewhope.org) Many Granada opportunities. A month minimum commitment (p492).

Café Girasol (☎ 612 6030) Offers and finds placements in Matagalpa (p471).

La Esperanza (☎ 837 3497; www.la-esperanza-granada.org) Educational project in impoverished villages. Two months' minimum.

Quetzaltrekkers Guide hikes and help street kids (p483).

Reserva Mirafior This community-run reserve has several ongoing projects (p478).

WOMEN TRAVELERS

There are no special dangers for women traveling in Nicaragua, but the same advice applies as for the rest of Central America about dress, catcalls, and so on. In fact, with the normal precautions, many women find Nicaragua to be a surprisingly pleasant country in which to travel. The Caribbean coast, however, is definitely a place to be more careful if solo.

WORKING

Because of a combined unemployment and underemployment rate of over 50%, it is difficult for foreigners to find paid work. Teaching English remains an option, but the pay is minimal. Traveler-related businesses may offer you work in bars, restaurants, or hostels on a short-term, low-paid basis.

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