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## Nicaragua: Unspoiled and Open for Business

By Charis Atlas Heelan

November 11, 2004

**November 11, 2004** -- Bordered by Honduras to the north and Costa Rica to the South and stretching between the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, Nicaragua forms the heart of Central America. It is land of breathtaking natural beauty boasting rainforests, lakes, volcanoes, pristine beaches, great surf and an abundance of distinctive flora and fauna.

Strangely these are not the attributes that usually come to mind when people think of Nicaragua. It is more likely that it conjures up images of revolution, civil war, poverty and natural disasters. It has now been almost 15 years since Nicaragua emerged from the ravages and despair of war, in fact Nicaragua is now amongst the safest countries in the region (according to a UN survey). Unfortunately its previous reputation remains largely intact and the country's fledgling tourism industry is fighting hard to try and dispel the danger myth. On a positive note though, it is exactly this lack of tourism that has prevented Nicaragua from becoming overdeveloped and environmentally impacted like some of its neighbors.

For the adventurous traveler, Nicaragua is unspoiled and can provide the ultimate Central American journey, especially the southern stretch of the Pacific coastline that is emerging as the country's main attraction. In December and January, the skies are clear, the average temperature is 80+ degrees and the landscape is lush and green. US dollars are accepted almost everywhere, but it is hard to pay with credit cards outside the main cities. One \$US dollar will buy you 16 Nicaraguan Cordoba Oro (NIO). English is widely spoken, especially on the Pacific coast.

The US Department of State advises that US citizens should exercise caution at night in Managua and avoid travel to the North Atlantic autonomous region, remote areas of the Atlantic coast and rural areas of the central-north of Nicaragua. (see [www.travel.state.gov/travel/nicaragua.html](http://www.travel.state.gov/travel/nicaragua.html) for further information).

Several carriers fly into Managua, the nation's unremarkable capital, from Miami including **TACA, Copa, Lacs Airlines** and **American Airlines**. **American Airlines** ([www.aa.com](http://www.aa.com)) currently has a Net SAAver fare starting as low as \$309 for a roundtrip fare. You must book by November 18, 2004 for flights departing through December 4, 2004. Visitors can buy a tourist card (approximately \$5) on arrival, which allows a stay of up to 90 days.

If you plan to take tours once you arrive, **Nicaragua Tours** ([www.toursnicaragua.com](http://www.toursnicaragua.com)) has a selection of options ranging from three to 14-days. Tours are based on interest: cultural, nature, classic, historical, adventurous, special interest and beach. Prices also vary according to required destinations and number of people in your party. The tour company is all English-speaking owned and operated.

**Gap Adventures** (tel. **800/465-5600**; [www.gapadventures.com](http://www.gapadventures.com)) has a 15-day "Volcanoes and Islands" tour starting in Managua. Tours run each month throughout the year and cost \$795 per person plus a local payment of \$200 to cover service, tips and incidentals (meals are not included). Accommodation (14-nights) is in simple bungalows and hotels and transportation is a combination of buses, ferries and local flights.

**Kontiki** (tel. **877/566-8454**; [www.kontiki.org](http://www.kontiki.org)) runs two "Nicaragua Highlights" tours that include roundtrip airfare from Miami. The five-day tour, priced at \$999, includes visits to Granada, Lake Nicaragua, the volcanoes of Ometepe Island, Volcan Masaya National Park, Masaya City's handicraft market and Managua. The eight-day tour includes all of the above plus visits to Leon, Mombacho and the rainforest and is priced at \$1149. Both prices include daily breakfast and all taxes, except the \$32 Nicaraguan departure tax to be paid locally. Departure dates and itineraries are flexible, with Kontiki being able to customize your tour on request. Other departure cities available at additional cost

For surfing enthusiasts, **CentralAmerica.com** (tel. **800/353-7948**;

[www.centralamerica.com/nicaragua/surfing/index.htm](http://www.centralamerica.com/nicaragua/surfing/index.htm)) has a choice of surfing tours ranging from day trips to eight-day expeditions. Their eight-day Masayita surfing tour requires a minimum of three and a maximum of eight participants. The \$990 price includes airport transfers, seven-nights accommodation at Hotel Isabella in Managua, daily shuttles to the surf boats, hotel breakfasts and lunches aboard the boats (fresh seafood), snacks, drinks (purified water, beer, and sodas), a qualified guide and boat operator. Their one day/one-night trip from San Juan del Sur, Granada or Managua is \$170.

**Leisure Vacations International** (tel. **800/997-9896**; [www.lvitours.com](http://www.lvitours.com)) has an eight-day Granada and Leon tour which includes roundtrip airfare from Miami to Managua, six-nights hotel accommodation (Managua, Leon and Granada), daily breakfast, all transfers, sightseeing in air-conditioned vehicles with English speaking guides, entrance fees and hotel taxes. Airport departure taxes and security fees of \$76 are additional. The Nicaraguan departure tax of \$32 is to be paid locally.

Latin American specialist **Exito** (tel. **800/655-4053**; [www.exitotravel.com](http://www.exitotravel.com)) has an eight-day San Juan River tour that starts in Managua. This private boating nature safari travels from Lake Nicaragua to the Caribbean Sea via the historic San Juan River with visits to the Indio-Maiz Biological Reserve, (Central America's largest lowland rainforest), historical cities and stunning beaches. Prices start at \$1646 (land-only) depending on

The southern Pacific coastal region around the town on San Juan del Sur is slowly becoming the tourism center of Nicaragua with its proximity to the historic colonial city of Granada, its magnificent beaches, environmentally-friendly accommodation, access to wildlife and ecotourism options.

The recently opened **Morgan's Rock Hacienda and Eco-Lodge** ([www.morgansrock.com](http://www.morgansrock.com)), near San Juan del Sur provides luxury accommodation with an environmental emphasis. The hotel, made up of 15 bungalows, is located in a tropical rainforest on a curving hillside with picturesque views through tree canopies to the mile-long stretch of virgin beach.

The tropical forest that surrounds the hotel is rich with wildlife like spider monkeys, capuchins, armadillos, sloths and opossums, as well as dozens of bird species and seasonally (August to January), giant leatherback turtles who come to the beach to lay their eggs. Environmental initiatives implemented by the hotel include the planting of almost two million trees, solar heating panels, redistribution of waste-water for irrigation and usage of locally farmed and grown produce including coffee, sugar and vegetables.

Named after a US Senator who had nominated Nicaragua as the route for the trans-oceanic canal (which was eventually built in Panama), the hotel is two plus hours from Managua, one and a half hours from Granada, or 45-minutes from the Costa Rican border. The hotel will collect guests from all these places, or from Liberia in Costa Rica. Bungalows cost \$179 per person per night in the high season (November to May) and \$209 from December 15, 2005, and January 5, 2005. These prices include all meals, local beverages, taxes and service charges.

**Parque Maritimo El Coco** ([www.playaelcoco.com.ni](http://www.playaelcoco.com.ni)) is located within the boundaries of La Flor wildlife refuge, on Playa Coco some 11 miles from San Juan del Sur. It has accommodation in the form of nine houses, three bungalows and four apartments -- all available to rent on a nightly or weekly basis. Prices start as low as \$45 per night for weekdays in a bungalow and \$69 for weekends (15% tax is additional). Although not especially luxurious, El Coco has functional bathrooms, electricity, fans, air-conditioning and cable TV. There's a restaurant, a shop and even an internet cafe, which is still a rare find in most of Nicaragua. The Park can arrange excursions by horse or bicycle to nearby villages, beach sports, boat trips to Isla Bolaños or a visit to playa La Flor, to view sea turtles laying their eggs. El Coco is three hours' drive from Managua, the last 45 minutes on a rough road so an SUV/4WD is recommended.

For more accommodation options including hotels and apartments for rent in San Juan del Sur visit [www.sanjuandelsur.org.ni](http://www.sanjuandelsur.org.ni).

For further information visit [www.nicaragua.com](http://www.nicaragua.com). For some additional reading to inspire you on your journey, pick up a copy of P.J. O'Rourke's *Holidays in Hell* or Salman Rushdie's *The Jaguar Smiles: A Nicaraguan Journey*.

**Have you been to Nicaragua? We'd love to feature your trip report in an upcoming Newsletter. Please, post your tale on our [Message Boards](#) today.**

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