



With just hours to create a temporary street fresco on Calle de las Alfombras, artists turn sawdust into an eye-catching work of art.

NICARAGUA

LEÓN

Celebrate Holy Week in a town where authentic Latin American ritual fuses with artistic passion.

The hot, steamy intellectual capital of Nicaragua's northwest is something of an unpolished gem, its Spanish colonial churches rubbing shoulders with gritty student bars and peeling revolutionary Sandinista murals. León's earthy traditions are on display during Semana Santa, the authentic Easter rituals marked by slow-moving religious processions, dirges, and wailing among the devout.

On Good Friday, the main avenue erupts into vivid splashes of color called *alfombras de aserrín*, or "sawdust carpets." Working late into the night, and often poring over ragged photos for reference, residents create amazing versions of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and other sacred motifs from pine needles, flower petals, sand, and dyed sawdust. The method originated in León more than a century ago and, unlike in other places celebrating Holy Week, the artists still work freehand rather than with molds.

"Anyone can claim a space on the street and do it," says Richard Leonardi, general manager at Tours Nicaragua. "Most of these people don't produce art the rest of the year, so it's very democratic." Family members, friends, and onlookers alike offer advice, perhaps on how to improve a halo or crown of thorns. The pieces have an ephemeral quality: Worshipers en route to Good Friday services at León's humongous cathedral trample the creations.

PLANNING León www.visit-nicaragua.com, www.nicaragua.com. **Cultural tours** www.toursnicaragua.com, www.vapues.com. Book hotels well in advance—and watch your valuables; thieves abound during Holy Week.

FOR FOODIES

Central Market

For mouthwatering cuisine during Holy Week, look no farther than León's atmospheric Mercado Central, the central market. Vendors on and around the square will be selling traditional Easter sweets like *huevos chimbos* ("fake eggs" of cane sugar and almonds) and *almibar* (soft mango-chestnut drops) alongside more rustic offerings of *gaspar* (dried salted gar) and *pinol de iguana* (iguana soup). Year-round, sidewalk barbecues serve heaping portions of *gallo pinto* (rice and beans), *papas rellenas* (stuffed potatoes), and *comida corriente*, a fresh spread of whatever's on that day. Wash it all down with popular *chicha*, an unfermented corn drink.