

Dreams to Acts: Nicaragua

Trip Preparation Guide | November 20-28, 2015



Join us on the trip of a lifetime!



Coordinated by Random Acts, a division of The Art Department, Inc.

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This Nicaragua Trip Preparation Guide has been designed to answer your questions and help you prepare for our trip to San Juan del Sur. With heartfelt thanks for the volunteer work you are about to do, the people of Nicaragua (and everyone at Random Acts) truly appreciate your commitment to help. Together we can turn dreams to acts.

Please feel free to contact us with any questions, concerns, or comments by sending an email to projects@randomacts.org.

SECTION 1 Background Information on Nicaragua



HISTORY

Nicaragua is the largest country in Central America, bordering Honduras to the north and Costa Rica to the south. The Spanish Empire conquered this region in the 16th century, and Nicaragua achieved its independence from Spain in 1821. Since then it has undergone periods of political unrest, dictatorship, and fiscal crisis. During the Nicaraguan Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, the Sandinista National Liberation Front led a campaign to overthrow the Somoza dictatorship, and the Sandinistas took power in July 1979. At this time, Nicaragua was largely in ruins from both the war and a devastating earthquake in 1972; hundreds of thousands were homeless, refugees, or in exile. Under the Sandinistas, Nicaragua underwent a period of political, economic, and cultural reform, as well as another war with an anti-Sandinista movement called the Contras. Daniel Ortega led the country during this time, until he lost in the 1990 General Elections. He was voted back into office in 2006, and has continued to be Nicaragua's president through the present day. In the past two decades political turmoil has calmed, but Nicaragua remains the second poorest nation in the Americas, after Haiti, with almost half of the population living below the poverty line. Through fundraising and volunteering, you will be a part of the massive international response that is needed to help Nicaraguans better their lives.



LOCATION

During most of our stay, we will be situated in San Juan del Sur, on the southwest coast of Nicaragua. It is located about 130 km from Managua, the capital, and only about 30 km from the border with Costa Rica. San Juan del Sur is a beautiful fishing village turned tourist town, and now attracts both Nicaraguan and foreign vacationers. It is especially popular among surfers.

SECTION 2

Life in Nicaragua

CLIMATE

San Juan del Sur is in the country's Pacific lowlands geographical region and has a hot, tropical savanna climate. The dry season is typically from mid-November to mid-May, and the rainy season runs from mid-May to mid-November. We will be traveling to San Juan del Sur in late November, around the end of the rainy season. During this month the temperature averages between 23–27 °C, or 73–81 °F. However, due to humidity it may feel much hotter. Precipitation in November is generally around 112 mm, or 4.4 inches.



CULTURE



Nicaraguan culture has strong folklore, music, and religious traditions. It is deeply influenced by European culture but is also enriched by Amerindian sounds and flavors. Indigenous groups that historically inhabited the Pacific coast have mostly been assimilated into the Mestizo culture.

Music and dancing in Nicaragua are a mixture of indigenous and Spanish influences. The marimba is a common musical instrument, and is uniquely played by a sitting performer holding the instrument on his knees. He is accompanied by a bass fiddle, guitar, and guitarrilla (a smaller guitar, similar to a mandolin), and they play at social functions as a sort of background music. There are various types of traditional dances in Nicaragua, and salsa and bachata dancing are also becoming increasingly popular.

Literature from Nicaragua has historically been an important source of poetry in the Spanish-speaking world; many literary figures from Nicaragua are internationally renowned.

Elementary education, though theoretically free and compulsory for all Nicaraguans, is not strictly enforced and many children are unable to attend due to their families living too far away from schools or needing to have them work.

Under the Somoza regime, limited spending on education and generalized poverty constricted educational opportunities and forced many adolescents into the labor market. In the 1970s, only 65% of the children of primary school age were enrolled in school, and 75% of the rural population was illiterate. Few students enrolled in secondary school, in part because most secondary institutions were private and too expensive for the average family, and only 8% of college-age Nicaraguans enrolled in universities. The upper-class families, however, typically sent their children abroad to be educated.

The Sandinista government increased spending on education and doubled the number of primary and secondary school teachers, the number of schools, and the total number of students enrolled at all levels of the educational system. They also reformed the system of higher education by reordering curricular priorities, closing down redundant institutions and programs and establishing new ones, and increasing lower-class access to higher education. More focus was placed on agriculture, medicine, and technology. A literacy campaign in 1980 reduced the illiteracy rate from 50% to 23% of the total population.

In rural areas, gender roles are fairly traditional – the women cook, clean, and look after children at home while the men work in the fields. In more urban areas, many women work outside their home and household duties may be taken care of by housekeepers.

RELIGION

Religion plays a significant role in the culture of Nicaragua, though both the government and the constitution promote religious freedom and tolerance. The majority of the population is Roman Catholic, and evangelical protestant groups have been growing rapidly since the 1990s.

Most locals honor patron saints selected from the Roman Catholic calendar, and each city or town has an official saint, also known as the Santo Patrono, which have been designated since colonial times. Nicaraguans hold annual fiestas to celebrate these patron saints, and these are often loud, joyous celebrations that attract large crowds with music, dance, and traditional interpretations. The biggest religious holiday is neither Christmas nor Easter, but La Purísima, a week of festivities in early December dedicated to the immaculate conception, during which elaborate altars to the Virgin Mary are constructed in homes and workplaces.



LANGUAGE

Central American Spanish is spoken by 90% of the country's population, though there are many indigenous influences. A distinguishing characteristic is the tendency to replace the "s" sound with an "h" sound when speaking.

GREETINGS AND OTHER BASICS:

Hola: Hello

Buenos días: Good afternoon

Buenas noches: Good evening

Adiós: Goodbye (In Nicaragua, this is also used to say “hello”.)

¿Cómo está?: How are you?

¿Cómo están?: How are you? (plural)

¿Qué tal?: How’s it going?

Bienvenidos: Welcome

¿De dónde eres?: Where are you from?

¿Cómo te llamas?: What’s your name?

Por favor: Please

Gracias: Thank you

De nada: You’re welcome

No entiendo: I don’t understand

No hablo español: I don’t speak Spanish

¿Habla inglés?: Do you speak English?

¿Cuánto cuesta?: How much does it cost?

¿Dónde está el baño?: Where is the bathroom?

¿Qué hora es?: What time is it?

For more Spanish phrases, see <http://ielanguages.com/spanish1.html>



SOCIAL CUSTOMS AND ETIQUETTE

Some important social norms to keep in mind:

- Nicaraguans are generally courteous and appreciate this trait in visitors. It is polite to address strangers as “usted” rather than the informal “tú” (or its local form “vos”).
- When men greet other men, handshakes are the norm. Both men and other women greet women with a smile and “hola” or “mucho gusto,” or a handshake if it’s a bit more formal. Friends and family commonly greet each other with a light hug and a kiss on the cheek.
- It is normal for Nicaraguans to ask others about their marital status, children, jobs, and even salaries during initial conversations or meetings; please try not to feel uncomfortable or offended by these types of questions.
- Most Nicaraguans like to have some personal space, and there is usually little to no touching during conversations. Women should be reserved when speaking with men, otherwise minor actions such as smiling or eye contact may be interpreted as welcoming romantic advances.
- Being on time is very rare; it’s acceptable to show up half an hour to an hour late, so try not to be impatient or upset if this happens.
- When gesturing to someone to come toward you, use your hand, palm-side DOWN, and crook your fingers.
- Taking your shoes off at a meeting is considered rude, as is putting your feet up on a desk or a chair.
- Try to avoid saying “no” when someone offers you something to eat or drink.
- Cleanliness and personal hygiene are valued; avoid being seriously unwashed in public places.
- For airport or hotel baggage handlers, it is customary to tip \$1 USD per bag. For restaurants and other services, 10-15% is customary but not obligatory. Sometimes this tip is already included in the bill, so remember to check.
- Staring at foreigners is common, especially in more rural areas, so be prepared for this.

While working in Nicaragua you will be seen as a role model and it is necessary to conduct yourself appropriately at all times. This includes being aware of your actions, your speech, and your attire. Please be flexible and willing to adapt to situations as they arise. You cannot predict what each day may bring! Stay positive, use initiative, be proactive, and take a hands-on approach to your actions.

SECTION 3

Your Nicaragua Experience



DEALING WITH A DIFFERENT CULTURE

It is important to remember that you are dealing with another culture when you are volunteering internationally. This may seem obvious but it is easy to forget what this means: different expectations and behaviors will be required of you. How you approach a particular situation in your own country is not necessarily the appropriate response in Nicaragua.



WHAT TO WEAR

Today, most Nicaraguans dress in Western-style clothing, though generally in a more modest manner. In fact, much of the clothing is second-hand, donated from countries such as the US. Despite this, Nicaraguans take pride in their appearance and will make sure their clothes are clean, even if they only have one or two outfits. Men wear short sleeved or light long sleeved shirts and long pants. Women wear long pants and short sleeved shirts or skirts or dresses that go down to the knee. In the countryside women tend to dress more conservatively, but if going out at night, expect to see tight skirts and low cut tops.

Modest dress is encouraged. Throughout the duration of your volunteer time, dress will be casual in most situations. Knee-length or below-the-knee-length skirts, loose-fitting pants, jeans to the knee or longer, and modest tops with sleeves or straps going over the shoulders are the best option for women. For men, long pants, jeans, three-quarter-length shorts, shirts, and t-shirts are most appropriate. For the feet, good walking shoes and sandals or flip-flops are best. The temperatures generally range from very warm to hot, so lightweight, breathable clothing is essential. The sun can be very strong, so keeping your shoulders covered is recommended, as are hats and sunglasses. It is also important to bring clothes that are easy to wash and dry, especially as volunteers are responsible for washing their own laundry by hand. A small tip: bright colors tend to show less dirt.

Please refer to the Packing List for suggestions on what clothing to bring.



BASIC SAFETY RULES

The safety of our volunteers in Nicaragua is our top priority. Nicaragua has made great strides in terms of providing police presence and order throughout the country. Crime is now relatively low, though there are still some bad neighborhoods. The town of San Juan del Sur and the hotel we will be staying at are generally more stable and secure than Managua. However, even Managua is now quite safe as long as we stay together and alert.

RA will be providing a safe environment, transportation and activities. Volunteers are strongly encouraged to stay with the group and participate in the scheduled activities as per the agenda. Leaving the group or environment is not recommended and those doing so will be responsible for their own safety, transportation, etc. It is strongly recommended that should a member or members of the group wish to go out on their own that they do so only in groups and advise a member of the RA staff of their planned activities and locations.

Some additional safety tips to follow:

- Make copies of your passport. Leave one copy at home with a family member or trusted friend and keep one copy in your luggage.
- Stay with at least a few members of the volunteer group at all times.
- Check in with Random Acts staff at the required times.
- Don't bring or wear expensive jewelry or have too much cash on your person.



COMMUNICATION

Please remind your family that you may not be able to contact them straight after you arrive. Wi-fi is available at the hotel, but connections may be slow and electricity is unreliable. Alternatively, you can purchase a SIM card with data upon arrival at the airport in Managua.



MONEY EXCHANGE

The official currency in Nicaragua is the Nicaraguan córdoba (NIO). \$1 USD is around 25 córdobas.

Your travel, room, and board expenses will be paid to Random Acts prior to the trip. ATMs are readily available in Nicaragua should you wish to buy anything, but you should bring small bills in US dollars to cover tips (it is advisable to tip hotel porters \$1 or \$2), drinks, and other small expenses.



RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

Responsible tourism is about travelers making positive choices that are environmentally friendly, sustainable, ethical, and respectful to the local community and environment. It is also about taking responsibility for your actions and behavior. As a traveler you should:

- Learn about the country: learn keywords in the local language and be mindful of religious and social customs.

- Know the appropriate cultural behavior: respect the dignity and privacy of others – ask before taking photos; dress and behave respectfully, especially in villages, religious, and cultural areas; and be careful about giving gifts or money to children and beggars.
- Protect the endangered plants and animals: do not purchase wildlife products, such as ivory and skins; don't buy products made from coral or other endangered plants; and only buy wood carvings that come from a renewable, sustainable source.
- Support local initiatives: purchase local products, arts, and crafts; eat local rather than imported food.
- Pay a fair price: 50 cents may not mean much to you, but it may be a meal for the vendor; and pay a price that reflects what something is worth.
- Minimize environmental impact: dispose of rubbish carefully, recycle where possible, reuse your drink bottles, avoid using plastic bags, minimize water and power use.
- Think about your impact: remember you are a guest; don't do anything you wouldn't do at home, and make your trip a positive experience for both you and the people of Nicaragua

SECTION 4

Preparing for your Trip



INSURANCE

You are required to have comprehensive travel and medical insurance for this trip. Here are two recommended insurance providers:

Travelex (<http://www.travelex.com>) | **STA Travel** (<http://www.statravel.com>)



IMMUNIZATIONS AND HEALTH CONCERNS

Never drink tap water without filtering, boiling, or using water purification tablets. Hot drinks such as coffee and tea are usually fine, as they require boiled water. You should also avoid brushing your teeth with tap water; use water you would drink.

Listed below are required vaccinations for your trip to Nicaragua. Some of these you may have received as a child while others may not have been necessary, depending on the country you are from. Check with your travel doctor to find out which vaccinations are relevant to you. It is important not to leave this too close to the date you travel as some vaccinations take a few weeks to become effective. Other vaccinations cannot always be given together and some can be taken in oral form. Please consult your travel doctor at least eight weeks before you are due to volunteer.

More information about vaccinations recommended by the U.S. Center for Disease Control can be found here: <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/Nicaragua> This site also contains other valuable health-related information related to volunteering in Nicaragua.

We will be in an area in Nicaragua that is not rural, so your risk of contracting anything is slim. There is a huge contingent of Foreign Aid Workers there, and we will be staying in a hotel with excellent sanitary conditions and healthy, delicious meals.



REQUIRED VACCINATIONS

- Routine Childhood Vaccinations (U.S.)
- Current Tetanus Vaccination
- Hepatitis A
- Hepatitis B
- Typhoid



HEAT-RELATED ILLNESS

Be wary of heat stroke. Drink plenty of fluids. Protect yourself from the sun – hats, sleeves, sunglasses, and sunscreen should be worn. Bring plenty of oral rehydration salts/electrolytes.



MALARIA

Malaria is spread by mosquitoes. This disease can be fatal if not diagnosed quickly, but the risk is low in Nicaragua. Anti-malarial medications can assist in attacking the disease, but these need to be chosen appropriately. Please seek the advice of a physician before deciding to take anti-malarial drugs, as you may have a medical condition that prevents you from the use of one form of anti-malarial that will need to be considered by your own doctor. If you choose to take anti-malarial drugs, make sure that you allow enough time prior to your travel to obtain the medication and begin to medicate yourself. Also, be sure that you have enough medication for the entire time you are traveling, as it is not recommended to switch medications during usage. Some anti-malarial drugs are unavailable in some countries.



ADDITIONAL MEASURES YOU CAN TAKE TO PROTECT YOURSELF

You are most at risk at dusk or twilight when malaria- and dengue-bearing mosquitoes begin their day. Light colors are less likely to attract mosquitoes. Insect repellent containing DEET is most effective; the higher the level of DEET, the more protection you will receive. Lemon has also been known to act as a natural repellent, so you may prefer to seek assistance from a natural health store as an alternative. You should also consider treating your clothes with Permethrin prior to the trip.





EMERGENCY CONTACT

Please be prepared to provide the following on your personal information form:

1. An emergency contact person at home with a phone number and email address
2. The name and contact information for your insurance carrier while traveling
3. A list of all allergies (to medication particularly)
4. A list of medication you plan to be taking while traveling
5. Any special dietary requirements you have



PACKING LIST

Clothing

- Lightweight, comfortable walking shoes and one pair of sandals
- Full-length pants, 3/4 length pants, knee length shorts, softer cotton pants or shorts that may be worn around the hotel.
- T-shirts and shirts made of fabric that is easily washed, lightweight and compact. It is recommended that you wear t-shirts with sleeves, not tank tops.
- Sunhat
- A bandana
- Sunglasses
- Daypack or day rucksack

Personal Medical Kit

(Random Acts will have some basic medical supplies available to you, and others may be purchased, but it's best to bring what you will need.)

- Sunscreen with a high SPF factor
- Lip balm with a high SPF factor
- Aspirin/Advil

- Imodium or 'blockers' for diarrhea
- Malaria tablets (if recommended by your doctor)
- Band-Aids/plasters for minor cuts and burns
- Feminine hygiene products
- Grapefruit Extract (Whole Foods): good for eliminating anything funny in your intestinal track.
- Insect repellent with DEET
- Antihistamine for allergies and relief for bites
- Rehydration Tablets
- Calamine lotion or aloe vera to ease sunburn and bites
- Hand sanitizer

Personal Items

- Cash (small denomination USD notes: \$1, \$5, \$10, \$20)
- A money belt or small, safe bag to keep your money (and passport) close to you
- You are advised to bring \$300-\$450 in spending money, though ATMs will be available in Nicaragua. Please remember that you will be responsible for your expenses in Miami.
- Toiletries
- Padlocks for locking luggage
- Camera
- Journal and pens if you wish to keep a diary (highly recommended)

Personal Items

- Duplicate copies of papers (passport, credit card, flight info)
- Washing powder
- Packets of travel tissues
- Snack foods such as granola, protein bars, dried fruits and nuts. Make sure your snack foods are in sealed packages.

AIRPORT CUSTOMS

All baggage is x-rayed on arrival and is inspected by a random spot-check carried out by customs officials on arrival and departure. Personal effects, film, and cameras may be imported temporarily free of duty.

VISA, PASSPORT, AND EMBASSIES

Visa

North Americans and Europeans do not need a visa to enter Nicaragua for up to 90 days. Nationals of other countries should check with the Nicaraguan consulates in their countries for entry and exit requirements. Please state that the purpose of your travel is tourism.

Passport

Please make sure your passport is valid for at least six months from the date you will be arriving in Nicaragua, and that it contains at least two blank pages. Before leaving, make two copies of all documents such as passport, airline tickets, travel insurance policy, credit card, etc. Leave one set with someone at home and take the other set with you. Remember to keep the copies separate from the originals.



Embassies, High Commissions and Consulates

Nicaraguan diplomatic missions are a great source to find out information about the country. You can find out information about history, politics, tourism, national events and holidays, and about the relations between your country and Nicaragua.

A listing of Nicaraguan embassies around the world can be found at the following site:
<http://www.worldembassyinformation.com/nicaragua-embassy/index.html>

Thank you so much for your willingness to participate. This will be the trip of a lifetime! Please feel free to contact us with any questions or concerns.

CONTACT US

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