



Nicaragua

Introduction

Official Name: Republic of Nicaragua

Nationality: Nicaraguan

Area: 129,494 square kilometers (49,998 square miles)

Languages: Spanish, Miskito, other indigenous Amerindian dialects

Currency: córdoba (NIO)

Location: Central America, bordered by Costa Rica and Honduras with coastline on the Caribbean Sea and the North Pacific Ocean

Statistical Information

Population	5.68 million
0-14 years	35.5 percent
15-64 years	61.3 percent
65+ years	3.2 percent
Birth rate	24 births/1,000
Death rate	4 deaths/1,000
Fertility rate	2.7 children/woman
Pop. growth rate	1.855 percent
Life expectancy	70.9 years
Literacy	67.5 percent
HIV/AIDS rate	0.2 percent
Below poverty line	48 percent
Ethnic groups	69 percent mestizo 17 percent white 9 percent black 5 percent Amerindian
Religion	72.9 percent Roman Catholic 16.7 percent Protestant 1.9 percent other 8.5 percent none

Economy

Nicaragua has a high level of unemployment and one of the highest degrees of income inequality in the world. It also has the third lowest per capita income in the western hemisphere. The country's annual GDP growth has not been high enough to meet its needs, and it continues to rely upon international economic assistance. Nicaragua receives debt relief through the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries

initiative. The U.S. and Central America Free Trade Agreement, in effect since April 2006, has provided increased export opportunities for Nicaragua. Energy shortages due to high oil prices continue to be a threat to economic growth.

Government

Capital: Managua

Nicaragua is a republic. The president is both chief of state and head of government. The president and vice president run together, and are elected by popular vote for a five-year term. The legislature consists of the unicameral National Assembly or Asamblea Nacional. The National Assembly has 92 members, 90 of whom are elected by proportional representation to serve five-year terms. The remaining two Assembly seats are filled by the former president and the runner-up in the previous presidential election.

Climate

Nicaragua is divided into three geographical locations. The central highlands are away from the coasts and have a cooler, more temperate climate. This region contains cloud forests, which are subtropical forests characterized by a very high occurrence of canopy-level cloud cover. The two remaining areas are the Atlantic and Pacific lowlands. The Atlantic lowland area is full of rainforest; it has a tropical climate with high temperatures and high levels of humidity. The Pacific lowlands consist of a broad, hot, fertile plain.

Environmental Concerns

Nicaragua experiences deforestation and soil erosion, as well as water pollution.

History

Little is known of early Nicaraguan civilization, although it was likely part of the Mayan civilization in ancient times. The country's name probably comes from Nicarao, the leader of an indigenous community living along the shores of Lake Nicaragua. The

community was defeated by the Spanish under Gil González de Ávila in 1522. During the Spanish colonial period, Nicaragua was part of Spanish-controlled Guatemala.

In 1821, Nicaragua declared its independence from Spain, along with other Central American republics. It became a part of the Mexican empire of Agustín de Iturbide for a brief period, then joined the Central American Federation in 1825. The Central American Federation was a political union of five Central American republics: Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Costa Rica.

Political rivalries and conflicting interests led to the dissolution of the legislature of the Central American Federation in 1838. Nicaragua became a political battleground for liberals, centered in León, and conservatives, based in Granada. In 1855, the liberals and conservatives chose Managua as a compromise capital.

During the 17th century, the British had established influence over the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. In 1848, the British occupied the town of San Juan del Norte in an attempt to gain control of the Mosquito Coast and to slow U.S. efforts to build an interoceanic canal connecting the Atlantic and the Pacific. The British seizure began a period of conflict between the British and the Nicaraguans over control of the Mosquito Coast.

The U.S. was interested in a canal linking the two oceans, especially following the discovery of gold in California. In 1851, Cornelius Vanderbilt opened a shipping line from the East Coast of the U.S. to California which included overland travel along the route of the proposed Nicaraguan Canal. Tensions between the U.S. and Britain over the canal were somewhat lessened in 1850 as a result of the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty, but Nicaragua remained in a state of disorder.

The political disorder in Central America allowed for the brief triumph of American filibuster William Walker. In 1855, Walker entered Nicaragua, captured Granada, and set up a new government, but the alienation of his former friend Cornelius Vanderbilt, who controlled shipping lines to Nicaragua, forced his surrender to the U.S. Navy in 1857. Walker was shot by firing squad in Honduras in 1860.

After Walker's defeat, Nicaragua enjoyed a period of calm under successive conservative leaders, until liberal leader José Santos Zelaya became president in 1894. He established a strong dictatorship and extended Nicaraguan control over the Mosquito Coast. Although he promoted economic

development, the United States disliked his financial dealings with Britain. He eventually fell from power in 1909.

A provisional government was set up under Adolfo Díaz. Civil war soon broke out across the country, and in 1912 U.S. Marines landed in Nicaragua to support Díaz. The Bryan-Chamorro Treaty, signed in 1916, gave the United States the exclusive rights for a Nicaraguan canal, along with other privileges. Liberal forces in Nicaragua resisted U.S. interference and guerrilla warfare against the U.S.-sponsored Díaz government continued for years.

In 1925, American forces left Nicaragua, only to return the next year after Emiliano Chamorro seized power in a coup. Chamorro fled when U.S. troops reentered Nicaragua. Anti-occupation forces, led by Augusto César Sandino, continued to resist American occupation and the conservative Díaz administration. By 1927, the American diplomat Henry Stimson had managed to gain support for a new round of elections from most Nicaraguan factions, but Sandino continued to fight.

U.S. forces withdrew from Nicaragua in 1933. In 1936, Anastasio Somoza emerged as the leader of Nicaragua. He was officially elected president in 1937. Somoza's regime raised much opposition from liberal groups in Central America. A new president was elected in 1947, but Somoza ousted him after less than a month in office and resumed the office of president. Nicaragua's relations with other Central American republics soured under Somoza's regime. In 1956, Somoza was assassinated. His son, Luis Somoza Debayle, became president in his stead. Another son, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, became the head of the armed forces. Anastasio Somoza Debayle was elected president in 1967.

In May of 1972, Somoza resigned as president and handed power to a governing council, but he remained essentially in control of Nicaragua, as he commanded the armed forces. After the December 1972 earthquake, which caused terrific damage to Managua, Somoza became the director of emergency relief operations. He redirected portions of international aid to himself and his associates, causing outraged opposition.

In 1974, Somoza once again assumed the presidency. Opposition forces continued to grow, grouped into two main factions: the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) and the Democratic Liberation Union (UDEL). Clashes between Somoza's government and opposition forces continued to intensify throughout the '70s, until the FSLN and UDEL toppled the Somoza regime in 1979. The left-wing Sandinistas

took control of the government. The new Sandinista government instituted widespread social, political, and economic reforms. Many institutions and resources were nationalized, land was redistributed, and the health care and education systems underwent heavy reforms.

The United States did not support the new Sandinista government due to its ties to the Soviets and Cuba. In 1981, the U.S. cut off economic support to Nicaragua and began supporting counterrevolutionary military forces, known as *contras*. In December of 1983, the U.S. Congress passed legislation prohibiting any U.S. entity from providing aid to the Nicaraguan rebels. The U.S. government circumvented the legislation by using the National Security Council to channel money to the rebels in what became known as the Iran-*contra* affair.

In 1984, the Sandinista government held elections, and Daniel Ortega Saavedra became president. His government was popular, especially with peasants and urban poor. Nicaragua received substantial amounts of Soviet aid, but was still unable to support its economy. The Sandinista government began to curtail civil liberties in order to silence brewing dissent. In 1990, Violeta Chamorro, a political moderate, gained the presidency.

Hurricane Mitch caused heavy damage to agricultural land and infrastructure in November of 1998. Four thousand Nicaraguans died, including more than 1,500 people who were buried in a mudslide caused by the collapse of the Casita volcano.

A 2004 power struggle between Liberal party members allied with the Sandinistas and President Bolaños led to a governmental stalemate. Legislators attempted to pass constitutional amendments curtailing presidential powers and tried to remove the president from office, but the administration ignored the legislation.

In the November 2006 presidential election, Daniel Ortega Saavedra regained the presidency.

Ethnic Groups

The majority of Nicaraguans are mestizos, of mixed Amerindian and European (mostly Spanish) ancestry. An additional 17 percent of Nicaraguans are white, mostly of Spanish, German, French, or Italian ancestry. Nicaragua's mestizo and white populations live mostly in the more densely populated western portion of the country.

Around nine percent of Nicaragua's population is black, or Afro-Nicaragüense. They reside mostly along the more sparsely populated Caribbean coast.

Nicaragua's black population is mostly of West African descent; they are descendents of slaves and indentured laborers brought to Jamaica when the island was a British protectorate. There is also a smaller number of Garífuna, a people of mixed African and Amerindian descent.

About five percent of Nicaragua's population consists of unmixed descendents of the indigenous inhabitants. More than 50 percent of Nicaragua's indigenous population lives in rural areas, many of them in the Atlantic (eastern) lowlands. In western Nicaragua, there are indigenous groups related to the Mayans, including the Nicarao people on the shores of Lake Nicaragua. The Miskito people live in the eastern part of Nicaragua, along with the small Rama tribe. The 900 members of the Rama tribe are hunters, fishermen, and agriculturalists who live within a thirty-mile radius of the Rama Cay Island along the Caribbean coastline. The Sumo, or Mayangna, people also live along the Caribbean coastline in the Mosquito Coast area.

Religion

Although Nicaragua has no official religion, religious freedom has been guaranteed by the constitution since 1939 and is promoted by the Nicaraguan government. Bishops are expected to lend their authority to important state events, and their personal pronouncements regarding national issues are influential.

Roman Catholicism was brought to Nicaragua in the 16th century during the Spanish conquest. Until 1939, it remained the sole established faith. Slightly less than three-quarters of Nicaraguans are nominally Roman Catholic, although the number of practicing Catholics is much lower. Popular Catholicism revolves around saints, who are seen as intermediaries between God and humans. One well-known patron saint is Managua's Saint Dominic, or Santo Domingo. La Purísima, a week-long celebration in early December dedicated to the Immaculate Conception, is the high point of the Nicaraguan religious calendar.

Various Protestant denominations were first introduced to Nicaragua during the 19th century, but it wasn't until the 20th century that Protestant churches began to gain large followings along the Caribbean coast. The largest Protestant denominations in Nicaragua include the Moravian Church, the Baptist Convention of Nicaragua, and the Assemblies of God.

Culture

Food—Nicaraguans eat corn tortillas with most meals, like other Central Americans.

Nicaraguan tortillas are long, thin, and made of white corn. The tortilla is used to wrap meat and beans. Corn and beans are dietary staples, and garlic and onion are common seasonings. Nicaraguans particularly enjoy a small red bean often eaten refried in a dish called *gallo pinto*, or “spotted rooster.” The yucca root is popular, and has a high nutritional value. Fruits such as mangoes and plantains are also popular. The favorite nonalcoholic drink in Nicaragua is coffee. Nicaraguans take their coffee with milk in the mornings, and black with sugar the rest of the day. *Pinol*, the national drink, is made from corn flour with water. *Tiste* is similar to pinol and is made from ground tortilla and cacao. *Chichi*, a wine made from fermented corn, is common, as are beer and rum.

Social status—Historically, Nicaraguan society has been a society of classes with little possibility of social mobility. Children were expected to follow in the footsteps of their parents. The Sandinista revolutionaries in 1979 made an attempt to eliminate the class system; they deliberately redistributed wealth and land to lower the wealthy and raise the poor. Land is the traditional measure of wealth in Nicaragua. Ownership of a telephone also signifies a relatively well-to-do person.

Marriage—Common-law unions exist, but because of the influence of Roman Catholicism, many couples marry within the church. Newly married couples sometimes live with one set of parents until they are able to afford their own house.

Education—Nicaragua’s public education system suffers from inadequate funding. In the 1980s, access to education increased with the introduction of free public education. Education is free and compulsory for children from ages 7 to 12, but only 70 percent of children actually attend classes. By law, all public instruction is in Spanish, even in the west, where Spanish is not spoken in the home. Nicaragua has one national university, with 7,000 students on two campuses. There are also several religious universities.

Etiquette—Nicaraguans are very respectful and polite in conversation. They rarely use the familiar *tu* (you) form of address, as most other Central Americans do. However, they do tend to use the less common familiar *vos* form when addressing one another.

Dress

Common Nicaraguan dress is a cotton shirt and pants for men, and a skirt and blouse for women. Traditional Nicaraguan costumes can still be seen

during celebrations; there are a variety of Nicaraguan dances, each with their own unique traditional style of costume.

Travel/Transportation

Some of Nicaragua’s major highways are paved and in good condition, but seasonal rains cause significant degradation to road beds, even toll roads and well-maintained highways. Many smaller roads are potholed, narrow, and lack shoulders. Rural roads are not usually lit at night, so travel at night outside major cities can be hazardous.

It is not uncommon for Nicaraguan drivers to signal turns with their hands if a car’s turn signals do not function. Bicycles, oxcarts, dogs, and horses can often be found even on main roads in Nicaragua.

If traveling by taxi, use registered taxis with red license plates and a company name and logo. Carry small bills, since taxi drivers often do not make change.

Visitors who wish to drive in Nicaragua should obtain an Inter-American or International Driving Permit. These permits allow a motorist to operate a vehicle in a foreign country when accompanied by a valid license from his or her own country. The Inter-American or International Driving Permit is a translation of a U.S. or Canadian driver’s license.

Either of these permits can be obtained in the United States or Canada before traveling. The American Automobile Association (AAA) and the American Automobile Touring Alliance are the only organizations in the U.S. authorized by the State Department to issue Inter-American or International Driving Permits. The Canadian Automobile Association (CAA) is authorized to issue Inter-American or International Driving Permits to Canadian citizens. The cost is under \$20; the application will need to be accompanied by two passport-sized photos.

Transit regulations are administered by the Nicaraguan National Police. For more information regarding insurance, driver’s permits, and mandatory vehicle equipment, refer to the National Police website at www.policia.gob.ni, or contact the Embassy of Nicaragua.

Illness/Injury

Medical care is limited outside Managua. Treatment for serious conditions can often be found only in Managua; smaller villages have clinics that can handle most routine treatment. Many doctors and hospital staff do not speak English, and medical reports will be written in Spanish.

In case of emergency, a patient will be taken to the nearest public hospital, unless the patient or someone with them indicates that they are able to pay for treatment at a private hospital. Payment for medical services is usually expected in cash, although private hospitals usually accept major credit cards. Most U.S. health insurance plans will not cover international claims.

Crime

Violent crime in major cities has been on the rise in Nicaragua, but is mostly confined to poorer areas. Street crime, such as pickpocketing, happens occasionally on buses or in crowded markets.

Police coverage is sparse outside major areas, especially in the Atlantic coast autonomous regions.

Travelers should avoid wearing expensive jewelry or carrying large amounts of cash, as this creates a target of opportunity.

Safety and Security

Nicaragua has not experienced acts or threats of terrorism in recent years.

Rural areas of northern Nicaragua along the border have been extensively de-mined, but there is still a small possibility of encountering a land mine for travelers who plan to leave main roads in northern Nicaragua.

Entry/Exit Requirements

A valid passport is required to enter Nicaragua. Visitors will also need to purchase a tourist card upon arrival. Tourist cards are typically issued for 30 to 90 days. There is also a departure tax, which may be included in the price of a return plane ticket. If not, the departure tax may be paid at an airline counter.

As of June 2006, Nicaragua entered a "Central America-4 (C-4) Border Control Agreement" with Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Under this agreement, citizens of the four countries may travel freely across land borders between the four countries without entry and exit formalities at border stations. This agreement also extends to visitors who have legally entered one of the four countries. Once a visitor has entered one of the four countries, he or she may freely cross land borders between the four countries without additional visas or tourist entry permits.

For more information concerning entry and exit requirements, contact the Embassy of Nicaragua at 1627 New Hampshire Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20009 or info@embanic.org.

Immunizations

There are no required immunizations to enter Nicaragua, unless entering the country from a country where yellow fever is present. Hepatitis A and B, typhoid, and rabies vaccinations are highly recommended.

Malaria is a risk in rural areas and the outskirts of Managua. The recommended antimalarial drug for Nicaragua is chloriquine.

Dengue fever, another mosquito-borne illness, is endemic in Nicaragua. There is no vaccination for dengue fever; to reduce the risk of exposure, use insect repellent.

Special Circumstances

Strong currents and undertows off Nicaragua's Pacific coast can be dangerous to swimmers. Powerful waves have occasionally resulted in broken bones. Injuries caused by sting rays are not uncommon in the waters off Nicaragua's Pacific beaches.

Tap water is not safe to drink in Nicaragua. Visitors should drink only bottled water. Bottled juice and soda are also safe options.

U.S. and Canadian dollars are widely accepted in Nicaragua, as are major credit cards and traveler's checks. Hotels are typically safe places to change dollars to córdobas.

Purchasing land in Nicaragua can be complex, since many land titles are disputed due to the Sandinista government's redistribution of property. Foreigners who wish to purchase property in Nicaragua should hire Nicaraguan legal representation to investigate the land and ensure that title ownership is not disputed. Disputed claims can turn into long and frustrating court battles.

Electricity

American appliances may be used in Nicaragua without a power converter or plug adapters, since Nicaragua uses 120V/60Hz power and type A plugs. American appliances with grounding (type B) plugs may need a plug adapter, since Nicaraguan outlets generally do not have a hole for a grounding pin.