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# Great Escape

## N I C A R A G U A

TRAVEL  
SECRETS  
2016

From the **churning waves** of the Pacific in the west to the **blue lagoons** of the Caribbean in the east, Nicaragua is Central America at its most colourful: **tropical islands** and **dense jungle**, **smouldering volcanoes** and storied **colonial towns**

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Nicaragua's car-free Little Corn Island lies in the Caribbean Sea and was once a regular haunt for pirates



# Plan your trip

- 1** Admire fine colonial Spanish architecture while wandering the tree-lined avenues of the country's oldest city, **Granada** (p50).
- 2** Wonder at strange legends and peer deep into Nicaragua's volcanic heart on the mysterious island of **Ometepe** (p52).
- 3** Pick through the jungle and explore a hidden world in the backwaters of the **San Juan River** (p54).
- 4** Slow down your life and play at being a castaway on the peaceful Caribbean sands of **Little Corn Island** (p56).
- 5** Buy some poetry from a local or lose yourself in classic Latin American verse in the bohemian university city of **León** (p58).



MAP ILLUSTRATION: ALEX VERHILLE. PHOTOGRAPHS: SAM ARMSTRONG/GETTY, PHILIP LEE HARVEY, FRANK SCHWERT/GETTY, ANNIE SHUSTRIN/TRAVELSHUS.COM

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### HOW TO GET THERE

Augusto C Sandino Airport in the capital Managua is the main hub for Nicaragua. There are no direct flights from Europe, but you can fly via the US on American Airlines, Delta and United (from £525; united.com). Routes going through Atlanta and Miami are mostly shorter than ones changing at Dallas-Fort Worth or Houston. Many travellers visit Nicaragua as part of a Central American overland trip, with chaotic but functional border crossing points from neighbouring Honduras and Costa Rica. UK nationals can visit Nicaragua for up to three months without a visa. There is a \$10 (£7) arrival tax, paid in cash on arrival. The \$35 departure tax is normally included in the airline ticket.

### HOW TO GET AROUND

Catching domestic flights can make sense in Nicaragua, particularly if you're travelling the long distance between the east and west coasts. Domestic carrier La Costeña flies from its hub at Managua to – among others – Big Corn Island, Ometepe and San Carlos (Managua–Corn Island from £130 rtn; lacostena.online.com.ni). Colourful old US school buses form the backbone of the public transport network, divided into express services (expresos) and local stopping routes (ordinarios). You pay when you're on board – just be insistent your luggage stays in the bus and doesn't get put on the roof. Expect to pay around 70p per hour travelled. Car hire is available at Managua airport (from £25 per day; hertz.com), but be aware road conditions vary wildly across the country: poor surfaces on the Caribbean coast mean it's best to take public transport here.

### HOW LONG TO SPEND

Visiting all the locations featured in our Great Escape should take around three weeks. Nonetheless, you could easily spend well over a month exploring Nicaragua. To extend a trip, consider visiting the artists' hangout of the Solentiname Islands in Lake Nicaragua, or the surfers' haunt of San Juan del Sur

on the Pacific coast. Putting the Corn Islands aside, Nicaragua's Caribbean coast rarely features on tourist itineraries and has a fascinating culture.

### WHAT TO BUDGET

By Central American standards, Nicaragua is a very affordable destination. Rarely would you pay more than £60 per night for a luxury hotel, and £10 for a top-end meal. If you're on a budget, roadside meals can be had for around £2 and simple guesthouses booked for about £10 per night.

### WHEN TO GO

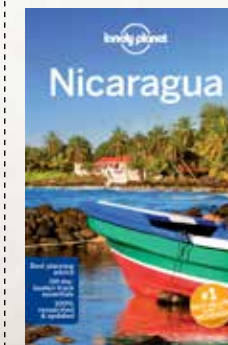
Nicaragua's high season follows dry weather from December to April, with price rises in some touristy areas like Granada and León. Low season coincides with the rains from May to October, though there are often spells of sunshine between showers.

### WHO CAN HELP

Central American specialist Journey Latin America offers a range of guided group tours and individual itineraries in Nicaragua, staying in mid-range to upmarket hotels and lodges. A 14-day trip featuring all of the locations and accommodation options in our article starts from £2,771, including all flights, excursions and local transport. There are also 18-day group tours from £2,298 (journeylatinamerica.co.uk).

### HOW TO PLAN

Lonely Planet's *Nicaragua* (£15.99) has more on the country; download single chapters at lonelyplanet.com (£2.99).



## ON THE ROAD

### Read...

*The Jaguar Smile*, Salman Rushdie's book about travelling in Nicaragua in the 1980s, in the aftermath of the leftist Sandinista sweeping to power.



### Buy...

Balsa wood carvings; native to the Solentiname Islands but found across Nicaragua, these traditional crafts come in all shapes and sizes – most common are birds.



### Drink...

Flor de Caña; one of Latin America's best rums, available in white and dark varieties, and aged up to 25 years.



### Discuss...

The Nicaraguan Canal; a controversial planned shipping lane to rival that of nearby Panama, set to come with a huge environmental cost (to find out more see rainforest-rescue.org).



### Play...

Baseball; where the national sport of its neighbouring countries is football, Nicaraguans have had a penchant for hitting home runs since the sport was brought here in the 19th century.



### Eat...

The national dish of rice and black beans, often served with scrambled eggs at breakfast.

