

Nicaragua

Smoking Volcán Concepción and her almost perfect cinder cone rise from silvery, pure Lago de Nicaragua to pierce the cloudy sky. 'Land of Lakes and Volcanoes' indeed, you think, as the rolling waves of Cocibolca (an ancient indigenous name for this 'Sweet Sea') rock your suddenly tiny ferry into unspeakable admiration. For these symbols of the nation – wind over water, fire from the earth – convey the elemental significance of Nicaragua's most powerful passions, poetry (don't get them started, unless you want to) and revolution.

For visitors of a certain age, just the name Nicaragua – taken from a tribal chief of such wisdom and power that he may never fade from this nation's collective memory – evokes grainy footage of camouflage-clad guerrillas, punctuated by gunfire and a 1980s soundtrack. Despite having ended more than 15 years ago, leaving Nicaragua one of the safest countries in the Americas, the Contra War is too often our collective memory of the land of Nicaraao.

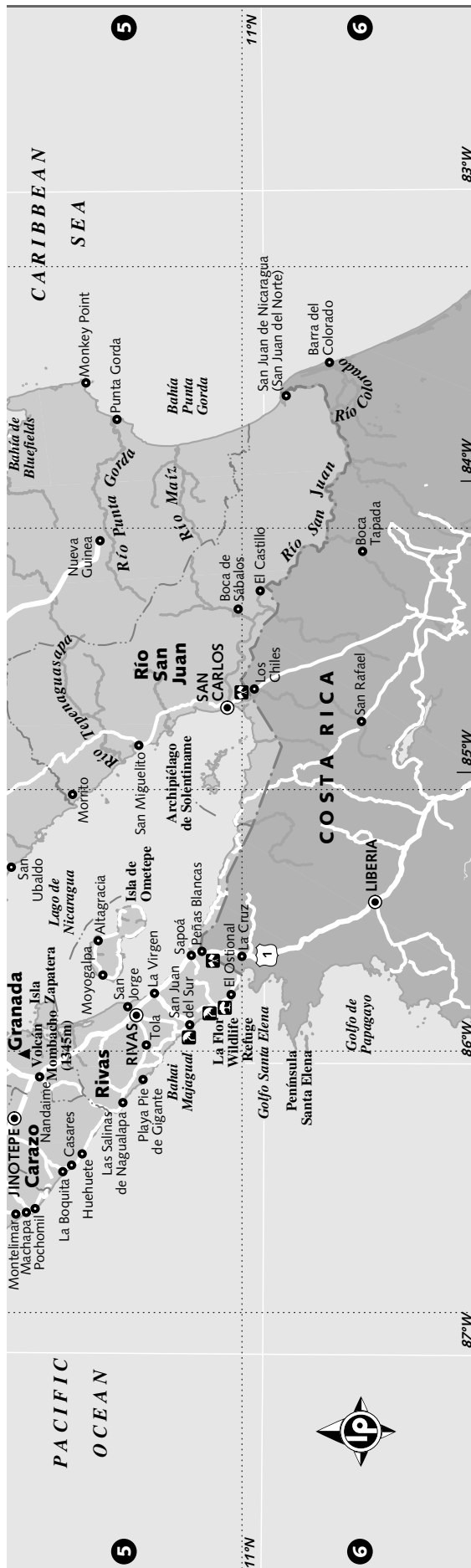
But you'll see so much more. If you climb Concepción you'll look out over gorgeous colonial Granada and her hundreds of tiny tropical *isletas* (islets), across the slender isthmus pockmarked with crater lakes to where the Pacific breaks hollow on sandy cove beaches. Beyond, red-and-black Volcán Momotombo towers above Lago de Managua – its counterpoint is Sandino's massive iron silhouette, conscience of the nation and solemn defining feature of the Managua skyline.

Proud León also beckons with its churches and museums, while the cloud forests, frothing waterfalls and incredible coffee of the cool, green Northern Highlands may tempt you upwards. Here, in the mountains and lakes, Central America's mightiest rivers begin their journey across the autonomous, indigenous-owned rolling hills of the Caribbean lowlands, to the sea.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 129,494 sq km (largest in Central America)
- **Capital** Managua
- **Country Code** ☎ 505
- **Money** córdoba; US dollar widely used
- **Number of Animal Species** 1400
- **Phrases** *Nica* (Nicaraguan guys and gals); *vos* (you); *tuanis* (right on)
- **Population** 5,465,100 (least densely populated in Central America)
- **Shoreline** 1040km
- **Visa** US\$25 for citizens of 40 countries; US\$7 entry (no visa needed) for everyone else; see p288





HIGHLIGHTS

- **León** (p159) and **Granada** (p110) Choosing a favorite might provoke these two colonial rivals, with the country's best museums and architecture
- **Río San Juan** (p275) Take a riverboat ride into the rain forest, then visit the art colony of the Archipiélago de Solentiname
- **Isla de Ometepe** (p137) Nicaragua's ecological crown jewel has two volcanoes, one active and both with stunning lake views
- **Jinotepe** (p217) Colonial treasure surrounded by steep jungled mountains, with Matagalpa's hip scene close by
- **Waspám** (p236) Get off the beaten track and into the indigenous-owned Mosquitia and its lifeline, Central America's longest river

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Nicaragua has a range of microclimates, and it's always worth checking the weather to see where you want to go first. On the Pacific side, *invierno* (winter), or rainy season, runs May to November, at its rainiest in September and October when sea turtles nest 3000-strong to a beach. *Verano* (summer), or dry season, is November to April, the best time for hiking, camping and partying, as it coincides with high tourist season (December to March), most pronounced along the Costa Rican border. As *verano* desiccates to a close, the Pacific forests lose their leaves and lake levels drop revealing sandy lake beaches that you'll put to good use as temperatures soar from the normal high 20s into the mid-30s or worse.

And then there are the mountains, from the islands of cool cloud forests atop each volcano to the monolithic granite peaks of the central highlands, where the seasons become blurred in the chilly misty mornings, with temperatures between 12°C and 24°C. On the Atlantic side rainy and dry seasons are almost entirely academic, so check the weather; along the Río San Juan, one of the wettest places on earth, always pack a raincoat.

HISTORY

Monkey Point, south of Bluefields, has evidence of one of the earliest human encampments in the Americas, perhaps

HOW MUCH?

- **Surfboard rental** per day US\$10-15
- **Museum admission** US\$2
- **2-hr bus ride** US\$2
- **Internet access** per hr US\$0.70
- **Típica breakfast** US\$1.50

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **Gallon of gas** US\$3.50
- **1L bottled water** US\$0.70
- **Servico of Flor de Caña rum** US\$5
- **Sandino T-shirt** US\$5
- **Quesillo with extra onions** US\$1

8000 years old, marked by clam shells. More impressive, however, is a site in Managua, where a family left their footprints in the volcanic mud about 6000 years ago.

By 1500 BC, Nicaragua was broadly settled, and though much of this history has been lost, at least one ancient treaty between the Nicarao capital of Jinotepe and its rival Chorotegan neighbor, Diriamba, is still celebrated as the Toro Guaco (see p107).

The agricultural revolution arrived around 450 BC, when domesticated corn, yucca, beans and other crops were introduced. By AD 300, trading partners as far away as modern-day Colombia and the United States were providing new technology like *matates* (corn-grinding stones) and tough obsidian tools capable of carving soft volcanic basalt.

By AD 800, petroglyph and statue fever was sweeping across Nicaragua, and many designs, including an Aztec calendar and representations of the deity Quetzalcóatl, heralded the arrival of one of Nicaragua's most important migrations.

With the collapse of the Aztec empire, a tribe of Náhuatl-speaking refugees seeking a prophesied lake island settled Isla de Ometepe in the early 1000s, although some archaeologists question this official story. Colonies of possible Maya origin had already settled the central highlands of Matagalpa, Chontales and Juigalpa, while the Atlantic Coast was home to a number

of groups with rather mysterious origins, including the Mayangna (see p228) and Miskito (see the boxed text, p238) peoples, the last of whom came across the most curious thing in 1502.

At the mouth of the Río Coco, a storm-whipped fleet of ramshackle Spanish galleons were being led by an aging Christopher Columbus, his crew on the verge of mutiny. The Miskitos led the explorer to safety, and the Americas' fate was sealed.

Spanish Conquest

The first Spaniards arrived on the Pacific Coast in 1522, led north from the Gulf of Nicoya by conquistador Gil González de Ávila. González first met with Cacique (chief) Nicarao on the shores of Lago de Nicaragua at a spot still marked by the Cruz de España (p136). The chief famously subjected González to hours of inquiry about science, technology and history; González famously gave Nicarao an ultimatum: to convert to Christianity, or else. Nicarao ordered his people to comply, but the Spanish did not live up to their end of the bargain; other native groups were thus warned.

Six months later González made Cacique Diriangén the same offer; Diriangén went with 'or else.' His troops were outgunned and eventually destroyed, but they inspired further resistance. After conquering four main Pacific tribes – 700,000 Chorotega, Nicarao, Maribios and Chontal were reduced to 35,000 in 25 years – the nations of the Central Highlands halted Spanish expansion at the mountains, with grim losses.

Undaunted, in 1524 Francisco Fernández de Córdoba founded Granada and León, which was later moved after being buried by Volcán Momotombo. In 1633 the first European settlement was founded on the Atlantic Coast by the grandly named British Providence Company, a contingent of pirates (see the boxed text, p113).

By forging alliances with the disgruntled indigenous groups and committing acts of considerable derring-do, pirates helped weaken Spain's hold over the New World. This, combined with conflict in Europe, helped bring about Central American independence.

Nicaraguan Independence & Civil War

Nicaragua won independence from Spain in 1821, and the resulting power vacuum led to civil war. Conservative Granada had long played rival to the colonial capital, Liberal León – and with independence, its position was suddenly vulnerable. The compromise – naming the fishing village of Managua as national capital in 1852 – only interrupted hostilities.

Desperate, León hired filibusterer William Walker (see the boxed text, below) to help, naïvely failing to realize that the Tennessee mercenary had his own agenda. After Walker was finally defeated and León completely humiliated, the conservatives took power for 30 years of peace, if not prosperity. Their cozy relationship with the US became an emotional issue, and when Liberal General José Santos Zelaya took power in an 1893 coup, he rejected a US proposal to build the interocean canal through Nicaragua out of hand.

When the USA began construction in Panama instead, Zelaya tried to backtrack, approaching Great Britain, Germany and

Japan about another canal. His reforms – for instance, repealing laws requiring unemployed campesinos (farmers) to pick plantation coffee for subsistence wages – had already alienated the upper classes, thus Zelaya was politically weak when US marines arrived.

For the next two decades the USA dominated politics in Nicaragua. In 1914 the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty was signed, granting the USA exclusive rights to a canal that it had no intention of building, just to shut out the competition. The occupation's casual brutality – torture, political killings, dragging the bodies of dead rebels through city streets – intimidated most Nicaraguans and inspired one teenage boy, Augusto C Sandino (see the boxed text, p222).

Sandino & the Somoza Dynasty

The Liberals mounted a noble, if ineffective, resistance to the US occupation, which wilted completely in the late 1920s. But Sandino – by now commander of his own personal army – continued fighting. Although domestic pressure forced the US

WILLIAM WALKER

It's a cliché to accuse Nashville, Tennessee-born William Walker of a Napoleon complex – at 5ft 2in he'd suffered childhood taunts of 'missy' while caring for his ailing mother. His social life thus lacking, by age 22 he spoke several languages and had degrees in medicine and law.

Quite progressive at the outset of his career, Walker became editor of the left-wing *San Francisco Herald*, where he spoke out against slavery. After the deaths of his young wife and beloved mother, however, and after the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe where Hidalgo ceded half of Mexico to the United States – leaving the other half tantalizingly independent – Walker decided to change careers.

Filibustering, a word derived from an old Dutch term for pirate, had become the Spanish verb for invading another country as a private citizen, then unofficially receiving aid from your home government. Walker's first filibustering gig attacked La Paz, Mexico, where he pulled off a stunning, if short-lived, victory against the larger, better equipped (but totally unprepared) Mexican army. Walker raised the flag of the Republic of Sonora and declared himself president, then was chased back over the border; only 10 of the original expedition survived. The venture played well in the press, however, and Walker was offered a job by the town of León.

Dubbed 'The Immortals' by the tabloid press, Walker's army landed in San Juan del Sur and easily took Granada – but didn't cede control to the Leónese. Walker was instead elected president by the largest margin in Nicaraguan history, and US president Franklin Pierce was the first to recognize the not-at-all suspicious new government. Walker reinstated slavery, declared English the official language and launched an attack on Costa Rica, a cholera-ridden debacle that saw both armies decimated by disease. Other Central American armies fell on Walker, forcing him into retreat and, as he passed his old home he set it alight, leaving behind the sign 'Here was Granada.'

Despite his defeat, Walker returned to the USA a hero and easily raised enough cash for two return trips. The first ended with his capture by US troops, who returned him home, the second with his capture by the British Navy, which turned him over to Honduran authorities, who had Walker executed by firing squad in 1860.

military to pull out of the country as the Great Depression ground on, they trained the National Guard, under the command of loyal bureaucrat Anastasio Somoza García, as an insurance policy.

In February 1934, after a dinner party celebrating peace accords with the new Liberal president Sacasa, Sandino and his men were murdered outside the Presidential Palace. Somoza, a guest at that party, would go on to overthrow Sacasa in 1937. His US-backed dictatorship, veneered with fraudulent elections and puppet governments, allowed Somoza to amass landholdings equal to all of El Salvador.

After his 1956 assassination in León, Somoza was succeeded by his elder son, Luis Somoza Debayle, the best of the Somozas. His innovative projects were supported by the US Kennedy administration, which in return was graciously granted full use of Puerto Cabezas for launching its disastrous 1961 invasion of Cuba. Somoza called for actual elections shortly afterwards, lost handily to Liberal Renée Schick, then quietly retired. His younger brother, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, was not as eager to give up his birthright.

Luis died in 1967 and Anastasio assumed the presidency. The West Point graduate used the National Guard ruthlessly, stifling a growing call for democracy. An increasingly militant group of university students calling themselves the Sandinistas tried to counter him, but few thought them a viable alternative.

A 6.3 earthquake in the early morning of December 23, 1972 changed all that. Fifteen square kilometers of Managua's city center were reduced to rubble; 6000 people were killed. The world, moved by the holiday devastation, donated aid on an unprecedented scale; Somoza diverted almost everything to family and friends.

The Sandinistas were, with one powerful betrayal, legitimized. Nicaraguans from every walk of life threw in their support, and over the next five years the nation became ungovernable. The National Guard destroyed entire cities and assassinated *La Prensa* editor Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, still somehow failing to win the hearts and minds of the people. Almost every country in the Americas and Europe cut ties with the Somoza regime...except the US.

The revolution marched to victory on July 19, 1979 and Somoza fled the country. He was assassinated shortly afterwards in Paraguay.

Revolutionary Government & the Contra War

The Sandinistas inherited a country in shambles. Poverty, homelessness, illiteracy and staggeringly inadequate health care were just a few of the widespread problems. Some 50,000 people had been killed in the revolutionary struggle and 150,000 were made refugees.

The FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front) and prominent anti-Somoza moderates (including Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, widow of the martyred Pedro Joaquín Chamorro) set up a 'Junta of Five' to administer the country. The constitution was suspended, congress was dissolved and the National Guard was replaced by the Sandinista People's Army. Health-care reforms and a widely lauded Literacy Crusade, which cut illiteracy from more than 50% to 13% in two years, earned the revolutionary government accolades on the world stage.

But the junta was rigged: two of the supposed moderates were secretly aligned with FSLN commander Daniel Ortega, and the other two – Chamorro and businessman Alfonso Robelo – resigned within the year. Unchaperoned, Sandinistas nationalized more than 300 businesses and passed the Agrarian Reform Law, nationalizing 'non-productive lands' larger than 500 *manzanas* (blocks of 350 hectares). Though the number of landowners went from 10,000 to 30,000, such reforms did little to quell international concerns about all those Soviet and Cuban advisors, or allegations that the Sandinistas were providing arms to leftist rebels in El Salvador.

In January 1981, just days after taking office, US president Ronald Reagan cancelled Nicaragua's aid package and publicly committed his administration to helping the National Guard regroup and re-arm as the Contras, whose mission to overthrow the Sandinista-led Nicaraguan government would last a decade. Reagan constructed bases for Contras in Honduras and Costa Rica, providing millions in training and material aid.

TICOS, NICAS & THE GALLO PINTO WARS

Like so many Central American conflicts, this, too, can be reduced to basic grains: both Costa Rica and Nicaragua claim to have invented *gallo pinto*, that breakfast treat involving rice, beans, oil and salt. In Costa Rica they usually use black beans; in Nicaragua, red. And if anyone, in either country, asks which you prefer, don't answer. It's a trap.

Both countries have won awards for their version of the breakfast dish. A year after Costa Rica earned a spot in the *Guinness World Records* for cooking the largest batch of *gallo pinto* in human history, clearly a direct challenge to Nicaraguan nationalistic pride, Pharaoh's Casino in Managua decided to pick up the glove. For 16 hours four chefs and 30 cooks stirred the mix with shovels in a Humvee-sized basin. The result was 18,400 servings exactly, making Costa Rica's *gallo pinto*, with only 13,000 servings, look like, well, a hill of beans.

'The idea arose after Costa Rica assumed that this typical Nicaraguan dish would be theirs if they cooked a lot of it,' explained Pharaoh's manager Héctor García, hopefully in jest. 'Nicaragua has now done the same, even surpassing our goal in the response and defense of our national dish.' Perhaps coincidentally, Costa Rica took the Río San Juan dispute (see the boxed text, p276) to the World Court at the Hague one month later.

The civil war between the Contras and government forces intensified after Daniel Ortega won apparently free and fair elections in 1984. He declared a state of emergency, shut down the press and initiated a military draft, his troops graciously retooled by the Soviet Union. Contras then targeted the food supply, and over half of the year's wheat and bean crops were lost. In 1985, the US implemented a full economic blockade, including food and medicine. More than 60,000 soldiers – roughly half from each side – and 50,000 civilians died.

In 1987, Costa Rican President Oscar Arias asked five Central American presidents to sign a desperate peace plan, which also aimed to stop the horrific civil wars tearing apart El Salvador and Guatemala. Among other things, it called for an end to all military aid, specifically from the US and Soviet Union.

All of them signed. Arias was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Reagan criticized the treaty as 'deeply flawed' and, according to Arias, his administration did everything it could to undermine the process. It failed. By 1993 Central America was at peace for the first time in generations.

Nicaragua at Peace

The Arias accords succeeded not only because both sides truly thirsted for peace, but because both were having problems with their arms dealers. The Soviet Union, months away from collapse, was mired in its own political upheaval, while the

Reagan administration had just been busted in an embarrassing debacle known as the Iran-Contra Affair (see p30).

In accordance with the Arias accords, Ortega lifted press censorship, enforced a ceasefire and called for general elections to be held in 1990. His second presidential bid was opposed by a coalition, the Unión Nacional Opositora (ONU; National Opposition Union), united only in their opposition to the FSLN, the embargo and the war. Their candidate, former Junta leader and *La Prensa* publisher Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, became the first female head of state in the Americas. Conservative commentators speculated that Ortega would refuse to step down, but the transition of power was relatively peaceful, although there were some lovely parting gifts (farms, islands) to the Sandinista faithful, a move known as 'La Piñata.' The USA finally called off the embargo, but the country was in ruins.

Although Chamorro had been perceived as a weak candidate, she rose to the office. Two of her children had been Sandinistas, two of them Contras, thus all Nicaraguans understood that national reconciliation was no abstraction to her. She decentralized the government, brought the police and military under civilian control, and cut the military's numbers from almost 95,000 at the war's peak to less than 20,000. Her best efforts were thwarted by unpleasant realities – poverty, hunger and continued US interest in the region – but

for all the compromises she was forced to make she constructed a stable foundation upon which the nation could rebuild.

Chamorro's replacement, who handily beat Ortega (despite the FSLN's new, less threatening campaign color – pink!), was a blast from the dictatorial past: corpulent Liberal Arnoldo Alemán, voted one of the world's 10 most corrupt politicians by the UN Human Rights subcommission. Alemán siphoned some US\$100 million from government coffers, which may be chump change where you're from, but not in Nicaragua. Even after Hurricane Mitch savaged the country in 1998 – killing 4000 people and destroying a surreal 70% of the infrastructure – he stayed on the take. When current (at research time) president Enrique Bolaños, also of the Liberal Party, took office in 2001, he promised to put Alemán in jail. To everyone's surprise Bolaños actually did it. But it was too late, in a way.

Current Events

In 1999 perennial FSLN presidential candidate Daniel Ortega, honing in on Arnoldo Alemán's post-scandal political weakness like a bull shark in a kiddie pool, joined with the disgraced president in El Pacto. The secret (for 10 minutes) agreement has effectively ensnared the country in a two-party electoral system while simultaneously keeping Alemán out of prison, a neat trick if you can pull it off.

Despite these Machiavellian manipulations Ortega lost the 2000 presidential elections, though his influence remains at least equal to President Bolaños': the Central American Free Trade Agreement (Cafta; see the boxed text, p32) couldn't pass until the two had a long, probably symbolic, meeting behind closed doors. The real upset was in the Región Autónoma del Atlántico Norte (RAAN; North Atlantic Autonomous Region) where the Yatama political party, blocked from running for office, called on its almost entirely indigenous constituency to boycott the elections. A Sandinista candidate won in Bilwi – a bit shocking in the Contra stronghold – and the World Court ruled that elections were tainted. In the 2005 municipal elections Yatama returned to the ballot and won three major towns.

Banking on similar international pressure against the pact, current presidential

candidate Herty Lewites, a much-loved former Managua mayor and the brains behind Hertylandia theme park, has founded his own political party: Alianza Herty. Lewites, a former Sandinista gunrunner and member of the FSLN's inner circle, mistakenly believed that there were primaries for his party's presidential candidates. Daniel Ortega wasted no time correcting Lewites, excommunicating him from the FSLN and forbidding him to use red and black (and, presumably, pink) in his campaign.

Lewites went with baby blue and regularly appeared with the man who should have been his top political rival, Eduardo Montealegre, the Liberal stalwart who refused to play puppet to the not-quite-incarcerated Alemán, and was forced to found Alianza Liberal Nicaragüense – Partido Conservador (ALN-PC) to make his bid for the presidency.

In the meantime, at the time of going to print, most Nicaraguans are just hoping that they get through the November 2006 elections peacefully, if only to keep rising tourism revenues flowing in. There is the sense that if Ortega wins or, worse, if there are violent protests, international investment will flee the country. Regardless, the pluralistic process, and an economy that continues to expand no matter what intrigue is on in Managua, keeps things optimistic on the home front.

THE CULTURE

The National Psyche

Nicaragua has a fierce cultural streak and prides itself on home-grown literature, dance, art, music and cuisine, consciously resisting gnawing globalization at its borders. This spiritual independence is a holdover not only from the revolution and Contra War, it goes back to Spanish colonization when indigenous nations won limited autonomy at enormous personal cost, which was considered worth it.

Nicaragua also still suffers from a bit of post-traumatic stress disorder. Spanish speakers will hear plenty of stories involving tanks, explosions and aerial bombings, not to mention 'the day the family cow wandered into the minefield' stories. Former Sandinistas and Contras work, play and take communion together, however, and any tensions you might

expect seem to have been addressed and worked through. Opinions differ about the Sandinista years, but both sides will always agree to a good debate. Jump in and you'll learn more about the political scene than you ever would by reading a paper.

Of course attitudes differ from place to place. Residents of the English- and Miskito-speaking Atlantic Coast rarely consider themselves part of Nicaragua proper, and many would prefer to be returned to the British Empire than suffer further oppression by the 'Spaniards' on the other side of the country. The cattle ranchers of the Central Highlands resist interference from the federal government, while coffee pickers in Matagalpa or students in León are willing to walk to Managua to complain to the government if they perceive that any injustice has been done.

Lifestyle

Nicaragua is a country in motion. One in five Nicas live outside the country, most in the United States, Costa Rica and Honduras. Waves of migration to the cities, which began in the 1950s, have left more than 55% of the population urban. Most internal immigrants are young women, and most go to Managua; men tend to follow the harvest into rural areas and the surrounding countries. Regular jobs are difficult to find, and more than half of employed Nicaraguans are in the 'informal sector' – street vendors, maids, artisans – with no benefits and no job security.

Wealth is distributed unequally, with the moneyed elite living much as they would in Miami or elsewhere, hanging out at the malls, talking on cell phones and driving in SUVs that here, at least, occasionally see a dirt road. For the vast majority of Nicaraguans, however, just putting food on the table is a daily struggle, with 50% living below the international poverty line and perhaps a third of the country subsisting on two meals or less per day; almost one fifth of children are at risk of problems relating to malnourishment.

Women, especially in rural sectors, are likely to work outside of the home, and do half of all agricultural labor. This stems in part from ideals espoused by the Sandinistas, who considered women equal play-

ers in the remodeling of the country, but also from necessity, as many men died or were maimed during the wars, and later emigrated to find work; after the Contra War, the country was more than 55% female. The strong women's movement is fascinating; check out **Boletina** (www.puntos.org.ni in Spanish) to learn more.

Population

With 5.5 million people spread across 130,000 sq km, Nicaragua is the least densely populated country in Central America, but it's uncommonly diverse. The CIA World Factbook estimates that 69% of the population is mestizo (mixed indigenous and white), 17% white, 9% black and 5% indigenous. Ineter (Nicaraguan Institute of Territorial Studies) claims that almost 500,000 people are indigenous: Miskito (150,000), Mayangna/Sumo (13,500) and Garífuna (7000), all with some African heritage, occupy the Caribbean Coast alongside the Rama (1350), and all are thought to have originated in South America. In the Central and Northern Highlands, the Cacaopoeras and Matagalpas (97,500) may be Maya in origin, while the Chorotegas (82,000), the Subtiavas (40,500) and the Nahoas (19,000) have similarities to the Aztecs.

European heritage is just as diverse. The Spanish settled the Pacific Coast, with a wave of German immigrants in the 1800s leaving the Northern Highlands surprisingly *chele* (white, from *leche*, or milk). Many of those blue eyes you see on the Atlantic Coast can be traced back to British, French and Dutch pirates.

The original African immigrants were shipwrecked, escaped or freed slaves who began arriving almost as soon as the Spanish. Another wave of Creoles and West Indians arrived in the late 1800s to work on the banana and cacao plantations of the east coast. Mix all that together, simmer for a few hundred years, and you get an uncommonly good-looking people who consider racism a bit silly.

SPORTS

It's just not a weekend in Nicaragua without the crack of a baseball bat, but there really are other sports in Nicaragua, though you may have to look.

Football, or soccer, is growing in popularity and the **National Fútbol League** (www.fenifut.org.ni in Spanish) has a website with schedules and stats. The Mexican government, clearly shocked by Nicaraguan indifference to the sport, is building a new 20,000-seat stadium in Managua, which may one day fill.

Cockfighting is another popular spectator sport, where beautiful alpha roosters with knives strapped to their feet slash each other apart in teeny tiny bullrings; it may be fun if you can stomach it. If you can't, check out *Gente de Gallos* magazine, which includes breeding tips, detailed photos and a special history feature in each of its issues.

Bullfights, which take place during *fiestas patronales* (saints days), are considerably less gory as it's illegal to kill the bull. This leaves the exhibition somewhat point-free, but watching drunks try to ride the exasperated bulls is always good fun.

Many towns have pickup soccer, baseball, volleyball and basketball games, and foreigners are more than welcome to join in. Hey, it's an opportunity to interact with the locals without worrying about the subjunctive tenses.

RELIGION

Although Nicaragua's majority religion is Catholic – between 55% and 70% of the country – Nicaraguan Catholicism retains many indigenous elements, as the décor and ceremonies in such churches as San Juan Bautista de Subtiava and Masaya's María Magdalena make clear. Liberation theology also made its mark on Nicaraguan Catholicism, influencing priest and poet Ernesto Cardenal (see the boxed text, p267) to advocate armed resistance to the Somoza dictatorship. Though he was publicly chastised and later defrocked by Pope John Paul II, Cardenal remains a beloved religious leader. Nicaragua's incredible selection of Catholic churches and fascinating *fiestas patronales* remain highlights of the country.

On the Atlantic Coast, Moravian missionaries from Germany began arriving in the early 1800s, and today their red-and-white wooden churches are the centerpieces of many Miskito and Mayangna towns. More recently, over 100 Protestant sects, most US-based and collectively referred to as *evangelistas*, have converted at least 15% of the population; in fact, many of the foreigners you'll meet in rural Nica-

TAKE ME OUT TO THE BEISBALL GAME

The best afternoon out in all Nicaragua is appreciating Nicaragua's national pastime: baseball. Americans may want to brush up on the rules, as tourists from other countries will want you to explain what's going on.

Despite the urban myth, Nicaraguan baseball pre-dates the arrival of the United States Marines in 1909, although their presence certainly gave the game a boost. The first recorded baseball series in Nicaragua took place in 1887, when two Bluefields teams – Southern and Four Roses – played a seven-game set. Baseball made its official Pacific Coast debut in 1891, and the first national championship took place in 1915.

The Atlantic and Pacific leagues battled separately for decades, but came together in 1932; an Atlantic team won the season 40-3. Nicaragua would nevertheless rise to become a baseball power, on par with Cuba, the Dominican Republic and the USA, and has produced at least five major-league legends: Tony Chevez, Albert Williams, David Green, Porfirio Altamirano and, of course, Hall of Famer Denis Martinez, for whom the national stadium is named.

The **National Baseball League** (www.ibw.com.ni/~beisnica in Spanish) begins the season November 14 with the *primera vuelta* (first flight) and *segunda vuelta* (second flight), which pit all seven teams – Estelí, Chinandega, León, Granada, Managua, San Fernando (Masaya) and Costa Atlantica (Bluefields) – against each other. The top four go to the semifinals, played between mid-February and March 25. The winners go for seven games March 26 to April 4, when the national champion takes the crown.

Of course, there's no reason to pay extra to see a pro team unless you want to. Municipal and department leagues have free or cheap games almost year-round at stadiums and parks across the country, which is almost more fun.

ragua are missionaries, who may try to convert you too.

Most of Nicaragua's tiny Jewish community fled in 1979, when the country's one synagogue was abandoned and destroyed, but Judaism is beginning to make a comeback, perhaps inspired by current renegade presidential candidate Herty Lewites, son of Jewish immigrants who fled Eastern Europe during WWII. Perhaps most interesting, almost 10% of Nicaraguans say they are atheist or agnostic, unusual in Latin America and a huge relief if you're one too.

ARTS

Literature

Nicaragua, as any book will tell you, is the only country in the world that celebrates literature, particularly poetry, with appropriate passion, revering its writers with a fervor reserved (in more developed countries) for people like Paris Hilton. Both major daily papers run a literary supplement in their Friday editions, high-school kids form poetry clubs, and any campesino picking coffee in the isolated mountains can tell you who the greatest poet in history is: Rubén Darío (see the boxed text, p35), voice of the nation. They will then recite a poem by Darío, quite possibly followed by a few of their own.

The nation's original epic composition, the Nica equivalent to *Beowulf* or *Chanson de Roland*, is *El Güegüense*, a burlesque dating from the 1600s. A morality play of sorts, it pits an indigenous Nicaraguan businessman against corrupt and inept Spanish authorities; using only his sly wit and a few multilingual double entendres, the Nica ends up on top.

León has been home to the nation's greatest poets, including Darío, Azarias H Pallais, Salomon de la Selva and Alfonso Cortés, the last of whom did his best work while going insane in Darío's childhood home. A Rubén Darío tribute site (www.dariana.com) has biographies and bibliographies of major Nicaraguan writers. The most important modern writers include Pablo Antonio Cuadra, a former editor of *La Prensa*, and Ernesto Cardenal.

One of the few Nicaraguan writers regularly translated into English is Giaconda Belli (www.giocondabelli.com in Spanish),

who was working undercover with the Sandinistas when she won the prestigious Casa de las Americas international poetry prize. Her internationally acclaimed work is both sexual and revolutionary, and is the best way to get a chick's-eye view of Nicaragua in the 1970s.

Music & Dance

Folkloric music and dance received a huge boost from the revolution, which sought to mine Nicaraguan culture for cultural resources rather than import more popular options, quite possibly at great cost. As a result, you'll probably be able to see a musical or dance performance during even a short visit, the most convenient being *Noches Verbenas* held every Thursday evening at the National Artisans Market in Masaya. Also check at cultural centers, close to the parque central (central park) in most larger towns, or at the municipal theaters in Granada, León and Managua, to see what's on. *Fiestas patronales* are a good time to catch a performance, which in the Northern Highlands will likely have a polka component.

Polka lovers should keep an eye out for Don Felipe Urrutia's *La Flor de Tuna*; his native Valle de Tunosa de Estelí is famed for polka masters like Guilbaldo Sosa and Carlos Benavides. Other artists to keep an eye out for include Alejandro Vega Matus, sometimes credited with writing the music for the national anthem; Luis A Delgadillo, founder of the National School of Music and Symphony Orchestra; and Camilo Zapata, known for *Solar de Monimbó*.

Perhaps the most important musical form is marimba, usually played on xylophones made of precious wood with names like 'The Lovers,' 'Dance of the Black Woman,' and 'Fat Honey,' which you'll enjoy over a cold glass of *chichi* (mildly alcoholic corn beverage) at some shady parque central. The guardians of this and other traditional forms of Nicaraguan music are the **Mejía Godoy brothers** (www.mejiagodoy.org in Spanish), who you can (and should) catch live in Managua. For the latest in the Nica rock scene, check out popular program **El Expreso Imaginario** (www.ibw.com.ni/~expreso in Spanish) or **Radio Pirata** (pirata.tk). These are radio stations whose websites have lots of info on the music scene.

Theater

Traditional music, dance and theater are difficult to separate; all are mixed together with wild costumes to create spectacles that generally also have a religious component plus plenty of fireworks. Pieces you'll see performed by streetside beggars and professional troupes include *La Gigantona*, with an enormous Spanish woman and teeny tiny Nicaraguan guy; the lady in question was probably real. Another common piece is *The Dance of the Old People*, in which an older gentleman woos a sexy grandma, but once she gives in, he starts chasing younger women in the audience.

Modern theater is not well developed in Nicaragua, and only major towns have performance spaces. One of the most successful recent shows has been *El Nica* (see the boxed text, p85), a monologue about being a migrant worker in Costa Rica.

There's also a growing independent film scene, and you can catch very low-budget, usually documentary films, usually with overtly feminist or progressive themes, at cultural centers – but never movie theaters, which show mostly attempted Hollywood blockbusters.

Sculpture & Painting

The oldest artistic tradition in Nicaragua is ceramics, dating from about 2000 BC, with simple, functional vessels, developing into more sculptural representations by around AD 300. By the time the Spanish arrived, Nicaraguan ceramics were complex, artistic and often ceremonial, and indicate a pronounced Aztec influence in both design and decoration. Remember that it's illegal to remove pre-Colombian ceramics from Nicaragua – they can theoretically put you in jail for it.

Today, top-quality ceramics are most famously produced in San Juan de Orient, which is known for colorfully painted fine white clays and heavier, carved pots; in Mozonte, near Ocotol; and at Matagalpa and Jinotega which are renowned for their black ceramics.

Almost as ancient an art, stone carving probably became popular around AD 800, when someone realized that the soft volcanic basalt could be shaped with obsidian tools imported from Mexico and Guatemala. Petroglyphs (see the boxed text,

p140), usually fairly simple, linear drawings carved into the surface of a stone, are all over the country, and it's easy to arrange tours from Isla Ometepe, Granada and Matagalpa.

Stone statues (see the boxed text, p117), expressive and figurative, not to mention tall (one tops 5m) are rarer, but also worth seeing; the best museums are in Granada and Juigalpa. Much finer stone statues are being produced today, using polished, translucent soapstone worked in San Juan de Limay; some of the best examples are in the nearby Estelí cathedral.

Painting apparently arrived with the Spanish (though there's evidence that both statues and petroglyphs were once more vividly colored), the earliest works being mostly religious in nature; the best places to see paintings are in León, at the Museo de Arte Sacre and the Ortiz-Gurdían Foundation.

The latter also traces Nicaraguan painting through the present, including the Romantic and Impressionistic work of Rodrigo Peñalba, who founded the School of Beaux Arts, and the Praxis Group of the 1960s, led by Alejandro Arostegui and possessed of a heavy-handed social realism, depicting hunger, poverty and torture.

In the 1970s, Ernesto Cardenal founded an art colony on the Archipiélago de Solentiname, an isolated group of islands in the southeast corner of Lago de Nicaragua, today internationally renowned for the gem-toned paintings and balsa-wood sculptures that so colorfully (and accurately) capture the tropical landscape. If you can't get to the islands yourself, try the Masaya markets, or any of the art galleries in Managua or Granada.

Murals are another art form that took hold in the 1970s and 1980s, and all over the country (standout cities include León, Estelí and Managua) you'll find incredible pieces; check out www.muralesdeoctubre.com (in Spanish) for a sneak peak at what's going on now. A more venerable form of the art is on display every Semana Santa in the Subtiava neighborhood of León, when 'sawdust carpets,' scenes painstakingly rendered in colored sawdust, are created throughout the neighborhood, then swirled together as religious processions go by.

ENVIRONMENT

About 18.2% of Nicaragua is federally protected as part of 76 different wildlife areas with nine different levels of management. The system is not even close to perfect, and problems with poaching and deforestation are rife. But the government, perhaps inspired by the ability of neighboring Costa Rica to sell a walk in the woods for US\$14 per person, has deemed it worth fighting for, and in 2005 it even committed Navy vessels to help save the baby sea turtles (see the boxed text, p48).

Marena (Ministry of Environment & Natural Resources; www.marena.gob.ni) administrates most wildlife areas, often through other public and private organizations. There's a Marena office in most major towns, and while tourism is not its main job, staff may be able to find guides, transportation and lodging for more-difficult-to-access parks. They can at least point you toward folks who can help, which could be, for example, a women's organic coffee collective. Have fun!

The Land

The formation of the Central American Isthmus began about 60 million years ago, only connecting the two massive American continents for the first time three million years ago. Marking the volcanic crush of the Cocos and Caribbean tectonic plates, the Maribios Volcanic Chain is one of the most volcanic places in the world. There are 58 major volcanic formations, including 28 volcanoes and eight crater lakes, including Reserva Natural Laguna de Apoyo, with hotels and a Spanish school, Laguna Tiscapa in downtown Managua, and Laguna Asososca, with no development at all.

Nicaragua's highest mountains, however, are metamorphic, not volcanic, and contiguous with both the Rocky Mountains and Andes; they go by several names, including Cordillera Dariense (after Rubén Darío), and inspired the name of this book's Northern Highlands section. Two of the most accessible reserves up top are Reserva Natural Mirafior, close to Estelí, and Reserva Natural Cerro Apante, a hike from Matagalpa. Or go deeper, to Reserva Natural Macizos de Peñas Blancas, actually part of the largest protected swath of rain forest north of the Amazon, Bosawás (see the boxed text, p219).

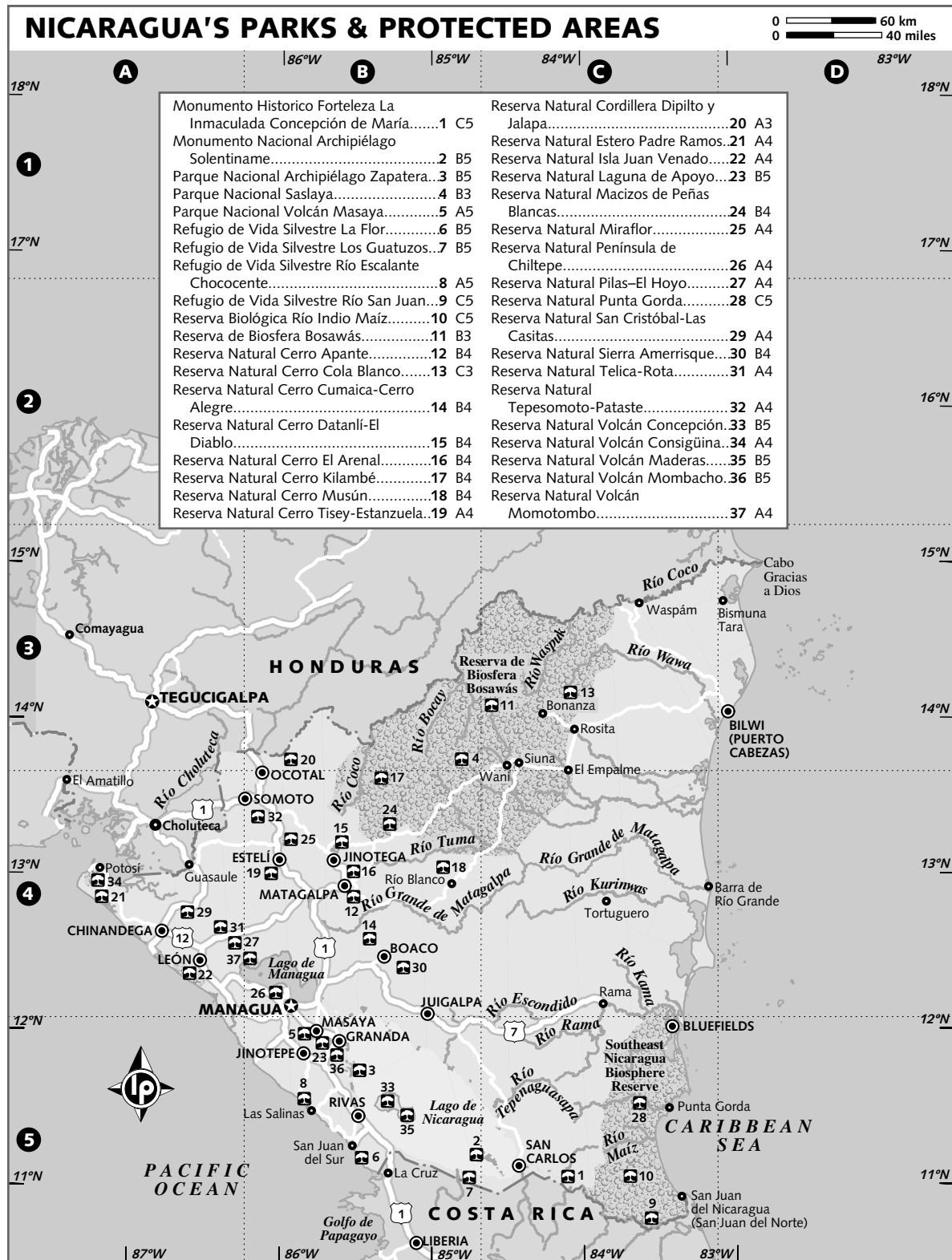
La Reserva de Biosfera Bosawás (Bosawás Biosphere Reserve; from Río BOcay, Cerro SASlaya and Río WASouk), 730,000 hectares of humid and tropical and subtropical forest, is also accessible by the largest river in Central America, the Río Coco (560km). The Caribbean lowlands, remarkable for their dry pine savannas and countless wetlands, have four major river systems, and the easiest way in is along the Río San Juan (p275), a Unesco Biosphere reserve.

Nicaragua also has the two largest lakes in Central America, Lago de Managua (1064 sq km) and Lago de Nicaragua (8264 sq km), a freshwater echo of the Caribbean Sea with more than 500 islands, some protected, including the petroglyphs of Isla Zapatera (p129), as well as wonderful wetlands, like Refugio de Vida Silvestre los Guatuzos (Los Guatuzos Wildlife Refuge; p274).

Wildlife ANIMALS

Nicaragua is home to about 1800 vertebrate species, including 250 mammals, and 30,000 species in total, including 688 bird species (around 500 resident and 150 migratory). While Nicaragua has no endemic bird species, 19 of Central America's 21 endemics are represented here. Nicaragua's spectacular national bird, the turquoise-browed mot-mot, has a distinctive notched tail. Other birds people come to see are the uracas, or huge bluejays, of Isla de Ometepe, the canaries who live inside the fuming crater of Volcán Masaya and beautiful waterfall of Reserva Natural Chocoyero-El Brujo, and beautiful waterfowl of the Río San Juan.

Other visitors are more interested in the undersea wildlife, which on the Pacific side includes tuna, rooster fish and snook. From May to September, you can try for wahoo and dorado, while sailfish bite through to October. Note that deep-sea fishing is more work, as the continental shelf lies further offshore (more than 50km) in Nicaragua than other places. Lago de Nicaragua and the Río San Juan have their own scaly menagerie, including sawfish, the toothy-grinned gaspar, mojarra, guapote, and most importantly, tarpon, as well as the only freshwater sharks in the world.



Endangered Species

Nicaragua has about 200 species on the endangered list, including four types of sea turtles (see the boxed text, p48) and two types of iguanas, both traditional food sources, as well as boa constrictors and alligators, which will feed your family in a pinch. Golden frogs and blood frogs, like

amphibians across the globe, are also dwindling. Endangered birds include quetzals, peregrine falcons and macaws, with two of Central America's last viable population in Reserva Natural Volcán Cosigüina and Reserva Indio-Maíz. Several endangered or threatened mammals also make their homes here, including howler, white face

and spider monkeys; several kinds of cats, including jaguars and mountain lions; as well as aquatic species like manatee and dolphins. Offshore fisheries are being, or have been, depleted of oysters, lobster, green turtles and all manner of fish.

PLANTS

Nicaragua has four major life zones, each with very different ecosystems and plant life. Dry Tropical Forests are perhaps the least impressive but also the rarest, as their location – below 500m, often right by the beach – and seven-month dry season make them perfect places to plant crops and build resort hotels. Most plants lose their leaves by January, except in the largest remaining mangrove stand in the world, partially pre-

served as Reserva Natural Isla Juan Venado and Reserva Natural Estero Padre Ramos.

The North-Central Subtropical Forests vary widely in altitude (100m to 2107m), temperature and rainfall (800mm to 2000mm), with three main classifications: Subtropical Dry Forest, with sandy acidic soils and four species of pine trees (this is their southernmost natural border) can be seen in the RAAN and Segovias, including Jalapa, with access via private reserves; Humid Tropical Forests, with poor soils that make for lousy farming and are therefore still intact; and Cloud Forest, above 1200m, with epiphytes, mosses, lichens and lots of orchids, which you can see at Reserva Natural Cerro Datanlí-El Diablo, among many other places.

WHEN THE EARTH MOVES *Robert Olson*

Geology doesn't often move fast, but when it does, as in Nicaragua, it can be devastating. The greatest hazard in Nicaragua is landslides, which can and have buried entire villages. Volcanoes produce unstable slopes, and when heavy rains come the slopes give way. The worst is called a *lahar*, a river of mud that can remove bridges, towns and roads; this was the cause of most deaths during Hurricane Mitch, when the crater lake of Volcán Casita gave way, killing 3600 people. But volcanic eruptions, tsunamis and earthquakes are also issues.

So what causes all of this exciting geology? Plate tectonics. Nicaragua, like most of Central America, is on the Caribbean Plate, which is stationary. The Cocos Plate, to the west, is moving east and colliding with the Caribbean Plate. (The velocity of this collision is about 10cm per year, or about four times as fast as your fingernails grow). Since something must give way, the Cocos Plate descends beneath the Caribbean Plate, a process called subduction.

The Cocos Plate, which has been detected 40km below the surface, is composed of rock that is less dense than that of the Caribbean Plate, and saturated with seawater. When this rock reaches a depth of a few kilometers, it melts and rises through the overlying rock, reaching the surface as volcanoes. Nicaragua has 28 volcanoes, some rising to nearly 1800m, and all within about 50km of the Pacific coast. Most are considered inactive, but that is a relative term.

Plate motion creates other interesting geology. Just west, on the Cocos Plate, are remnants of ocean floor spreading centers with pillow lavas and black smokers. Because some of the Cocos Plate is being scraped off to pile up on top of the Caribbean Plate, the West Coast of Nicaragua is littered with recognizable pillow lavas, which look like pillows, but can be as large as automobiles! These can be hard to find because only geologists care about them, but keep your eyes open.

The process of subduction causes stress to build up in the plates, and it is relieved by earthquakes. Because many of the earthquakes occur beneath the Pacific, they cause tsunamis. The earthquake and tsunami of September 1992 caused waves up to 10m to strike the coast. At least 170 people died and 13,000 were left homeless. Earlier tsunamis occurred in 1854 and 1902.

Earthquakes have shaped Nicaragua as well. Not only did the 1972 earthquake devastate Managua, but a 1931 quake had already initiated discussion about relocating the city. And in 2000, two earthquakes in two days destroyed villages to the southeast.

Plate motion also created Lago de Nicaragua which, with an area exceeding 9000 sq km, was once a part of the Pacific. It was separated from the Pacific by uplift of the land which now forms the coast, and by accumulation of volcanic deposits. It gradually became a freshwater lake, but still contains some saltwater fish species.

PARKS & RESERVES IN NICARAGUA

Major park or natural area	Features	Activities
Parque Nacional Volcán Masaya (p100)	most heavily venting volcano in Central America, possibly gateway to hell; lava tunnels; parakeets	driving to the edge of an active crater, bird-watching, hiking
Reservas Natural Volcán Concepción and Volcán Maderas (p138)	one island, two volcanoes: gently smoking Concepción and dormant Maderas, crowned in cloud forest	hiking, petroglyph hunting, swimming, kayaking
Refugio de Vida Silvestre Río San Juan (p260)	epic riverboat ride, stunning Spanish fortress, island art colony, macaws, trees full of egrets, giant tarpon	canoeing, kayaking, shopping, hot springs, fishing, horseback rides
Reserva de Biosfera Bosawás (p228)	largest reserve in Central America, gold mines	testing your limits, trail-less hikes, shopping
Reserva Natural Cerro Musún (p242)	quetzals, cloud forests, huge waterfalls, real trails	hiking, birdwatching, swimming
Reserva Natural Mirafior (p197)	cloud-forest reserve innovatively managed by agricultural cooperative: it's nature and culture!	milking cows, hiking, swimming in waterfalls, admiring orchids
Reserva Natural Cerro Tisey-Estanzuela (p198)	cloud forests, views across the Maribios volcanic chain, goat cheese	hiking, swimming, eating cheese
Reserva Natural Tepesomoto-Pataste (p205)	the Río Coco is born – in the 'Grand Canyon' of Nicaragua	Hiking, rock scrambles, freezing cold water
Reserva Natural Isla Juan Venado (p176)	Sandy Pacific barrier island; mangroves, sea turtles, lagoons	boating, surfing, camping, swimming
Parque Nacional Archipiélago Zapatera (p129)	isolated islands covered with petroglyphs, ancient statues, small volcano, rustic accommodations	climbing, hiking, boating, pretending you're an archaeologist
Refugio de Vida Silvestre La Flor (p157)	leatherback & Olive Ridley turtles, primary dry tropical forest, beaches	surfing, camping, sea turtle ogling
Reserva Natural Volcán Mombacho (p128)	volcanic views of Granada and Cocibolca, dwarf cloud forest, 100 species of orchids, fumeroles	hiking, camping, riding in military transport, butterfly garden
Reserva Natural Volcán Cosigüina (p189)	5 reserves, 6 active volcanoes, hot springs, crater lakes, macaws, archaeological sites, boiling mudpits	volcano surfing, hiking, camping, swimming, facial mud masks

The Central Subtropical Forests of Boaco and Chontales have been largely devoured up by cattle ranches, and while there are a few reserves, including Reserva Natural Sierra Amerisque, access

to these areas is limited. Just to the east are the Caribbean lowlands, where there are swamps and thick, dense foliage that you can see on the riverboat ride from El Rama.

Endangered Species

Nicaragua has lost about 90% of its original forest since the 1930s, although the revolution and Contra War put a halt to much of the harvest. But as the mines have been cleared and paramilitary groups captured, the logging companies have begun moving in fast – there were only 22 timber companies in 1992, compared to 600 in 1995.

The Indio Maíz and Bosawás Biosphere Reserves are two of the largest preserved tracts of rain forest in the world, forming the core of the proposed Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, which will one day (hopefully) allow species to pass freely through wild jungle between North and South America. Unfortunately, illegal logging operations seem unstoppable, and the mysterious five-year moratorium on a ban on exporting mahogany, a slow-growing precious wood, threatens even more forests.

But what seems unstoppable is the migration eastward of small farmers hoping to carve out a subsistence living from the natural reserves. Since the Somoza era, these unpopulated lands have been considered a ‘political safety valve,’ one not yet shut off. As the land often occupied is usually humid tropical forest, which keeps most of its nutrients as biomass tied up in trees and plants, the soil usually only has enough oomph for two or three harvests, when the would-be farmer has to slash and burn another farm from the jungle.

FOOD & DRINK

Although Nicaraguan food lacks the sophisticated complexity of French or Peruvian cuisine, not to mention the spices of Mexican food (although there’s usually a homemade *chilero*, jar of pickled peppers, carrots and onions, on the table), it’s good, cheap and healthy. Granada, Managua and San Juan del Sur all have international eateries, which are a wonderful thing if you need a break from rice and beans, but they tend to be expensive and only OK. But if you prefer a taste of the local culture, there are plenty of places to start.

Staples & Specialties

Most Nicaraguans start and finish every day with *gallo pinto*, rice and beans cooked separately and then fried together (on the

Atlantic Coast, in coconut milk). Granada’s light signature dish, *vigarón*, is made with yucca and cabbage salad, and topped with a big *chicharon*, or pork skin, while heftier *quesillos* are like mozzarella cheese, sautéed onions and sour cream burritos – yum.

Güirilas hail from the Matagalpa highlands; they’re rich pancakes made with fresh corn and griddle fried, then served with *cuijada*, a soft crumbly cheese. Tripe soup, also called *mondongo*, is a Central Meseta specialty, but also keep an eye open for *sopa huevos del toro*, or ‘eggs of the bull soup,’ made from another surprisingly appetizing part of the bull.

Nacatamales, often only available on Sundays, pack a banana leaf with cornmeal *masa*, potato, pork, tomato, onion and sweet chilies steamed to greasy perfection. *Tamal relenos* have a sweet cheese filling, *tamugas* use sticky rice instead of cornmeal, while *yoltamals* are made with fresh corn, and usually come in their own husk. *Baho* (pronounced bow), what’s steaming in those kettles at parks and markets, is another weekend specialty involving plantains, yucca, cassava and other vegetables steamed together with spicy pork, topped with cabbage salad.

The Caribbean Coast may have better food, most famously *rondon*, a slow-cooked seafood-and-coconut stew you should order well in advance. Don’t miss coconut bread, usually sold fresh from private homes, or the enormous river shrimp of the Río San Juan. The Miskito and Mayangna people’s signature dish is *wabul*, made with mashed plantains, milk and perhaps cacao, and is served hot.

Rosquillas are simple corn bread rings, made to be served with coffee, which can be seasoned with cheese, spices or cinnamon for desert. Other sweets include *bunuelos*, a Semana Santa tradition made with fried cassava stuffed with cheese and sugar, topped with hot syrup; *cajetas* made by combining fruit, milk, sugar, cinnamon and perhaps some grated coconut; and *picos*, common triangle-shaped sweetbreads stuffed with sticky-sweet *cuajada* cheese, sugar and cinnamon.

Drinks

Believe it or not, the coffee may be your big disappointment. Though Nicaragua produces some of the best coffee in the world,

most places outside the Northern Highlands and tourist zones serve Presto instant. Sigh. Note that a *café con leche* may be a cup of hot milk that you stir the coffee crystals into.

Rum drinkers, on the other hand, will love Flor de Caña rum, usually ordered by the half liter with a bottle of Coke, tub of ice and bowl of sliced limes, and called a *servicio completo*. The same company also makes the country's two major beers, Victoria and Toña.

Pinol is so beloved by Nicaraguans that they call themselves *pinoleros*, but this beverage, made of toasted corn powder, should be sweetened or taken with cacao (chocolate) as *tiste* the first time. *Chicha* is the bright pink corn beverage, and if it's called *chicha bruja* (witch chicha) or *chicha fuerte* (strong chicha), it's been fermented into an alcoholic beverage, an indigenous tradition.

Refrescos, also called *naturales* or *batidas*, are fruit drinks blended with either water or milk (sometimes yogurt or orange juice), served sweet unless you specifically request it *sin azucar* (without sugar). Be sure to try bright purple *pithaya* and creamy, rich *semilla de jícara*.

Where to Eat & Drink

Comedors are very basic eateries that usually serve eggs and *gallo pinto* for breakfast and a cheap (US\$1.50 to US\$3) *comida corriente* (set plate) the rest of the day, usually consisting of rice, beans, fried plantains (*tostones* are the hard-fried savory ones, *repochetas* are the sticky-sweet brown ones), cabbage salad and some type of meat. *Sodas* are more of a Costa Rican term for small restaurant with a menu, but you'll still find them near the southern border. *Fritangas* are temporary stands that set up each evening and sell inexpensive grilled meats, fried foods and (surprise) rice and beans, sometimes on a banana leaf in Granada or a plastic bag at bus stations everywhere. Steam-table buffets let you point and choose from an array of mains and sides, but try to go as early during mealtime as possible.

Vegetarians & Vegans

The biggest problem vegetarians will have in Nicaragua won't be staying full – that's a cinch (well, as long as you don't inquire too deeply into the origins of the grease your

gallo pinto was cooked in). It'll be boredom. Love rice and beans? Good. Because that's what you'll be eating pretty much every day, along with a scrambled egg, fried plantains, hunk of cheese, cabbage-based salad and tortilla. Don't be jealous; your carnivorous pals are eating the same thing, but with the added option of stewed or fried meat.

Steam-table buffets are another good option, where you can point to several vegetarian sides and make your own meal. Vegans will have a hard time getting enough protein, so take advantage of city grocery stores to stock up on snacks.

Eating with Kids

Although few restaurants actually have children's menus, all will try (unless they're extremely busy) to accommodate finicky kids. Nicaraguan cuisine is fairly bland, and you're usually safe with *gallo pinto* and *refrescos*. Nicaraguans also seem much more accommodating of unruly behavior than in North America and Europe, and will make a community effort to entertain distressed young diners.

MANAGUA

pop 1,400,000 / elevation 90m

Sprawling along the silvery edges of Xolotlán, broad Lago de Managua, this is the nation's capital and nerve center, an admittedly unlovely urban expanse of unsigned, tree-lined boulevards and uninspired modern monoliths that almost never seduce visitors into spending more time here than is absolutely necessary.

Yet this sultry and seismic 'Daughter of War' and 'City of Peace' is beloved with a proud ferocity by its 1.4 million inhabitants, and its volcanic skyline and cosmopolitan charms have inspired a library's worth of poems. Aren't you curious as to why?

Start by ascending Loma de Tiscapa to Sandino's famous silhouette, with views from the ancient crater lake to monumental Volcán Momotombo (not to mention the wacky cathedral). And around you the city pulses, with great nightlife, excellent restaurants and, most importantly, thousands of families rebuilding their nation, *poco a poco* (little by little), into all that

NAVIGATING MANAGUA

As in other Nicaraguan cities and towns, only Managua's major roads are named. Large buildings, *rotondas* (traffic circles) and traffic lights serve as de facto points of reference, and locations are described in terms of their direction and distance, usually in *cuadras* (blocks) from these points. Many of these reference points no longer exist, and thus addresses may begin with something like '*de donde fue Sandy's*' (from where Sandy's used to be...).

From the reference point, a special system is used for the cardinal points, whereby *al lago* (to the lake) means 'north' while *a la montaña* (to the mountains) means 'south.' *Arriba* (up) is 'east' toward the sunrise, while *abajo* (down) is 'west,' and sunset. Thus one might hear: '*del antiguo Cine Dorado, una cuadra al lago y dos cuadras arriba*' ('from the old Cine Dorado, one block toward the lake and two blocks up').

Confused? So are we. Most listings in this chapter give the 'address' in Spanish, so you can ask locals for help or just let the cab driver figure it out.

their poets and revolutionaries, campesinos and visionaries, once promised.

HISTORY

A fishing encampment as early as 6000 years ago (see p76), Managua has been an important trading center and regional capital for at least two millennia. When Spanish chronicler Fernandez de Oviedo arrived in 1528, he estimated Managua's population at around 40,000; most of these original inhabitants fled to the Sierritas, the small mountains just south, shortly after the Spanish arrived. The small town, without even a hospital or school until the 1750s, didn't really achieve any prominence until 1852, when the seemingly endless civil war between Granada and León was resolved by placing the capital here.

The clever compromise might have worked out better had a geologist been on hand: Managua sits atop a network of fault lines that have shaped its history ever since. The late 1800s were rocked by quakes that destroyed the new capital's infrastructure, with churches and banks crumbling as the ground flowed beneath their feet. In 1931 the epicenter was the stadium, which killed dozens during the big game; in 1968 a single powerful jolt right beneath what's now Metrocentro Mall destroyed an entire neighborhood.

And on the evening of December 23, 1972, a series of powerful tremors rocked the city, culminating in a 6.2 quake that killed 11,000 people and destroyed 53,000 homes. The blatant siphoning of international relief funds by President Somoza touched off the Sandinista-led revolution,

which was followed by the Contra War, and the city center, including the beautiful old cathedral, was never rebuilt.

ORIENTATION

The Interamericana (Pan-American Hwy) enters Managua from the southwest, via Jinotepe, as Carr Sur, and exits to the northeast, past the airport toward Matagalpa and El Rama, as Carr Norte. Running southeast from Metrocentro and Rotonda Rubén Darío is Carr Masaya, along which Managua's swankiest discos, restaurants and malls can be found. Heading west are Carr Nueva and Carr Vieja (New and Old Hwys) to León. Managua has hundreds of neighborhoods stretched between these highways, and not even the kamikaze *taxistas* (taxi drivers) know them all (although they will assure you that they do).

Zona Monumental, on the lakefront site of Managua's pre-1972 downtown, is home to the Museo Nacional, Casa Presidencial (Presidential Palace) and Teatro Rubén Darío. It's connected by Av Bolívar, a major thoroughfare, to the Plaza Inter shopping mall, Loma de Tiscapa and Barrio Martha Quezada, with most services for budget travelers. To the southwest are Barrio Balonia, with midrange accommodations, and Plaza España, next to Rotonda El Güegüense, with banks, travel agencies and airline offices.

To the southeast is Managua's modern commercial center, a 2km strip of Carr Masaya extending southeast from Metrocentro Mall and Rotonda Rubén Darío through the cluster of glittering restaurants and bars known as Zona Rosa, as well as swish Los

MANAGUA IN ...**One Day**

If you wake up in Barrio Martha Quezada, you can just walk to the top of **Loma de Tiscapa** (p74) and the unmissable silhouette of **Sandino** (see the boxed text, p222). Then grab a cab (negotiating your fare beforehand!) to **Huellas de Acahualinca** (p76) for ancient history, then **Zona Monumental** (p74) for the modern version. If nothing's on at **Teatro Nacional Rubén Darío** (p84) that night, enjoy a mellow evening of live music at **La Casa de los Mejía Godoy** (p84) or dance the night away at **Hipa Hipa** (p84).

Three Days

After communing with Sandino and Momotombo, you'll even have time to take the **Tiscapa Canopy Tour** (p74), then really enjoy the museums and monuments, grabbing tickets for **El Nica** (see the boxed text, p85) at Teatro Nacional Rubén Darío; discuss afterward at **Bar La Cavanga** (p84). The next morning, check out the beaches of **Pochomil** (p88) or the mountains of **Montibelli Reserva Privada** (p91), then show off your tan on the **Zona Rosa** that night. Day three is shopping: grab souvenirs at **Mercado Roberto Huembes** (p85) or resupply for the hinterlands at the markets and malls. After lunch in exclusive Altamira, perhaps **Ola Verde** (see the boxed text, p81), stop by the **Nueva Catedral** (p76), then have a nap before hitting **Bello Horizonte** (see the boxed text, p83) for your last night out.

Robles and Altamira, two of Managua's most exclusive neighborhoods. West of Ronda Rubén Darío is Universidad Centro America (UCA), with left-wing bookstores and minibuses to most major regional cities, including Granada and Masaya.

Mercado Israel Lewites, where there are buses to northwest Nicaragua and Carazo, is about 3km west of UCA on Pista de la Resistencia, while Mercado Roberto Huembes, with great souvenir shopping and buses to Granada and southwest Nicaragua, is southwest of Metrocentro. Further west still is Mercado Mayoreo, where there are buses to northwest Nicaragua and the Caribbean Coast. Managua International Airport is 11km west of town on Carr Norte.

MAPS

Free maps of Managua are widely available at Intur and most hotels, but none of them are particularly detailed. If you're headed out into wilder Nicaragua, pick up topos and maps of Nicaragua's major protected areas at **Marena Central** (☎ 263 2830; www.marena.gob.ni; Km 12.5 Carr Norte; 🕒 8am-4pm Mon-Fri), or check out **Ineter** (Nicaragua Institute for Territorial Studies; Map p70; ☎ 249 2768; frente Migración Extranjera; 🕒 8-11:30am & 1-4pm Mon-Fri), which has excellent maps of the entire country.

INFORMATION

Managua is a modern city that's (arguably) designed for the automotive age, as opposed to a strollable colonial town. It's also hot and sticky: daytime temperatures hover between 30°C and 34°C most of the year, only dipping into the 20s in December and January, and cooling off with afternoon showers during the May to September rainy season. Moreover, Managua has big-city problems, including plenty of crime and a bus system that's not exactly user friendly. Unless you're a committed shoestringer or have a rental car, chances are you'll be getting to most of these destinations in a taxi.

Bookstores & Libraries

Managua has a great selection of bookstores – if you can read Spanish. There are better selections of English-language books in San Juan del Sur and Granada. UCA and UNAN (see p73) both have excellent libraries.

Biblioteca Banco Central de Nicaragua (☎ 265 0131; Km 7 Carr Sur, 150m este) Also has art openings and other events.

Casa de los Tres Mundos (Map p80; La Marseilles, 2½c norte; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Artsy and lefty Spanish-language books.

El Parnaso (Map p80; ☎ 270 5178; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat) Across from the UCA, this lefty bookstore also has a great selection of magazines.

La Colonia (Map p70; Plaza España; Rotonda Jean Paul Genie 1c sur, Carr Masaya) This upscale grocery chain has a big selection of books and magazines; the Plaza España outlet is great.

Librería Hispamer (Map p80; ☎ 278 3923; www.hispamer.com.ni) One block east, one block south of UCA, Hispamer has the country's best selection of Nicaraguan and Latin American literature, history and poetry, plus local news and arts periodicals.

Plaza Inter (Map p78; Plaza Inter; ☎ 9am-9pm) Near Barrio Martha Quezada, the parking-lot level at the mall has a stand selling beat-up paperback thrillers and old lefty lit – in English.

Cultural Centers

Ben Linder House (Map p70; ☎ 266 4363; www.casabenlinder.org; Monseñor Lezcano, de donde fue el Banco Popular, 2c al lago, 2c arriba) Named for an American engineer and unicycle clown who was killed by Contra forces in 1987, this cultural center primarily serves the English-speaking volunteer community, with weekly presentations and discussion groups Thursday at 8:30am, but stop by anytime to see the amazing murals and chat.

Centro Budista Bodhichita (Map p78; ☎ 268 2541; centrobudistanic@yahoo.com.mx; Estatua Montoya 1c abajo, ½c al lago) Meditation and related classes.

Centro Cultural Managua (Map p75; ☎ 222 5291) One block south of the Plaza de la República, with changing art exhibits, concerts and dances, plus handicrafts fairs the first Saturday of the month.

Código Espacio Cultural (Map p80; ☎ 267 2635; www.galeriacodice.com; Hotel Colon 1c sur, 2½c arriba) Not just the hippest progressive art exhibition space in the country, its mix of openings, unusual performances and other offbeat offerings make this the place to hook up with Managua's creative elite.

Emergency

Ambulance (Cruz Roja; Red Cross; ☎ 128)

Fire (☎ emergency 115, ☎ 222 6406)

Police (☎ emergency 118, ☎ 249 5714)

Immigration Office

Immigration office (Dirección de Migración y Extranjería; Map p70; ☎ 265 0014; ☎ 8-11:30am & 1:30-3pm Mon-Fri) Stays can be extended for up to three months for US\$25 per month. The office is 200m north of the Tenderí traffic signal near the Ciudad Jardín area. There's a US\$1.50 per-day fine for overstaying your allotted period (three months for US citizens, one month for most others, which is just odd).

Internet Access

Internet access is fast and plentiful, averaging US\$0.70 per minute at cafés all over

town. Internet cafés in Barrio Martha Quezada include:

In Touch Internet (Map p80; per hr US\$0.70) Close to Hotel Colón.

Internet Posada de Ruth (Map p78; per hr US\$0.70; ☎ 8am-10pm) Across from Shannon Bar.

Kafe Internet (Map p78; per hr US\$0.70; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-6pm Sun) Pay for half-hour increments in advance.

Plaza Inter (Map p78; per hr US\$2.50; ☎ 10am-10pm) Ground floor, offers plush seats.

Laundry

Laundry services are sadly lacking here, but most hotels offer laundry (in cheaper places, by hand, so allow time to dry). If your hotel doesn't do laundry, try the one next door.

Media

Six major TV channels are based in Managua; the most popular is **Canal 2** (www.canal2tv.com), with trusted news. Scores of radio stations, mostly play reggae, Mexican *norteños*, Shakira or soft rock of the '70s and '80s, but be sure to tune into **Radio Sandino** (AM 740; www.lasandino.com.ni), with left-wing news, views and folk music; **Radio Ya** (FM 90.1; www.nuevaya.com.ni), the popular FSLN station; and **Radio Pirata** (FM 99.9; http://pirata.tk), a heavy-metal, blues and grunge antidote to Air Supply overload.

MAGAZINES

Between the Waves Ignore the gorgeous, scantily clad cover model (or don't), this great English-language quarterly has tourist information, bus schedules and in-depth stories about Nicaragua's neatest destinations.

Magazine Published weekly by *La Prensa*, this glossy magazine is free for subscribers and worth hunting down by anyone else for articles like 'Daniel Ortega and Arnoldo Alemán in High School.' (They were both mediocre students with discipline problems, if you were wondering.)

Nicaragua's Best Guide (www.guideofnicaragua.com) A slick online magazine with lots of reviews, articles and free downloadable maps.

NEWSPAPERS

El Mercurio It's never available anywhere remotely respectable, but you can practice your Spanish with brutally illustrated car-accident stories or soft-core porn that may begin, 'When I first joined the revolutionary army, I didn't realize it was co-ed...'

El Nuevo Diario (www.elnuevodiario.com.ni) Once upon a time the FSLN mouthpiece, the more sensationalistic (this is a good thing) and still left-wing daily also has a fine Sunday humor edition, *El Alacran*, which adds

excellent captions to the week's news photos, as well as a competing Thursday entertainment insert.

La Prensa (www.laprensa.com.ni) Nicaragua's blue-chip, right-wing newspaper is worth picking up on Thursday for *Viernes Chiquito*, an entertainment supplement, and on Sunday for *El Azote*, with political cartoons and *Muro de Fermin*, a sharp 'funny' featuring a witty Nica couple who live in a one-room shanty, corrugated tin roof secured by an old tire, with their (at least) nine kids.

Medical Services

There are scores of pharmacies, some open 24 hours (just knock), and nine hospitals in Managua, including:

Hospital Alemán-Nicaragüense (Map p70; ☎ 249 3368; Km 6 Carr Norte) Has some German-speaking staff and modern equipment.

Hospital Bautista (Map p70; ☎ 249 7070, 249 7277)

This was Managua's best hospital, and still has much of the country's top health-care facilities; some staff members speak English.

Hospital Metropolitano Vivian Pellas (☎ 255 6900; www.metropolitano.com.ni; Km 9.75 Carr Masaya) This new, US\$23 million state-of-the-art hospital is Central America's most advanced, with one of the best child burn units in the world. Pellas, matriarch of Nicaragua's wealthiest family – Flor de Caña rum, Toña and Victoria beer, Toyota, Dollar, Credomatic, BAC, and that's just for starters – was burned on over 40% of her body in a horrific 1991 plane crash that killed 150 people, and decided to make sure that others in her situation would get the best treatment possible.

Money

Also thanks to the Pellas family (see above) and Credomatic (Map p70), you can probably use Visa, MasterCard and Amex more often in Nicaragua than back home. Traveler's checks, basically useless elsewhere in the country, can be changed at either **Banco America Central** (BAC; Map p70; www.credomatic.com/nic; Plaza España) or the **American Express office** (Map p70; ☎ 266 4050; Viajes Atlántida office; ☎ 8:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat). Managua has scores of banks and ATMs, most on the Visa/Plus system. BAC, with machines at Metrocentro Mall (Map p80), the international airport, Plaza España (Map p70) and the Esso station (Map p78) just north of Plaza Inter, accepts MasterCard/Cirrus debit cards and gives US dollars and córdoba. Any bank can change US dollars. *Coyotes*, black-market moneychangers, are generally honest (but you should know roughly how much to expect back) and use the same exchange rates as the bank; try Plaza España.

Post & Telephone

Enitel is adjacent to Palacio de Correos. More convenient and cheaper are the millions of Internet cafés with inexpensive international calls, or using Enitel phone cards, available at *pulperías* (convenience stores) everywhere, for local and national calls. Private rental phones (available at many shops and hotels) are convenient but expensive.

Palacio de Correos (Map p75; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat) Two blocks west of the Plaza de la República is the main post office (the former Enitel building). *Lista de correo* (poste restante) mail goes here and is held for up to 45 days. An Express Mail office is also here.

Tourist Information

Intur Central (Map p78; Nicaraguan Institute of Tourism;

☎ 222 3333; www.intur.gob.ni; Crowne Plaza 1c sur, 1c oeste) The flagship office of Nicaragua's official tourist info organization, in Barrio Martha Quezada, has heaps of flyers and other useful info, and can point you to hotels and other services in Managua and throughout the country. There's another office in the international terminal at the airport.

Marena Central (Ministry of the Environment & Natural Resources; ☎ 263 2830; www.marena.gob.ni; Km 12.5 Carr Norte; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) Bring ID to the inconveniently located headquarters (out past the airport, a US\$6 taxi ride) to access maps, flyers and management plans for most of Nicaragua's 82 protected areas.

Universities

Universidad Centro America (UCA; Map p80; www.uca.edu.ni) Founded in 1960 as a Jesuit school, this is one of Nicaragua's premier universities, with a science and alternative-technology-heavy curriculum, Che Guevara sculptures and vegetarian eateries out front. Worth a wander, in particular the Centro Historia Militar, with relics from Sandino to the Sandinistas, if you're beginning to worry that the revolution is over.

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua (UNAN; Map p80; ☎ 278 6769; www.unan.edu.ni; Enel Central 2 Km al sur) The Managua branch of Nicaragua's oldest university (the original is in León, the former capital) was founded in 1958 and has more than 24,000 students.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Managuans seem almost proud that the city is dangerous; strangers will warn you constantly to watch your bag and back, not realizing their own friendly concern is the norm. Statistically, Managua is the safest Central American capital (though it sure doesn't feel like it); most travelers have no problems.

Still, as a 'rich foreigner' you will be targeted, so be smart. Around Tica Bus, Barrio

Martha Quezada and Plaza Inter Mall, just assume that you are being watched. Stay alert, walk confidently, and leave backpacks, purses, passports and important documents in your hotel. ATM machines are under constant surveillance – see those adorable tots on bicycles? Yeah, them. Take a taxi after banking or shopping, not to mention after dark, even if it is just a few blocks. The unlit streets between the mall and Barrio Martha Quezada are particularly dangerous.

'Guides' and taxi drivers (see the boxed text, below) who meet the international buses will do anything to steer you toward hotels that give them a cut. Just tell them (politely – they're friends with all the muggers) that you have reservations.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Managua's sights are few and, with the exception of the often deserted Zona Monumental, far between. Even shoestringers should consider taking taxis.

Barrio Martha Quezada & Around

Since the days of the *internacionalistas* (idealistic visitors who came during the revolutionary years in the 1980s) Barrio Martha Quezada has been the city's budget travel headquarters. It has a great mall, most international buses and lots of cheap food and lodging. It's also convenient to a handful of sights.

TAXI SCAMS

Driving a Managua taxi is an art – a scam art. Here are some favorite techniques:

- The Runaround: Look at the Barrio Martha Quezada map – your hotel is probably just a few blocks from the bus station. So why was it a 10-minute, US\$20 ride?
- The Bait & Switch: After quoting you a price (25!), they'll tell you that it was 25 each, or worse, 25 dollars (instead of 25 córdoba, which would have been a deal).
- The Back Scratch: The hotel is closed? It's changed names? It's filled with rats? No. But the other hotel he's recommending gives him a cut.

PARQUE HISTORICO NACIONAL LOMA DE TISCAPA

Home to what's easily Managua's most recognizable landmark, Sandino's somber silhouette, this **national historic park** (Map p70; ☎ 8am-8pm Tue-Sun) was once the site of the Presidential Palace where Sandino and his men were executed in 1934; what looks like a dilapidated parking structure was for decades one of Nicaragua's most notorious prisons. You can see Sandino, hastily erected by the departing FSLN government after its electoral loss in 1990, from almost anywhere in town; begin your ascent at the Crowne Plaza. You'll pass **Monumento Roosevelt**, constructed in 1939 with lovely lake views, which is today a memorial to those killed in the revolution.

The top of the hill is actually the lip of Volcán Tiscapa's beautiful little crater lake, with incredible views of the city, both cathedrals and Volcán Momotombo, plus **Canopy Tiscapa** (Map p70; ☎ 893 5017; canopytiscapa@yahoo.com; US\$11.50), a small but fun 1.2km, three-platform, 25-minute tour. There's a cave just hidden by the lake's surface where you can evidently take snacks for the spirits of those who have drowned here, who will then reward you with gold; but keep in mind that the lake is polluted with untreated sewage.

ARBORETUM NACIONAL

These modest **gardens** (National Arboretum; Map p78; US\$0.30/0.06 adult/student; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri), inconveniently located halfway between Barrio Martha Quezada and the Plaza Monumental on Av Bolívar (well, it's convenient if you're making the hot 40-minute walk between them), features more than 200 species of plants divided into Nicaragua's five major life zones, of which only the Dry Tropical Forest and Central Lowlands look happy; that was one sad coffee plant. Your fee includes a guided tour, where you'll see a *madriño*, the national tree, and *sacuanjoche*, the national flower. Enjoy the shade.

Zona Monumental & Malecón

This quiet collection of pre-earthquake and postrevolutionary monuments, pretty parks, museums and government offices was once the pulsing heart of Managua; the *malecón* (pier), a pleasant stroll from

the Zona Monumental, once overlooked a living lake lined with restaurants and festivities. Then came the 1972 earthquake, and two decades of war and privation, and the center was all but abandoned.

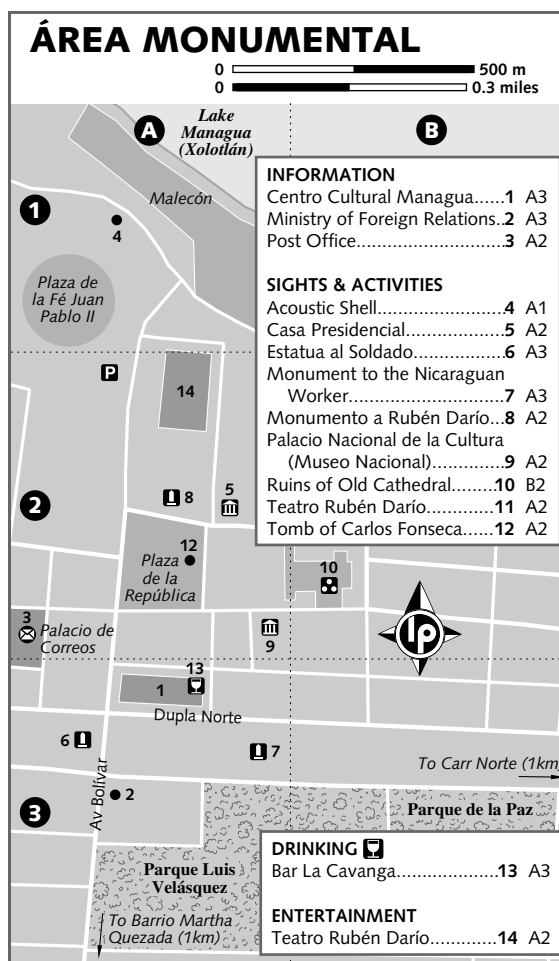
But slowly – little by little, as they say in Nicaragua – it is being resuscitated. Government buildings have been rebuilt; trees replanted; and ramshackle restaurants once again host cheerful after-church crowds on the lakefront. Heck, ex-President Alemán's pork-barrel extravaganza **Fuente Audiovisual** here offers a Vegas-style light-and-sound spectacular involving 'dancing' fountains, Strauss waltzes and *cumbias* (Colombian dance tunes) at 6pm and 9pm most nights.

The hollow shell of Managua's **Old Cathedral** (Map p75) remains Managua's most poignant metaphor, shattered by the 1972 earthquake and, despite promises, never restored. Though still beautiful and serene, attended by stone angels and dappled in golden light, it is empty and off-limits; the cathedral without a heart, in the city without a center.

Adjacent to the cathedral, the 1935 **Palacio Nacional de la Cultura** (Map p75; ☎ 222 2905) houses the **Museo Nacional** (admission US\$2; ☎ 8am-5pm). The timeline starts only 500 million years ago, as Nicaragua is one of the newest places on earth, and takes visitors through the formation of the lakes and volcanoes – not to mention gold mines – before getting to pre-Columbian statuary (see the boxed text, p117) and one of the best pottery collections in the country, all well signed and explained.

Other exhibits whiz through the Spanish colonial period before landing in the Sandino, then Sandinista, eras. Above the main staircase is a mural of revolutionary movements in the Americas by Mexican artist Arnold Belkin, and there's also a room tracing 500 years of art (most from the 1970s). Admission includes a 30-minute guided tour in Spanish.

Opposite is the brand-new **Casa Presidencial** (Map p75), the offices (but not the home) of the current president, rebuilt during the Alemán years with the help of the Taiwanese government. Directly south of the plaza is the old Grand Hotel, now the **Centro Cultural Managua** (Map p75; ☎ 222 5291) – see p72 for details of programs. In the center of it all is shady **Plaza de la**



República, inaugurated in 1899 by national hero and original anti-American General José Santos Zalaya, and called José Dolores Estrada Park. Snacks and poorly lit benches for young lovers are attended by enterprising children hoping to sell nifty little insects (US\$0.06) crafted from local palm fronds. On the northeast of the plaza rests the tomb of Sandinista commander **Carlos Fonseca** (Map p75). See p207 for more on Fonseca.

On the lake side of Plaza de la República, the **Monumento a Rubén Darío** (Map p75) was recently refurbished after the original 1933 statue fell into graffitied disrepair. A group of artists did a guerrilla installation, veiling the city's shame from public view and demanding poetic justice. In 1998 the cash-strapped government bowed to public opinion and, with Texaco Oil's help, restored the likeness of Nicaragua's favorite son. Toward the lake is the oblong **Teatro Nacional Rubén Darío** (Map p75; ☎ 266 3630) – see p84 for entertainment details.

The *malecón* is a bit depressing on off days, especially if you're pondering almost beautiful Lago de Managua, more properly

known as **Xolotlán**, since 1927 one of the most polluted bodies of water in Central America. Foreign governments are helping clean it up, and in the meantime families turn out on Sundays and partiers on weekend evenings, not to swim but to enjoy the quirky collection of seaside kiosks, and the rickety theme park rides at the west end of the complex.

The new and trippy **Acoustic Shell** was designed by US artist Glen Howard and completed in July 2005; it's a spectacular place to see a folkloric event of the anniversary of the revolution. It overlooks **Plaza de la Fé Juan Pablo II**, which commemorates Pope John Paul II's appearances here in 1983 and 1996. On a little hill opposite is the *ranchito* (open-sided, thatch-roofed hut) that sheltered John Paul as he spoke to the masses of Nicaraguans assembled in the vacant lot now occupied by the plaza.

Other monuments in this area include the statue of Latin American liberation superhero **Simón Bolívar**, donated by the government of Venezuela in 1997; slightly overgrown **Plaza de la Cultura de Guatemala**; and the unabashedly political, disturbingly disproportionate **Estatua al Soldado** (Nameless Guerrilla Soldier; Map p75) on the west side of Av Bolívar, catercorner from the Centro Cultural Managua. 'Workers and campesinos onward till the end,' reads the inscription, which explains the pickax, if not the assault rifle with a Sandinista flag sticking out of it. A block away, another uncomfortably contorted sculpture, this one commissioned by the Liberals, celebrates the **Nicaraguan Worker** with a bronzed, rather hunchbacked couple who look like they need a vacation and decent health care.

From here, you can see the lighthouse, a symbolic beacon for a country torn apart, of the 1990 **Parque de la Paz** (Peace Park; Map p75), perhaps the most interesting monument of all. The reflection pool has been drained and the light rarely shines, but what remains are weapons – machine guns, pistols, even a tank – forever encased in concrete by former President Violeta Barrios de Chamorro. It's sort of like Mad Max meets Rollerball, not pretty or comfortable, but it is the monument most worth seeing.

Around Managua

HUELLAS DE ACAHUALINCA

Take a taxi (US\$3 per person) to what's perhaps Managua's most intriguing site, the **Footprints of Acahualinca** (Map p70; ☎ 266 5774; admission US\$2, photos US\$1.25; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat). Discovered by miners in 1874, these fossilized tracks record the passage of perhaps 10 people – men, women and children – as well as birds, raccoons and deer across the muddy shores of Lago de Managua some 6000 years ago. Despite early speculation that they were running from a volcanic eruption, forensics specialists have determined that these folks were in no hurry – and oddly enough, were fairly tall, between 145cm and 160cm.

The excavation was undertaken by the Carnegie Foundation in 1941 and 1942, and unearthed 14 layers, or 4m, of earth. They found some later Chorotega ceramics (about 2m down) and other intriguing artifacts, though there's no money to take it further. There is, however, a nifty on-site museum, with human skulls, a fossilized bison track and lots of ceramics, and your fee includes a Spanish-language tour of the whole shebang. Don't skip this one, it's an international treasure.

NUEVA CATEDRAL

Just north of the Metrocentro Mall is an unforgettable Managua landmark, and the hemisphere's newest **cathedral** (Map p80; ☎ 278 4232), an architectural marvel that leaves most visitors, well, scratching their heads. It's not a mosque, really: the 63 cupolas (or breasts, or eggs; speculation continues) symbolize Nicaragua's 63 Catholic churches, and also provide structural support during earthquakes – a good thing, since it sits astride a fault line. The interior is cool, heartfelt and unspectacular, although the shrine on the northwest side is nice. Of the US\$45million used to construct the cathedral, US\$3.5 million was donated by avid pro-Lifer Tom Monaghan, owner of Domino's Pizza.

COURSES

At **La Academia Nicaragüense** (Map p80; ☎ 277 5557), just north of the UCA gates, you can take Latin dance classes, among other offerings (ballet for kids, for example) for about US\$20 per month.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

In addition to enthusiastic celebrations of national events, Managua has its own parties.

Annual Taxi Grand Prix (Last week in March) Drivers modify a licensed taxi's exhaust system, don a helmet and seat belt, then head to the pit at the Old Cathedral. The roads of central Managua are closed off and dozens of five-car, five-lap races scream through the city, but only one will win a brand-new cab.

Day of the Revolution (July 19) You'll finally understand why people still love Daniel Ortega when you see the master work a crowd of 100,000 red-and-black flag-waving faithful.

Festival of Santo Domingo de Guzman (August 1–10) Managua's *fiestas patronales* (patron saint parties) feature a carnival, sporting events, *hípicos* (horse parades) and a procession of *diablitos*, which takes Santo Domingo to his country shrine at Sierritas de Managua, followed by music and fireworks.

SLEEPING

Most budget travelers stay in Barrio Martha Quezada, about 10 square blocks of fairly strollable streets, although crime is on the rise (see p73). But there are other options, from the posh boutique hotels of the Centro Commercial to more modest midrange options in Boloña, convenient to Barrio Martha Quezada's collection of backpacker-oriented businesses.

Barrio Martha Quezada

Better known to *taxistas* as 'Ticabus,' the international bus terminal upon which the barrio (district) is centered, Martha Quezada's been hosting shoestringers for a generation.

BUDGET

Casa Vanegas (Map p78; ☎ 222 4043; casavanegas@cablenet.com.ni; s US\$6, s/d with bathroom US\$10/12; ☒) Exceptionally clean and comfortable, this friendly family-run spot is a great budget choice offering spotless nonsmoking rooms, hammocks and great security.

Apartamentos Vanegas (☎ 249 8707; unfurnished/furnished apt US\$400/500) Long-term visitors can ask at Casa Vanegas about these beautiful apartments in convenient Barrio Boloña.

Guest House Santos (Map p78; ☎ 222 3713; r per person US\$4) This cheap and funky backpackers hot spot hosts international shoestringers and jewelry-selling locals in its randomly shaped and occasionally cleaned

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Hotel Los Robles (Map p80; ☎ 267 3008; www.hotellosrobles.com; La Marseillaise, 30m sur; s/d incl breakfast US\$70/80) This Spanish colonial gem is absolutely flawless, from the attractively landscaped courtyard, centered on a burbling marble fountain, to the antique-style wooden furnishings and absolutely modern amenities of the comfortable rooms – guests even receive a complimentary cell phone during their stay. Service is impeccable, the neighborhood is swanky and strollable, and dinner (US\$10.50) is divine. Dahlings.

rooms. The equally grungy annex, Casa Azul, is quieter.

Hospedaje La Quintana (Map p78; ☎ 254 5487; claudiaquintana@cablenet.com.ni; r per person US\$5, d with bathroom US\$12; ☒) A good deal on a somewhat dark but very clean room in a comfortable family home, this fine spot also has Internet.

Posada de Ruth (Map p78; ☎ 222 4051; s/d with fan US\$10/12, with air-con US\$20/22; ☒) Across from Shannon Bar, clean, recently remodeled rooms are brightly painted, and offer easy access to the best Internet around.

Casa Gabrinma (Map p78; ☎ 222 6650; s/d/tr per person US\$10) Relaxed and homey guesthouse has a variety of different rooms arranged around a garden, with rudimentary bedding, private bathroom, fan and large screened windows, plus access to the excellent library.

There are other perfectly acceptable budget options, including:

Hospedaje El Viajero (Map p78; ☎ 228 1280; s/d US\$8/12) West of Tica Bus, has six rooms with rattling fans and private bathrooms, featured a little prominently in each room.

Hospedaje El Dorado (Map p78; ☎ 222 6012; r per person US\$6) Small rooms, tiny showers, wonderful owners and a no-drunks policy; ask about group rates.

MIDRANGE

Hotel-Apartamentos Los Cisneros (Map p78; ☎ 222 3535; paginasamarillas.com/hotelyapartamentosloscisneros.htm; s/d with fan US\$20/30, with air-con US\$35/45; ☐ ☒) A great deal on quirky, colorful, relative luxury, it's got hot water, phones, art, hammocks and potted plants everywhere; for US\$5 more you basically get an apartment, including kitchen.

The latest upscale franchise to inhabit the landmark neo-Aztec pyramid by the mall, **Crowne Plaza** (Map p78; www.cpmanagua.com) was in the middle of a full-scale remodel at press time; let us know how it turns out.

Barrio Boloña

Between Martha Quezada and Plaza España, this more upscale residential neighborhood has a handful of relaxed boutique hotels. Directions are usually given from Canal Dos (Canal 2; see Map p78).

Estancia La Casona (Map p78; ☎ 266 1685; www.estancialacasona.com; esquina norte Canal 2 2½c abajo; 📶 📺) Adorable and has all the amenities you'd expect – hot water, air-con, cable TV, free Internet – but the clincher is a big thatch-roofed *ranchero* in the gardens out back that makes a good lounge or conference room.

Hotel Maracas Inn (Map p70; ☎ 266 8612; www.maracasinn.com; Hospital Militar 1c norte, 1½c oeste; r incl breakfast US\$50-75; 📶 📺) Cute rooms in pastel colors come with all the amenities, excellent service and, best of all, a pool.

Hostal Real (Map p78; ☎ 268 1438; www.hostalreal.com.ni; Rotonda El Güegüense 1½c al lago; s/d incl breakfast US\$60/65; 📶 📺 📺) The area's most luxurious option has big windows, beautiful antiques and hot-water bathtubs. Impressive.

Centro Commercial & Carretera Masaya

Although this cluster of upscale neighborhoods includes Metrocentro Mall and Managua's busiest intersection, walking around these shady side streets is rather nice, plus it's convenient to the country's best hotels and discos. Of course, you'll pay for it.

BUDGET

Hotel Ideas D Mamá (Map p70; ☎ 278 2908; www.hotelideasdemama.com.ni; Rotonda Santo Domingo 5c sur, 2½c abajo; r per person with fan/air-con incl breakfast US\$12/20) This beautiful, if budget, B&B has pastel rooms with romantic lighting and a tropical garden out back. A good deal.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Sol y Luna (Map p80; ☎ 277 1009; solyluna@cablenet.com.ni; La Marseilles, 50m abajo; s/d incl breakfast US\$57/73; 📶 📺 📺) This is one of Managua's snazzier boutique hotels, with

large, attractively furnished, Internet-wired rooms, tiny personal patios and a sunken circular couch thing in the main area. It's soothing.

Hotel Colón (Map p80; ☎ 278 2490; hcolon@hcolon.com; Km 4.5 Carr Masaya, de Edificio BAC 2c arriba; s/d US\$52/67; 📶 📺) Clean and pastel, with breezy causeways, lots of wrought iron and a vaguely Roman theme.

Hotel El Almendro (Map p80; ☎ 270 1260; www.hotelelalmendro.com; de Metrocentro 2c oeste, ½c sur; r incl breakfast US\$46-59; 📶 📺) The whole place is sort of stylish, but it's a good deal because of the in-room kitchens, and there's a nice patio, too.

TOP END

Real Intercontinental Metrocentro (Map p80; ☎ 278 4545; www.gruporeal.com; r US\$140-160; 📶 📺 📺 📺) The fanciest hotel in town, period, this place has amazing rooms, great views, flawless service, various buffet restaurants, gym, business center, 24-hour Internet, boutique stores and maybe 10 mysterious little bottles of attractively packaged toiletries in the gigantic bathrooms. Oh, yes.

Seminole Plaza Hotel (Map p80; ☎ 270 6496; www.seminoleplaza.com; Bancentro Carr Masaya 1c oeste, 1c sur; s/d US\$85/95; 📶 📺 📺 📺) Business class gone baroque-crazy means gold gilt accents and art with your flawless concierge service – all at half the price of the Intercontinental. Even better, it's all part of a slightly scandalous business venture by Florida's Seminole Tribe, which has invested US\$10 million into Nicaragua since the late 1990s. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the US\$14 lunch buffet rocks.

Hotel Princess (Map p80; ☎ 270 5045; www.hotelesprincess.com; d US\$95-195; 📶 📺 📺 📺) More elegant, with attractive rooms that don't take decorating risks, it's also got a five-star lunch buffet and beautiful pool.

Holiday Inn (Map p70; ☎ 270 4515; www.holidayinn.com.ni; Pista Juan Pablo II; r US\$75-80, ste US\$105-150; 📶 📺 📺 📺) Just like back at home, but more expensive; the suites are huge, some with kitchens, and have great views.

Around Managua

Quaker House (Centro de los Amigos, Casa Cuaquera; ☎ 266 3216; friends@ibw.com.ni; Hospital Lenin Fonseca, 5c al lago, 75 varas arriba; dm volunteer/traveler US\$5/8;

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(P) In quiet, residential Las Brisas, this Friends House caters to witness trips and work brigades but happily accepts travelers, with kitchen, washing machine, telephone and limited parking.

Hotel y Restaurante César (☎ 265 2728; www.hotelcesar.com; Km 8.5 Carr Sur; s/d US\$59/65; (P) 🍴 🏠 🚗) The best reason to stay on the outskirts of town is the big pool surrounded by beautiful gardens overlooked by a neat outdoor bar. Rooms come with air-con, hot water, cable TV and in-room Internet, and the restaurant makes its own cheese.

El Camino Real (☎ 263 1381; www.caminoreal.com.ni; r US\$95-195; (P) 🍴 🏠 🚗) About 1.5km west of the airport, El Camino has pools, pool tables, convention centers, glittering

shops etc, but the reason you're here is the huge 24-hour, Egyptian-themed, Las Vegas-style Pharaoh's casino next door.

EATING

Go budget in Barrio Martha Quezada or upscale on Carr Masaya, but whatever you do, enjoy Managua's variety of cuisines before you head out into the *campo* (countryside).

Barrio Martha Quezada & Boloña

This area caters to businesspeople and backpackers, so prices are good.

BUDGET

Cafetín Mirna (Map p78; pancakes US\$1.50; 🕒 6am-3pm Mon-Fri, 6:30-11am Sat & Sun) Everyone loves a big

breakfast here, with fluffy pancakes, fabulous fresh juices and a good lunch buffet, too. It's a tradition.

Doña Pilar (Map p78; dishes US\$2-4; ☎ 6-9pm Mon-Sat) Get mouthwatering *típico* (regional) fare at this popular evening *fritanga* (sidewalk grill). Chicken or enchiladas are served with *gallo pinto* (rice and beans), chopped pickled cabbage and plantain chips.

Comidas Sara (Map p78; dishes US\$2.50-4; ☎ 4pm-1am) Perhaps the best chicken curry (veggie curry also available) with mango sauce in Managua is served at this fabulous four-table hole-in-the-wall.

Cafetín Tonalli (Map p78; dishes US\$2-6; ☎ 7am-6pm Mon-Fri, 7am-12:30pm Sat) Enjoy yogurt and granola, fresh-baked bread or vegetarian lasagna in the lovely garden in back of this pleasant café, run by a women's co-op.

Comida a la Vista (Map p78; dishes US\$2-5; ☎ 11am-3pm Mon-Sat) Easily the best of the barrio's half-dozen steam-table buffets is this popular restaurant, with another location in Boloña (Map p78). It serves a variety of salads and meatless entrées in addition to the usual beef and chicken.

Licuarios Ananda (Map p78; healthy mains US\$1-4, lunch buffet US\$2.25; ☎ 6am-9pm Mon-Sat) Enjoy vegetarian goodies and 50 different kinds of *licuados* (sugary fruit and veggie juices; US\$1) on this spacious patio overlooking lush gardens; the lunch buffet is held from 11am to 3pm.

MIDRANGE

La Cazuela (Map p78; mains US\$3-12; ☎ 8am-9:30pm) There are two outlets of this seafood restaurant in the neighborhood, the first more upscale, the second a bit cheaper, with a great seafood lunch buffet that's only US\$3, including a drink.

In addition to the dozen or so cheapo restaurants in the food court, Plaza Inter has two Asian restaurants: **Tokyo Carne** (Map p78; ☎ noon-3pm & 6-10pm) and **Mongolia Buffet** (Map p78; ☎ noon-3pm & 6-10pm). Choose to grill your own meat and veggies at the table (US\$2 to US\$12) or indulge in the very complete, and not entirely Asian, buffet (US\$8).

TOP END

Restaurante Santa Fe (Map p78; ☎ 268 9344; Canal 2 2c sur; mains US\$4-12; ☎ noon-10pm) Despite the name, there's no green chili at this quality Tex-Mex spot, with a huge bar, good enchi-

ladas and renowned steak. Make reservations on weekends.

Restaurant Churrasco (Map p70; mains US\$6-15; ☎ noon-midnight) Across the street is this other date-night favorite, specializing in slabs of flame-broiled meat.

Palace of Korea (Map p80; ☎ 266 8968; del Hospital Militar 1c abajo; mains US\$8-20; ☎ 11am-10pm) Satisfy your kim chi craving surrounded by marble columns and alongside Korean-style sushi, table-top barbecues and a potent chicken soup with ginseng. One room has traditional seating.

Centro Commercial & Carretera Masaya

There are probably 50 restaurants lining this strip, including plenty of Nicaraguan and US chains (TGI Fridays, anyone?), not to mention the massive food court at Metrocentro.

BUDGET & MIDRANGE

La Hora del Taco (Map p80; de donde fue Sandy's, Carr Masaya 1c arriba; dishes US\$2-8; ☎ noon-11pm) This may be the best Mexican food in Nicaragua, and enchiladas, tacos and *chiles rellenos* are reasonably priced, too.

Cocina Doña Haydee (Map p80; mains US\$3-8; ☎ 7am-10pm) One block east of Pharaoh's, this spot does rustic right down to the traditional costumes and classic menu, from *gallo pinto* to *guiso de chilote* (cheese soup with baby corn) to steak with all the trimmings.

Pita Express (Map p80; Sinsa 75m sur Calle Altamira; mains US\$3-6) Take a pillow and grab a hookah (flavored tobaccos available), then relax with a delicious pita packed with hummus, shwarma or falafel.

Valenti's Pizza (Map p80; Lacmiel 2c este; mains US\$3-6) Good pizza and great atmosphere at

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Ola Verde (Map p80; Pharaohs 2c abajo, ½c al lago; ☎ 9am-7:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat) This combination whole-foods store, deli and upscale vegetarian restaurant in the shady Altamira neighborhood is a real treat, with a beautiful dining area and even lovelier food, from curried tofu and veggie soups to the wonderful daily specials, all designed by a PhD nutritionist who knows how to cook.

the heart of a neighborhood packed with restaurants catering to business lunchers, sometimes called ‘Zona Cero.’

TOP END

Alí Babá (Map p80; meals US\$5-10; ☎ 6pm-late Tue-Sat) Also in Zona Cero, this hot spot is famed for its shwarma, shish kebabs and other Middle Eastern treats with a Libyan flavor, not to mention the disco it turns into after-hours.

Rincón China (Map p80; meals US\$5-8; ☎ 11:30am-9:30pm) Considered one of the city’s best Asian restaurants, it has huge US\$4 lunch specials.

La Stradivari Restaurant (Map p80; meals US\$6-15; ☎ 6-11pm daily, noon-3pm Mon-Sat) Also in Zona Cero but more upscale than Valenti’s, La Stradivari is known for its fresh pasta and pizza; try anything in spinach sauce.

Marea Alta (Map p80; ☎ 278 2459; meals US\$6-18; ☎ noon-midnight) A tourist tradition since the US ambassador was kidnapped here in the 1970s, the menu is in English, the beef is USDA, the seafood is absolutely spectacular and comes with a wine list from Argentina, Italy, Spain, France and so on – and it delivers.

Young Bin Kwan (Map p80; Calle Principal Los Robles; mains US\$6-60; ☎ 11am-10pm) The city’s most exclusive sushi joint has a menu in Japanese (ack!) and also specializes in exotic soups.

Ta-Fa Comida China (Map p80; ☎ 278 4967; mains US\$4-35; ☎ noon-10pm Tue-Sun) The other contender for best Chinese food in Nicaragua, most dishes are a reasonable US\$4 to US\$6; with the much pricier Peking duck and shrimp-ball soup you’ll need to order ahead.

La Marseilles (Map p80; ☎ 277 0224; Calle Principal Los Robles; ☎ Mon-Sat) The gold standard of Managua cuisine is a landmark, with other fine dining options clustering around its tastefully art-bedecked walls, outstanding wine pairings and authentic French cuisine. Make reservations.

Café de Paris (Map p80; ☎ 278 3267; meals US\$8-30; ☎ noon-3pm & 6-11pm Mon-Sat) Less renowned but just as good as La Marseilles, this intimate dining option involves lots of forks, delicious crepes and a very French chef who recommends the lobster with mushrooms in cognac sauce. Be sure to make reservations.

Groceries

Managua is the best place to stock up in the country. Supermercado La Unión (Map p80) is convenient to Metrocentro and Zona Cero hotels.

La Colonia (Map p70; Plaza España, Rotonda Jean Paul Genie 1c sur, Carr Masaya) The poshest supermarket chain, with organic veggies, imported liquor and all the brands you miss from back home, plus one of the best selections of books (in Spanish) in the city. The one at Plaza España is the nicest, and close to Boloña and Barrio Marta Quezada; the HyperColonia on Carr Masaya is huge.

Super Stop & Go (Km 8 Carr Masaya; ☎ 8am-9:30pm) Expats in the know hit this hidden spot for Nicaragua’s best selection of gringo grub – caviar, curry paste, eight kinds of barbecue sauce and more. Don Pan, with gourmet baked goods, and Bavaria Delikatessan, with imported meats and cheeses, are nearby.

Nature Shoppe (Map p80; ☎ 270 2822; naturalshoppe@hotmail.com; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat) Close to Valenti’s Pizza, this natural grocer has all the vitamins and mysterious holistic treatments you need, plus the organic cookies you want. It also arranges massages, acupuncture and other treatments by reservation.

DRINKING

Managua is far and away the country’s nightlife capital. Check entertainment listings in *Esta Semana*, the Thursday supplement to the newspaper *El Nuevo Diario*, or *Viernes Chiquito*, the competing Thursday supplement from *La Prensa*, and keep an eye open for *Diversión Total*, a free entertainment zine covering Managua, Masaya and Granada. **Nicaragua Tonight** (www.nicaragua2night.com) and **Nicaragua Bacanal** (www.bacanalnica.com) have lots of photos and some information.

Nonalcoholic Beverages

In addition to **Licuaados Ananda** (Map p78; ☎ 6am-9pm Mon-Sat), there are several options for healthy drinking.

Casa de los Jugos (Map p80; juices & snacks US\$1.50-4; ☎ 8am-8pm) In Zona Cero, serves fresh juices and healthy snacks on a nice porch.

Frutilandia (Map p78; Calle 27 de Mayo; snacks US\$1-2; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri, 8am-5pm Sat) With fruity beverages, healthy sandwiches and light breakfasts.

Bars & Pubs

There are several spots for a cold one around Barrio Martha Quezada.

Shannon Bar (Map p78; www.shannonbar.com; ☎ 4pm-2am) The classic bar in this area, this Irish pub is an expat gathering spot and one of the only places in town where you can get a cold Guinness tallboy, Old Holburn rolling tobacco, and big plate of *bocadillo Irlandes* (US\$3), aka bangers 'n' mash.

Bar La Curva (Map p78; Av Bolívar) South of the Crowne Plaza hotel, there's live music on weekends at this open-air bar, with its mellow globe lights and tropical ambience, just oozing a laid-back vibe.

El Chamán (Map p80; ☎ 278 6111; cover US\$2) Young scenesters gather at this popular dance club near Metrocentro. Live music on Thursday.

Zona Hippo's (Map p80; www.zonahippos.com; ☎ noon-2am) Wanna go where everybody knows your name? Globalization has arrived and it's called Hippo's Grill & Tavern, with nine different burgers, next door to affiliated Woody's Sports Bar, with 15 different types of hot wings. Both have Caesar salads, plenty of 'flair,' nonthreatening rock music and very full bars. There's another outlet by the Santo Domingo mall.

Pírata (Map p80; seafood US\$10-30; ☎ noon-2am) Next door to Hippo's but not affiliated, Pírata has live music on Friday, tasteful Cuban music most other days, expensive cocktails, an outdoor bar and an elaborate pirate theme (see the boxed text, p113) that includes booths inside a Spanish galleon and fountains with fake treasure and real turtles. It's upscale; the US\$30 signature *boca* (appetizer) is lobster baked in a pineapple with cheese, served with white wine.

Tsunami (Map p80; ☎ 267 1009; Lacmiel, 15 varas este) In Zona Cero, off Carr Masaya, this big, conversational, outdoor sports-type bar gets a good meat-market crowd, with several similar watering holes nearby.

Just south of La Curva, set back from the street, Bar La Loma (Map p78) attracts a young 20s crowd, with music ranging from rock to hip-hop. One block west of La Curva, there is evidently food at Restaurant El Grillo (Map p78), this spot's most recent hard-partying incarnation, but the crowd still goes all night. Close to El Grillo, you can dance all night at Bar Changó (Map p78), a Cuban-themed disco which sometimes screens movies in the early evening. For special events, it may charge US\$2 cover.

Gay & Lesbian Venues

The gay and lesbian scene is hidden, but you can find it. There are a few gay clubs in Managua, which is a few more than you'll find anywhere else in the country. Most Nicaraguan gays and lesbians hook up with friends through <http://gay.com> or www.gaydar.co.uk, so log on and see if anyone's found better places than these.

Somos (González Paso 1c al lago) Gay and lesbian, but straight friendly, this gay disco has live shows and sometimes a cover. Nearby, try Le Bistro.

Pacu's (Puente del Edén 1c al lago, ½c arriba) A bit mellower, this bar and disco has a restaurant and pulls in a youthful crowd some nights. Gays and lesbians are welcome.

Tabú (Hospital Militar 3c norte, 1c oeste) The dance floor gets going on weekends.

BELLO HORIZONTE

Arguably the best night out in Managua, this traffic circle in the northeast corner of town has grown into an epicenter of mariachi madness and magnet for party people from all over the country. With an unrivalled and oh-so-strollable collection of fast food and *fritangas*, discos and dive bars, plus one legendary pizza joint holding it all together, this is the place to be.

Bar-Restaurant Los Ídolos (Map p70; medium pizza US\$4-7; ☎ 9am-5am) A small, dark, and impossibly hip restaurant, fronted with the aforementioned idols and packed to the wide and sparkly brim with mariachi musicians on their tequila break, this is the rock upon which Bello Horizonte's party scene was built. The pizza's good, too.

From there, your options really are endless. You could get your groove on Charlie's Place (Map p70) or Sueños de la Luna (Map p70) disco-bars, catch a quiet brew or some great live music at Bar Aché (Map p70), play pool, watch the big game, or just pour your spare change into any of several casinos; Fantasy Club (Map p70) has a 'No Mariachi' policy, which you may appreciate at some point in the evening. Or just hang out in the traffic circle with a bottle of rum and Managua's underage cool kids, and enjoy the vibe.

Nightclubs

Remember, those cute heels take up much more space than they're worth in your backpack. Well, unless you're coming to Managua.

XS (Map p80; ☎ 277 3086; Km 5 Carr Masaya; ☎ Wed-Sat) XS draws 20-something club-heads, eager to dance away their worries in this sleek mirrored space.

Hipa Hipa (Carr Masaya; cover US\$3) Not just a club, but *the* club, with a dress code, Euro styling, imported DJs and 'a better class of people' (between 18 and 22), as one pudgy scenester suavely put it.

El Quetzal (Map p80; ☎ 277 0890; Km 5 Carr Masaya) Near Rotonda de Centroamérica, El Quetzal has had one of the city's largest and liveliest dance floors for years. Salsa, *merengue* and cumbia are in heavy rotation at this cavernous club.

Island Taste (Map p70; ☎ 240 0010; Km 6.5 Carr Norte) On weekends the Caribbean crowd packs the floor to soca (defined by fast beats and calypso-like undertones) and reggae grooves at this spot on Carr Norte.

Live Music

La Casa de los Mejía Godoy (Map p80; ☎ 270 4928; Plaza El Sol 2c sur; cover US\$8-15; ☎ Thu-Sat) Living legends Carlos and Luis Enrique Mejía Godoy, whose folk music explorations into the heart of Nicaraguan culture have become church hymns and revolutionary standards since they first started laying down riffs in the 1960s, have their own intimate venue. Here you can watch them and similarly inclined friends play. Make reservations.

Bar La Cavanga (Map p75; ☎ 228 1098; Centro Cultural Managua; cover US\$4; ☎ from 9:30pm Thu-Sat) Take a taxi out to this 1950s-era gem, which stages live folk and jazz shows in the sketchy neighborhood near the old cathedral.

Ruta Maya (Map p78; ☎ 266 0698; Estatua Montoya 1.5m este; cover US\$1-5) Look around for flyers with monthly listings of the happenings at this thatch-roofed venue, which range from Bee Gees cover bands to Caribbean *palo de mayo* to *son nicaraquíense* (traditional Nicaraguan folk music). Traditional Nicaraguan food is served buffet style at lunch.

Campestre el Bosque Discoteca Las Palmeras (Map p70; semaforos antigua 1c norte, ½c oeste; ☎ 4pm-

midnight) Party like the locals at this shady spot with a pool and live (think folksy Nica) music after 8pm.

Bar Barba Roja (Map p80; Rotonda Darío 1c sur, 10 varas oeste; cover US\$2-5) Proving that you don't need a garage to play garage rock, bands come to this bar from all over Nicaragua to show what they can do with three chords.

ENTERTAINMENT

There are dozens of venues around town that occasionally have live music, folkloric dance, alternative theater, poetry readings and other cultural offerings; check the Thursday edition of *La Prensa* or *El Diario* for listings.

If you can, try to catch something at Instituto de Nicaragua y Centroamerica, a good excuse to hang out at UCA (see p73), or **Biblioteca Banco Central de Nicaragua** (☎ 265 0131; Km 7 Carr Sur, 150m este), with wonderful art shows and offbeat performances in a beautiful building.

La Academia de Danza (Map p80; ☎ 277 5557; frente UCA) At the UCA, this place often has performances, and also teaches classes if you'll be in town for a while.

Cinemas

Alianza Francesa (Map p80; Mexican embassy in Altamira) Free unusual movies, usually in French, at 8pm Wednesday and Saturday.

Cinema Plaza Inter (Map p78; US\$2) At Plaza Inter close to Barrio Martha Quezada, has eight screens of (mostly) Hollywood's finest.

La Sala de Teatro Justo Rufino Garay (☎ 666 3714; contiguo al Parque de las Palmas; US\$2) Artsy movies at 7pm Wednesday.

Metrocentro Cinemark (Map p80; US\$2.50) At the bigger, better mall, an even plusher six screens, playing the same blockbuster movies.

Theater

One of the few Managua buildings to survive the 1972 earthquake, groovy **Teatro Nacional Rubén Darío** (Map p75; ☎ 266 3630; Zona Monumental) often has big-name, international offerings on the main stage. It's worth trying to catch some experimental jazz or performance art in the smaller Sala Experimental Pilar Aguirre, which usually has a lower cover charge and more interesting work. Shows and schedules are listed in the paper.

EL NICA: A MONOLOGUE BETWEEN TWO CULTURES

Like 500,000 Nicas living and working in Costa Rica, José Mejía went there to build a better life for his family, but for him it didn't work out. After being ridiculed by his Costa Rican co-workers for his supposedly humble origins, he returned home for a lengthy discussion of Costa Rican–Nicaraguan relations with his tabletop crucifix.

El Nica (www.elnica.org), a two-hour monologue by writer and actor César Meléndez, who plays José Mejía, has gone from a labor of love performed in schools and basements to being one of the biggest theatrical hits in Central America. It's a biting critique of Tico nationalism, but is not afraid to poke fun even at Sandino: 'Now that kid even had the nerve to put together an army to kick out the foreign invader...so well, that foreign investment has been afraid of coming to Nicaragua ever since!'

Meléndez' family came to Costa Rica as migrant workers when he was only five years old, and he has lived his life between the two cultures. 'When you have an emergency in life, you always turn to your nearest brothers. Isn't that right?' Mejía asks his tormenters. And this play's success on both sides of the border proves that there's still love underneath it all.

Sports

Estadio Denis Martínez (Map p78) is the national baseball stadium, and is absolutely packed between mid-November and early April, when Nicaragua's seven professional teams, including the Managua Bóers, go for the national championships. Get stats, schedules and more at **Beisball Nica** (www.ibw.com.ni).

Cranshaw Stadium, the smaller soccer stadium nearby, is currently being replaced by a brand-new 22,000-seat beauty close to UNAN; the **Nicaraguan Football Association** (www.fenifut.org.ni) will have the latest.

SHOPPING

Boutiques are clustered in Altamira, with standouts being Mama Delfina (Map p80), with top-quality *artisanías* (handicrafts) and a cute café up top, and Simplemente Madera (Map p80), a fascinating place to browse even if you don't go home with the organically shaped wood furniture, much of it made from already fallen trees.

Casa de los Tres Mundos (Map p80; La Marseilles, 2½c norte; ☎ 8am–5pm Mon–Fri) In the Zona Rosa/Zona Hippo, this is Ernesto Cardenal's (see the boxed text, p267) home turf, selling not only his sleek, modernistic sculptures but also a great selection of top-quality naïve paintings from the Archipiélago de Solentiname, books and DVDs (most in Spanish, all leftist).

Galería Solentiname (☎ 277 0939; Enel Central sur 600m) If you can't make it out to the islands, this attractive gallery featuring top-of-the-line work will make you want to figure out a way.

Markets & Malls

Mercado Roberto Huembes (Map p70) This is more than just the southbound bus terminal; it has the best selection of souvenirs in Managua, from all over the country.

Mercado Oriental (Map p70) Stash your cash in a couple of places (sock, bra) and try to find a local guide for Central America's largest market and scariest shopping experience. But it's so cheap, and probably the only place in town with live hand grenades...

Plaza Inter (Map p78) Adjacent to Barrio Martha Quezada, it's convenient, with a movie theater, lots of US\$1 shops, a couple of department stores and solid food court.

Metrocentro (Map p80) Watch young, rich Managuans mate and date at more than 50 glittering boutique shops and department stores, dainty cafés and beauty salons; there's also a cinema and food court.

Santo Domingo Mall (Km 8 Carr Masaya) The biggest, newest and, at press time, emptiest shopping center.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Managua International Airport (MGA; ☎ 233 1624/28; www.eaai.com.ni; Km 11 Carr Norte) is a small, manageable airport that is getting more business as tourism and business travel to Managua increases, but it still has that small-country charm. There's a BanPro Visa/Plus ATM, Internet access (per hour US\$2), souvenir shops and crappy food in the main terminal; don't expect to lounge over a good meal. **Intur** (☎ 8am–10pm) has an office inside the international terminal where English-speaking staff can recommend hotels, confirm flights and share

flyers. The airport also has the best selection of English-language magazines in the country.

The smaller, more chaotic domestic terminal is just west of the main building. Departure tax for domestic flights is US\$2, for international flights US\$32, payable in US dollars or córdoba only.

Aerocaribbean (☎ 270 4134; Bosques de Altamira, frente el Cine 158) One Saturday flight to Havana, Cuba.

American Airlines (Map p70; ☎ 266 3900; www.aa.com; Plaza España 3c sur) Two flights daily to Miami.

Atlantic Airlines (☎ 222 5787; www.atlanticairlines.com.ni; Bust José Martí 2½c este) International flights to Tegucigalpa on Monday, Wednesday and Friday; and daily domestic flights to Bluefields and the Corn Islands.

Continental Airlines (☎ 278 7033; www.continental.com; Ofiplaza bldg, 2nd-level bldg 5) One daily flight to Houston.

Copa Airlines (☎ 267 3976; www.copaair.com; Km 4.5 Carr Masaya, Tip Top ½c oeste) Daily flights to Guatemala City, Managua, San José, San Salvador and Panama City.

Grupo Taca (Map p70; ☎ 266 6698; www.taca.com; Plaza España) Daily flights to Miami, Los Angeles and several Latin American cities.

La Costeña (☎ 263 2142; www.flylacostena.com) The major internal carrier has regular service to Bluefields, the Corn Islands, Las Minas, Bilwi and Waspám.

Bus

Managua is the main transportation hub for the country, with four major national bus and van terminals, plus a handful of international bus lines, most grouped in Barrio Martha Quezada.

INTERNATIONAL BUSES

Tica Bus (Map p78; ☎ 222 3031) is in a newly remodeled terminal at the heart of Barrio Martha Quezada.

Costa Rica US\$12, 10 hours, 5:45am, 7am and noon; for Liberia and San José

Guatemala US\$33, 30 hours, 5am; there is a continuing service to Tapachula, Mexico (US\$48, 48 hours)

Panama City US\$36, 34 hours, 5:45am and 7am

San Salvador US\$25, 11 hours, 5am

Honduras US\$20, seven hours, 6am; there is a continuing service from Tegucigalpa to San Pedro Sula (US\$28, 11 hours)

King Quality (Map p78; ☎ 228 1454), across from Tica Bus, has in-flight...er, in-ride meal service and less intense air-conditioning.

Costa Rica US\$16, eight hours, 2:30pm

Guatemala US\$51, 32 hours, 3:30am; for Guatemala City

El Salvador US\$27, 10 hours, 5am and 3pm; for San Salvador

Honduras US\$24, 10 hours, 5am; for Tegucigalpa

Transnica (Map p78; ☎ 270 3133; 1c west of Esso), in convenient new digs in Barrio Martha Quezada, also offers luxury service.

Costa Rica US\$12, nine hours, 5:30am, 7am and 10am; there's a luxury bus (US\$20) at noon; for San José

San Salvador US\$25, 11 hours, 5am

Honduras US\$20, 10 hours, 5am; for Tegucigalpa

Del Sol Bus (☎ 270 2547) has one bus leaving for San Salvador (US\$25) from Managua's Holiday Inn (Map p70) at 6am daily.

Central Line (Map p78; ☎ 254 5431; 3c west of Esso) offers services to San Salvador (US\$25, 10 hours, 5am) and San José, Costa Rica (US\$12, eight hours, 10am), with stops in Masaya and Liberia.

NATIONAL BUSES & MINIVANS

Buses leave from three main places: Mercado Roberto Huembes (for Granada, Masaya and southeast Nicaragua); Mercado Israel Lewites (for León and the Northern Pacific); and Mercado Mayoreo (for the Caribbean Coast and the Northern Highlands). Some also leave from the Mercado Oriental (Map p70), mainly to rural destinations not covered in this book. It's faster, more comfortable and a bit more expensive to take minivans from **UCA** (pronounced 'ooka'; Map p80). Minivans leave when full for León, Granada, Masaya, Rivas, San Jorge, Ticuantepe, Jinotepe, Masatepe and all of the Pueblo Blancos (White Villages). From Mercado Roberto Huembes (Map p70) minibuses leave when full to Ticuantepe, Santo Domingo and most of the Pueblos Blancos, among others. Regular buses and minibuses leave for destinations including:

Granada US\$0.75, one hour, 5am to 10pm, every 15 minutes

Jinotepe microbus US\$1.25, one hour, depart when full

Masatepe US\$1.10, 5am to 6pm, every 20 minutes; also serves San Marcos

Masaya US\$0.60, 40 minutes, 5am to 8pm, every 20 minutes

Naindame US\$1.50, one hour, 6am to 8pm, every 15 minutes

Rivas expreso US\$2.10, two hours, 4am to 6pm, every 30 minutes; *ordinario* US\$1.50, 2½ hours, 4am to 6pm, every 30 minutes; microbus US\$2.50, 1½ hours, depart when full

San Juan del Sur US\$3.50, 2½ hours, 9am and 4pm
Sapoá/Costa Rica US\$3.50, 2½ hours, 6am to 5pm, every 30 minutes

From **Mercado Israel Lewites** (Bóer; Map p70; ☎ 265 2152) minibuses leave when full to Chinandega, La Concha, Corinto, Jinotepe, León, Masatepe, Nagarote, Puerto Sandino and El Sauce, among others. Regular buses run to destinations including:

Carazo US\$0.80, one hour, 4:30am to 6:20pm, every 20 minutes; serving Diriamba and Jinotepe

Chinandega/El Viejo US\$2, 2½ hours, every 30 minutes; bus stops in León

El Sauce US\$3, 7:45am and 2:45pm

La Paz Centro US\$.90, one hour, 6am to 5pm, every 30 minutes

León expreso US\$1.25, 1¼ hours, 5am to 4:45pm, every 30 minutes; via New Hwy and La Paz Centro

León ordinario US\$1, two hours, 5am to 4:45pm, every 20 minutes; via Old Hwy and Puerto Sandino

León microbus US\$1, 1¼ hours, depart when full

Nagarote US\$0.70, 45 minutes, 6am to 5pm, every 30 minutes

Pochomil/Masachapa US\$0.70, 1½ hours, 6am to 6pm, every 20 minutes

Mercado Mayoreo (Map p70; ☎ RAAN 233 4729, Rama 233 4533) serves both the Northern Highlands and RAAN and the road to Rama, including San Carlos. Destinations include:

Boaco US\$1.75, one hour, 4am to 6:30pm, every 30 minutes

El Rama expreso US\$9, 5½ hours, 2pm, 6pm and 10pm; *ordinario* US\$7, eight hours, 4am, 5am, 6am, 7:30am, 8:45am and 11:30am

Esquipulas US\$3, 2½ hours, 6:25am, 8:20am, 12:25pm, 1:25pm, 2:50pm and 3:50pm

Estelí US\$3, 2½ hours, 5:45am to 5:45pm, every 30 minutes

Jinotega US\$3.50, three hours, 4am to 5:30pm, almost hourly; the 3pm bus serves San Rafael del Norte (US\$3.75)

Juigalpa US\$1, two hours, 5am to 4:45pm, every 20 minutes; transfer to San Carlos, Nueva Guinea and El Rama buses

Matagalpa US\$3, two hours, 3am to 6pm, every 30 minutes

Ocotal US\$3.75, 3½ hours, 3:20am to 4:15pm, almost hourly; the 3:20am, 10:15am and 3pm buses serve Jalapa (US\$6, five hours)

Río Blanco US\$5, four hours, 4am to 3pm, almost hourly

San Carlos US\$9, 12 hours, 5am, 6am, 7am, 9:15am, 10:15am, 1pm and 6:30pm

Siuna US\$9, 10 to 12 hours, four daily

Somoto US\$3.75, 3½ hours, 7:15am, 9:45am, 11am, 12:45pm, 1:45pm, 2pm, 3:45pm and 4:45pm

Car

INSURANCE

By law, you must get basic insurance (US\$10 per day) with car rental, which usually has a US\$1500 deductible and does not cover flat tires. For another US\$10 to US\$15 per day, you can get supplemental insurance that will cover the deductible. Chances are, your credit card already provides supplemental insurance for at least the first two weeks of your rental, so call your card company and ask.

RENTAL

Renting a car is relatively inexpensive, thanks to pro-tourism tax laws. You need a driver's license from your own country (valid for one month after you arrive in Nicaragua) and a credit card; you must be over 25 years old, but ask around if you're not. Renting a car at the airport costs you a hefty 15% extra, so consider taking a taxi to an off-site office. Rental-car companies will wait for you at the Peñas Blancas border, and some companies, including Hertz, will let you take your rental car to Costa Rica with prior arrangement; it doesn't work the other way around.

Budget (☎ in Managua 266 6226, in the US & Canada 800-758 9586) has excellent service and consistently lower rates than the other guys, but Dollar also gets rave reports. Other possibilities:

Alamo (☎ airport 233 3718, Managua 270 1939; alamo@cable.net.com.ni)

Avis (☎ airport 233 3011, Barrio Boloña 268 1838; avisnic@cable.net.com.ni)

Best (☎ 263 3242) Airport only.

Dollar (☎ 266 3620; www.dollar.com.ni) Has deals that include rooms at several Managua hotels, including El Conquistador and La Casona.

Exotic (☎ 233 4695; www.exoticrentacar.com.ni; Km 9.5 Carr Norte) At flashy Hotel Camino Real, specializes in limos and other fabulous rides.

Hertz (☎ airport 233 1237; www.hertz.com.ni)

Lugo (☎ airport 263 2368, Managua 277 0582; www.lugorentacar.com.ni)

National (☎ 270 1968; www.nationalnicaragua.com)

Nicaragua (☎ Barrio Boloña 250 2114, Bello Horizonte 244 1051; www.nicarentacar.com) Managua-based company that will accept a US\$200 deposit in lieu of a credit card.

Payless (☎ airport 233 1329, Managua 278 1825; www.payless.com.ni)

Targa (☎ reservations 222 4824, airport 233 1176, Managua 222 4881; rentacar@ibw.com.ni)

World (☎ 263 1011; worldrentacar@cablenet.com.ni)
Avoid the airport tax by running across the street to the office at Best Western Las Mercedes.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

The airport is 11km from town and has its special, more expensive taxis (US\$15 to US\$20 to most Managua destinations) which don't pick up passengers. At night this is worth it, but during the day you can just run across the very busy Carr Norte to the bus stop, where *colectivo* taxis cost US\$5 to go into town.

Bus

Local buses are frequent and crowded. They're also known for their professional pickpockets, though the warnings are probably overblown – stay alert and you'll be fine. Routes run every 10 minutes from 4:45am to 6pm, then every 15 minutes until 10pm. Buses do not generally stop en route – look for the nearest bus shelter. The fare is US\$0.35. Useful routes include:

No 109 Plaza de la República to Mercado Roberto Huembes, stopping en route at Plaza Inter.

No 110 Mercado Israel Lewites (Bóer) to Mercado Mayoreo, via the UCA, Metrocentro, Rotonda de Centroamérica, Mercado Roberto Huembes and Mercado Iván Montenegro.

No 116 Montoya statue, Plaza Inter, Mercado Oriental and Rotonda Bello Horizonte.

No 118 From Parque Las Piedrecitas, heads down Carr Sur, then east, passing by the Mercado Israel Lewites (Bóer), Rotonda El Güegüense (Plaza España), Plaza Inter and Mercado Oriental on its way to Mercado Mayoreo.

No 119 From Lindavista to Mercado Roberto Huembes, with stops at Rotonda El Güegüense and the UCA.

Car & Motorcycle

Driving in Managua is not recommended at night – even if you have a rental car, consider getting a taxi, and make sure your car is in a guarded lot. Night drivers should keep their windows rolled up and stay alert.

Taxi

Most taxis in Managua are *colectivos*, which pick up passengers as you go. There are also more expensive private taxis based at the airport, Metrocentro Mall, Mercado Roberto Huembes and other places. These

are safer, but regular taxis also always congregate close by. Licensed taxis have red plates and the driver's ID above the dash; if yours doesn't, you're in a pirate taxi. This is probably OK, but don't go to the ATM, and beware of scams (see the boxed text, p74) no matter what kind of taxi you're in.

Fares are US\$1 to US\$4 per person within the city. From Barrio Martha Quezada, taxis go to the airport (US\$10/10/15 for one/two/three people), Mercado Roberto Huembes (US\$3/4 for one/two people), Mercado Israel Lewites (US\$2/3), Mayoreo (US\$5/6), Zona Rosa (US\$2/3) and Huellas deAcahualinca (US\$3/4). Prices rise at night.

AROUND MANAGUA

LAGUNAS DE XILOÁ & APOYEQUE

Half a dozen crater lakes lie near Managua. The best for swimming is **Laguna de Xiloá**, on the Península de Chiltepe, about 20km northwest of Managua off the road to León. Xiloá is also suitable for windsurfing and diving, with clear waters holding at least 15 endemic species. Though crowded on weekends, the lagoon remains quite peaceful during the week.

It's a steep 30-minute hike from Laguna de Xiloá to less accessible but more picturesque **Laguna de Apoyeque**, deep within a steep crater. Small alligators can be spotted basking beside its sulfurous waters. Take bus 110 from the UCA to Ciudad Sandino, where you can catch an onward bus to the lagoons.

EL TRAPICHE

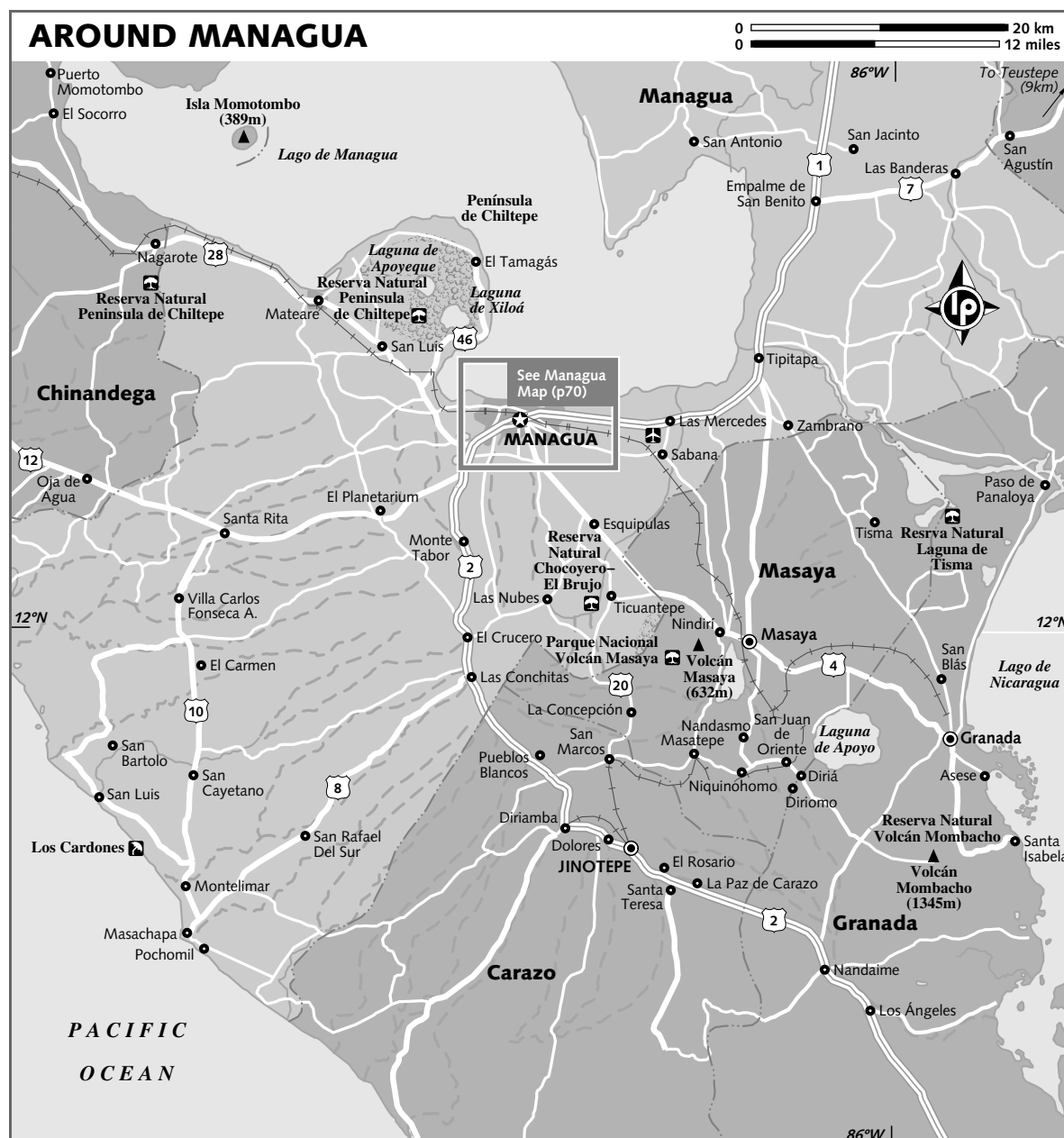
This natural *balneario* (thermal spa), **Los Baños Termales y del Club Náutico de Río Tipitapa** (admission US\$2.30), is 22km from Managua in the town of Tipitapa, with therapeutic waters surrounded by gardens and restaurants. Buses to Tipitapa depart from Mercado Central/Roberto Huembes.

PACIFIC BEACHES

Not even 50km from Managua are some of the most beautiful beaches in Nicaragua.

Masachapa & Pochomil

Although the three square blocks of restaurants, bars and hotels have largely supplanted the original fishing village of



Machapa (now located just north), it's still the only organically grown town around. **Cyber & Restaurant GLC** (Internet per hr US\$1; ☎ 6am-10pm) has hamburgers (meals US\$1 to US\$4) and Internet access. There are no banks in Masachapa but Montelimar has an ATM (p90).

There's great surfing – a left point break just north of Montelimar, and a hollow right reef break to the south; Quizala, a beach break, is closer to Masachapa. South to Pochomil there are scores of smallish, predictable peaks that would be perfect to learn on, if someone had a surfing school around here. In fact, no one even rents boards, though you could rent a **private lancha** (small motorboat; per hr US\$12-20).

Buses and pedicabs ply the 2km **Centro Turístico Pochomil** (car/pedestrian US\$1/free), between Masachapa and the government-operated tourist center. This one has about 30 businesses, mostly waterfront restaurants and bars, almost all with *palapa* (thatched) roofs, fronting a truly spectacular beach. Come for the day or stay at **Hotel Alta Mar** (☎ 269 9204; tr with fan/air-con US\$15/25; P ☎), with small, clean, wood-paneled rooms that are more than adequate.

Hospedaje Flipper (d US\$6) is the cheapest accommodations in town, with OK cement rooms and cleanish private bathrooms; it caters to couples on a beach break. Right on the water, **Hotel Summer** (☎ 269 7754; s/d US\$30/40; P ☎ ☎) has a big pool and classy

rooms with cable TV, and if you eat at the restaurant, nonguests can swim (adult/child US\$3/1.50) here too. Next door, you could rent a **private home** (☎ 266 7975; house US\$150) right on the beach – it's a big, yellow, five-room wooden house. **Hotel Vista al Mar** (☎ 269 0115, 244 0736; d US\$30-40; Ⓟ 🚿), in the same cluster, is closest to the water; go for the more expensive rooms, with views.

Just south, cheerful **Hotel Bahía** (☎ 2545128; www.hotelbahia.com; s/d/tr incl all meals US\$35/60/75; Ⓟ 🚿) is threadbare but somehow nicer, with pretty cabins, words of wisdom, and a woody lot. Meals are served family-style.

Several beachfront bars cater more to local fishermen than tourists; give Comacho's Disco Bar, on the road to Montelimar, a whirl.

Hotel Vistamar (☎ 265 8099; www.vistamarhotel.com; d with/without 3 meals, beer & rum US\$155/81; Ⓟ 🚿 🚿) is one of the nicest hotels on the Nicaraguan Pacific. Try to stay upstairs in the breezy two-story beach bungalows arranged around two pools, with great porches and outdoor seating scattered around the premises. Rooms aren't enormous, but could certainly sleep a family of four.

Buses run from Pochomil and Masachapa to Managua's Mercado Israel Lewites (US\$1.25, one hour) every 20 minutes from 7am to 5:30pm.

Montelimar

Formerly the Somoza's summer home, **Barceló Montelimar Beach Resort** (☎ 269 6769; www.barcelo.com; Ⓟ ✉ 🚿 🚿 🚿) does it right: it's got 88 rooms and 204 bungalows, stocked with coffeemakers, hairdryers, DirectTV, Internet access and more, plus four huge pools, tennis courts, discos, restaurants, beauty parlors, and even miniature golf. Prices are all-inclusive – food, beer, rum and most activities – and if you're into this sort of thing are a good deal. Day-trippers can visit the casino for free, or pay US\$50 per person for use of all facilities. If you just want to use the ATM, tell the gatekeeper 'casino.' Works like a charm.

Close by is **Montelimar Cave**, with several petroglyphs that show traces of red and blue pigment still apparent, suggesting that all these monochromatic carvings were once a bit showier.

North of Montelimar, **Los Cardones Hotel Ecológico** (☎ 887 5225, 222 6887; www.loscardones.com) has just five pretty *cabinas* (cheap hotels), great food and some of the best surfing in Nicaragua just steps away from your hammock. Owners also offer fishing, snorkeling and horseback riding, and sea turtles lay their eggs on the beach. The whole operation is not only low impact (solar energy, composting) but also family friendly, with breaks for kids under 12. They want you to stay at least two nights, with single/double packages including three meals starting at US\$150/200; a week surfing package is US\$450/600. An expert left point break, a right reef point, and beach breaks just offshore make this a surfing paradise. From Managua, head toward the beach until California, then follow the signs 15km to Los Cardones. Or, take the bus from Managua's Mercado Israel Lewites to San Cayetano (US\$0.70, one hour, 4am to 9pm, every 45 minutes), get off in California and stick your thumb out.

TICUANTEPE

pop 30,000 / elevation 360m

Just 19km from Managua, Ticuantepe is a refreshing escape from the sweltering city, with temperatures ranging from 22°C to 28°C. It's on the western rim of the Complejo Ventarrón Volcanic (Ventarrón Volcanic Complex), across from Nindirí and Masaya.

Occupied for at least 2500 years by the Matagalpa Indians, Ticuantepe is today the service center for an enormous and productive agricultural region, colloquially known as the Valle de las Piñas (Valley of Pineapples). The closest thing to a tourist attraction in town is the **Museo Arqueológico Municipal Raúl Rojas** (admission free), next to the *alcaldía* (mayor's office), with more than 50 stone and ceramic pieces dug up in the immediate era, plus an actually impressive mural of Ticuantepe c AD 1200. If it's closed, ask at the mayor's office if they'll let you in. There's also a quiet **trail** climbing dormant Cerro Ventarrón: go southeast on the dirt road by Comedor Bianca for about an hour on foot, then enjoy the views of Masaya.

One of the most important petroglyphs in the region, tantalizingly entitled **Pared de Serpientes** (Wall of Snakes), has more than 25 beautifully preserved, serpent-related

drawings, and is evidently within easy walking distance of town. Unfortunately, it's on private property (ask Cantur, downtown, about guides) and surrounded by trash, including open sewage.

Parque Zoológico Edgar Lang Sacasa (adult/child US\$0.70/0.30; ☎ 8:30am-5pm Tue-Sun), at Km 16 on the Masaya Hwy, is your basic developing-world zoo, featuring local wildlife and a few African species lounging listlessly in smallish enclosures; the nutria sure are cute, though. If you do drop by, bring insect repellent.

There's no lodging in town, but you can eat at Comedor El Chanchito, two blocks north of the post office) and specializing in pork dishes, or Comedor Bianca (half a block south of the *alcaldía*), where the focus is on *carne asada*. Two more upscale and outdoorsy eateries are right on the highway: **El Parador** (Km 18 Carr Masaya; dishes US\$2-8), with prim gardens and some Salvadoran food, including pupusas (cornmeal mass stuffed with cheese or refried beans); and **Mi Viejo Ranchito** (Km 17.5 Carr Masaya; ☎ 7am-8:30pm), a thatch-roofed spot, open later on Fridays for 'Romantic Nights,' which could include *quesillos* and *tiste* (corn liquor) *au deux*.

Microbuses to Managua (Mercado Roberto Huembes; US\$0.70) and San Marcos (US\$0.50) leave from the parque central (central park) when full (about every 20 minutes). You can catch a taxi or *moto* (motorcycle) to the area reserves.

Reserva Natural Chocoyero-El Brujo

This deep, Y-shaped valley encompassed by a small, 184-hectare **natural reserve** (☎ 864 8652; admission US\$4), 23km south of Managua and visited by 10,000 people visit each year, was originally protected to safeguard almost one-third of Managua's water supply. Then some astute soul noticed that these aquifers are exceptional. **El Brujo** (The Wizard) is a waterfall that seems to disappear underground, separated by a 400m cliff from **El Chocoyero** (Place of Parakeets), the less immediately impressive cascade. But show up at around 3pm and you'll see bands of parakeets come screaming home for their evening gossip.

Start at the Interpretive Center, with displays about the park's five different parakeet species, then the two trails leading to the waterfalls, both of which could take all

afternoon, if you're slow. It may just have the most comfortable public campsites in Nicaragua (per person US\$4), and you can rent a small tent for just US\$10 more.

The reserve is 7km away from where the Managua-La Concepción bus drops you off, so it's much easier to get a cab in Ticuantepe (about US\$10). After going 14km on the main road, turn west to Ticuantepe and La Concepción, and at Km 21.5 a dirt road goes to the entrance.

Montibelli Reserva Privada

Make reservations at least three days in advance to visit one of Nicaragua's best **private reserves** (☎ 270 4287; www.montibelli.com; d cabinas US\$40; ☎ Tue-Sun), tucked into a quiet corner of humid tropical forest along the Meseta's flattened spine. It has excellent birding, almost 40 species of butterfly, great food and wonderful guided hikes. On **Los Balcones Trail**, you can see yellow and brown orependola birds, best known for their unique nests that swing like mossy pendulums from the trees. **Mirador Trail** offers spectacular views of Volcán Masaya, Cerro Ventarrón and Mombacho.

The reserve also organizes package deals geared toward students and scientists, including camping (per person US\$35) for groups of at least 10 people, including five meals, guided hikes and other activities. To get here, take a *moto* (US\$2) from the Ticuantepe bus stop. The well-signed turnoff for the reserve is at Km 19 of Carretera Ticuantepe-La Concepción (or La Concha); it's another 2.5km to the reserve.

MASAYA & LOS PUEBLOS BLANCOS

This is the *meseta central*, the central plateau, a patchwork panorama of crater lakes and active volcanoes, colorful colonial cities and brilliant green *fincas* (plantations). It is in many ways the heart and soul of Nicaragua, as densely populated as El Salvador and home to a disproportionate number of myths, traditions and wild *fiestas patronales*, holy days that at heart seem less Catholic, revealing rather something that the Spanish were never quite able to tame.

Masaya, the 'Cradle of Nicaraguan Culture,' is the regional capital and home to the national *artesanía* (handicraft) market, where folkloric dance takes place at least once a week, if nothing more exotic is on.

To the south and west are Los Pueblos Blancos, or White Towns, a colorful collection of indigenous sites and Spanish cities, each with its own claim to fame. Further west still are Carazo's coffee-topped highlands, which suddenly slope down the continental shelf to broad and sandy Pacific beaches that international visitors almost never explore.

Climate & Geography

The relatively hot, low-altitude cities of Masaya and Nindirí actually sit on the rim of what may be the largest crater in the Americas, El Ventarrón, whose rim also encompasses Ticuantepe, Masatepe, the Laguna de Masaya and Parque Nacional Volcán Masaya (p100), a must-see attraction.

Heading west, the landscape rises to the *meseta*, a cool central plateau with peaks as high as 600m and a refreshing median temperature of 20°C to 24°C, then even higher past San Marcos, in the Carazo department. Coffee, citrus and other relatively cool-weather crops carpet slopes that still harbor some of the region's original semihumid tropical savanna, which receives a moderate 1300mm of rainfall annually. The ridge of this volcanic crinkle runs parallel to the Pacific, dropping fast and steep just 20km to the hot and sandy Carazo beaches.

In addition to Volcán Masaya, there are two important and accessible natural reserves nearby: Laguna de Apoyo (p102), an enormous, ancient, clean crater lake, with several hotels and regular bus service; and tiny Reserva Natural Chocoyero-El Brujo (p91), with a waterfall and lots of parakeets, most easily seen with your own transportation.

Getting There & Around

Masaya is the regional transportation hub, with regular buses to Managua, Granada, Rivas and the Costa Rican border, as well as throughout the Pueblos Blancos and Carazo towns. Jinotepe is the western transportation center. Roads are excellent

throughout the region, with the exception of beach access, and fleets of minivans run regularly from village to village.

One of the best reasons to travel this region is the opportunity to ride in a *moto*, a tiny three-wheeled taxi that uses a motorcycle (or riding mower) engine and maxes out at about 40km/h, going downhill. They're everywhere. The smoothly paved and gently rolling hills also make for remarkable cycling – there used to be a place in Masaya's Mercado Artesanías (Mercado Viejo) to rent bicycles; ask around to see if it's reopened.

MASAYA

pop 118,000 / elevation 240m

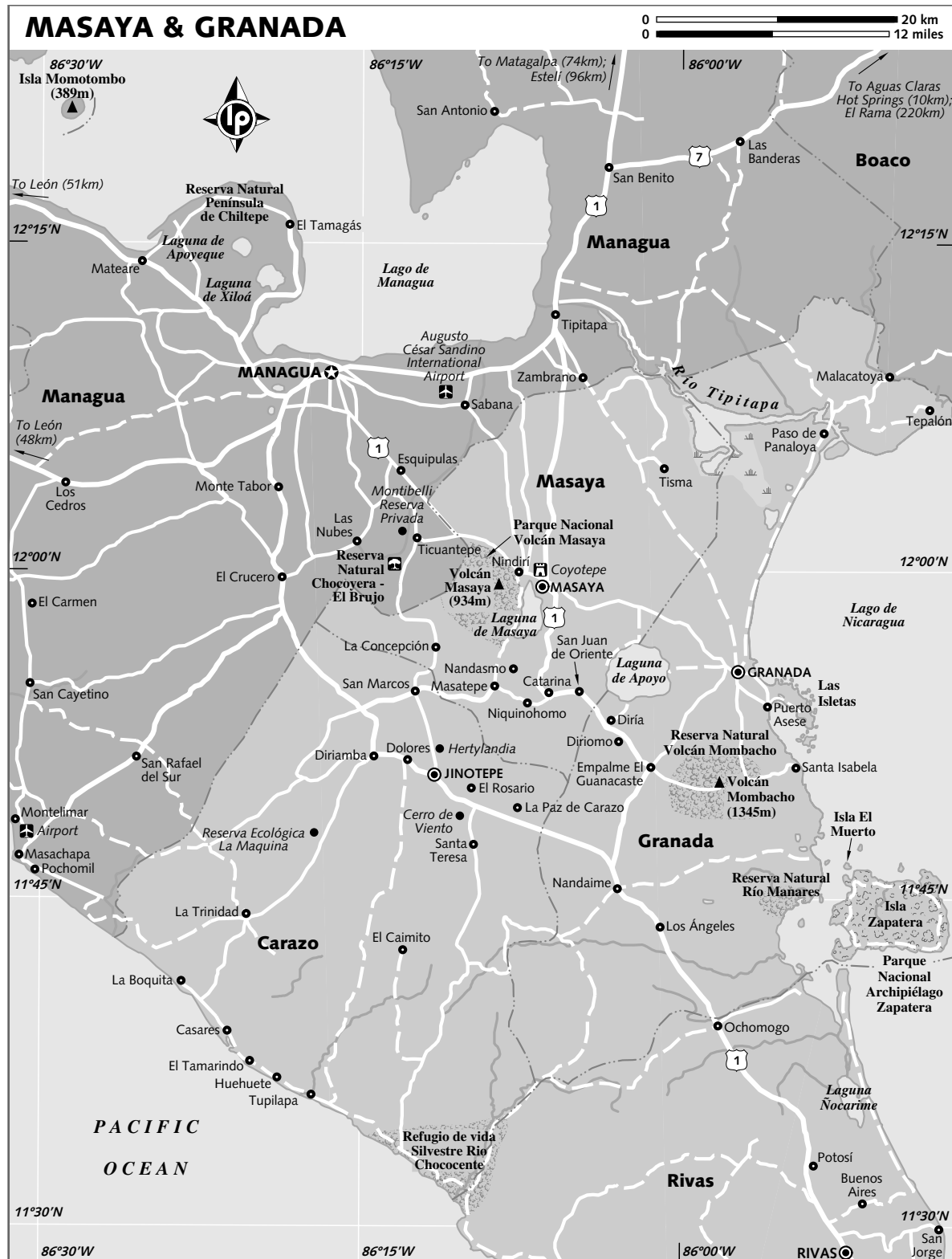
Masaya has been a center of art and culture since long before the Spanish arrived, its Chorotegan roots showing throughout its extravagant annual events calendar and at every religious event, not to mention in the residents' mastery of traditional indigenous handicrafts.

Most international visitors come for two reasons: Volcán Masaya, fuming madly overhead, and the Mercado Artesanías, a square-block, Gothic, Spanish-fortress-themed edifice built more than a century ago, and today packed with some of Central America's best souvenirs (see p99). Nicaraguan tourists, by the way, always make sure their visit coincides with one of Masaya's many spectacular festivals (see p96).

Despite the excellent shopping and perfect location (between Granada and Managua), Masaya isn't exactly a tourist mecca. Its authentic Spanish colonial architecture still shows wear and tear incurred during the massive 2000 earthquake, and the hotel and restaurant scene leaves a bit to be desired. Regardless, compared to Granada, Masaya's lack of pretensions and its cultural attractions make it a less glamorous, but perhaps more authentic, base from which to explore this rich region.

Orientation

Masaya, the smallest department in the country at only 590 sq km, is 29km southeast of Managua and 16km northwest of Granada. The city sits at the edge of Laguna de Masaya, beyond which rises Volcán Masaya, and is the economic and transportation hub for the region.



There are several parques central (central parks), remnants of when Masaya was a group of small communities, but today the most important central plaza is the one that fronts Iglesia La Asunción, two blocks west of the Mercado Artesanías. From La Asunción, the lagoon and baseball stadium are seven blocks to the west. Five

blocks to the south are Barrio Monimbó and Iglesia San Sebastian. The Mercado Municipal (Mercado Nuevo) and main bus station are about six blocks to the east of Parroquia La Asunción, past the Mercado Artesanías.

The neighborhood north of La Asunción contains most of Masaya's restaurants

and hotels, as well as famed Iglesia de San Jerónimo.

Continue for about 1km and you'll reach the old train station and the main road to Managua. The entrance to Forteleza Coyotepe is 2km to the north, and Parque Nacional Volcán Masaya is about 7km further.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet La Reform@ (per hr US\$0.70; ☑ 7am-9pm) This place is fast and right around the corner from the Mercado Municipal and bus lot, toward Calle San Miguel.

Kablenet Café (per hr US\$0.70; ☑ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-3pm Sun) Across from Hotel Regis.

MASAYA

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Scale: 0 to 800 m / 0 to 0.5 miles

Inset Map Scale: 0 to 200 m / 0 to 0.1 miles

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital Hilario Sanchez Vásquez (☎ 522 2778; Calle San Miguel) Has emergency room services.

MONEY

Banco America Central (BAC) With a 24-hour ATM next to the Mercado Artesanías, it accepts MasterCard/Cirrus and Visa/Plus, and changes traveler's checks inside.

BanPro A block away from BAC, this has another 24-hour ATM, but it accepts Visa/Plus only.

Eso At the *empalme* (three-way intersection) with the main Granada–Managua highway. Use Visa/Plus or MasterCard/Cirrus debit cards at this ATM, which offers US dollars or córdobas.

POST & TELEPHONE

Enitel For international calls. It faces Parque 17 de Octubre.

Post office & DHL Both conveniently inside the Mercado Artesanías. Depending on how fast you want that hammock on your porch back home, DHL is open Saturday mornings.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Intur (☎ 522 7615) This well-funded office with English-speaking staff sells a fairly useful, if distorted, map (with lots of factoids in English) and has broad information about the region.

Sights & Activities

Most people visit Masaya to shop; if that describes you, skip ahead to p99.

One of the best ways to see the town is in a **horse-drawn carriage**, about US\$2 per person for the grand tour. Skinny horses may dissuade some would-be riders, but note that Granada's burgeoning tourist industry (ie horrified, complaining tourists) has inspired some serious equine weight-gain.

If you're here between Thursday and Sunday, consider taking the cute little **tourist train** (US\$2, 40 minutes) from Hotel Madera's Inn on a guided tour of Masaya. Highlights include the *malecón* (waterfront), Iglesia de San Jerónimo and the old **1926 train station** (Av Zelaya), which unfortunately remains closed to the public.

CHURCHES & PLAZAS

There are 12 major barrios (neighborhoods) in Masaya, all of which were once separate communities with their own churches, plazas and identities: Monimbó, San Jerónimo, Santa Teresa, Villa Bosco Monge, Aserrio, Santa Susana, Las Malvinas, El Palomar, La

Ceibita, Cerro Forteleza El Coyotepe, Sylvio Renazco and Cerro la Barranca

At the center of it all is the 1750 **Parroquia de La Asunción**, an attractive but scarred late-Baroque beauty that the Spanish government has offered to help repair. It watches over the parque central, formally known as **Parque 17 de Octubre** in honor of the 1977 firefight that pitted local residents (armed with explosive homemade weapons) against Somoza's National Guard.

Monimbó is Masaya's most famous neighborhood, its ancient center now marked by the 1935 **Iglesia San Sebastián**. Perhaps more important, **Iglesia María Magdalena**, sort of the female counterpart to San Sebastián, is where many of Monimbó's most important festivals begin or end.

Although **Iglesia San Juan** is usually closed to the public, check out the surrounding neighborhood strung between La Asunción and the lake, with more than a dozen hammock workshops and factories. Other churches worth seeing include more modern **Iglesia de San Miguel**, whose resident San Miguel Arcángel makes the rounds during the procession of St Jerome, and 1848 **San Juan Bautista**, small, simple and much nicer inside than out.

Parroquia El Calvario, seven blocks north-east of the parque central on Calle El Calvario, is a squat colonial structure with no spire, most remarkable for the extraordinary statues of Jesus and the thieves being crucified, right at the entrance. Those are original – the rest had to be remodeled after the earthquake of 2000.

Among the major buildings worst hit by the earthquake, which also destroyed about 80 homes, was 1928 **Iglesia de San Jerónimo**, the spiritual heart of Masaya and one of the most recognizable silhouettes on the skyline. But that hasn't stopped anyone from celebrating the longest *fiestas patronales* in Nicaragua, with their epicenter, as always, right here.

THE MALECÓN & LAGUNA DE MASAYA

Just seven blocks west of the parque central, past hammock factories and Iglesia San Juan, is one of the most inspiring views in a region famed for the same, across Laguna de Masaya to the smoking Santiago crater. The still attractive, if crumbling, *malecón* was constructed in 1944, when you could still swim, drink or fish in the impressive

lagoon. Things have changed. Several trails carved into the volcanic crater millennia ago still lead from a humble collection of restaurant/bars down to the water, but hardly anyone ever uses them anymore.

MUSEO & GALERÍA HÉROES Y MARTIRES

Inside the *alcaldía* (mayor's office), this museum (☎ 552 2977; suggested donation US\$1; 🕒 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) honors Masayans who gave their lives during the revolution. There are walls of photos and interesting displays of bomb-building materials and weapons, as well as personal effects including musical instruments and a few Chorotegan funeral urns. It's poignant.

FORTELEZA COYOTEPE

Built in 1893 atop Cerro de los Coyotes, the eerie **Fortaleza Coyotepe** (admission US\$0.70; 🕒 8am-6pm) witnessed the last stand of Benjamín Zeledón, the 1912 hero of resistance to US intervention. The marines managed to take the fortress, watched all the while by a young man named Sandino, who vowed his revenge. In the end it would also be the National Guard's last stronghold, overrun during Sandinista's final 1979 offensive.

It's worth the climb just for the view: Laguna de Masaya, Lago de Managua, Volcán Mombacho and, if it's clear, Volcán Momotombo, rising red and black above Managua. But your entrance fee, a donation to the Nicaraguan boy scouts, also includes a Spanish-language tour of the underground prison, detailing each daily atrocity.

You can walk 2km north on the Interamericana (Pan-American Hwy), but it's worth getting a Managua-bound bus (US\$0.30) or taxi (US\$1) to avoid the scary traffic. Taxis charge extra to take you up the steep hill, otherwise it's a sweaty half-hour hike.

Tours

Most people organize tours from Granada (see p119), but there is one homegrown Masaya outfit, **Servitour Monimbó** (☎ 522 7404, 623 5689). Across from Iglesia San Sebastián, it offers inexpensive tours of local crafts workshops, as well as trips to Aguas Clara hot springs (p241) and Reserva Natural El Chocoyero-El Brujo (p91). Most trips are geared toward larger groups.

Festivals & Events

Every Thursday night at about 5pm, **Jueves de Verbena** has food, music and ballet *folklorico* at the Mercado Artesanías; most Granada tour outfits offer this as a weekly add-on to their regular Masaya trips.

La Virgen de la Asunción (March 16) Better known as the Virgin of the Burning Finger or Festival of the Cross, the town's top Virgin is taken to the lake for a blessing of the waters and a good look at the slender protrusion of lava that threatened the town during the 1772 eruption, until she stopped it.

Jesús del Rescate (April 3) Scores of *carretas* (oxcarts) begin their journey from Masaya to San Jorge (p136).

San Lázaro (week before Palm Sunday) Includes a procession of costumed dogs.

Día de la Virgen de la Asunción (August 15) Everyone's favorite patron saint, María Magdalena, is hoisted atop the shoulders of revelers for her annual tour of Monimbó; fireworks are involved.

San Jerónimo (September 30) Officially eight days of festivities, folks have stretched out Nicaragua's most famous festival to three months. The patron saint (in the guise of a bearded campesino named 'Tata Chombó,' or 'Doctor of the Poor') is taken from the San Jerónimo church altar and borne around Masaya while traditional dances are performed, including Mozote y Verga, a mock battle that ends with peacemaking ceremonies to commemorate the September peace treaties of 1856, 1912 and 1979. Fireworks, marimbas, parades, drag queens and more make this a fiesta to remember.

Noche de Agüizotes (last Friday in October) Not to be confused with Halloween or Day of the Dead, this spooky festival features legends come to life and ghosts of the dead, plus the costumed living parading through the streets.

El Toro Venado (last Sunday of October, third Sunday of November) This dance involves a mythical creature which is half-bull, half-deer (read: half-Spanish, half-indigenous), and whose mission is to make fun of the rest of the fair.

Baile de los Diablitos (last Sunday of November) Little devils dance in honor of Mephistopheles and San Jerónimo.

Sleeping

Most budget lodging is clustered about four blocks north of Parroquia La Asunción, along Av Zelaya. Nicer hotels are on the Carretera Masaya, interspersed with lots of love hotels. A good rule of thumb: if there's a hiding place for your car, chances are rates will be hourly.

Hotel Regis (☎ 522 2300; cmolinapalma@hotmail.com; old/new r per person US\$3/6) Three and a half blocks north of the main plaza, Hotel Regis offers small, tidy rooms in aquamarine cement for

'MONIMBÓ IS NICARAGUA!'

Masaya may have been declared the 'Cradle of National Folklore,' but the folklore of Masaya is the folklore of Monimbó. Once the region's most important indigenous city, this famous Masaya neighborhood, centered around Iglesia San Sebastián, is still populated mainly by people of Chorotegan descent.

Though a vital part of Masaya and Nicaragua, in many ways Monimbó remains a world apart: indigenous government structures such as the Council of Elders are still in place, if largely relegated to ceremonial status.

One reason for Monimbó's cultural autonomy is its celebrated history of almost continuous rebellion against the Spaniards and other occupiers. Most recently, in 1977, the people of Monimbó famously attacked Somoza's feared National Guard, using homemade weapons – contact bombs, machetes and lances – produced by their own artisans and craftspeople. They held the barrio for a week.

After the battle, the Monimboseños donned traditional Spanish masks, borrowed from folkloric dances that ridiculed those occupiers, and denounced to the newspapers the abuses and atrocities of the National Guard. Those who participated are proud to note that masks, both as symbols and disguises, have been used ever since in revolutionary movements across Latin America and the world.

The country was inspired by the barrio's spectacular resistance, and streets across the nation echoed with the battle cry, 'Monimbó is Nicaragua!' Ernesto Cardenal (see the boxed text, p267) wrote that the masked Monimboseños had declared their barrio 'Free Nicaragua.' And in the end, Masaya and Monimbó were the first cities to be liberated.

Monimbó has also fought to protect its traditions and folklore, in particular its very traditional way of celebrating religious events. During the festivals for **St Lazarus**, one week before Easter, Iglesia María Magdalena is attended by devotees and their dogs, which are dressed up as children, witches, space aliens and more. A special mass is followed by food and corn liquor for all.

Los Agüizotes is another important celebration, featuring spirits of the dead and characters from indigenous horror stories (many originating during the Spanish conquest). The Headless Priest and La Carreta Nagua (Chariot of Death) are used throughout the year to scare children into better behavior, but on the last Friday in October make their way through the streets of Monimbó and Masaya.

Costumes are prepared the night before in a ceremony called **La Vela de Candil** (Vigil of the Candle). They are placed on a table with a large candle in the middle, and those watching over it throughout the night keep themselves awake with fireworks, live music, alcohol and dancing, after which everyone prepares for the annual procession.

The Barrio of Monimbó organizes festivals and events throughout the year; ask at **Intur** (☎ 522 7615) or your hotel if anything is on while you're in town.

Monimbó native Ruth Danelia López Gaitan wrote her 'Sustainable Tourism' thesis for the University of Nicaragua about the cultural traditions of Monimbó. Contact her through **Landcruiser Tours** (☎ 645 5702; www.landcruisertours.com).

cheap prices, or newer, nicer rooms with more light for a bit more. They're arranged around a pleasant courtyard, at the end of which are several clean, shared bathrooms. The couple who run the place are especially helpful, and maintain a solid information board.

Hotel Central (☎ 522 2867; horacio_perez_boza@hotmail.com; d with/without bathroom US\$8/6) Almost next door to Regis, this place is super-basic, but you get a TV. There's one tiny, windowless single under the stairs for US\$3.

Hotel Monte Carlo (☎ 522 2927; tr with fan/air-con US\$10/20; 🚽) Across the street and a step up, clean bathrooms are still shared (with only one other room, though). Still, rooms are nice, and the wicker furniture and lush plants give it a sort of rustic jungle ambience.

Hotel Madera's Inn (☎ 522 5825; hmaderas@ibw.com.ni; Av Zelaya; s US\$15, q US\$20-30; 🚽) This homey and colonial family-run hotel has doubles with air-con and direct TV and bathroom or small rooms with firm

bunk beds and separate bathrooms. Cozy common areas are strategically arranged throughout the rambling mansion, breakfast is US\$2, and there is a Budget and Alamo desk where you should reserve cars at least two hours in advance (they need to be driven down from Managua).

Hotel Monimbó (☎ 522 6867; r US\$10-25; 🏠) Around the corner from San Sebastián, in the heart of Monimbó, this brand-new spot has spacious, immaculate, modern rooms with cool tiling, air-con and bathroom, plus pickups at Managua international airport and other little luxuries you'll appreciate.

Madonna Inn y Restaurant (☎ 522 6363; lunaz@munditel.com.ni; d US\$30-35; 🏠 🍷) Just north of Texaco on the Carretera, this is a great option if you just need a real hotel: super-clean, pretty furniture, great mattresses, hot-water bathrooms, air-con, the works. There's even an attached Mexican restaurant open 24 hours (meals US\$3 to US\$8) downstairs.

Eating

Masaya isn't known for its cuisine, but you can get by on the cheap.

RESTAURANTS

Comidas Criollas (lunch buffet US\$2-3; 🕒 9:30am-7pm) Right on the park, this impressive steam-table buffet serves huge portions of great food with a few solid vegetarian options.

La Comedor Criolla (Av Zelaya; 🕒 7am-3pm) Not to be confused with Comidas Criollas, this place is close to the budget hotels and also does a good steam-table buffet.

La Jarochita (Av Zelaya; dishes US\$2-3; 🕒 11:30am-late) A block north of the main plaza, Jarochita is well known throughout the region as one of the (if not the) best Mexican restaurants in Nicaragua. It is very good, with Vera Cruz-style tacos, spicy *posole* (rich hominy stew) and good seafood; it doesn't skimp on the cheese.

Bar Restaurant Che-Gris (mains US\$3-7) Around the corner from Hotel Regis, this popular spot has a selection of meat, seafood and vegetarian meals; a *comida corriente* (mixed plate of different foods typical of the region) is US\$2.50. It's considered one of the best restaurants in town, which may be true, but don't get all excited.

Pizza Hot (🕒 10am-10pm) In addition to decent pizza, this franchise location also offers fried chicken and spaghetti.

Los Farolitos (mains US\$2-5; 🕒 6:30am-midnight) This narrow restaurant/bar serves breakfasts with a backpacker-friendly gimmick: you pay for each item (toast, fried plantains, *gallo pinto* – blended rice and beans) separately, each never costing more than US\$0.50. Creative salads (try the broccoli and chicken) and other snacks come all or nothing.

Aeropuerto 79 (Km 31.5 Carr Masaya; dishes US\$2.50-8; 🕒 10am-11pm) Just south of Masaya on the main road, this fairly spectacular spot – colorful tilework, beautiful gardens, sculptures of large-breasted women – has well-prepared typical food, and specializes in exotic meat, such as armadillo, rabbit or deer. It was a Sandinista military depot during the revolution, and a nearby plane crash in 1979 inspired the peacetime name.

CAFÉS & QUICK EATS

Inexpensive *comedores* (basic eateries) cling to the outside of the Mercado Municipal, away from the buses, where plastic baggies of *vigarón* (mashed yucca topped with coleslaw and pork rinds), fruit salad and *gallo pinto* can be had for less than US\$1, a sit-down meal with a drink for around US\$2.

Mercado Artesanías (Mercado Viejo; mains US\$2-4; 🕒 10am-6pm) Has a handful of slightly more expensive cafés with less hectic ambience, longer menus and ice cubes made of purified water. Café Che Gris gets the raves, but most local business owners order their food from Cafetín Sacuanjoche, with a cheap set plate at lunch.

Fruti Fruti (Av Zelaya; snacks US\$2-6; 🕒 7am-10pm) Fruit smoothies (and not the healthy kind) plus cold sandwiches, salads and snacks make this a fine stop.

Golden Pizza (☎ 522 4601; Av Zelaya; slice/pie US\$0.70/4) It's not the best pizza on earth, but it delivers.

Panadería Norma (🕒 8am-8pm) One block north of the Mercado Artesanías, this outlet of Nicaragua's best bakery has a variety of cakes, buns and pastries, plus real, brewed coffee for just US\$0.15 a cup.

GROCERIES

Palí (🕒 7:30am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-6:30pm Sun) Opposite the park, you can put your own meal together, then indulge in Eskimo ice cream.

Drinking

Masaya actually has a great – and evidently gay-friendly – party scene. **Viva Masaya** (www.vivamasaya.com) has photos and up-to-date information for party people.

La Ronda (☎ noon-midnight Tue-Sun) This rather tranquil and elegant spot right on the park has a good happy hour and popular Wednesday karaoke night.

Coco Jambo (☎ 9pm-3am Fri-Sun) Danceheads opt for this big club at the south end of the *malecón*, where a cheesy good time can usually be had.

El Toro Loco (cover US\$2.50; ☎ Thu-Sun) gets packed on reggae nights, while Chapo's Bar & Grill, the new hot spot, serves steak, allows smoking in the open-air bar and hosts all-night reggae parties on weekends, conveniently right next to the budget hotels.

Entertainment

Enjoy a soda or beer at one of the very basic eateries on the *malecón* or, better, take yourself out to a ball game at the wonderfully rustic, red-brick-and-masonry Estadio Roberto Clemente, with lagoon views and professional baseball games between January and May, with local leagues getting a workout in the off season.

Shopping

Masaya's main claim to fame is shopping, and savvy buyers come here to find great deals on Nicaragua's finest handicrafts. Tours and taxi drivers drop you off at the 1888 **Mercado Artesanías** (National Artisans Market, Mercado Viejo or Old Market), a somewhat incongruous, black-basalt Gothic structure with a Spanish-fortress motif, including turrets, towers and oversized gates. Despite a major fire in 1966, it was used as a regular market until 1978, when Somoza's National Guard all but leveled it. The building, which covers an entire city block, was abandoned until renovations began in 1994.

Today it is a wonderful place to stroll, with attractive booths separated by wide and breezy walkways, showcasing the highest quality crafts in the country. Thursday nights are *Noches Verbenas*, when free folkloric dance exhibitions, marimba performances and traditional foods make this the best party in town. If you run out of money, there are two ATMs across the street; if you run out of space, there's a post office and

DHL office inside the building. They're serious.

Public buses drop you off in the massive bus lot behind the huge, chaotic Mercado Municipal (Mercado Nuevo), a more typical market with unrefrigerated meat counters, colorful vegetable stands, toiletries and a wide selection of somewhat lower-quality handicrafts, cigars, handmade shoes and fun souvenirs at discount prices crammed under the hot, busy tents. Pay attention, watch your backpack and wallet, and have fun.

Can't stop shopping? There are handicrafts workshops all over town. Hammock factories congregate in Barrio San Juan, between La Asunción and the lagoon, while wood and leather workshops are hidden throughout Monimbó. **Servitour Monimbó** (☎ 522 7404, 623 5689) can arrange guided walks through the best of them.

Getting There & Around

Agencia Ticabus (☎ 522 3697; Av Zelaya) is operated out of a private home, so knock if it doesn't appear to be open. Buses depart from the Esso station at the junction for San José, Costa Rica (US\$12.50, nine hours, 6am and noon); San Salvador (US\$25, 4am); and Panama City (US\$37.50, 4am). Transnica and King Quality buses stop at Texaco, across the Carretera. Taxis and horse-drawn carriages both charge around US\$0.75 for a ride across town. **Hotel Madera's Inn** (☎ 522 5825; hmaderas@ibw.com.ni) has a Budget and Alamo desk, but vehicles need to be driven down from Managua.

Minivans to Managua (UCA; US\$0.80, 30 minutes) leave the park in front of Iglesia de San Miguel when full, about every hour. Other buses and minivans arrive and depart from the eastern side of the Mercado Municipal.

Carazo (San Marcos, Diriamba and Jinotepe) US\$1, 1¼ hours, 5am to 6pm, every 20 minutes

Catarina, Diriomo and Diría US\$0.80, 40 minutes, 6am to 5pm, every 20 minutes

Catarina, San Juan de Oriente, Niquinohomo, Masatepe and San Marcos US\$0.80, 1¼ hours, 5am to 6pm, every 20 minutes

Granada US\$0.80, 40 minutes, 5am to 6pm, every 20 minutes

Laguna de Apoyo rim US\$0.35, 20 minutes, 5am to 5pm, every 20 minutes; bottom US\$0.70, 30 minutes, 5:30am, 10:30am and 3:30pm

Managua US\$0.50, one hour, 4:30am to 5:10pm, every 20 minutes

MASAYA & MESETA ARTS & CRAFTS

Let's face it: you didn't come to Masaya for the food. This is where you can find *artesanías* (handicrafts) from throughout Nicaragua, all within an hour of the airport. Heck, if you check out the factories, you may even be able to get some of this stuff emblazoned with 'Mexico,' 'Guatemala,' or 'Pura Vida Costa Rica,' just to confuse your friends and coworkers.

Masaya itself has been famed since long before the Spanish arrived for its excellent craftsmanship, including leather, woodcrafts and so much more, on display alongside work from all over the country.

The prices given are for items of average quality – a spectacular piece may warrant a spectacular price tag.

- Hammocks (US\$10 to US\$20 for the simple ones, US\$25 to US\$50 for the nice ones) Bulky but beautiful, Nicaragua's signature craft is made right here in Masaya, and yes, you'll be kicking yourself for not struggling home with one on the plane.
- Naive paintings and balsawood carvings (US\$5 to US\$200) Glowing colors and tropical subjects are a window on the exotic Islas Solentiname (see p266).
- Black ceramics (US\$3 to US\$20) Typical of Matagalpa and Jinotega (see p217), smooth, heavy ceramics are specially fired for a deep black sheen.
- Natural fiber weavings (US\$3 to US\$10) Whether it's the light, flexible jipi japa hats of Camoapa (see p241), the elaborately patterned reed mats from Masatepe (see p106), or even the woven palm-leaf crickets (US\$0.06, or 1 córdoba) that every enterprising eight-year-old in Nicaragua has on offer, you'll find it here.
- Carved jícara shells (US\$1 to US\$5) You've probably seen the shiny green seeds hanging from the rangy-looking trees, one of the first plants ever domesticated – not for food, but for the shell. Carvings on durable cups and bowls range from simple to stunning, and are priced accordingly.
- Che Guevara memorabilia (Give what you can, take what you need) Some claim you can find more variation on Che Guevara-related items – jewelry, stash boxes, coffee brands, soapstone carvings, T-shirts with images other than 'pensive Che' – in Nicaragua than anywhere else in the world, including Cuba. Let the communist in your life know you care.
- Caribbean woodcarvings (US\$5 to US\$25) Several indigenous groups, including the Garífuna and Miskito (see p253), make small, detailed woodcarvings in precious hardwood, generally with nautical themes like canoes, lobsters and fish.
- Organic coffee (US\$3 to US\$6) If you can't make it to the Northern Highlands (see p210) or Isla de Ometepe (p147), be sure to pick a couple of bags of premium high-altitude brew here.
- Soapstone sculptures (US\$20 to US\$50) They don't take up much space, but these sensually smooth marmolina sculptures from San Juan de Limay (see p199) will weigh you down.

Matagalpa US\$1.30, 1½ hours, 5:30am and 6am

Ticuantepe US\$0.70, 45 minutes, 6am to 5pm, every 20 minutes

PARQUE NACIONAL VOLCÁN MASAYA

The Spaniards said this was the gate to hell, and put the Bobadilla cross (named for the priest who planted it) atop a now sadly inaccessible cliff. **Volcán Masaya** (☎ 522 5415; admission US\$4; 🕒 9am-4:45pm) is the most heavily venting volcano in Nicaragua, and there is no way, in a more litigation-happy nation, that you would ever be allowed to drive up

to the lip of a volcanic cone as volatile as the Santiago crater.

There's always lava bubbling at the bottom (you probably won't see it, though), and a column of sulfurous gases rising above; in 2001 an eruption hurled heated rocks 500m into the air, damaging cars and narrowly missing people. The brochure explains that this is 'adventure tourism,' with risks, and recommends limiting your visit to 20 minutes or so.

But you have to go. Masaya is already inside the volcano, an enormous and ancient

crater called El Ventarrón, with a barely perceptible rim that runs from Ticuantepe (see p90) to Masatepe, and around the Laguna de Masaya. Don't you want to see this open gateway into the earth's mantle, which has inspired human sacrifices and Catholic exorcisms? Try to arrive in the afternoon, when the crater's thousands of *chocoyos* (parakeets) return to their nests in the crater walls, apparently unharmed by the billowing toxic gases.

There are more than 20km of hiking trails. Shorter, most accessible treks require **guides** (per group US\$0.70, plus tips), which you pay for with your admission. **Sendero Los Coyotes** (1.5km) meanders through lava-strewn fields and dry tropical forest; **Sendero El Comalito** (2km) takes you to a smaller cone surrounded by fumaroles; and **Sendero Las Cuevas** (1½ hours) lets you explore the very cool lava tunnels of Tzinanacanostoc, with bats.

There are also longer hikes (5km to 6km) that don't require guides (although you could certainly arrange them) to lookout points and large rocks. If you speak Spanish, ask your guide to show you around the attractive **museum**, at the visitors center, with impressive natural history displays and beautiful murals, and a new **butterfly garden**.

The **park entrance** is 7km north of Masaya. You'll pay for your entry and guided hikes at the booth, and receive a surprisingly handy brochure with a map and useful information in Spanish and English. It's 5km of paved road to the crater and **Plaza de Oviedo**, which honors the intrepid priest who went down into the volcano with a sample dish, to find out whether or not the lava was (as he suspected) pure gold. It wasn't, but folks were still impressed enough with the feat to name the parking lot after him.

There's no camping, but **Hotel Volcán Masaya** (☎ 522 7114; r with 1/2 beds US\$27/37), right by the park entrance, has bare but comfortable rooms complete with screened-in porches. It only serves breakfast (US\$2) and snacks, and restaurants are a long walk along the busy road; consider bringing food with you. About 3km south, **El Raízón Hotel** (☎ 279 8520; www.hotelraizon.com; r incl breakfast US\$20-40; 📍 🚗 🚲) is inconvenient unless you have a rental car, in which case it's a good deal. There are a variety of rooms (some with

air-con), hammocks strewn around pretty gardens, tasteful furnishings and on-site Internet, plus a restaurant and minimarket.

Any Managua-bound bus from Masaya or Granada can drop you at the entrance, but it's a steep, hot climb to the crater; hitching is definitely possible. Consider taking a round-trip taxi from Masaya (US\$8) or Granada (US\$15), including an hour's wait at the top. Most tour outfits in Granada come here as part of a Masaya day trip, including the markets and Catarina overlook, for around US\$15 per person.

NINDIRÍ

pop 35,700

Only 3km north of Masaya, the much more adorable (and cleaner) town of Nindirí may have been even more important than Monimbó during the Chorotega era. Archaeological treasures abound, as you'll see at tiny **Museo Tindirí** (donations accepted; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri). Vast quantities of priceless ceramics, ancient sculptures and colonial-era artifacts (3000 in all) have been crammed into this cheerfully painted building, one block from the attractive **parque central**.

If the lady who runs the museum is out, you could check out the 1529 Catholic **church**, which has been left in adobe simplicity by subsequent renovations. It's home to Cristo del Volcán, credited with stopping a lava flow from destroying the town during the 1772 eruption that opened the Santiago crater.

Adventurous souls could take the short hike to **Cascadas Cailagua** and **petroglyphs**. Start at the cemetery close to the Nindirí *empalme*: take the road through the cemetery until you get to the three green crosses; make a right and follow the trail through the gap in the fence and across the field. The waterfall would be more attractive without the litter (and raw sewage), but check out the wall of petroglyphs nearby.

Unfortunately, there are no hotels in Nindirí, but tour operator **Harold Ramos** (☎ 522 5979, 611 8196; Del Parque de Nindirí 21/2c oeste Colegio Oreana Teresa) can arrange lodging in the city (per person US\$5) or country (US\$4). Meals cost US\$3 extra. Ramos also leads guided city tours in pedicabs (US\$3) and visits to indigenous communities (US\$10) around Nindirí, as well as hiking trips at a

private reserve. He's a member of the Red de Turismo Sostenible (RTS; Sustainable Tourism Network).

There are two great restaurants close to the Nindirí *empalme*. **Nika Pollo** (dishes US\$2-3; ☎ 7am-11pm), a huge diner and international truckers refuge, has 11 massive breakfasts and excellent wooden playground. Call ahead if you want an entire pig roasted. **Bucaneros** (meals US\$5-13; ☎ 10am-midnight) is also a bar, but serves good food alongside great volcano and lagoon views, with live music on weekends and pool all week long.

RESERVA NATURAL LAGUNA DE APOYO

This 200m-deep, 200-centuries-old crater lake is said to be the country's cleanest and deepest, with warm undersea fumaroles that feed the refreshing, purportedly healing and slightly salty waters. A vision in sapphire set into a thickly forested, steeply walled volcanic crater, the whole place echoes with howler monkeys at sunrise. And the reason why Laguna de Apoyo is Nicaragua's easiest reserve to enjoy is because it's so poorly protected.

The lagoon falls into several Marena (Ministry of the Environment & Natural Resources) jurisdictions, some of which can apparently be talked into ignoring flagrant abuse of fuzzy 'integrated ecosystem management' regulations, as you'll see. It's not paradise lost (yet) but this fragile environment has been developing rapidly. Please tread as lightly as you can here.

Many visitors are content with just taking in the view from Catarina or Diría, Mombacho rising like a distant lover above the far rim. But it's worth making your way to the bottom for one of the finest swims you'll ever enjoy.

Activities

Real serious adventure-sports addicts – the ones who have their own equipment and don't mind paying to drag it all over Central America – have been hitting this place for years. Parasail off the crater rim, windsurf across the surface, but please don't use any sort of motorboat or jet-ski (they are available), as it's illegal and probably bad karma as well.

A tiny, increasingly touristy town lies at the bottom of the paved road into the cra-

ter, accessible via an often unsigned turnoff about 15km north of Granada, halfway to Masaya. There's a free **beach** at the bottom of the road; look for the trail just to the right of where the road splits. Otherwise, pay a few dollars to any of the hotels for day-use privileges at their docks.

Spanish School Laguna de Apoyo (☎ 825 1409, 882 3992; www.guegue.com.ni/eco-nic; dm US\$7.50, s/d/tr without bathroom US\$16/19/22, r with bathroom US\$25) runs 20-hour per week tuition for US\$190/700 per week/month with room and board, US\$20 extra to guarantee individual instruction. Rather than stay with a host family, you can stay and eat at its cozy hostel with pleasant, if rustic, rooms. Note that one of the shared bathrooms has a great little waterfall. It also serves good family-style meals (US\$3) at 7:30am, 12:30pm and 6:30pm; guests can use the kitchen at any other time.

This is also an ecological research station, and hosts scientists studying the region's endemic fish population – which means it also offers **crater dives** (1/2 tanks US\$35/45). The way the crater so suddenly plunges into murky darkness is worth a look, as are fumaroles and a brownish endemic species (one of four) nicknamed 'chancho.' You must be PADI certified. The school also rents kayaks (US\$10 for four hours) and bikes (US\$5 per day).

San Juan del Sur Diving School (☎ 279 8628; www.abucear.com), based in San Juan del Sur (p148), also offers Laguna de Apoyo dives.

Sleeping & Eating

There are lots of options for staying at the bottom of the crater, or check out Masatepe (p106) and Catarina (p104) if you're more interested in the view. Your dining options are very limited; consider bringing groceries.

A handful of very basic bar/restaurants have been squatting here illegally over cheap beer and fried food for years, but may soon be pushed out by more upscale developments, which are also probably illegal. They're generally deserted except on Sunday afternoon, when half of southwestern Nicaragua turns out to drink and swim.

Monkey Hut (☎ 887 3546; www.thebeardedmonkey.com; dm US\$10, r US\$16-24, cabañas US\$30-40; (P)) Operated by Granada's popular Bearded Monkey hostel, this waterfront property

has a beautiful dock, lots of toys (including free kayaks), beer on the honor system and a swimming hole the size of a volcanic crater. It sells snacks, but bring your own grub. You can come as a day-tripper for US\$5, plus US\$1 transport from Granada.

Hospedaje Crater's Edge (☎ 895 3202; www.craters-edge.com; dm US\$10, d US\$20-35, q US\$40; 📍) In a cool, tiled house about 500m from the *empalme*, this new entry has rocking chairs right by the water, a 12-bed dorm with lake views and breezes, and five double rooms with different combinations of bathroom and air-con. The quads are larger with two double beds each. Hostal Oasis (p121) in Granada runs a minivan to here at 10am and 4:30pm daily.

Hospedaje Las Clarineros (s/d US\$7/11) This 1940s beach house has a shared bathroom, nice porch, a kitchen you can use, and is within convenient stumbling distance of all the bars. If they'd just wipe everything down, it'd be OK.

La Orquidea (☎ 872 1866; dm US\$10, r US\$15-35; 📍) With B&B ambience and outstanding backyard, this winner has a variety of rooms including one 2nd-story US\$15 option with windows on all sides, which may be just for you. Guests can use the full kitchen. It's a bit past the Spanish school.

Norome Resort & Villas (☎ 883 9093; www.noromevillas.com; d US\$65-75, villas US\$90-180; 📍 📺 📶) More popular with packaged tourists, this swanky spot offers beautiful wooden homes (some three-bedroom) with all the amenities, including Internet access, artfully arranged around the bottom of the crater. You can also visit for the day (US\$3), and take advantage of its nice dock. Like it? They'll sell you a timeshare.

Getting There & Around

You can walk here from Granada: take the dirt road northeast of the cemetery for about two hours through a poor but pretty region, and bring everything you'll need to eat and drink, as there are no services at this end of the lake. Once you reach the crater rim, ask local farmers for permission to cross their land. Steep trails also begin at the *miradors* (viewpoints) in Catarina and Diria, more or less a 1½-hour round-trip.

Buses run every half-hour between the crater rim and Masaya (US\$0.30, 6am to 6pm). Only three buses, which read 'El

Valle de la Laguna,' descend all the way to the waterfront (US\$0.70, 6:30am, 11:30am and 4:30pm), returning from Masaya at 5:30am, 10:30am and 3:30pm. The half-hour, 2km descent isn't a bad walk, but going uphill is just hot.

Hitchhiking is common on this stretch, but taxis are not (except on Sunday). Taxis from Granada (US\$10) and Masaya (US\$6) may charge less to drop you off at the top. The Bearded Monkey Hostel and Hostal Oasis (both in Granada, see p120) charge US\$1 for the trip.

LOS PUEBLOS BLANCOS

Drenched in local color, it's no wonder that the White Towns often use the tagline 'Meseta de los Pueblos' (Little Plateau of the Towns) instead. Originally built from the chalky, pale volcanic tuff upon which this pastoral scene is spread, these rural communities – not to mention the roads between them – once shimmered a blinding white indeed, amid the pale green patchwork of pasture and jungle.

Today the centuries-old buildings have been painted, and the shady roads are paved, most days lined with stands selling vividly painted *artesanías*. Each town has its specialty: hand-crafted ceramics or homemade sweets, wooden furniture or freshly cut flowers. Cool breezes (an average 23°C) blowing in off the crater lakes keep these colonial gems crisp and clean, but it is their myths and legends that make them so appealing.

Festivals & Events

With a pantheon of saints and virgins celebrated with an almost pagan vigor, the Masaya *meseta* claims some of the most colorful fiestas in the country.

San Silvestre Papa (Catarina; December 31–January 1) Hey, you've got to do New Year's somewhere, and this parade is famous for its bouquets of flowers.

Virgen de la Candelaria (Diriomo; February 2–8) Wake up early – the fireworks will help – to see the Virgin off on her annual trip to nearby Los Jirones.

Domingo de Trinidad (Masatepe; mid-May) Forty days after Semana Santa, this is the biggest *hipica*, or horse parade, in Nicaragua; festivities peak on May 23 but keep going for another month.

María Auxiliadora (Pío XII; May 24) There's rarely much reason to visit this little town, unless you want to see the *Baile del Viejo y Vieja* (Dance of the Old Couple) done right.

San Pedro (Diría; June 17 through July) Diría celebrates its patron saint with some dances celebrating Cacique Diriangén, and with others involving dried bull penises.

San Juan Bautista (Catarina; June 24) Coincidentally falling on the summer solstice, this wild festival features dances, ceremonial fights and music.

Santa Ana (Niquinohomo; July 26) Ballet *folklorico*, fireworks and parades make this one of the country's biggest celebrations for this popular saint.

Santa Catalina de Alejandría (Catarina; November 25–26) Ballet *folklorico* and a parade.

Catarina

pop 7100

At the crossroads of Los Pueblos Blancos, Catarina is known for its *viveros* (greenhouses), displaying in the misty altitude bright tropical plants that visitors take home to gardens across Nicaragua.

Its real claim to fame, however, is the **mirador** across the startling blue waters of Laguna de Apoyo, to Granada and Cocibolca all the way to Ometepe. Today lined with inexpensive restaurants and souvenir shops connected by windy walkways, this spot is rumored to have been youthful Augusto C Sandino's favorite place to meditate, and appropriately so, for this is also the grave site of Benjamín Zeledón, whose burial Sandino witnessed. There's a half-hour trail to the water, with excellent views.

The town itself is sparkling clean and beautiful, a Spanish colonial gem with two of the nicest budget hotels on the *meseta*. **Hospedaje Euro** (☎ 558 0045; r per person US\$3) has rather cavernous turquoise rooms sleeping three, with fans, volcano art and clean shared bathrooms. **Hotel Jaaris** (☎ 558 0020; s/d US\$9/12) has a cool, tiled porch with rocking chairs, hammocks and a large dog; OK rooms all have bathrooms. The hotels are next to each other, one block downhill from the church.

It's easy to visit Catarina, and almost any regional tour from Masaya or Granada includes a quick stop at the top of the volcanic crater. If you're driving, note that there's a US\$0.70 fee to park at the *mirador*. There are minibuses for destinations throughout the *meseta*, while buses run regularly between the *mirador* and destinations including:

Granada US\$0.80, 30 minutes, 6am to 6pm, at least every hour

Managua Mercado Roberto Huembes US\$0.60, 50 minutes, 6am to 6pm, every 30 minutes; microbus (UCA) US\$0.80, 40 minutes, depart when full

Masaya US\$0.70, 30 minutes, 6am to 6pm, every 30 minutes

San Juan de Oriente

pop 3100

Also known as San Juan de los Platos, this very attractive colonial town has been in the pottery business since before the Spanish conquest. While production of inexpensive and functional pottery for local consumption is still important, most of the cheerful shops lining the hilly cobblestone roads are selling decorative pieces – vases, wind chimes, wall hangings, that sort of thing – which you probably won't want to carry for weeks and weeks in your backpack.

The most famous workshop is **Cooperativa Quetzalcóatl**, but there are dozens of places where you can find your masterpiece, and probably watch the artisans at work. After the pieces are thrown on the wheel, they are partially dried. Then the designs are carved by hand from the cool, moist clay, and painted to be fired a final time. Many artisans feared they had lost their livelihood in July 2000 when earthquakes shattered their kilns, but Nicaraguan business groups came to their rescue, donating almost 200 new kilns to the community.

Diría & Diriomo

pop 26,000

These twin towns are located right across the road from one another (a US\$0.70 *moto* ride) and both are well worth visiting.

Diría boasts Mirador el Boquete, the mellower, less touristed overlook of Laguna de Apoyo, where views include a handful of **bar-restaurants** (☎ noon-midnight Mon–Thu, noon–2am Fri–Sun) that get packed with *fiesteros* on weekends.

From the lookout, there's a steep, half-hour trail to the bottom, where a muddy little beach offers access to the bright blue water for swimming. This viewpoint is no more difficult to visit than Catarina: from Granada, take any Niquinohomo-bound bus (US\$0.50, every 30 minutes), which will stop in front of 1650 Parroquia San Pedro, in the city center. It's a 2km walk or US\$0.30 *moto* ride to the lookout.

This unassuming **church**, by the way, marks the spot where Cacique Diriangén, chief of the Dirian peoples at the time of the Spanish conquest, first met conquistador Gil González Dávila, on April 17, 1523. Unlike Nicarao, Diriangén didn't trust the newcomers and opted to ignore their three-day deadline to become a Christian, instead choosing 'or else.' Diriangén attacked, which in retrospect was the best course of action, and today both of these towns – as well as Diriamba in Carazo – are named for the indomitable *cacique* (chief). In one corner of the shady park, there's a sculpture of the man, always ready. See p54 for more on Cacique Diriangén.

Enchanting **Diriomo** has a world-class claim to fame, and even officials at the *alcaldía* would like to stress that it has long been known (this reputation evidently predates the Spaniards) as the **Witch Capital of the Meseta**. Although the entire region is well known for its *curanderos* (folk healers), Diriomo remains proud of them, even after centuries of oppression.

Most healers work out of their homes, which are unsigned. If you're looking for love potions, hoping to attract wealth, or simply want your fortune told, ask at the *alcaldía*, or look for Professor William Mena, Antonio Castellon or Andrea Peña, three of the better-known practitioners. Most Granada-based tour companies can also arrange an audience.

Diriomo is also famous for its *cajetas*, rich fruit-flavored sweets most famously available at **Casa de Cajetas** (US\$1-2; ☎ 6am-noon & 1-8pm); the day's flavors are posted on the wall. They're also sold elsewhere in town and along the highway. The town is also known for its *chicha bruja* (an alcoholic corn beverage) and even stiffer *calavera del gato* ('skull of the cat'; drink at your own risk). **Iglesia Nuestra Señora de Candelaria** is the perfect centerpiece for this witchy place, with rather Gothic stone walls and an extra-interesting collection of saints.

There's no lodging in either town, and while there are simple *comedores* in both, the best restaurants are on the freeway between them: Los Robles, a block before the Diría *empalme*, and El Aguate, about 200m past the turnoff, are both beautiful *rancheros* (thatch-roofed, open-air structures) with upscale Nica dining. You

can check your email at **Cyber Conexion** (per hr US\$1).

Buses leave almost hourly from the parque central for Managua (US\$0.80), via Naindame, and every 40 minutes for Masaya (US\$0.60).

Niquinohomo

pop 13,500

This quiet, 16th-century Spanish colonial village is the birthplace of General Augusto César Sandino, who did indeed appreciate the fact that the name is Náhuatl for 'Valley of the Warriors.' The church is lovely and there's all sorts of attractive architecture all over town, but you've probably come all the way out here to see the man's birthplace, now **Agusto C Sandino Library** (☎ 9am-noon & 1:30-5pm Mon-Sat). Well, there is a small room off to the side with a couple of artifacts, displayed beneath a taped-up English-language biography that someone downloaded from the Internet.

If you want to stay, you could make reservations at **Rancho Ebenezer** (☎ 884 9452; www.ranchoebenezer.com; dm US\$3; 📷 📺), 3km from town. The *finca* is run by a Christian group, but anyone is welcome if there's space. The family-style meals are US\$3 each, farm tours US\$30 per group. There's Internet (US\$3 per hour) but no flush toilets. They may be able to arrange transportation from town.

Closer to town, you can grab a good meal in the gardens of **Estancia El Bosquecillo** (meals US\$1-6; ☎ 10:30am-4pm & 5:30-9pm), right by the park; try the chicken tacos (US\$1.25). Check your mail two blocks from the park at **Cyber Esquina** (per hr US\$1).

Nandasmo

pop 7900

On a spur road, the small village of Nandasmo is best known for its tiny arts and crafts – itsy-bitsy wooden furniture and tableware, doll-house scale. Unlike the other towns in the region, roadside stands and adorable shops aren't really in evidence, though it might be different during the high season. Most of the miniatures are actually sold in Mexican, Costa Rican and Guatemalan handicraft markets, which then pass on the markup to you.

There's also an undeveloped **overlook of Laguna de Masaya** several kilometers north of town along a rough dirt road.

Masatepe

pop 25,500

Photogenic and fabulous, this undiscovered colonial gem has a wonderfully well-kept downtown, great food, better views of the volcano than Masaya (not to mention better furniture than Catarina and sticky-sweet *cajetas* that one might compare favorably with those in Diriomo, if one weren't afraid of being jinxed) and one truly marvelous guesthouse in the countryside.

There's not a whole lot to do, although Masatepe's old railway station has been reincarnated as one of the best **artisan markets** (☎ 9am-6pm) in the country. Unfortunately for backpackers, the focus here is furniture – from wonderful cane-woven rocking chairs and brightly colored cabinets – all of which is ridiculously cheap, until you factor in the cost of shipping it back home. Sigh.

There are two websites that cover the city: **Masatepe Online** (www.masatepe.org), with more of a focus on events and the arts, and **M-City** (www.masatepecity.com), with more commercial listings.

For a celluloid glimpse of the city, check out the film *Los Gallos no Lloran* (The Roosters Don't Cry; gallosnolloran.com), a low-budget romance involving the bitterly competitive Nicaraguan cockfighting scene, which was filmed right here.

Towering over Masatepe's attractive central plaza, **Iglesia San Juan Bautista** is home to El Cristo Negro de La Santísima Trinidad, whose feast days mean a month of parties between mid-May and mid-June, and features nationally famous folkloric dances like La Nueva Milpa, Racimo de Sacuanjoche and Masatepetl. The sweeping adobe makes a fine colonial centerpiece, but it's the views from its gates, of fuming Volcán Masaya, that add depth to your prayers.

Casa de Cultura Zoila (admission free; classes per month US\$9), in one of Masatepe's oldest extant buildings, is just downhill from the church. It has pool and ping-pong tables you can use, as well as the occasional painting or folkloric dance exhibition; it also offers classes in art, Latin dance and pastry making. **Cyber Compa** (per hr US\$0.85) is two blocks toward the main road from the park.

There's one place to stay in town – actually a 4km downhill walk or US\$2 *moto* ride from town, and well worth the trouble.

Beautiful **Centro Ecoturístico Flor de Pochote** (☎ 885 7576; www.flordepochote.com; dm per person US\$4, cabins US\$20; 📍) actually lies within the Reserva Laguna de Apoyo. Enjoy excellent views of the lake and volcano, fuming right overhead (OK, 6km away, but that's close enough), from the porch of your basic dorm or beautiful cabin – all made of local materials. You're welcome to wander the 14-*manzana finca* or go on a number of guided hikes (US\$3, horses extra US\$2), including a walk to Laguna de Masaya. There's also an alternative trail from near here to the Santiago crater; it's currently off-limits, but ask. Day-trippers are welcome to stop by, especially if they spring for a guided hike or great meal at the restaurant (US\$2 to US\$4), with lots of Zvegetarian options and an outstanding view.

Disco Masatepe, on the freeway, gets going on weekends only.

The reason why most people come to Masatepe, however, is the food. It's best known for delicious, steaming bowls of *mondongo* (tripe soup), a source of serious regional pride. Yes, tripe is indeed cow stomach, but it's not only been cleaned, it's been marinated with bitter oranges and fresh herbs, then simmered with garden vegetables for hours.

There are several spots to try this or other, less threatening, local specialties. **Mondongo Veracruz** (dishes US\$2-6; ☎ noon-9pm), three blocks north of the church, is the classic, where soup (with its traditional side, Flor de Caña) has been served at noon sharp for half a century. **Mi Terruño** (dishes US\$3-8; ☎ 9am-10pm), 4km west of town, is the more attractive and upscale option, serving *mondongo* and other regional specialties, including *pele-buey* (a tasty and adorable cross between a sheep and goat), in luxuriant gardens alongside *tiste* or local fruit wines in traditional jícara (a hard-shelled fruit traditionally used to make cups and bowls) gourds; it's even got its own-brand coffee beans.

Even shoestringers need to check out the other local specialty, *tamugas* – like a *nacatamale* (banana-leaf-wrapped bundles of cornmeal, meat, vegetables and herbs), but made with sticky rice instead of cornmeal. Pick up yours at **Leonor Barquero Tamugas/Nacatamales** (large/larger US\$0.75/0.90), just half a block from the park, then

finish it off with some of Masatepe's famous sweets from Dulcería Chepita, half a block west of the train station.

Buses leave the parque central every half-hour for Masaya (US\$0.60) and Managua (US\$1.30, one hour), while minivans make the run to Jinotepe (US\$0.50, 15 minutes) when full.

San Marcos

pop 25,900 / elevation 600m

On the site of what's thought to be the oldest human settlement in Nicaragua, San Marcos has a pronounced and festive student presence thanks to bilingual **Ave Maria College** (www.avemaria.edu.ni). San Marcos' *fiestas patronales* (April 24 to 25) are some of the most impressive in the country.

This would make a fine place to spend the night, if it weren't for the lousy hotel situation. But it's almost worth it just to enjoy slurred political commentary including 'I hope the Sandinistas win everything and kick all of the gringos out!' (from an American exchange student) or 'President Somoza wanted to get out of politics, but the old man, he didn't want to hand the country to the communists, so he hung in there...he hung in there!' (from a recently returned Nicaraguan).

There's no statue for San Marcos' most famous native son – Anastasio Somoza García, the original dictator. This might make Sandino feel better about that lousy excuse for a museum in Niquinohomo.

Bancentro, on the main road just west of the park, has a 24-hour ATM (Visa/Plus only). If you're on the MasterCard system, go south two blocks for the BAC ATM. There are lots of Internet cafés, but the most convenient is **SuperCyber** (per hr US\$0.70), right on the park.

Unfortunately, the hotel situation is irritatingly expensive for what's on offer. **Casa Blanca** (☎ 535 2717; d/tr US\$35/45), three blocks east of the parque central, has big, nice rooms with hot-water bathrooms, but no TV or air-con, which you might expect at this price. **El Portal** (☎ 432 2276; d US\$25; 🚽), across from La Casona, does have TV, air-con and even refrigerators, but is sort of grimy.

Hotel y Restaurante Lagos y Volcanes (☎ 883 4060; www.resortlagosyvolcanes.com; r US\$35; 📶 🚽 🚰), 2km south of San Marcos in La Concha,

has attractive cabañas strung with hammocks, an on-site restaurant and a pool with Jacuzzi. Cabañas have hot-water bathrooms, and the pool has volcano views.

Day-trippers must stop by for a stroll around the park and a fabulous gourmet coffee beverage at **La Casona Coffee Shop** (snacks & drinks US\$2-5; ☎ 10am-midnight Tue-Sun, 4pm-midnight Mon), which has huge burgers and sandwiches, and lots of other excellent coffee-shop grub. It's also a good place to have a beer or six after dark.

Other popular spots include **Cafeteria Paladar** (dishes US\$1-3), a basic *comedor* at the corner of the park, and a good *fritanga* (sidewalk barbecue) that sets up at dusk in front of Farmacia Inmaculada, also by the park. There are lots of bars (and better house parties), but up-and-coming grunge bands get their workout at La Fabrica, a warehouse space catercorner from Casa Blanca.

San Marcos lies at the border of the Masaya and Carazo departments, and you'll probably have to change buses or minivans here to get between them. Minibuses leave when full from the parque central to Managua (US\$1, one hour), Jinotepe (US\$0.30, 20 minutes), Masaya (US\$0.60, 45 minutes) and other destinations all day long.

CARAZO

This department, blessed with beautiful mountains reaching 870m (bring a sweater) and wide, sandy beaches (bring your swimsuit) – separated by only 35 steep kilometers – is central in Nicaraguan history and myth. This is not only where the first Nicaraguan coffee was sown, but also where the nation's most famous burlesque, *El Güegüense*, was anonymously penned in the late 17th century. The comedy, which pits Nicaraguan ingenuity against Spanish power, always gets a laugh. It was written (and is still performed) in Náhuatl, Spanish and Mayangna.

Regional relations apparently predate the Spanish conquest, as Carazo's four major towns still celebrate an interesting ritual called the **Toro Guaco**: La Concepción brings out her patron saint, the Black Virgin of Montserrat, to meet Santiago, patron of Jinotepe, the old Nicarao capital; San Sebastián from its ancient Chorotegan rival, Diriamba; and San Marcos, from the university town of the same name. Four

times throughout the year – the saints' feast days – the saints pay ceremonial visits to each other, an event livened up with striking costumes and masks displayed in dances, mock battles and plays that satirize their Spanish invaders. The biggest bash is on April 24 to 25, in San Marcos (see p107).

Diriamba

pop 51,191 / elevation 576m

Already a bustling Chorotega town when the Spanish arrived, Diriamba has a reputation for the revolutionary (Cacique Diriangén's sculpture welcomes you to town), as well as some truly terrible roads. It was also, as architecture buffs will note, an early benefactor of the coffee boom, and remains the repository of some fairly spectacular European-style architecture from the late 19th century and early 1900s – and check out that clock tower.

Museo Ecológico Trópico Seco (☎ 534 2129; museoeeco@ibw.com.ni; admission US\$1; 🕒 8am-noon Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Mon-Fri), four blocks south of the park, was Nicaragua's first natural history museum (sort of), with informative, if low-budget, displays that focus primarily on the ecosystem of the Río Grande de Corazo and turtles of the Refugio de Vida Silvestre Río Escalante Chococente (see p136). Your fee includes a Spanish-language tour, which really brings the rain forest mural to life.

There are two budget hotels in town, **Hospedaje Diriangén** (☎ 534 2428; s/d US\$7/9; 📍), just east of the Shell station, with bathrooms and a parking lot; and **Casa Hotel Diriamba** (☎ 534 2523; d US\$12), even more basic, just east of the clock tower.

Closed at press time, **Abundance Farm** (www.abundancefarm.com) offered inexpensive lodging at an organic farm; check the website to see if it's reopened. Or, try brand-new **Finca San Gregorio** (greenokstu@hotmail.com; dm US\$2; 📍), with a dormitory, tent sites, a pool (!) and great meals for US\$2.

Jardín y Vivera Tortuga Verde (☎ 534 2948; www.ecolodgecarazon.com; r US\$30-40) is perhaps the most luxurious lodging on the *meseta*. This verdant spot has just three rooms, all hewn from beautiful precious woods in different configurations (the largest has a kitchen and sleeps five), with hot water, cable TV and bathrooms. Better, it's on the grounds of one of the most elaborate garden-greenhouses you've ever seen, with

little paths weaving between an entire jungle's worth of tropical plants and flowers. It also rents out a little house by the shore in Casares.

There are several simple *comedores* clustered close to the market, or go upscale at **Rancho Mi Bohio** (meals US\$3-8; 🍽 lunch & dinner) three blocks east of the clock tower, specializing in *churrasco* (roasted meats), lobster and other goodies.

Jinotepe is the main transportation hub, and you can get a Jinotepe microbus (US\$0.30, 15 minutes) any time at the market in front of the clock tower. A few buses and minibuses do leave from this station, including:

La Boquita microbus US\$0.80, 45 minutes, 6am to 6pm, every 30 minutes

La Boquita/Casares US\$0.40, 1½ hours, 5am to 5pm, every hour

Managua US\$1.25, 1¼ hours, 5am to 6pm, every 20 minutes

Jinotepe

pop 38,000 / elevation 600m

Historically separated from its eternal rival by the Río Grande de Carazo (which is predictably too polluted for swimming, but worth a wander if you're here), proudly Nicarao Jinotepe is the capital of Carazo and the most city-like of any town this side of Masaya.

INFORMATION

Bancentro Right on the parque central, has a Visa/Plus ATM.

Cyberland (per hr US\$0.70) Internet cafés are everywhere, but Cyberland, next to Pizza to Go, is fast and comfortable.

Intur (☎ 412 0298; carazo@intur.gob.ni) Conveniently inside a tiny arts-and-crafts market across from Palí, it can recommend hotels and offer information for all of Carazo.

Jinotepe Online (www.jinotepenicaragua.com) Check out this site for a rundown of the area's attractions in English (scroll down).

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The Spanish-colonial-style city is centered on the requisite impressive church, **La Iglesia Parroquial de Santiago**, with excellent stained glass, and perpetually bustling **Parque Los Chocoyitos**.

The oddest attraction has to be **Hertylandia** (☎ 532 3081; www.hertylandia.com), Nicaragua's first and only theme park, built by perpetual optimist and popular former Managua

mayor (and perhaps, by the time you read this, president) Herty Lewites. The former Sandinista gun runner become Minister of Tourism during the 1980s, and his few less-than-spectacular private projects, including this and those drowned *rancheros* along Lagunas Xiloá and Apoyeque (see p88), have clearly convinced him to go back into public service.

Hertylandia has fared fairly well, and its aging stucco turrets (like Disney, there's a castle theme) holds two options for diversion: a **water park** (per person US\$3.50), with a pool and several decent waterslides, and the **dry park** (admission US\$1.25, per ride less than US\$1), with mellow kids rides. It's a 1km, US\$0.30 cab ride from Jinotepe.

SLEEPING

There are a handful of cheap hotels, some unsigned, close to the parque central, but the best of the bunch is very clean **Hospedaje Colson, Casa Huéspedes** (r per person US\$5), two blocks south of the old cinema, with flush toilets, windows, fans and mattresses that don't have a life of their own.

Hotel Casa Grande (☎ 532 2741; casagrande@nicarao.org.ni; basic/deluxe d US\$35/55) This, on the other hand, is one of the nicest hotels on the *meseta*. The rather plush property has hot water, laundry service, cable TV and even an in-room phone, all located right downtown.

Cerro de Viento (marcial_jaen@hotmail.com; admission US\$0.70, camping per person US\$3, cabaña US\$10) About 5km south of Jinotepe, near the town of Santa Teresa, is some home-grown sustainable tourism. The pretty property has with trails, swimming holes and an outstanding view to the Pacific Ocean. It belongs to Marciel Umaña, who offers guided hikes and horseback rides (US\$5). There are six cabañas with bathroom set out in the forest, and *comida típica* (cooked over a wood fire) costs US\$2 a plate. Camping includes shower and toilets.

EATING & DRINKING

The parque central is packed with food stands and *fritangas* all day long, or eat at permanent Cafetín Tunng Yeun, with cheap Nicaraguan and Asian dishes in a friendly kiosk. There's also an early-morning coffee stand, a favorite of expats.

El Coloseo (mains US\$3-6; ☎ noon-10pm Tue-Sun) One block north of the church, El Coloseo may have the best pizza in Nicaragua, or at least on the *meseta*.

Pizza to Go (medium pie US\$3.50) Shoestringers will note that, just down the street, Pizza to Go is pretty darned good and about half the price of El Coloseo.

Restaurant El Sardina (meals US\$3-8; Km 49.5 Carr Sur) In a spacious thatched-roof *ranchero*, on the main road, this place has the best seafood in town.

There's an enormous Super Palí, one block from the parque central, which is the best grocery store in the region. Keep an eye open for a Seventh Day Adventist health-food store that allegedly has fresh wholewheat bread.

La Academia was the most popular disco at press time, with reggae and karaoke nights.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Jinotepe is a transportation hub, and the big, messy terminal is just north of the parque central, on the Interamericana. To get to the beaches take a microbus to Diriamba (US\$0.30, 15 minutes), leaving every few minutes. Buses leave Jinotepe for destinations including:

Granada US\$1.25, 1½ hours, three daily

Managua bus US\$1.25, 1¼ hours, 5am to 6pm, every 20 minutes; microbus US\$2, one hour, 6am to 6pm, every hour

Masaya US\$0.40, 1¼ hours, 5am to 5pm, every 30 minutes; with stops in San Marcos, Masatepe and Catarina

Rivas US\$2, two hours, 6am to 3pm, every hour; with stops in Santa Teresa and Nandaime

Ticuantepé US\$1, one hour, six daily

La Maquina

About halfway between Diriamba and the beaches, take a break from dodging potholes at this excellent roadside attraction.

Reserva Ecológica La Maquina (☎ 887 9141; admission US\$1.25; ☎ Tue-Sun) is a respected private reserve and a fine place for a swim.

There's an on-site **restaurant** (meals US\$2-5), or you're welcome to have a picnic at the reasonably spectacular waterfalls just a few minutes from the road. Displays note that, according to an ancient legend, the water has Viagra-like properties.

There's also **camping** (per person US\$3) and three trails that explore the 154-hectare

property, mainly primary dry tropical forest and a few bonus waterfalls and big trees, including huge strangler figs. Buses between the beaches and Diriamba pass every 40 minutes.

La Boquita

Make a right when you hit the sand for the nicest of the government tourism complexes that pepper the Pacific coast: **Centro Turístico La Boquita** (pedestrian/car US\$0.10/1.25). Enjoy the broad white-sand beach at any of 11 restaurants, all serving cold beer and US\$6 lobster plates, or in one the two hotels.

Hotel Palmas del Mar (☎ 887 1336; d US\$40; 📍 🚗 🚶), open in high season only, is a relatively swish spot with private pool, cable TV and room service. **Hotel-Restaurant Suleyka** (☎ 854 9733; tr US\$20), open year-round, has basic rooms that sleep three, including fans and musty bathrooms – try to get room 4, which is bigger and has more light. The restaurant is solid.

This is more of a swimming than a surfing beach, but if swells are big, waves can get a nice peak; some restaurants rent boards.

Casares

If Boquita seems too synthetic, head south to Casares, a real fishing village, with three seafood restaurants that do brisker business in adult beverages; Doña Paulina seems to be the favorite for food.

The only accommodations in town are at the fairly luxurious **Hotel Lupita** (☎ 552 8708; lupita41@ibw.com.ni; tr US\$45; 📍 🚗 🚶), which doesn't really have a beach, just waves crashing into the cliffs far below the swimming pool (which is actually sort of nice). Rooms are fine, with air-con, TV and flagstone floors, but the whole place seems isolated and a bit creepy.

The often-impassable road south to **Playa Huehete** was being paved at the time of research; considering that this is Carazo's best **surf beach** – with a point, beach and rivermouth break – and already a favorite spot for vacation homes among Jinotepe's hoity-toity crowd, expect more development soon. There is a road, sort of, between Casares and El Astillero (p136), but it's 4WD-only in dry season. Be sure to check water depth before crossing any streams.

GRANADA & AROUND

pop 90,000 / elevation 40m

Granada is Nicaragua at its most photogenic, a city of graceful adobes and elegantly proportioned porticoes drenched in rich tropical colors, Volcán Mombacho rising ragged above and shimmering Cocibolca (Sweet Sea; Lago de Nicaragua) arranged at her feet. But the beauty overlooking the lake is more than just a pretty facade: behind the city's carved wooden doors, arranged around beautifully restored courtyards, you'll find an eclectic bar and restaurant scene, wonderful hotels and other little luxuries that offer a taste of Nicaragua's historic wealth and power.

This Spanish colonial masterpiece, arguably the oldest European city on the American mainland, has become the epicenter of a lively expat scene that has furnished its new home with creature comforts from sushi to a Reiki massage. So put away the water purification tablets, slip into your nicest (or cleanest) clothes and flag down one of the horse-drawn carriages plying the city's lively boulevards, and just enjoy.

GRANADA

Nicknamed 'the Great Sultan,' in honor of its Moorish namesake across the Atlantic, Granada was founded in 1524 by Francisco Fernández de Córdoba, and is the oldest city in the New World. It was constructed as a showcase city, the first chance that the Spanish had to prove they had more to offer than bizarre religions and advanced military technology, and it still retains an almost regal beauty, each adobe masterpiece faithfully resurrected to original specifications after every trial and tribulation.

A trade center almost from its inception, Granada's position as the mistress of Lago de Nicaragua became even more important when the Spanish realized, in the 1530s, that the Río San Juan was navigable from the lake to the sea. This made Granada rich – and vulnerable. Between 1665 and 1670, pirates sacked the city three times (see the boxed text, p113), and that was only the worst of it.

Undaunted, Granada rebuilt and grew even richer and more powerful, a conservative cornerstone of the Central American

GRANADA

0 400 m / 0 0.2 miles

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1 **2** **3** **4**

To Malacatoya (25km)
To Granada Airport (3km)
To Masaya (16km); Managua (45km)
To Nandamie (22km)
To Nicaragua Butterfly Reserve (4km); Laguna de Apoyo (5km)

Parque Sandino
Parque Central
Parque Xalteva
Lago de Nicaragua
Rio Sacacitoya
Arroyo de Carita
Arroyo Aduna
Calle Santa Lucía
Calle La Inmaculada
Calle Arenal
Calle La Libertad
Calle La Calzada
Calle El Cairito
Calle Vega
Calle Atravesada
Calle 14 de Septiembre
Calle Estrada
Calle Nueva
Calle Real Xalteva
Calle Xalteva
Calle Corral
Calle Cervantes
Av Arellano
Av Guzmán
Park
To Disco Bar Bamboo; Discoteque Centauro; Puerto Asele (5km); Las Isletas (5km)

economy. And, after independence from Spain, the city chose to challenge the colonial capital, longtime rival and liberal bastion León, for leadership of the new nation.

Tensions erupted into full-blown civil war in the 1850s, when desperate León contracted the services of American mercenary William Walker (see the boxed text, p55) and his band of 'filibusterers.' Armed and funded by the burgeoning Confederate States of America, Walker defeated Granada, declared himself president and launched a conquest of Central America – and failed. Walker was forced into a retreat after a series of embarrassing defeats that pushed him north, from Costa Rica to Rivas, and as he fell back to his old capital city, he set it afire and left in its ashes the infamous placard: 'Here was Granada.'

Fortunately spared the worst of both the revolution and the Contra War, Granada's beauty and location are once again attracting business. A massive restoration project – some of it public, but most of it being undertaken by wealthy Nicaraguans and interested expats – is rebuilding this fine city to its original glory. It makes a welcoming entry point to Nicaragua. It also makes a very comfortable base for exploring Masaya, the Pueblos Blancos and Volcán Mombacho, or even Managua, just an hour away.

Orientation

Granada's warren of adobe-lined streets can be confusing at first, but the city is a logical Spanish grid, centered on the cathedral and the parque central (central park). Calle La Calzada runs eastward from the park about 1km to Lago de Nicaragua and the ferry terminal. South of the dock, a lakefront park extends toward Puerto Asese, where day cruises depart for Las Isletas.

Calle Real Xalteva is the principal road heading west of the parque central, past three important churches to the old Spanish fortress. Calle Atravesada, one block west of the parque central, is the main north-south artery, connecting the Mercado Municipal (close to the Rivas- and Masaya-bound buses) at the south end of town with Parque Sandino, the old train station and the main highway to Managua, just north of the city.

Information

BOOKSTORES

Mavericks (Map p114; ☎ 552 4120; Calle El Arsenal; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sat, 10am-noon Sun) Good coffee, great conversation, a solid selection of new magazines and used books in English and other languages.

CULTURAL CENTERS

Fundación Casa de los Tres Mundos (Map p114; ☎ 552 4176; www.c3mundos.org) French classes, art exhibits, free movies and cheap musical and theatrical performances are all geared to diversifying influences on Nicaraguan culture by rejecting the idea of 'forcing imported cultural elements on a Third World country. Instead, it aims to serve as a connection between these traditions...to rediscover buried cultural heritage and to help a young nation search for a unique identity.' Which seems to be working.

EMERGENCY

Ambulance (Cruz Roja; Red Cross; ☎ 552 2711)
Police (☎ 552 2977, 552 2929)

INTERNET ACCESS & RESOURCES

Those colonial adobes are packed with Internet cafés, most charging about US\$1 to US\$1.25 a minute, less if you get away from the plaza.

Find It Granada (www.finditgranada.com) A somewhat more complete guide to the city's business, restaurants and hotels.

Granada Portal (www.granada.com.ni) Worth logging on just to enjoy the inspired introduction, but actual information is light.

InterKa@fe.net (Map p114; per hr US\$1.10; ☎) Very air-conditioned, across from Hotel Colonial.

LAUNDRY

Fernanda Laundry Service (Map p114; Calle La Calzada; per 1-5kg US\$2.50) Next to Zoom Bar.

Laundry Olga Padilla (Map p114; Calle Consulado; per load US\$4; ☎ 7am-9pm) It's one and a half blocks north of the parque central.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospitals (☎ 552 2719)

MONEY

Several banks have Visa/Plus ATMs, while MasterCard/Cirrus customers have BAC and the Esso station. *Coyotes* (moneychangers) can be found along Calle Atravesada, one block west of the park, or around the market. They are generally honest, but know about how much you're going to get back.

PIRATES OF LAKE NICARAGUA!

It was one of the most daring exploits in pirate history, a career coup even for dashing, up-and-coming buccaneer Henry Morgan and his band of rum-soaked merry men: the sacking of Central America's crown jewel, Granada.

It couldn't have been done in a full-size sailing vessel – if you follow Morgan's path up the Río San Juan you'll see how those rapids would tear a regular ship apart. But this crafty band of quick thinkers appropriated six 12m wooden canoes (after their regular pirate ships were impounded by Spanish authorities) following an equally spectacular sacking of Villahermosa, Mexico. The atypical craft proved more than adequate for further pillaging along the Caribbean coast, which gave the 30-year-old Morgan an idea.

The crew battled the currents of the Río San Juan at night and hid their canoes during the day, then made their way across the great lake. The June 1665 attack caught complacent Granadinos completely off guard: the pirates occupied the city for 16 hours – just like the Disney ride, but more violent – then stole all the ammunition, sank all the boats and sailed off to a warm welcome, as heroes and legends, to Port Royal, Jamaica.

Buccaneers had been a part of Caribbean culture since the late 1500s. They were bands of escaped slaves, indentured servants and deported criminals who lived off livestock, and (so the legend goes) stretched the skins on 'buccans,' hence the name. When other European powers, envious of Spain's newfound riches, decided to set up shop in the sunny Caribbean, they contacted the buccaneers and began making deals.

In 1655 the English made their move and, with buccaneer support and intelligence, took the island of Jamaica and transformed it into a British colony – a colony of ex-convicts and street toughs. Among them was Henry Morgan, who quickly climbed the ranks from co-pirate, sacking such hot spots as Santiago, Cuba, to a pirate commander with the successful Granada expedition under his belt. By the time Sir Henry Morgan drank himself to death in 1688, he had been made Pirate King (technically, Lieutenant Governor of Jamaica) and Knight of the British Empire.

He had also influenced a generation. Between 1665 and 1670, Granada was sacked three times, even as Morgan took more pirate canoes up the Río Coco, where he made powerful allies of the Miskito Indians (see the boxed text, p238). With their help, pirates sacked Ciudad Antigua and Estelí, where Morgan himself stayed for a while, and founded several of the surrounding towns.

Pirates actually founded more cities in Nicaragua than they ever sacked, including Pueblo Viejo and several surrounding towns in the Segovias, Bilwi, on the Caribbean Coast, and most famously Bluefields, named for founder Abraham Blauvelt, a Dutch pirate who worked the waters from Rhode Island to Panama. Heck, pirate William Dampier, a trained scientist and veteran of the 1665 sacking of Granada, filed the report on the earliest historic eruption of San Cristóbal in 1685.

Although the 1697 Treaty of Ryswick guaranteed that England, Spain, France and Holland would respect each others' property in the New World, the pirates (for whom legality was not a huge concern) continued to try for Granada; in 1769, 17-year-old Rafaela Herrera was forced to command Spanish forces at El Castillo against pirates trying to sack Granada yet again. And she won, even as the age of pirates on the sweet sea slipped into history.

Banco America Central (BAC; Map p114) With the most services for tourists of any bank, it also has a 24-hour ATM (Visa/MasterCard/Plus/Cirrus) that gives US dollars and córdobas.

Esso (Map p111) An ATM (Visa/MasterCard/Plus/Cirrus) is available at the gas station on the main highway, 11 blocks north of the center.

POST & TELEPHONE

Post office (Map p114; Calle Atravesada; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Opposite the Cine Karawala.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Intur (Map p114; ☎ 552 6858; www.intur.gob.ni; ☎ 8:30am-12:30pm & 1:30-5pm Mon-Sat) The Granada branch of the national tourist office is predictably professional, with up-to-date transportation schedules, a good city map (US\$1) and lots of information and flyers. It's half a block south of Iglesia San Francisco.

Mavericks (Map p114; ☎ 552 4120; Calle El Arsenal; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sat, 10am-noon Sun) The bookstore has a good bulletin board out back with information about area businesses and events.

NICARAGUA



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Sights & Activities

Although Granada is one of those places you'll want to capture on film forever, please keep an eye open for camera snatchers.

GRANADA WALKING TOUR

Too tired? Take a **horse-drawn carriage** (see p119), about the same price as a taxi, to any of these locations (at least between the city center and the lake) or ask for a city tour, around US\$12 for a maximum of five people.

Beribboned horses line up alongside the fine parque central, also called **Parque Colón**, pleasantly shaded by mango and malinche trees. The **Cathedral de Granada** (Map p114), on the east side of the plaza, was originally built in 1583 but has been destroyed countless times since. This most recent version, built in 1915, has four chapels; a dozen stained-glass panels are set into the dome.

On the park's southeast corner, the beautifully restored Hotel Gran Francia (see p123) was formerly the home of William Walker, and is now a fine place for a drink, if only to ogle the gorgeous pool and shady green courtyard across the street. On the west side of the park, **Palacio**

de la Cultura Joaquín Cuadro Pasos (Map p114), named after the Granadino poet who wrote *Canto de Guerra de las Cosas* (War Song of Things), a surrealist masterpiece of 20th-century Spanish verse, is worth a wander, then head north to **Plaza de la Independencia**, also known as the 'Plaza de los Leones.' The obelisk is dedicated to the heroes of the 1821 struggle for independence, while the Cruz de Siglo was erected in 1900 to mark the new century.

On the east side of this plaza is the **Casa de los Leones** (see p117), named for the carved lions on the stone portal, the only part of the original structure that survived Walker's 1856 retreat. Rebuilt as a stately private home in 1920, it is currently home to Casa de los Tres Mundos, which often shows movies right on the plaza and has other cheap or free cultural events.

Head one block east on Calle El Arsenal for the awesome blueberry facade of **Convento y Museo San Francisco** (see p116), best captured on film close to sunset (but the museum closes at 5:30pm). From here, head south on Calle Cervantes, passing all manner of beautiful colonial mansions – keep an eye out for ceramic historical markers embedded in the

walls – until you get to Calle La Calzada. This is where the carriage would be handy – it's a hot kilometer through the featureless new neighborhoods (built as the lake retreated from its much higher waterline in the 1500s) to Lago de Nicaragua, passing 1626 **Iglesia de Guadalupe** (Map p111), originally built as a fort.

The ferry terminal is on your left, but make a right through the green Spanish fortress (US\$0.12) for the **Centro Turístico** (see p118), a lazy lakeside park with restaurants, bars, playgrounds, beaches, kayaks and Puerto Asese, where you can catch boats and explore a year's worth of volcanic lake islands, the **Isletas de Granada** (see p118).

Grab a cab, unless you're enjoying the heat (and Granada is not a 'dry heat'), back to the park, where you can fortify yourself with a plate of *vigarón* (a pile of mashed yucca topped with a tangy cabbage salad and big pork rind served up on a washed banana leaf) and a tall glass of *chicha* (a creamy, bright pink corn-based drink), perhaps purchasing a ceramic whistle from one of the cute kids wandering around. From here, you could head four blocks south on Calle Atravesada to the overflowing and fun (if not particularly good for souvenir shopping) 1892 **Mercado Municipal** (Map p111), a neoclassical building that may be beautiful, though there's really no way of knowing until somebody gets up there and scrubs down the facade.

Or, head west on Calle Xalteva, which once connected the Spanish town of Granada to its much older indigenous neighbor, Xalteva. You'll pass **Iglesia de La Merced** (Map p111), four blocks west of the parque central, considered the most beautiful of Granada's churches. A handful of art galleries and antique shops are clustered nearby. Just south of the main road is the poorly signed **Casa Natal Sor María Romero Meneses** (Map p111), where a small collection of artifacts and original writings mark the birthplace of Central America's first official saint.

The old indigenous neighborhood, now wholly assimilated, is marked by **Iglesia de Xalteva** (Map p111), the dilapidated but attractive 19th-century church that houses La Virgen de la Asunción. Across the street is shady Parque Xalteva, with rough stone columns and overgrown ambience, perfect for a picnic lunch. Continuing west, you'll

pass another gorgeous little church, **La Capilla María Auxiliadora** (Map p111), closed for remodeling as of December 2004, but worth a look for its beautiful pastel interior.

If you've come this far, it's only four more blocks to 1748 **Fortaleza La Polvora** (see opposite), where you can climb to the top of the guard tower for the best view in town.

CONVENTO Y MUSEO SAN FRANCISCO

The oldest church in Central America and the most striking building in Granada (that is to say, Nicaragua) boasts the big robin-egg-blue birthday cake facade of **Iglesia San Francisco** (Map p114; ☎ 552 5535; admission US\$2; 🕒 8:30am-5:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat & Sun), which, incidentally, houses the best museum in the region. Originally constructed in 1585, it was subsequently burnt to the ground by pirates and later William Walker, rebuilt most recently in 1868 and restored in 1989.

The museum is through the small door on the left, where guides (some of whom speak English) are available for tours; tips are appreciated. Museum highlights include top-notch primitivist art, a scale model of the city and a tribe of papier-mâché Indians cooking, relaxing in hammocks and swinging on *comelazatoaztegam*s, a sort of a 360-degree see-saw.

The reason why you're here, however, is the Zapatera statuary, two solemn regimens of black basalt statues, looming above large men and possessed of 10 times their gravity, carved between AD 800 and 1200, then left behind on the ritual island of Zapatera (see p129). Most were discovered by US diplomat Ephraim Squier and Swedish scientist Carl Bollivius in the late 1880s and gathered in Granada in the 1920s.

IGLESIA DE LA MERCED

Arguably the most beautiful church in the city, this landmark (Map p111), four blocks west of the parque central, is fronted by a plaza popular with young lovers and players after dark. Originally completed in 1539, it was razed by pirates in 1655 and rebuilt with its current baroque facade between 1781 and 1783. Damaged by Walker's forces in 1854, it was again restored with the current elaborate interior in 1862. Although Catholics come to see an important image of the Virgen de Fatima, anyone can enjoy climbing the **bell tower** (admission US\$1). The

THE STATUARIES OF NICARAGUA

Although Nicaragua has yet to be adequately explored by trained archaeologists, at least four important statuary sites have been unearthed. The figurative pieces range from 1m to 4m high, were probably carved between AD 800 and 1200 using obsidian tools (technology imported from Mexico in about AD 300), then sanded to a smooth finish, and possibly painted. While the different 'schools' of sculptors clearly influenced each other, sites reveal unique artistic styles.

Chontales Statuary

Several sites throughout Boaco, Matagalpa and Zalaya produced finely detailed statues with expressive faces, much taller and thinner than elsewhere. Archaeologists hypothesize that they were used as columns for buildings, and you can see for yourself at Juigalpa's incredible Museo Archaológico Gregorio Aguilar Barea (see p243).

Isla de Ometepe statuary

The island is known for its squat and realistic figures, thought to represent chiefs and other historic people, but portrayed as half-human, half-animal. Although other sites are likely entombed in the ashes of Concepción's eruptions, only a few excavated examples are on display on the island, most behind the church in Altagracia (see p145).

Isla Zapateria Statuary

The best-known statuary, with excellent examples on display at Granada's Convento y Museo San Francisco (see opposite), also includes sites on the ceremonial islands of Pensacola, Zonzapote, Punta de las Figuras and Las Cañas. Considered the best artistically, archaeologist Frederik W Lange called the sculptors 'poets of rock.' Human-animal hybrids, or animals with human heads in their mouths, probably refer to legends that humankind emerged from beneath the ground.

León Statuary

Least known is this statuary, which includes the Isla de Momotombito (see p177), where Ephraim Squier reported some 50 statues still standing in 1854. Sadly, most of the statues overlooking Lago de Managua island seem to have disappeared.

caretaker usually takes people up at around 11am, but you can ask anytime.

CASA DE LOS LEONES & FUNDACIÓN CASA DE LOS TRES MUNDOS

Founded in 1986 by Ernesto Cardenal (see p267), **Fundación Casa de los Tres Mundos** (Map p114; ☎ 552 4176; www.c3mundos.org; adult/child US\$0.70/0.30; 🕒 gallery 8am-6pm) moved to elegant 1720 Casa de los Leones in 1992. At the entrance, a board lists special events, which are frequent, cheap and usually interesting: poetry readings, classical ballet, folkloric dance and free movies on the 'Cube of Light,' a fabric screen where foreign and artsy films are shown for free on the plaza. During regular business hours, your entrance fee buys you a look at a beautiful mansion (the facade is original) and a few art displays.

MI MUSEO

This brand-new **museum** (☎ 552 7614; cnr Calles El Arsenal & Atravesada; admission free; 🕒 8am-noon Mon-Sat, 1:30-5pm Mon-Fri) displays an incredible

private collection of ceramics dating from at least 2000 BC to the present. Hundreds of beautifully crafted pieces were chosen with as much an eye for their artistic merit as their archaeological significance, and displayed in the grand old adobe with the same aesthetic awareness.

NICARAGUA BUTTERFLY RESERVE

About 4km from Granada on the dirt road that leads from the cemetery to Laguna de Apoyo, this new **mariposario** (☎ in English 895 3012, in Spanish 863 2943; www.backyardnature.net/nbr; admission US\$7) offers tours through the butterflies, and also rents cabins for US\$20, including a tour.

FORTALEZA LA POLVORA

Originally called the **Fortaleza de Armas** (Map p111; donations appreciated; 🕒 8am-5pm) when it was constructed in 1748, this lavishly turreted Spanish fortress still has the best view in town, over ancient, water-stained church domes all the way to Lago de Nicaragua.

You can also check out a roomful of paintings, some for sale, a couple of artifacts worth poking around, not to mention one of the better public toilets (it's hexagonal!) in Nicaragua.

ANTIGÜA ESTACIÓN DEL FERROCARRIL

Nine long blocks north of town along Calle Atravesada, you'll find shadeless Parque Sandino, next to the **old train station** (Map p111), now a technical vocational school. Built in 1882 and operational in 1886, the US marines remodeled it in 1912. There's lots of playground equipment, some with train themes, and a few well-preserved railroad cars are on display nearby.

GRANADA CEMETERY

Used between 1876 and 1922, some of Granada's wealthiest decades, this beautiful cemetery (Map p111) has lots of picturesque mausoleums and tombs, including those of six Nicaraguan presidents. Most people come to see the 1880 neoclassical stone **Capilla de Animas** (Chapel of Spirits), a scale replica of the French chapel of the same name. Close by is another rather mysterious replica, of Notre Dame cathedral. No one knows who built it, as the names have been chiseled away. This is also the starting point for the two-hour walk (or much quicker bike ride) to the back of Laguna de Apoyo (see p102).

CENTRO TURISTICO

Enter through the green **mock Spanish fortress** (Map p111; admission per person/car US\$0.12/1) to a 2km stretch of lakefront with shady paths, sandy beaches, trees that seem designed for hammocks, restaurants, picnic areas and playgrounds, and free mangoes (if you can beat the parrots and street kids to 'em) all over the place starting in late February. Before jumping into the water with all the smiling families, take a good look at the river draining into the lake right there. Luckily, **Piscina-Ristorante Casa Vivaldi** (☎ 552 7567; Calle El Caimito; ☎ 9am-9pm) has a clean pool for US\$3 just up the street.

There are probably a dozen restaurants, most of the 'fried fish and cold beer' variety, but the standout is **Restaurante Frutti D'Mare** (Map p111; seafood US\$6-12; ☎ 10am-10pm), with Italian-style seafood and a good wine list. More famously, the Centro is home

to some of the town's top youth-oriented discos – see Drinking, p125.

If you come during the day, you can arrange a trip to Las Isletas in a motorized *panga* (small covered boat) at **Puerto Asese**, almost 3km from the entrance (see below).

LAS ISLETAS

One of the most beautiful ways to pass the time is touring this miniature archipelago of 365 (OK, maybe fewer) tiny tropical islands, topped with rare birds and colorful flowers, mansions hung with hammocks, and a handful of hotels and restaurants where you're most cordially invited to sit back and enjoy it all for a while. There's even a Spanish fortress, 1784 **Castillo San Pablo**, with great views of Granada and Volcán Mombacho, plus a fine swimming hole nearby, and **Isla de los Monos** (Monkey Island), where the residents are friendly, but may run off with your picnic lunch.

Formed 10,000 years ago when very visible Volcán Mombacho exploded into its current ragged silhouette, these islands were once one of the poorest neighborhoods in Granada, and some are still home to impoverished families, who in general have no official property rights. They are being gradually supplanted by the beautiful homes of folks like the Pellas (Flor de Caña, Credomatic) family, former President Chamorro, and lots of expats in paradise. Want to join them? There are plenty of 'For Sale' signs, and your guide knows all the prices.

Most tour companies run trips to Las Isletas, or do it yourself with **Inuit Kayaks** (Map p111; ☎ 614 0813, 608 3646), about 1km from the Centro Turistico entrance, which runs several guided tours (about US\$10 per hour) and also rents tents – camping is free in the Centro Turistico. Inuit Kayaks also plans to offer sailboats and windsurfing soon.

You can hire a boat at either **Puerto Asese** (☎ 552 2269; www.aseselasisletas.com) or **Marina Cocibolca** (☎ 228 1223); there may also be cheaper collective boats, so ask. Private *pangas* seating at least 12 cost about US\$15 per hour, so try to get a group together. Binoculars and sunscreen are a good idea.

There are several places where you can ask your driver to stop for lunch, including **Isleta Cifar**, about 15 minutes from Puerto Asese, where María Teresa Marengo has

a pool and serves her famous fried fish platter (US\$10). A bit further in, **Isla Punta Correviento** has two pools, a kid's playground and another seafood restaurant, also locally owned.

You could stay a while on Isla La Ceiba at **Hotel Isleta La Ceiba** (☎ 552 2100, 882 3928; www.nicaraolake.com.ni; all-inclusive r per person US\$55; 🚿 🚿) with a package deal that includes a pretty air-con cabin with hot-water bathroom, three meals, drinks and round-trip transportation to Puerto Asese, not to mention access to the pool, rowboats and kayaks. You can stop in for lunch or visit on a day trip. A collective boat (US\$10 return) leaves Puerto Asese at 10am, noon, 2pm and 4pm daily, returning at 11:30am, 1:30pm, 3:30pm and 5:30pm.

Hotel Isleta El Roble (☎ 894 6217, in France 06 08 93 56 96; www.nicadescanso.com; d/tr incl 3 meals US\$80/90; 🚿 🚿), almost an hour from Puerto Asese, is a beautiful French-owned hotel that limits visitors to 12 per day, including day-trippers who can come as part of a tour (US\$35, including lunch). There's also a pool, kayaks and multiday deals that save you a bundle.

MASSAGE & THERAPIES

After all that sightseeing, don't you need to pamper yourself with a massage (US\$40), facial (US\$45) or perhaps some reflexology? Try **InterConnection Wellness Center** (Map p114; ☎ 552 7954, 880 0438), upstairs from Cafe DecArte.

Or you could get a massage (US\$10 to US\$20) from Roxanne, at **Roxanne Massage** (Map p114; ☎ 829 9184; roxven26@yahoo.com; Calle El Caimito), who's also a home decorator; there's also **Casa Clarita Maximus Spa** (Map p111; ☎ 552 8422; www.casaclarita.com; Calle El Arsenal), behind Iglesia San Francisco, with facials (US\$25), massages (US\$40 to US\$50) and more.

Courses

There are loads of freelance Spanish teachers, most with experience at one of the schools listed, who will come to your hotel for US\$5 per hour, and may be able to arrange homestays. Check bulletin boards in backpacker hotels, or try **Ruth Abea** (☎ 552 5866; per 1/12/20hr US\$5/35/50), one and a half blocks north of Iglesia de Xalteva; **Bayardo Corea Cuadra** (☎ 552 4684); or **Maycor**

José García (☎ 898 5768; granadaspanishtutor@yahoo.com).

Ave Nicaragüita Escuela Español (Map p111; ☎ 605 5092, 806 4974; www.avenicaraguita.com; Calle La Calzada; per 10/20/30hr US\$87/157/197) Professional operation works with (and at) the Red Cross; classrooms could get hot by the afternoon.

Casa Xalteva (Map p111; ☎ 552 2436; www.casa xalteva.com; Calle Real Xalteva 103) Next to the church of the same name, Casa Xalteva also runs a children's shelter. It can get hot during afternoon classes.

La Gran Sultana Spanish School (Map p111; ☎ 898 5768; granadaspanishtutors@yahoo.com; per 1/10/20hr US\$5/45/80) Homestays (one has a mom who speaks French) are US\$60 extra, including all meals, and you pay the family directly. It's one block south of Iglesia de Xalteva.

One-on-One Tutoring (Map p111; ☎ 552 6771; www.1on1tutoring.net; Calle La Calzada; per 10/20hr US\$50/95) With guaranteed private classes arranged around a beautiful leafy patio, this is a good option. Homestays with meals cost US\$60 per week.

OTHER CLASSES

Mosaics Workshops (Map p114; US\$3) Janet Gallagher at Cafe DecArte regularly offers classes; the fee includes all your materials, which will (hopefully) become a beautiful bowl; she also teaches local kids as part of the Muchachos de Mosaico program, and you can buy their work here.

Painting Classes (per day/month US\$1.25/7) Ask at Casa de los Tres Mundos about twice-weekly classes at Fortaleza El Polvora.

Yoga Classes (Map p111; ☎ 834 5884; helenkaye@yahoo.com; Calle Cuiscoma; US\$4; 🕒 8am Mon, Wed & Fri) Travel is about stretching yourself, right?

Tours

The classic Granada tour takes a **horse-drawn carriage** (up to 5 people US\$12) from the park for an hour-long whirl past churches, the cemetery, the *malecón* (waterfront) and more with your Spanish-speaking guide. These guys know how to give a tour, too: this has been a family business since 1868, when carriages were first introduced here and in Masaya. They'll also wait at Puerto Asese for the other classic Granada trip, a boat ride through Las Isletas (see opposite), and wait. You can arrange trips all over the country from Granada, which is the epicenter of Nicaragua's nascent tourist industry, with recommended splurges including the Granada City Tour (per person US\$15 to US\$25), Reserva Natural Volcán

Mombacho (with/without canopy tour US\$65/40) and Masaya Market and Volcano (US\$30 to US\$50, including Catarina).

Prices are lower for larger groups, so solo travelers should shop around to see who is already going; reputable operators include:

Amigo Tours (Map p114; ☎ 552 4080; www.amigo.tours.net) This is fancier than the others, it's inside Hotel Colonial.

Eco Expedition (Map p114; ☎ 552 2727; www.discoverynicaragua.com; Calle Real Xalteva) On the pricey side.

JB Funtours (Map p114; ☎ 552 6732; jbfuntoursni@yahoo.com) Located in a souvenir shop on the parque central.

Paradise Tour (Map p114; ☎ 841 9285) One block east of the cathedral, this is a budget option.

Tierra Tour (Map p114; ☎ 862 9580; www.tierra.tour.com) Across the street from Paradise Tour, this is a recommended company.

Other operators include:

Blue Mountain Horseback Riding (Map p114; ☎ 552 5323, 838 4487; per person US\$20) Offers one tour: horseback rides through the lakes and volcanoes begin at 10am, stop for a lunch buffet in a little town, and return at 5pm.

Land Cruiser Tours (☎ 895 5244; www.land.cruisertours.com; from per person US\$50) See the country on a custom tour in a super-plush Land Cruiser; co-owner Ruth López Gaitan is an expert on Masaya's fascinating Barrio Monimbó (see the boxed text, p97).

Mombotour (Map p114; ☎ 552 4548; www.mombotour.com) In Centro Comercial Granada, this recommended outfitter is part of the Mombacho Canopy Tour (US\$40), which you can combine with other active options like guided hikes up Reserva Natural Volcán Mombacho, kayak trips through Las Isletas and bike rides to Laguna de Apoyo.

Nicaragua Adventures (Map p114; ☎ 883 7161; www.nica-adventures.com) This outfit is the most expensive – and exclusive – tour operator of them all, dahlings.

Oro Travel (Map p111; ☎ 552 4568; www.orotravel.com; Calle Corral) Reputable outfitter, half a block west of the San Francisco convent, offers good-value trips all over the country.

Festivals & Events

Granada hosts a variety of interesting events and festivals throughout the year; check out the website **Casa de los Tres Mundos** (www.c3mundos.org) for what's on during your visit.

International Poetry Festival (February; www.festivalpoesianicaragua.org.ni) This festival brings together wordsmiths from all around the country and Latin America.

Fiestas de Agosto (third week of August) Granada celebrates the Assumption of Mary with fireworks, concerts in the park, bullfights (although it's illegal to kill the bull in Nicaragua), horse parades and major revelry by the lakefront.

Inmaculada Concepción (Purísimas; November 28–December 7) Neighborhoods bear elaborate floats through the streets in honor of Granada's patron saint, the Virgen Concepción de María. You'll hear them signaling their arrival by blowing in conch shells to drive the demons away.

Sleeping

These are all low-season prices, which at pricier hotels increase around 15% during the high season (December to May). Make reservations and expect to pay more around Christmas, Semana Santa, the mid-August *fiestas* and Independence Day (September 15).

Granada was undergoing a time of explosive growth at the time of research, with several hotels under construction. While this sort of overdevelopment can be frustrating for guidebook publishers, it's great for travelers – don't be afraid to bargain.

BUDGET

Bearded Monkey (Map p111; ☎ 552 4028; www.thebeardedmonkey.com; Calle 14 de Septiembre; hammock/dm/s/d/tr US\$2/4/9/11/14) Make sure you make reservations for the popular Bearded Monkey, managed by a British-American couple, in a cavernous colonial home containing co-ed dormitories with foam-pad bunks and several private rooms. The pleasant café/bar here serves outstanding international cuisine – don't miss the burritos or Thai food – and gets lively in the evening, making it a good spot to chat with other travelers. Those interested in working or volunteer opportunities should check out the extensive message board. The owners rent out bikes, screen English-language movies and run several cheap tours, including one to their Laguna de Apoyo-side dream home, the Monkey Hut (see p102).

Hospedaje Cocibolca (Map p114; ☎ 552 7223; www.hotelcocibolca.com; d with fan/air-con US\$13/29;

RURAL TOURISM WITH UCA-TIERRA Y AGUA

Originally formed in 1984, the **Union of Agricultural Cooperatives** (es.geocities.com/ucatierrayagua) was about the only tour operator in the country, helping the eager and idealistic *internacionalistas* (politically motivated foreign tourists) of the 1980s arrange food, lodging and entertainment. It was low-tech: visitors would stay in a home, eat (and perhaps learn to cook) traditional foods with the family, and tour farms, rural development projects and nature areas that weren't too dangerous.

Today it's called UCA-Tierra y Agua (more upbeat than the previous 'UCA-Heroes and Martyrs of Nandaime), and along with its sister program in Estelí, UCA-Miraflor (see p198), is going stronger than ever. There are four community-based ecotourism opportunities available within a few hours in Granada, three with lodging and all with guided hikes (per day US\$7), horseback rides (per hour US\$3), boat trips and basic restaurants. Begin by visiting **UCA's Granada office** (Map p111; ☎ 899 2927; ucatierrayagua@yahoo.es; 🕒 8am-4pm Mon, Wed & Fri) in the unsigned green and white house one block west of Shell Palmira; a mural on the corner has a map and directions. They'll help arrange transportation and lodging:

Albergue Nicaragua Libre (dm incl 3 meals US\$12) Easiest to reach, it's a 1km walk from where the bus drops you on the Granada–Nandaime road, and the lodge has electricity, running water and guided trips through organic coffee farms and horseback rides to San Juan de Oriente (see p104).

La Granadilla (dm incl 3 meals US\$10) A bit further down the same road, La Granadilla is more rustic and electricity is iffy, but you're only 20 minutes from the entrance of Volcán Mombacho. You can arrange guided hikes up the mountain, or for farms in the area.

Isla Sonzapote (dm or campin g per person US\$3, incl 3 meals US\$10) On spectacular Isla Zapatera (see p129), dorms have a simple restaurant, solar electricity, running (but not drinking) water, and access to the petroglyphs, fishing trips and the three-hour hike to the top of the volcano (629m). UCA will help you catch the public boat.

La Nanda There's no lodging, but there is a restaurant, and a three-hour hike to otherwise inaccessible Reserva Natural Lagunetas de Mecatepe (US\$4 per group), with five cute lagoons.

🏠 📺) This is a great choice for couples, an excellent option with attractively furnished rooms, cozy hangout spots, a guest kitchen and Internet access (per hour US\$1), all done with an eye for detail and cleanliness.

Hostal Oasis (Map p111; ☎ 552 8006; oasisgranada@hotmail.com; Calle Estrada; dm/s/d US\$6/14/22; 🏠 📺) It's a bit more expensive – and totally worth it – for the beautiful dorm with gorgeous polished-wood furniture (where you can lock up your pack) and there's a beautiful little swimming pool. Besides, you can make up the difference by using the fast and free Internet, or by making a complimentary 15-minute phone call (value US\$3) to the USA or Canada. Hotel staff can arrange stays at Hospedaje Crater's Edge (see p103), at Laguna de Apoyo.

Hostal Esfinge (Map p111; ☎ 552 4826; esfingehostal@yahoo.com; s/d without bathroom US\$6/9, with bathroom US\$9/12, r with air-con US\$35; 🏠 📺) Never mind the scruffy neighborhood

across from the market; this beautiful old house has been colorfully painted and has good security, a gracious hostess, a guest kitchen and new mattresses – but circa early-1970s furniture – plus guarded parking. There are good vine-covered hangout areas out the back. Groups get better deals here.

Hospedaje La Libertad (Map p111; ☎ 552 4117; hospedaje_lalibertad@hotmail.com; Calle La Libertad; dm US\$6, r per person with/without bathroom incl breakfast US\$25/10; 🏠) In an elegant colonial mansion across from the El Club hotel, this is a new hostel that takes care of you, with free Internet, a guest kitchen and very clean dorms, all decked out in super-cool furniture.

Hostel San Angel (Map p114; ☎ 552 6373; myvcay@hotmail.com; s/d per person with fan US\$10/18, d with air-con US\$28; 🏠 📺) Granada's best deal on Spanish colonial elegance, just half a block south of the parque central, is this homey spot. There are good, clean rooms that have lots of little amenities –

showers, towels and soap – plus a kitchen you can use, free coffee all day and a nice TV hangout area.

Hotelito Mochilero.com (Map p111; dm/d/tr US\$3/7/10) Mochilero means ‘backpacker’ and the .com is just randomly tacked on, but this is still the cheapest decent bed in town, with cleanish rooms, a guest kitchen and a big dirt lawn out back with hammocks. Walls almost hit the ceiling.

Hospedaje La Calzada (Map p111; ☎ 552 6736; s/d without bathroom US\$6/9, with bathroom US\$8/12) Big, clean, tiled rooms with thin mattresses surround a huge cement courtyard with a ping-pong table and a kitchen that guests are welcome to use – a good deal.

Another Night in Paradise (Map p111; ☎ 552 7113; donnatabor@hotmail.com; apt US\$20) Home of Granada’s very own ‘Mother Teresa with a potty mouth,’ Donna Tambor’s fabled *hospedaje* (guesthouse) is mostly closed, but you can still rent one fully furnished little house at back. Donna is a great contact person for hooking up volunteer opportunities, so feel free to get in touch if you’re interested in helping out.

Hospedaje Central (Map p114; ☎ 552 6044; dm US\$3.25, r US\$5-16) The wonderful original owner of this longtime travelers’ favorite recently passed away, and both the restaurant and hostel have gone straight downhill since then. Too bad.

Marina’s Hostel (Map p114; ☎ 552 8340, 887 6035; marinashostel@yahoo.com; dm US\$6-10, s/d with fan US\$21/26, with air-con & cable TV US\$32/36; 🚿) Newly remodeled, with clean, decent rooms, good beds and a cute little pool, plus free coffee all day, this place is just fine.

MIDRANGE

El Club (Map p111; ☎ 552 4245; www.elclub-nicaragua.com; Calle La Libertad; s US\$35, d US\$45-65; 🚿) Decorated in an impeccable minimalist groove, with beds on platforms that rise from the floor, this is one of the coolest options in town. Fresh flowers every day, attention to lighting, air-con and a great courtyard for lounging are even better if you stay in the upstairs rooms.

Posada Don Alfredo (Map p111; ☎ 552 4455; alfredpaulbaganz@hotmail.com; d US\$25-35, extra with air-con US\$10; 🚿) In what Alfredo claims is the fifth-oldest European house in the Americas, huge, gorgeous rooms sprawl around a miniature jungle garden that you

can enjoy in hammocks or over a big German breakfast (US\$5 to US\$8). Most rooms have shared bathroom (building codes), but there’s hot water. Bikes (per day US\$6) can be rented.

Estancia Mar Dulce (Map p111; ☎ 552 3732; www.hotelmardulce.com; small s/d US\$25/35, large r US\$40; 🚿 🚿 🚿) Rooms – especially the big ones, with two double beds – are cute, air-conditioned and decorated with an awesomely tacky-tacky vibe, but it’s really all about the pool, a serious project in creative tilework that may be one of Granada’s great architectural wonders.

Hotel Cocibolca (Map p114; ☎ 552 8219; www.hotelcocibolca.com; Calle El Caimito; d with fan/air-con US\$18/30; 🚿 🚿 🚿) A brand-new option opened by the superstars at Hospedaje Cocibolca, this sterile spot has a big Spanish courtyard and US chain-motel styling: small pool, two double beds, nightstand with lamp, little soaps, the whole thing – which makes this a great deal close to the city center.

Hospedaje La Pergola (Map p114; ☎ 552 4221; lapergolanic@yahoo.com; Calle El Caimito; d US\$40; 🚿 🚿) Around the corner from the Cocibolca and also brand-new, with similar style and amenities, this hotel is a bit more expensive and not quite as nice; but it’s still OK.

Casa Naranja (☎ 880 0438; redwarriorwon@msn.com; r per day/week US\$25/140; 🚿 🚿) Two blocks south of Calle La Calzada, this cute little orange house has air-conditioning, hot water, a pretty private garden and even coffee in the morning. Talk to Cafe DecArte for more information.

Casa Doña Pilar (www.granadanicaragua.com; r incl breakfast US\$29-42; 🚿 🚿 🚿 🚿) With only four attractive rooms, this British-owned guesthouse on the outskirts of town (a US\$0.70 taxi ride from downtown), with its *palapa*-lined swimming pool, secure parking and amenities including satellite TV, free Internet and laundry service, is well loved.

Casa Capricho (Map p114; ☎ 552 8422; www.casacapricho.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$35/50; 🚿 🚿 🚿) This attractive option has sophisticated and creatively decorated two-floor suites (and smaller, but still cool, one-floor options for solo travelers) plus hot water, air-con and a neat brick arch over the small pool outside.

El Maltese (Map p111; ☎ 552 7641; www.nicatour.net/en/elmaltese; r US\$22-50; 📍 🚰) The best option for staying right on the lake, this peaceful spot has good, clean rooms, air-conditioning and good views. There's a restaurant on-site, and bikes and canoes can be rented.

Hospedaje El Italiano (Map p111; ☎ 552 7047; italianrick@latinmail.com; s/d with bathroom US\$25/32; 📍) Spotless and air-conditioned rooms surround a tranquil patio. The café in the lobby serves tasty Italian gelato.

Hotel Granada (☎ 552 2974; info@hotelgranadanicaragua.com; s/d US\$25/30; 📍) Venerable and inconvenient Hotel Granada always held promise, and new owners have finally painted and fumigated the spacious rooms and furnished them with mismatched wicker, making this a decent midrange option.

TOP END

Hotel Gran Francia (Map p114; ☎ 552 6000; www.lagranfrancia.com; d incl breakfast US\$80-140; 📍 🚰 📺 🚿) With adobe-walled amenities suitable for a self-crowned king, William Walker's former home, right off the parque central, has been reconstructed according to his specifications – precious woods, beautiful tiles, shady courtyards – with all the modern amenities. The architecture is soaring, service impeccable and the cheap rooms are really small. Go ahead and spend the extra US\$20 to upgrade to a 'Junior Suite,' with a couple of sofas and a balcony. With all this architectural beauty, it's well worth dropping by for a drink at the up-stairs bar overlooking the street scene.

Casa San Francisco (Map p111; ☎ 552 8235; www.casasanfrancisco.com; d incl breakfast US\$40-60; 📍 🚰 📺) Perhaps even better, if you love a luxurious bathroom, this vine-draped and mosaic-tiled Spanish colonial mansion has been lovingly restored and finely furnished – Turkish lamps, hand-carved beds – plus modern amenities like air-con, cable TV and a pool. Some rooms have balconies, others patios, and some can be connected to make family rooms. There's a great Latin-fusion restaurant downstairs, plus one of the better selections of souvenirs in town.

Hotel Alhambra (Map p114; ☎ 552 2035; d/ste US\$80/100; 📍 🚰 📺 🚿) Serving Granada for more than half a century, this recently

remodeled, fairly luxurious property has a five-star location on the parque central and 60 rooms, including the high-ceilinged suites (worth the extra US\$20) with refrigerator, air-con, cable TV, two terraces, fresh flowers and room for four – there's even an OK pool downstairs. Other rooms are still nice.

Hotel Colonial (Map p114; ☎ 552 7299; www.nicaragua-vacations.com; s/d US\$55/70, ste US\$80-100; 📍 🚰) Another quality luxury property, in a Spanish colonial dream home just off the parque central. The 2nd-floor suites are fabulous, with little balconies, kitchenettes and lots of light; note that some of the luxuriously appointed bottom-end rooms don't have windows.

Eating

The classic Granada dining experience is relaxing over a light meal in a shady corner of the parque central. Four cute **kiosks** (vigarón US\$2; 🕒 9am-9pm) anchoring the plaza serve *vigarón*, best washed down with *chicha*.

RESTAURANTS

El Zaguán (Map p114; ☎ 552 2522; meals US\$4-10; 🕒 11am-11pm) Right behind the cathedral, the best restaurant in town does succulent fire-grilled meats, wonderfully prepared *guapote* (rainbow bass) from the lake or sea bass from the Pacific, all in a cozy dining room where dueling mariachi trios descend at sunset. Make reservations in the high season.

Rosticería J3 (Map p114; Calle Atravesada; típica US\$1-4; 🕒 8am-9pm) Inside this mini mall, enjoy outdoor tables and excellent service over big plates of typical food; the chicken in salsa is great.

Tercer Ojo (Map p114; ☎ 552 6451; meals US\$2-7; 🕒 10am-10pm Tue-Sun) Consider making reservations for one of the scarf-draped tables in this beautiful trippy-gypsy gourmet restaurant, where international offerings range from sushi to curries to big salads, lots of imported wines and a gourmet grocery in front.

Cafe DecArte (Map p114; dishes US\$3-6; 🕒 7am-10pm Wed-Mon) This restaurant serves fresh, healthy cuisine, including a recommended Caesar salad and tuna pita sandwich, plus daily vegetarian specials and fresh soups, not to mention a pretty darned spectacular

breakfast buffet (US\$4). The owners also offer mosaics classes to adults as well as local kids, who sell their stuff right here (see p119).

Nuestra Casa (Map p111; ribs US\$4-7; ☎ 8am-close) This homey spot serves some of the best baby back ribs anywhere – no joke, the owner is from Alabama and knows his craft – plus other mostly meaty specials. There's live music on weekends.

Doña Conchi (Map p114; Calle El Caimito; dishes US\$4-10; ☎ 9am-10pm) Excellent Spanish cuisine is served in a lovely garden, lit by candles in the evening. Prices aren't cheap, but the ambience and sangria (iced punch made from red wine, fruit juice and soda water) are unbeatable, and from time to time Conchi breaks out her castanets to dance for the lucky few.

Mona Lisa (Map p114; meals US\$3-8; ☎ 5pm-midnight Mon-Fri, noon-midnight Sat & Sun) The best pizza in town is served at this upscale joint, which is also a popular bar.

Restaurante Mediterráneo (Map p114; ☎ 552 6764; tapas US\$4-6, mains US\$8-12; ☎ 11am-3pm & 6-10pm Mon-Fri, 11am-10pm Sat & Sun) This beautiful restaurant, set around a big, leafy courtyard, has romantic music, great service and top-quality Spanish cuisine.

Piscina-Ristorante Casa Vivaldi (Map p111; ☎ 552 7567; meals US\$3-15; Calle El Caimito; ☎ 9am-9pm; 🍷) Winning 'best perk' in the Mediterranean category, however, is this Italian restaurant specializing in fresh pasta, tiramisu espresso beverages and fine wine served beneath a vine-draped patio. But really it's all about the pool (US\$3 just to swim). Hotel rooms are also being built.

Casa San Francisco (Map p111; dishes US\$2-6; ☎ 7am-2:20pm & 6-10pm) Around the corner from the eponymous church, San Francisco serves 'pan-Latin' cuisine, including moles (spicy sauce made with chilies, chocolate and served with meat), nachos, pupusas (a cornmeal mass stuffed with cheese or refried beans) and fajitas (marinated and grilled strips of meat served with a flour tortilla and savory fillings), plus a good happy hour with US\$2 margaritas and a fabulous Sunday brunch (10am to 3pm) for nursing your hangover.

Las Colinas del Sur (Map p111; Calle Atravesada; mains US\$4-8) Out past the Mercado Municipal, it's best to take a taxi (US\$0.70) to this locally revered hole in the wall, with delicious *guapote*, at reasonable prices.

El Club (Map p111; Calle La Libertad; mains US\$3-8) This attractive restaurant/bar does excellent international cuisine, from Italian lasagna to Indonesian satay, in cool Euro styling; it's a great place to meet friends.

Tequila Vallarta (Map p114; mains US\$3-8; ☎ 10am-10pm) The chef is actually from Puerto Vallarta, and the Mexican food – enchiladas, moles – is actually spicy. And there's a full bar with lots of tequilas!

Taquería La Jarochita (Map p114; mains US\$3-8; Calle El Caimito; ☎ 11:30am-10:30pm) The Masaya institution has opened another one of its fine Mexican restaurants here in town.

CAFÉS

Kathy's Waffle House (Map p114; dishes US\$2-3; ☎ 7am-2am; 🍷) With one of the best views in town (right across from the Convento San Francisco), this cheerful café has seven different kinds of waffles and lots of other great breakfasts, plus good coffee and wi-fi (!).

Café Blue (Map p114; meals US\$2-3; ☎ 7am-5pm) Not wanting to let expats make all the money off the pancake-loving backpacking crowd, these local ladies have started serving all your international faves under a cane roof, but consider going for the Nica breakfast instead.

Nica Buffet (Map p114; Calle Estrada; breakfast US\$3; ☎ 6am-noon) It's not actually a buffet, but it does have some of the best Western-style pancakes in town.

Restaurant Los Portales (Map p114; meals US\$2-6; ☎ 7am-10pm) Right on Plaza de la Independencia with ringside seats to all the action, you can enjoy a healthy selection of Mexican food, big salads, great service and Presto coffee on a porch across from Casa de los Leones.

Cafetín El Volcán (Map p111; quesillos US\$0.50-2; ☎ 7am-8:45pm) Get your *quesillos* (see the boxed text, p181) and *tiste* (toasted corn beverage) at this cheapie, close to Hostal Oasis.

Chichería Paris (Map p111; snacks US\$1-2; ☎ 10:30am-8pm) If you need a snack after climbing all those guard towers at La Fortaleza, stop here for *vigarón* and other traditional treats.

QUICK EATS

Granada has excellent street food, with bags of fruit salad (with fork US\$0.30) and other goodies on sale between the parque central

and Mercado Municipal in the morning. Just before sunset, **fritangas** (sidewalk barbecues; snacks US\$1-3) set up in the parque central and Calle La Calzada, dishing up barbecue, *gallo pinto* (rice and beans) and all things fried, onto washed banana leaves for you to enjoy.

Melbar & Los Hijos del Maíz (Map p114; set plate US\$1.25; ☎ 11am-10pm) Melba, the best-dressed woman in Granada, serves *comida corriente* (a mixed plate of different typical foods) and 13-córdoba (US\$0.76) *cerveza* (beer) in her five-star location, right around the corner from the cathedral.

Restaurant Don Daffa (Map p114; meal US\$3-5; ☎ 11am-7pm) This steam-table buffet, right on the park, may be a bit on the pricey side, but that's because it rocks.

Tele Pizza (Map p114; ☎ 552 4219; Calle El Arsenal; slice/pie US\$0.30/3) The excellent hand-tossed pizza may not be gourmet, but good prices, speedy delivery and carrot cake for dessert make this a local favorite.

Hot Dogs Connection (Map p114; hot dogs US\$1-3; ☎ 11am-8pm) In the same mini mall as Rosticería J3, it does lots of different dogs, including Don Perro Italiano, with mozzarella, oregano and olives.

It's worth checking out the cheap 'n' traditional steam-table buffet at **Las Bocaditas** (Map p114; dishes US\$2-6; ☎ 8am-10pm), to see if anything looks good. **Comedor-Fritanga Doña Cruz** (Map p114; dishes US\$2-4; ☎ 7am-10pm), the steam-table buffet next door, seems to have more fried items. There's also **Sophie's Deli Sandwiches** (Map p114; Calle Atravesada; 6-/12-inch sub US\$1.50/3; ☎ 10am-10pm), in the Centro Commercial Granada, which does submarine sandwiches.

GROCERIES

There are two grocery stores: Supermercado Lacayo (Map p114), one and a half blocks east of the parque central, with a better selection and cigarette rolling papers; and Palí (Map p111), across from the Mercado Municipal, with better prices and a tiny Musmanni bakery.

Drinking

The Centro Turístico is home to several discos, including Bar César (Map p111), close to the entrance, Discoteque Centauro (Map p111) and Disco Bar Bamboo (Map p111), a bit further in. Always use cabs

between the Centro Turístico and central Granada at night.

Café Nuit (Map p111) features live music on Friday and Saturday, and has a lush outdoor courtyard with round tables beneath the palms. Inside, the old colonial home has been transformed into a lounge, enjoyed largely by a Nica crowd. Granada's hottest dance spot, La Fábrica (Map p111), was closed at press time – if it's reopened, slip into your sexiest outfit and get ready to party into the wee hours.

Jazz-Bar Restaurant (Map p114; no cover, mains US\$3-12; ☎ music from 7:30pm) Hotel Colonial's low-key restaurant/bar serves French cuisine and has live jazz on Friday and Saturday evening at least.

El Quijote (Map p114; snacks US\$1-3) This new place with a sports-bar atmosphere and cheap *tragos* (shots) has some definite meat-market potential.

Mi Tierra Bar & Restaurant (Map p114; cnr Calles Real Xalteva & Atravesada; ☎ 10am-late) The disco goes especially late on Saturday and Sunday, but Fridays are Noches Bohemias, with drink specials and live music. Giant video screens, a very full bar and cheap food round out your night.

Redford's (Map p114; Calle El Caimito; fast food US\$2-6; 4pm-midnight) Big-screen TV, burgers and pasta even come with a few OK rooms out back for US\$8 a pop.

El Club (Map p111; ☎ 552 4245; www.elclub-nicaragua.com; Calle La Libertad) A stylish space without pretensions, El Club attracts a good mix of Nicas and travelers basking in the mellow vibe. If you're in town on the first Saturday of the month, be sure to hit one of its rotating parties, often featuring DJs from outside the region.

You can order up a hamburger and cold brew at Zoom Bar, then kick back for some NFL action at Granada's original expat hangout. Also keep an eye open for Pitbull Production 'Bar Tours' of Managua, which takes you to Hipa Hipa (see p84) and a few other clubs.

Entertainment

Cine Karawala (Map p114; Calle Atravesada; tickets US\$1.50) Granada's popular cinema shows mostly Western films on one of its two screens.

Bearded Monkey (Map p111; ☎ 552 4028; www.thebeardedmonkey.com; Calle 14 de Septiembre; tickets

US\$1) Everyone's favorite hostel screens indie and foreign films at 6pm and 8pm nightly.

Shopping

Casa de los Tres Mundos (Map p114; ☎ 552 4176; www.c3mundos.org) The foundation here sells a very good lefty selection of books, magazines and other souvenirs, including *Wani* magazine, 'the voice of the Caribbean Coast,' and *Gente de los Gallos*, your cock-fighting resource.

Mavericks (Map p114; ☎ 552 4120; Calle El Arsenal; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sat, 10am-noon Sun) In addition to stocking a great selection of books and magazines, your cheerful hostess Nadene is committed to supporting local art co-operatives, including Escuela Especial de Artesanías Populares, which teaches kids with disabilities how to make handicrafts that are on sale right here.

Nica Chic (Map p111; Calle La Calzada; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun) Cool clothes, handmade furniture and an oddball selection of affordable art make this worth a stop – there's also a book exchange with titles in English and German.

Doña Elba Cigars (Map p111; ☎ 552 3217) If you aren't getting up to Estelí (see p193) this trip, stop by here for a cognac-cured taste of Nicaragua. It's one block west of Iglesia de Xalteva.

Sultan Cigars (Map p114; ☎ 8am-7pm) A half-block east of the parque central on Calle La Libertad, watch folks hand-roll Estelí and Ometepe's finest into stronger *capa maduras* or smoother *sumatras*.

Al Anticuario (Map p111; ☎ 552 4677; ☎ 8am-10pm) Selling off unbelievably beautiful antiques, some several hundred years old, this is the place to find a cathedral-quality saint (US\$50 to US\$80 for smaller saints/virgins, US\$550 full size) or hand-carved mahogany furniture. It's a couple of blocks north of Iglesia de La Merced.

Harold Antiques (Map p111; ☎ 881 4975; haroldsandino@hotmail.com; ☎ 8am-6pm) Located just north of Iglesia de La Merced, Sandino began collecting beautiful antiques and high-quality replicas when he was hired to find props for the movie *Walker*; today this place is packed to the brim with beautiful stuff.

Claroescuro (Map p111; ☎ 895 3836; galleria_claroescuro@hotmail.com; ☎ noon-6pm Mon-Sat) Next door to Harold's, this Cuban-run gallery

represents about 35 Nicaraguan artists, some of them amazing, and periodically has openings where you can meet them.

Getting There & Around

Granada is not actually on the Interamericana (Pan-American Hwy), but instead is linked to the Costa Rican border and Managua by two spur roads. This means that Managua-bound buses from Rivas bypass Granada, so have the driver drop you off at Nandaime, which marks the turnoff to Granada, where regular Granada-bound buses arrive every 15 minutes or so.

AIR

Tiny **Granada International Airport** (☎ 233 2791), about 3km from the city center, has one flight daily to La Ceiba, Honduras, at 11:30am.

Nature Air (www.natureair.com) flies to Liberia, Costa Rica (US\$65/130 one way/return, 40 minutes), with a continuing service to San José (US\$120/240, two hours). Flights leave Granada at 8:15am and 5pm on Wednesday and Friday, and 5pm only on Sunday. Flights leave San José at 6:15am and 3pm on Wednesday and Friday, 3pm only on Sunday. The same planes leave Liberia one hour later.

BICYCLE

While bicycling in town might require nerves of steel, there are several mellow bike rides from town, including Laguna de Apoyo, Peninsula de Asese north of the Centro Turístico, and for strong bikers any of the Pueblos Blancos. The **Bearded Monkey** (Map p111; ☎ 552 4028; www.thebeardedmonkey.com; Calle 14 de Septiembre) rents bikes (US\$5 per day), as do **Bicicletería** (Map p114; bikes US\$9), half a block south of the park, **Tierra Tour** (Map p114; ☎ 862 9580; www.tierratour.com), **Posada Don Alfredo** (Map p111; ☎ 552 4455; alfredpaulbaganz@hotmail.com), and other hotels.

BOAT

Ferries leave the **ferry terminal** (Map p111; ☎ 552 2966; ☎ 10am-5pm) at the end of Calle La Calzada at 3pm Monday and Friday, stopping at Altagracia (Isla de Ometepe; US\$2, three hours), San Miguelito (nine hours) and San Carlos (US\$6/3 1st/2nd class, 13 hours). First-class seats, on the upper deck, have padded chairs and access to the TV, which will be on all night. Stake out a sleeping

spot early and don't forget your seasickness medication.

Puerto Asese (☎ 552 2269; www.aseselasisletas.com), about 2km southeast of town, has boats for the Isletas de Granada (see p118) and Parque Nacional Archipiélago Zapatera (see p129).

BUS

Both **Transnica** (Map p111; ☎ 522 661; www.transnica.com), with buses at 6:20am, 8am and 11am, and **Tica Bus** (Map p111; ☎ 552 4301; www.ticabus.com), with buses at 7am and 1pm, have offices located on Av El Ena Arellano; they both have daily buses to San José (US\$12), Costa Rica. For other international services, you'll need to go to either Rivas or Managua.

Granada does not have one central bus terminal. Buses to Managua's Mercado Roberto Huembes (Map p111; US\$1, one hour, 4am to 7pm, every 15 minutes) depart from near the old hospital. Micro-buses leave for Managua UCA (US\$1.20, one hour, 4:20am to 6pm, every 25 minutes) from two places: the convenient lot (Map p111) just south of the parque central on Calle Vega, and Parque Sandino, near the old train station (Map p114). Buses for Masaya (Map p111; US\$0.40, 30 minutes, 5am to 6pm, every 30 minutes) leave from two blocks west of the market, around the corner from Palí.

The main lot (Map p111) for southbound buses is one block south of the market, across from the Shell station. Normally no direct buses go to the border at Peñas Blancas (but ask during the Christmas rush from the border), so you'll need to change buses in Rivas.

Carazo US\$0.70, 50 minutes, 6am to 5:05pm, every 20 minutes; for San Marcos, Diriamba (with connections to the Carazo Beaches) and Jinotepe

Catarina & San Juan de Oriente US\$0.50, 30 minutes, 5am to 5:50pm, every 20 minutes; also serves Niquinohomo

Nandaime (Reserva Natural Volcán Mombacho)

US\$0.60, 20 minutes, 5am to 6pm, every 30 minutes

Pueblos Blancos/Carazo US\$0.40-0.70, 5:50am, 8:30am, 2:10pm and 5:10pm; for Diriomo, Diría, Catarina, Niquinohomo, Masatepe, San Marcos and Jinotepe

Rivas US\$1.10, 1½ hours, 5:45am, 6:30am, 7:10am, 8am, 9:30am, 12:30pm, 1:30pm and 3:10pm; catch the 1:30pm bus to make the last boat to Isla de Ometepe

THE FAST BOAT TO SAN CARLOS

Visiting the Río San Juan and Islas de Solentiname didn't always require a 14-hour ferry ride (or 12-hour bus ride, or inconvenient flight) across vast Lago de Nicaragua. During the 1980s it only took five hours, thanks to four already ancient but still speedy hydrofoil boats donated by the USSR, with several strings attached. Only Soviet technicians were allowed to maintain the machines, and also rather secretively supplied all the spare parts. Then the Soviet Union fell, the technicians were recalled, and one by one the hydrofoils were docked forever.

But they're still around – and two of them still run, sort of. There's always talk of resurrecting these old fast boats, which once crossed Cocibolca at a breezy 50km/h, and it seems likely that by the time you read this that state-of-the-art 1950s Soviet technology will be riding again. Keep your fingers crossed, and wear a life jacket.

RENTAL CAR

It's generally cheaper to rent cars in Managua, where your rental is probably parked right now – so be sure to allow a couple of hours for it to arrive. This region has good roads, and many attractions, including Los Pueblos Blancos, make excellent road trips. Although you can take cars to Isla de Ometepe (see p141), it's an expensive hassle.

Alamo (Map p114; ☎ 552 2877; www.alamonicaragua.com) At Hotel Colonial.

Budget (Map p111; ☎ 552 2323; www.budget.com.ni) At the Shell station.

Dollar (Map p114; ☎ 552 2947; www.dollar.com.ni) At Hotel Gran Francia.

Hertz (Map p114; ☎ 552 8103; sergiouca@yahoo.com) At Eco Expedition Tours.

TAXI

Taxis are plentiful and quality varies – choose a nice one if you're taking a trip of any distance. Always agree on a fare before getting in the taxi, which should be US\$0.50 per person during the day and US\$0.70 at night in the city. Always take a taxi between the beach bars and downtown. Horse-drawn carriages (Map p114), available at the parque central, are a more romantic, if recently more expensive, way around the city.

It's inexpensive and convenient to take taxis to other destinations, including Masaya (US\$10/15 market/volcano), Laguna de Apoyo (US\$10), Rivas (US\$20), San Juan del Sur (US\$25) and Managua (US\$30), keeping in mind that fares vary according to gas prices and your bargaining skills.

RESERVA NATURAL VOLCÁN MOMBACHO

It's been a few decades since this 1344m volcano, the defining feature of the Granada skyline, has acted up, but it is still most certainly active and sends up the periodic puff of smoke, just to keep the locals on their toes. It's easy to get to the crown of cloud forest, steamed up with fumaroles and other volcanic bubblings beneath the misty vines and orchids.

Reserva Natural Volcán Mombacho (☎ 552 5858, 624 0625; www.mombacho.org; adult/child US\$9/3; dm US\$12; 🕒 8am-5pm Thu-Sun) is managed by the very professional Fundación Cocibolca, which since 1999 has been building trails and running an ecomobile (think refurbished military jeeps seating 25) up the 40% grade up to 1100m. Get there early (especially if you have kids) to take the short trail through the **organic coffee farm**, or check out the **mariposario** (butterfly garden; adult/child US\$0.70/0.30) and **orchid garden** (adult/child US\$0.70/0.30) close to the parking lot.

Once you get to the top, where troops of three species of monkeys, 168 bird species and over 100 types of orchids are just part of the jungle canopy this park is intent on preserving, you have a choice of two trails: **Sendero del Cráter**, a 1.5km jaunt to the fumaroles, plus great views of Granada and Las Isletas; and **Sendero la Puma**, a steeper 4km trek around the lip of the crater, with even better views. Guides, many of whom speak English, are available at the entrance and run US\$5 per group (six maximum) for Sendero del Cráter, which you can also do on a self-guided tour, and US\$10 for Sendero la Puma, for which guides are mandatory.

You can also make reservations to sleep dorm-style in the **biological station**, with 10 beds and latrines outside, for US\$30 per person – this seems steep, but includes your entrance fee, transportation, a night tour, breakfast and dinner. Anyone can grab a simple meal at the cafeteria for US\$3.

Although the park is only open Thursday to Sunday, groups can make arrangements to visit on Tuesday or Wednesday, when it's less crowded. Time your arrival to coincide with an ecomobile departure, at 8:30am, 10am, 1pm and 3pm. If you have 4WD, you can drive for an extra US\$12 – plus US\$2 for every adult and US\$1 for every child in the car (it's discouraged). Public transportation is inconvenient. Take any Nandaime bus from Granada and ask to be let off at the entrance. From here, you'll walk two steep kilometers (stay left where the road splits) to where the jeep picks you up.

Several operators in Granada arrange tours to Mombacho, but try **Mombotour** (Map p114; ☎ 552 4548, 860 2890; www.mombotour.com; canopy tour adult/student/child US\$30/20/15), with offices in Granada's Centro Comercial. Part of Mombacho Canopy Tour, this local outfitter does guided hikes of Volcán Mombacho, coffee tours and a combo deal where you'll see the reserve and do the best zip-lines in the country, with 17 platforms and more than 1500 cables through the treetops.

The closest hotel is excellent: **Brisas de Mombacho** (☎ 561 2312; d US\$30; 🍴), at the Nandaime *empalme* (three-way junction), is a very comfortable spot to spend the night, with very clean rooms with good beds, cable TV and air-con, and lots of Louis XIV sorts of accents. The **Drive Inn La Cabaña** (meals US\$2-11), the *rancho* (thatch-roofed, open-air structure) on the other side of the parking lot, is considered the best restaurant in town.

Aguas Termales La Calera

The beautifully maintained, 45°C **hot springs** (☎ 552 6330; osorio@invernic.com), replete with sulfur, calcium and other minerals quasi-scientifically proven to keep you radiant and healthy, are hidden away on Finca Calera, inside the reserve and right by the lake. They're easiest to visit on a day trip from Granada (about US\$15 per person, including transport and entry); try **Tierra Tour** (Map p114; ☎ 862 9580; www.tierratour.com). You can also call or write ahead, then arrange the boat trip yourself.

Reserva Silvestre Privada Domitilia

A great place to take a break from the Granada scene and get back to nature is this **private wildlife reserve** (☎ 881 1786; info@domitilia

.org; dm US\$45, r per person US\$65, incl 3 meals), which borders the Reserva Natural Volcán Mom-bacho. It's pricey for what you get (no fans, composting toilets, but all the free fruit juice you can drink), but this protected patch of dry tropical forest is home to lots of howler monkeys, 165 species of bird and thousands of butterflies which take the place over like so many snowflakes on acid right at the end of rainy season, December or so. As dry season wears on, trees lose their leaves and you'll be able to see even more wildlife from the 20km of trails; bring sunscreen.

The reserve is 35km from Granada and not accessible via public transportation. Most Granada tour outfits run day trips (around US\$30 per person, including lunch). Or, drive here yourself (head east at Km 71½ on the Interamericana), then pay the US\$5 entry fee and mandatory guide fee (US\$5 per hour), and have fun.

PARQUE NACIONAL ARCHIPIÉLAGO ZAPATERA

Isla Zapatera, a dormant volcano rising to 629m from the shallow waters of Lago de Nicaragua, is an ancient ceremonial island of the Chorotega Indians and male counterpart to more buxom Isla de Ometepe, whose smoking cone can be seen after you take the three-hour hike to the top. The 45-sq-km island and surrounding archipelago of 13 islands are part of Parque Nacional Archipiélago Zapatera, designated to protect not only the remaining swaths of virgin tropical dry and wet forest remaining, but also the unparalleled collection of **petroglyphs** and **statues** left here between 500 and 1500 years ago.

A handful of archaeologists have worked these sites, including Ephraim Squier, who shipped several of the 15 statues he discovered here in 1849 to the US, where they are displayed at the Smithsonian Museum, and Swedish scientist Carl Bollivius, who discovered more statues, many of which are displayed at Convento y Museo San Francisco (see p116) in Granada.

Perhaps the most impressive expanse of petroglyphs is carved into a 95m by 25m expanse of bedrock at the center of **Isla El Muerto** (Island of Death), where many statues have also been found. Several of the other islands also have petroglyphs and potential archaeological sites. But, as in the

rest of Nicaragua, there simply aren't funds to dig further.

About 500 people live here quasi-legally, fishing and subsistence farming and hoping that no one puts pressure on Marena to do anything about it. Fortunately for them, the government isn't doing much of anything with these islands, which means infrastructure is basic and access is inconvenient. You can camp for free on the island, but bring your own food and water; there's one restaurant, as well as a simple lodge, both run by UCA-Tierra y Agua in Granada (see the boxed text, p121). They can help arrange passage on one of the public boats (US\$3) that leave irregularly from Puerto Asese, and may be able to arrange cheap transportation at other times.

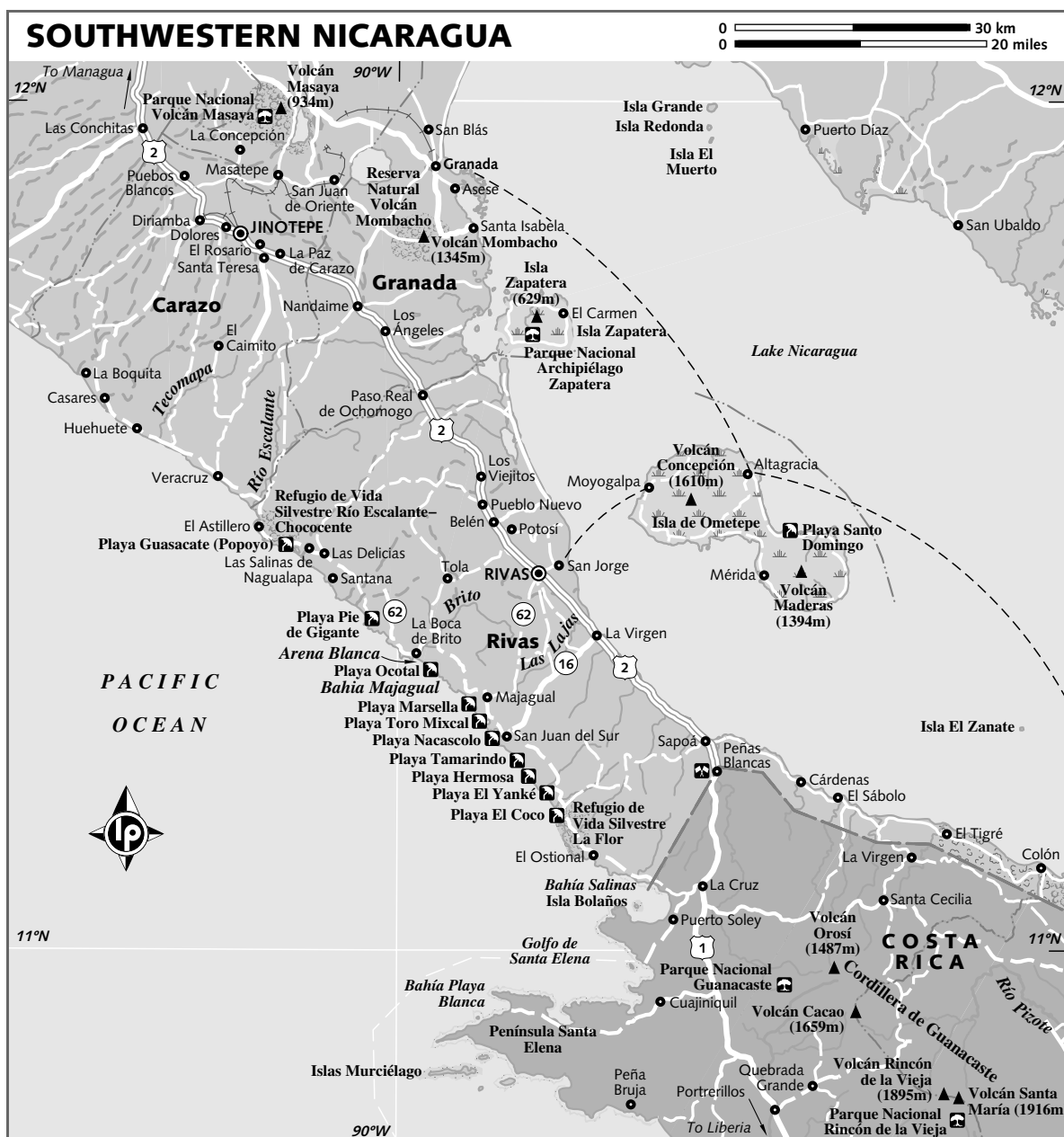
Otherwise, you'll need to sign up for a pricey day-long **tour** (per person US\$50-80) offered by almost every operator in Granada, or hire a private *lancha* (small boat) seating 12, about US\$150 round-trip, including a five-hour wait. You may be able to hitch a ride come November, however, when the Guapote Fishing Tournament of Isla Zapatera and Isla Muerto sends scores of fishing skiffs southward in search of the biggest *guapote* and grand prize – a motorboat.

SOUTHWESTERN NICARAGUA

This is the point where Nicaragua narrows to an isthmus, a slender land bridge of low mountains and sandy beaches stretched between the mighty Pacific Ocean and tranquil Lago de Nicaragua. These two massive bodies of water play a trick of light every evening, as the sun sets and paints the skies between them a fierce swirling violet and orange.

You may never forget your first sight of Isla de Ometepe in this light, rising from the shimmering lake to two volcanoes, one of them among Central America's most active, at press time murmuring threats of eruption. Fringing the isthmus from top to bottom are beautiful beaches that are only just now being discovered.

Their discovery may unnerve some travelers; the half-moon bay of San Juan del Sur may be the most touristed spot in



Nicaragua, so come psychologically prepared. But if you're in the mood – or just looking for a way to ease yourself into Nicaragua – San Juan's well-developed infrastructure makes this region a vacation in every sense of the word.

Climate & Geography

The Rivas Peninsula shares the same sedimentary shelf, deposited over the eons atop ancient, forgotten volcanoes, with Costa Rica's Nicoya Peninsula; both are far older than much of the surrounding countryside. The sunny, dry climate that makes the beaches perfect along here also hosts dry tropical forest, which wilts to brown and loses its leaves as the dry season (November

to May) wears on. On the upside, you can come here when the rest of the country is drenched, and still count on at least a couple of hours' sunbathing each morning.

Isla de Ometepe, the world's largest lake island, is the country's crown jewel. It is formed of two beautiful volcanoes, one of which seemed ready to erupt at the time of research (see the boxed text, p138).

Getting There & Around

Rivas is the regional travel hub, and its enormous, chaotic bus lot (which may be a bit of a shock if you're arriving from orderly Costa Rica; see p133) connects the region to Granada, Masaya and the rest of the country. It's usually easier to take *colectivo* taxis

to San Jorge, where the main ferry terminal to Isla de Ometepe is located. You can also get to Ometepe via ferry from Granada (see p126).

Regular buses also serve the beach towns, but for some, including Bahía Majagual and Playa Pie de Gigante, you'll still require an alternate form of transportation. The region is developing fast, though, so keep an eye out for more options.

RIVAS

Most visitors just come here to change dollars or buses, barely noticing as they navigate the raised, tiled sidewalks that this is a well-preserved Spanish colonial town, right down to the outstandingly kitschy parque central (central park) and fine collection of churches. It's not exactly like Granada – its horse-drawn carriages use regular old car tires instead of more photogenic wagon wheels, for example. But this regional capital, which administrates the country's wealthiest department, is too busy hustling and bustling to bother with inefficient traditions.

Rivas' obvious potential and proximity to Granada, Ometepe and San Juan del Sur are encouraging more cutting-edge investors to look at property here, but as yet, the town remains simply the easiest-to-reach spot off the beaten path.

Orientation & Information

Rivas has the biggest market, best groceries, cheapest Internet and widest choice of banks and businesses in southwest Nicaragua. Stock up!

Banco America Central (BAC) Three blocks west of parque central; it has an ATM, changes traveler's checks and gives advances on credit cards.

Café Internet This cybercafé (three blocks west of parque central's southwestern corner) and a dozen other cafés charge US\$1 per hour.

Intur (☎ 563 4914; rivas@intur.gob.ni) This friendly Intur outpost, northeast of parque central, has the usual selection of flyers and information on not only Rivas but also San Juan del Sur and Ometepe.

Rivas, Nicaragua (www.rivasnicaragua.com) A city website geared to locals more than tourists, with good information on doctors, businesses and services.

Sights

The main reason that Rivas is worth taking a two-hour layover between buses is the

Museo de Antropología (admission US\$1; ☎ 8:30am-noon & 2-5pm), four blocks northwest of the park. The building itself, Hacienda Ursula, is an 18th-century architectural treasure and site of William Walker's decisive defeat. After his troops, limping home after an embarrassing route by the Costa Rican military, took control of the hacienda, a school teacher named Emmanuel Mongalo y Rubio (who has his own monument two blocks south of the Texaco), set the fortress on fire. Most of the men were shot or captured as they fled the burning building. See the boxed text, p55 for more on William Walker.

Inside, the obviously underfunded museum has some moth-eaten taxidermy, a wall of myths and legends and, best of all, a well-signed (in both English and Spanish) collection of pre-Columbian artifacts, many of them recently discovered by the Santa Isabela Archaeological Project. This Canadian-Nicaraguan team is excavating what it believes to be Chief Nicarao's ancient capital of Quauhcapolca, just north of San Jorge. The site was occupied between AD 1000 and 1250, and the 400,000 artifacts they have uncovered there include tools, blow guns, jewelry, funeral jars and cookware, as well as a fertility goddess complex and representations of the Aztec deity Quetzalcoatl. One thing they haven't found are *comales* (Aztec tortilla griddles), which has convinced the crew that this region had contact with, but was never colonized by, the Aztecs.

Architecture buffs could also check out the **Biblioteca Pública de Rivas**, which may be the oldest extant building in Nicaragua. The 1863 **Iglesia Parroquial de San Pedro**, on the east side of the park, is also worth a look for its attractive classical facade and a great fresco in the cupola showing a battle at sea, with communism, Protestantism and secularism as burning hulks, and Catholicism as a victorious ship entering the harbor. Four blocks west is 1778 **Iglesia de San Francisco**, a beautiful wooden church notable for several well-carved saints and the mysterious underground tunnel connecting it to the parque central.

The **baseball stadium**, just south of town on the Interamericana (Pan-American Hwy), hosts one of the most competitive leagues in Nicaragua.



Sleeping

Also check out the sleeping options in San Jorge (see p137).

Restaurant-Hospedaje Español (☎ 453 0006; r per person US\$10) At the corner of the church, this solid budget option has four rooms with attractive hardwood floors, all with separate twin beds. The restaurant here (meals US\$3 to US\$6, open 9am to 10pm Monday to Saturday) does a fabulous *tortilla española*, plus lots of other Iberian goodies.

Hospedaje Lidia (☎ 453 3477; r per person US\$5, with bathroom US\$10) Opposite Intur, this amiable, family-run operation offers great budget lodging, with well-scrubbed rooms and thin mattresses. Breakfast (US\$2), served family style, is worth it.

Hospedaje Internacional (☎ 453 3652; r per person US\$4, with bathroom US\$10) Of all the roadside cheapies along the Interamericana, this is the best, with clean rooms ranging from tiny and basic to large and oddly shaped with TVs and other amenities.

Hotel Cacique Nicarao (☎ 453 3234; s/d/tr US\$35/45/55; ☺) This hotel has little rooms of painted brick that come with air-con, hot water, cable TV and breakfast. The attached restaurant (meals US\$3 to US\$10, open 6am to 10pm) has a nice dining room where you can watch Palí shoppers try to hail cabs. It's a block northwest of the park.

Hotel La Mar Lake Resort (☎ 453 0021; www.lamarlakeresort.com; d US\$45-85) Denis Martínez had a dream. And when you're already in

the Baseball Hall of Fame and have had the national stadium of your home country named after you (see p85) your dreams can be a little bit quirky. Martínez has transformed an old Sandinista prison into a lakeside resort with some of the finest Ometepe views anywhere. It's a half-hour, US\$5 taxi ride from either Rivas or the border, and almost worth it just for a drink or meal out on the breezy patio restaurant/bar (meals US\$4 to US\$11, open 7am to 10pm). Comfortable, if unexciting, rooms are flawlessly furnished down to the little bottles of shampoo, and there are two pools, kayak and bicycle rentals (US\$3 per hour), plus a popular Sunday barbecue (US\$8).

Eating

Rivas has plenty of cheap eats, with the very cheapest clinging to the outside of the chaotic market, next to where the bus pulls in – keep an eye on your stuff. The biggest grocery store in the region is **Palí** (☎ 7:30am-7:30pm Mon-Sat, 7:30am-3pm Sun), a couple of blocks northwest from the park.

Pollo Dorado (dishes US\$2-3; ☎ 10am-9pm) It gets raves for the ceviche (seafood marinated in lemon or lime juice, garlic and seasonings), jalapeño chicken and very cold beer.

Soda Rayuela (dishes US\$2-4) This clean, friendly restaurant north of the park has Rivas' best *tacos al pastor* (slow-cooked pork served on corn tortillas) and good chicken fajitas (grilled, marinated meat and vegetables served with a flour tortilla), too.

You can go upscale right downtown with a cold beer or a plate of buffalo wings at Tex-Mex La Carreta, east of Soda Rayuela, with dancing on weekends.

Restaurant El Padrino (dishes US\$2-3; ☎ 10am-3pm) This solid steam-table buffet offers lamb on Friday and seafood all week long, in addition to rice, beans, plantains, chicken dishes, salads and whatever else is fresh.

Coctelera Mariscazo (dishes US\$2-6; ☎ 11am-10pm) Some say it's the best restaurant in town, and you can indulge in one of its renowned fish dishes or go for the inexpensive set plate at lunch.

Drinking

Rivas isn't what you'd call a party town, but **El Principe II** (☎ Thu-Sun), by the stadium, is a popular 'family-style' disco with karaoke on Thursday, dance music on Friday and Sun-

day, and mixed music on Saturday. The food here is also very good. El Campeon and La Carreta both have dancing on weekends.

Getting There & Around

BUS

Rivas is the regional transport hub. Both **Transnica** (☎ 453 6619) and **Tica Bus** (☎ 453 4301) have offices in town and daily buses to San José, Costa Rica (US\$10); Tegucigalpa, Honduras (US\$20); San Salvador (US\$20); and Managua (US\$10). Both stop at the Texaco station.

The **bus terminal** (☎ 453 4333) is adjacent to the market, about 10 blocks west of the Interamericana. You can catch more luxurious long-distance buses (most headed to Managua, not Granada) at the bus stop just north of the exit to San Jorge.

Granada US\$1.50, 1½ hours, 6:30am, 7:25am, 11:20am, 12:15pm, 1:15pm, 3:20pm and 4:25pm; or take any Managua-bound bus and change at Nandaime

Managua US\$1.50, 2½ hours, 4:30am to 6pm, every 25 minutes

Refugio de Vida Silvestre La Flor & El Ostional US\$2.50, two to three hours, 5am, 7:30am and noon

Salinas & Tola Beaches US\$1.70, two hours, 9:10am, 11am, 12:50pm, 2:30pm, 4pm and 4:30pm; returns at 5am, 6am, noon, 7pm and 7:30pm

San Jorge US\$0.30, 20 minutes, every 30 minutes

San Juan del Sur US\$0.75, 45 minutes, 6am to 6pm, every 30 minutes; with continuing service to La Flor and El Ostional at 11:30am, 3pm and possibly 4pm

Sapoá/Peñas Blancas, Costa Rica US\$0.50, 45 minutes, 5am to 6pm, every 30 minutes

Southern beaches US\$2.50, two to three hours, 11am, 3pm and 4:30pm; service to San Juan del Sur, Playa el Coco, La Flor and El Ostional

TAXI

Colectivo taxis run regularly to San Jorge (US\$1.50) and San Juan del Sur (US\$4), but you'll have to charter your own for the Costa Rican border (US\$10), Granada (US\$35) or the Tola Beaches. Pedicabs and horse-drawn carriages are usually less expensive (and more fun) for shorter trips; the usual cost is US\$1 per kilometer per person.

TOLA & THE TOLA BEACHES

pop 20,000

It was too good to last, what with the perfect weather, pale beaches, excellent surfing and cheap land. But it's happened. The

Tola Beaches, once almost inaccessible and totally wild, now have a landowners association with an English-language newsletter and even a tagline: the Pacific Riviera. And you should see plans of all the fabulous gated communities they're going to build.

But as yet, only a few tastefully toned retirement resorts have actually gone up. Right now most of them are busy improving the roads (this is a good thing) and surfing forces are slowly carving out appealing, if sometimes rustic, claims in the sand; so there are plenty of beaches where you can still lounge on a shoestring.

There are no banks, real grocery stores, Internet cafés or cell phone signals in this region, so do what you need to do before you hit the trail.

Getting There & Around

Bus access is reliable but inconvenient, though it is improving along with the atrocious roads. The road is paved to Tola, then turns into an OK dirt road that can become impassable after particularly heavy rains; it's on the short list to be paved, however.

Buses leave Rivas for Las Salinas at 5:30am, 6am and 8:30am, and return at noon and 2pm. Note that Playa Pie de Gigante is a 7km walk from the bus stop.

El Astillero and Refugio de Vida Silvestre Río Escalante Chococente (Río Escalante Chococente Wildlife Refuge) are more accessible by bus from Managua, or you can catch a US\$10 cab from Salinas.

Taxis from Rivas make the run to Playa Pie de Gigante (US\$10), Santana (US\$30), Las Salinas (US\$35) and El Astillero (US\$40). If you take the bus to Tola, cabs cost about US\$3 less.

Tola

pop 23,200

Tola, whose name means 'the land of the Toltecs,' is rapidly developing into a service town for the construction, and eventually workers, for the big resort communities. The main reason to come here is to save a few dollars and catch a taxi to the beaches. There are no signed hotels, although you could arrange homestays. There is, however, a great restaurant, **El Naranjito** (dishes US\$2-6), serving excellent *plato típico* (a mixed plate of various foods typical of the area) and cheap beer.

Playa Pie de Gigante

This glorious white crescent of sand snuggled into the wildly forested mountains is almost worth the 7km hike from the bus stop, but consider taking a taxi. Playa Pie de Gigante has long been famed for cheap lobster, best enjoyed with a *servicio* of rum at one of the ramshackle seaside restaurants, and great surfing.

The popular sandy beach break right in front of 'town' gets hollow and fun when conditions are perfect, and has reliable peaks year-round. There's an endless tube about 45 minutes north that's also good for beginners. Special-name waves include Chiggers and Outer Chiggers, close to a rocky reef, and Hemorrhoids – this tube is for serious surfers, as it dumps you right onto gravel.

You'll need to hire a boat to most of the breaks, including the point break at Punta Manzanillo, just south, also called Punta Reloj. Ask the driver to take you past the 2m-long 'footprint' left in the rocky headlands that gave the beach its name, 'Giant Foot Beach.' Boats cost about US\$30 per hour; try Julian Martínez at Bar Mary Mar, who can also supply fishing poles and bait, or any of the surf camps.

SLEEPING & EATING

Most accommodations options are at surf camps, although you're always welcome to string up a hammock at **Bar y Comedor La Gaviota** (hammocks per person US\$3; ☎ 7am-10pm), a big wooden seafood restaurant (meals US\$1 to US\$6). Most prices quoted below are for surf packages that include boat tours, meals and more, but just show up and you will find room and board. During rainy season, some businesses are closed or keep shorter hours.

Giant's Foot Surf Camp (www.giantsfoot.com; per week per person US\$1000; ☎) This comfortable camp has two beachfront lodges. All rooms are air-conditioned and have bathroom, plus big TVs, screened-in lounges and more. The environmentally conscious crew is also planning working with a Spanish school in San Juan del Sur.

Hidden Bay Surf Lodge (www.nicasurf.com; per week per person US\$888, maximum 6) Surfer Dale Dagger is basically a legend. You can either arrange trips with him from San Juan del Sur, or stay here in Gigante in this plush

oceanfront pad, with big-screen TVs with DVD player, a gourmet chef in the kitchen and a boat ready to go when you are.

Reserva Ecológica Zacatan (www.zacatan.org; camping per person US\$3) This privately owned, 12-hectare swath of secondary tropical dry forest, 2km from the beach, is being developed by a University of Texas-Austin professor as a low-impact ecotourism destination. At press time there were already campsites with basic facilities and rough trails, with plans to have waterproof *rancheros* (thatch-roofed, open-air structures) and other creature comforts by the time you read this.

Hotel Brio (www.hotelbrio.com; r for 1 person US\$20, extra person US\$5) The same folks who run Reserva Ecológica Zacatan are also building this guesthouse and restaurant closer to the beach. Check the website to see if it's open.

There are a handful of ramshackle restaurants on the beach. Try **Bar y Restaurant Blue Sol** (dishes US\$2-6) for a pretty dining room. Or, for something completely different, try the **Restaurant** (dishes US\$4-10), where classically trained chef Maria Esperanza knows how to work with local ingredients. It can get crowded when the waves aren't breaking.

No less than nine enormous 'tourism complexes' are being constructed in the area, with condominiums, hotels, infinity pools, golf courses and more. Heck, **Arenas Bay** (www.arenasbay.com) even wants to change the name of the beach. Come soon.

Santana

The only way to walk to three of the prettiest beaches around – Playa Dorada, Playa Escondida and Playa Rosada – is if you're a guest or resident of plush **Rancho Santana** (☎ 887 4343; www.ranchosantana.com; d US\$80, casitas US\$150, house US\$250, 7th night free). Easily the most successful resort village on the block, it's got clubhouses, rental homes, pools, horses, tennis courts, a helipad and more. Fully furnished casitas have two bedrooms; houses have up to four (maximum two people per bedroom), with private pools. If you're tired of rice and beans, the swanky restaurant here (meals US\$4 to US\$10) is open to the public; consider wearing your cleanest shirt.

The most famous of the three beaches is Playa Rosada, with pretty pink sand, great

surfing and the **Jaro de Leche blowhole**, an odd hydrogeological formation that shoots ocean water several meters into the waves. You'll only see it if you stay here or come in a boat. But the owners are pretty cool, and if you ordered a nice meal at the restaurant and wore your cleanest shirt, maybe you could sweet-talk them into a stroll. Or, you could just tour the condominiums.

A very rough dirt road (4WD only in rainy season) to the coast begins from a signed turnoff about 1km past Rancho Santana and leads to **Santana Surf** (hammocks US\$2, r per person US\$5). There's also a small cluster of *pulperías* (stores) and *comedores* (basic, cheap eateries) at the corner, should you need to resupply.

Las Salinas de Nagualapa y Playa Guasacate

Home to one of the most storied waves in Nicaragua, the little town of Las Salinas de Nagualapa, named for the salt evaporation ponds you'll pass on the way in, is beginning to feel a bit like a beach town. You'll also see a large barn – it's actually the **hot springs** (admission US\$0.30), where you could soak away surfing-related soreness or wash your clothes.

Most people continue 4km past town to Playa Guasacate, where a shallow lagoon and slow river shift through the long sandy beach. It's often called Playa Popoyo in honor of the famed beach break, with right and left point breaks that break huge and hollow over the outer reef when conditions are right. Other named waves include Bus Stop – fast, powerful and unpredictable, it ends in shallow water with a rocky bottom. Cobra, nearby, is another fast wave, breaking left on more rocks. Emergencias, considered the best wave in the region, has a long, smooth left for longboarders and a short, fast, hollow right for shortboarders.

At **Hospedaje Mendoza** (aka 'La Tica II,' or 'Mendoza's Tiltin' Hilton'; hammock/camping per person US\$2/3, d US\$10, with 3 meals US\$15) you can stay in either the gently leaning one-story house or the newer two-story building; meals often involve fresh seafood, but don't miss the awesome pancakes.

Popoyo Surf Lodge (☎ in the US 888-899 8823; www.surfnicaragua.com; per week US\$960-1770) is about 2km back toward Salinas. This relatively plush surf camp has cheerfully

painted, two-story cement cabins arranged around the manicured grounds. Packages here include meals, transportation from the airport and trips out to the waves every day.

If you're a dedicated surfer, but ever since the company went public you just don't mind splashing out on a really nice place every once in a while, try **Hotel Punta Teonoste** (☎ 267 3008; www.hotellosrobles.com/en/playa; r per person US\$70, 2 people US\$85; 🏠), associated with Managua's swanky Los Robles: thatched-roof, bamboo-accented cabins have playfully plush interiors and overlook a fierce spire of rock jutting past Playa Conejo's pink-sand beaches. It even has plans for a spa – massages, gym, steambaths, the whole thing.

El Astillero

This picture-perfect fishing and lobstering village, inhabiting the dramatic headlands above a gently scalloped white-sand beach, doesn't have any hotels. But grab a whole fish with all the fixings at Bar Miramar, where fresh seafood comes with a view of the fishers mending their nets. This is also where you can arrange fishing boats to break offshore.

There's a beach break, too, a long left close to the mouth of Río Escalante, which gets hollow and powerful when swells top a meter, and crowded when neighboring surf camps get there first. There's also a fairly easy point break.

The folks who brought you Rancho Santana in Santana are planning **Astillero Beach Resort** (www.astilleroland.com), with condos, time-shares, an 18-hole golf course and even a synthetic Granada-esque 'colonial village.' But it's not built yet.

Refugio de Vida Silvestre Río Escalante Chococente

Much less visited than Refugio de Vida Silvestre La Flor (see p157), this wildlife refuge also gets *arribadas* (flotillas) of more than 3000 nesting Olive Ridley turtles at one time, as well as more solitary leatherback turtles, which make their nests here between July and December (peaking in August and September). The refuge protects five species of turtles, as well as 4800 hectares of dry tropical forests and mangrove swamps.

There's currently no public transportation, and no regularly offered organized tours to the refuge, but if you have a 4WD there are two signed entrances from the Interamericana; Ochomogo, closer to Rivas, is the better road, and winds 35 rocky kilometers to the sea. Or, you could walk along the shore 4km from El Astillero, which may have lodging before this book is updated. You can camp at the park for US\$4.

SAN JORGE

Just 15 minutes from the bustle of Rivas are the beaches of San Jorge, lined with inexpensive seafood restaurants and rollicking bars, not to mention the country's best views of Isla de Ometepe. It gets packed during Semana Santa and on sunny summer weekends with revelers from all over the region.

International tourists, however, tend to just roll through en route to the island, stopping at the ferry terminal just long enough to wonder if those delicious breezes might be worth enjoying a moment more.

Orientation & Information

San Jorge is inconvenient to stroll around, but the beachfront – with the ferry terminal, several restaurants and most of the bars – is a featureless 1km walk past a faux Spanish fortress on the main road. Take taxis after dark.

Cybercafé San Jorge (per hr US\$1) A half block east of the park.

Ometepe Tours (☎ 563 0665) Part of Bar El Navigante, right at the ferry terminal, this brand-new guide service offers island tours, hotel reservations and more.

Online Internet (per hr US\$1) One block north of the park.

Sights & Activities

Ask your taxi driver to point out the **Cruz de España**, suspended from a gleaming half-arch above the traffic, which allegedly marks the exact spot where conquistador Gil González Dávila and Cacique Nicarao first met, October 12, 1523. Brightly colored statues of both men flank the monument.

The breezy, volcano-gray **beach** (voted Nicaragua's cleanest in 2003) stretches 20m into the water during high season, when it boasts a busy boardwalk feel and free camping. During rainy season (June–November), lake levels rise and reduce the beach to a slender strand, and many of the restaurants

keep limited hours. There are excellent windsurfing conditions here November to April, as well as in La Virgen, about 10km south of town on the Interamericana.

San Jorge's eccentric selection of churches includes the squat, 19th-century Catholic **church** that welcomes you to downtown, and the humble blue-and-white **Iglesia de las Mercedes**, one of the oldest churches in the hemisphere; it may have been built in the late 1500s. It's rarely open to the public; religious holidays are your best bet for seeing inside.

Nuestra Señor de Rescate is the most striking church, repainted a brilliant purple with a mix that uses *huevos de amor* (fertilized chicken eggs) donated by parishioners; an equally colorful sculpture of a *carreta* (ox-cart) is out front. It's a national historic landmark, and the destination of an annual caravan of some 150 *carretas* from Masaya each year. They arrive April 23, the anniversary of San Jorge's miraculous appearance on the coast of Lago de Nicaragua. The ensuing **fiestas patronales** include parades, rodeos and several ceremonial dances, including a much-celebrated dance between the city's two images of San Jorge.

Sleeping

You can camp at the beach, close to the restaurants and bars, for free, although there's not much beach during rainy season. Restaurants offer showers for a small fee.

Hostal Azteca (☎ 563 0759; dm US\$3, r US\$10-15; 📍 🚻 🚿) The 46-bed, thatched-roof dorm actually offers some privacy (really) thanks to brightly colored curtains and partial walls. There are also cute private rooms, some with air-con, as well as an excellent restaurant (dishes US\$3 to US\$5) worth checking out even if you aren't staying here. But the real reason to stay, or at least drop by, is the incredible pool surrounded by murals, some with Canadian themes. It's a 15-minute walk or US\$0.30 taxi ride from the ferry terminal, and is well signed from the main road, two blocks west of the mock Spanish fortress.

Hotel Hamacas (☎ 453 0048; www.hotelhamacas.com; s/d with fan US\$15/20, with air-con & cable TV US\$20/35; 📍 🚻 🚿) Just a block from the beach, surprisingly nice, spotless rooms have big windows that open onto the shady courtyard/parking area, lined with the promised hammocks and a tiny pool.

Breakfast is complimentary, and other meals can be arranged in advance.

Eating

Bar-Restaurant Ivania (dishes US\$2-4; ☎ 6am-11pm) Two blocks from the parque central, this spot does good fish soup and *típico*, and has a rollicking bar scene at night. El Coralito, a block away, has similar offerings with a cowboy theme.

Los Ranchitos (dishes US\$2-10; ☎ 11am-10pm Mon-Sat) The best restaurant in town specializes in steaks and seafood served in a lovely *ranchero*. Hungry? Try the enormous and recommended *plato típico* (US\$12), which comes with enough rice, beans, avocado salad, sausage, pork and more for four people. There's a full bar.

The restaurants lining the beach are convenient if you're waiting on your ferry. Most are open 11am to 10pm, and serve mid-price seafood (US\$3 to US\$10) on breezy, palm-thatched patios. *Sopa de mojarra* (a fish soup made with coconut milk) is the local specialty. The best recommended beach spots are El Refugio and Restaurant el Ancla del Sur, south of the dock, or Sol y Arena, just north.

In town, there's a great **fritanga** (sidewalk barbecue; snacks US\$1-2; ☎ evenings) half a block west of the turnoff to Hostal Azteca; it sets up in the garage next to Carnicería San Jorge. A hamburger shack occupies the kiosk in the parque central starting at around dusk. One of the better pastry shops anywhere is Pandería San Martín, half a block west of the park.

Getting There & Around

Buses (US\$0.30) leave for Rivas almost hourly from the ferry terminal, passing by the parque central. *Colectivos* (US\$0.30 in town, US\$1.25 to Rivas) roam the streets.

The road ends at the ferry terminal, where there's inexpensive guarded parking for your car and regular boat service to Moyogalpa on Isla de Ometepe; see p141 for schedules and other information.

ISLA DE OMETEPE

pop 35,000

Nicaragua's dramatic candidate for 'Eighth Wonder of the World,' Isla de Ometepe is exquisite: two volcanic peaks rise from the hazy blue expanse of Cocibolca, 'the

Sweet Sea' (Lago de Nicaragua), and form an hourglass of beaches and jungles cinched to a sinuous isthmus between them.

It seems unsullied, and spectacularly so, protected from so many of the world's follies, including a lot of tourist infrastructure, by a cool, clean moat. But it's most certainly worth roughing it a bit to see primary forests trade off with organic farms in the folds of the volcanoes' fertile skirts, teeming with howler monkeys and parrots, and hiding a wealth of archaeological treasures.

Orientation & Information

Isla de Ometepe's 78km main road runs in a rough barbell shape, circling each volcano and running along the northern shore of the isthmus between them. The Concepción side of the island is more developed, and the major port towns of Moyogalpa and Altagracia are connected by a newly paved road. Charco Verde is on this side of the island, as is the best boat access to Isla de Quiste and Isla Grande.

Playa Santo Domingo, with the best hotels and most popular beach, is on the isthmus; the road splits upon arriving on the less developed Volcán Maderas side of the island, going right to Mérida and the San Ramón waterfall, left to Balgüe and Finca Magdalena.

No banks provide credit card or debit card transactions, although you can change

US dollars. Internet access tends to be slow and unreliable; at press time it was available only in Moyogalpa, Altagracia and a few hotels, but look for that to change.

Hacienda Mérida (☎ 868 8973) Cashes traveler's checks and euros (5% commission).

Hospital (☎ 569 4247) In Moyogalpa.

Police station (☎ 569 4231) In Moyogalpa.

Activities

Many of Ometepe's tourist attractions are hard to find or even a bit dangerous – take that active volcano, for example. Sometimes it's just worth hiring a guide. A handful of Moyogalpa-based tour companies have offices near the ferry terminal, but hotels can arrange almost any tour for you. You should almost always tip your guide. See also Tours, p141.

VOLCANO CLIMBS

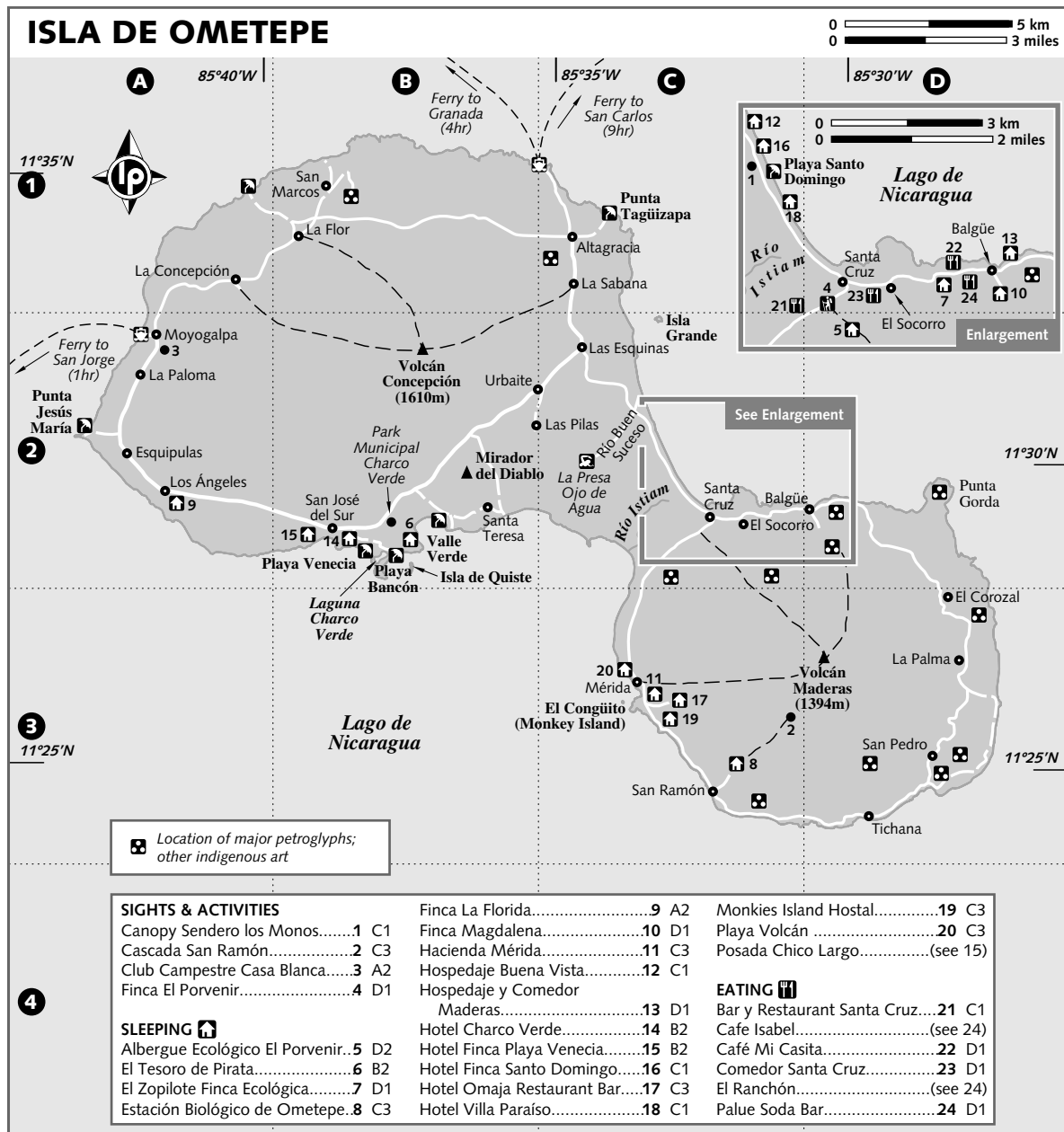
Náhuatl-speaking colonists came because their legends foretold an island with two (*ome*) peaks (*tepetl*): gently smoking Concepción (1610m) and inactive Maderas (1394m), carpeted in cloud forest, both of which are great climbs. Seriously consider taking a guide; tourists die on these volcanoes every year, usually after falling into a ravine, breaking something, then starving to death, which gives you plenty of time to feel like a dumbass for wanting to save US\$3.

THE EXPLOSIVE MOOD SWINGS OF VOLCÁN CONCEPCIÓN

She knows she's special: the star of the largest lake island in the world, Volcán Concepción is Central America's most symmetrical and arguably loveliest volcano, not to mention one of its most active and dangerous. Concepción roared back to life the same year that Krakatoa blew, in 1883, after centuries of hosting gentle cloud forests around her now gray and smoking craters. The event's thick and streaming lava invoked her ancient name, Mestlitepe, 'The Menstruating Mountain.'

And indeed, the fiery flow seems cyclical. In 1921 ash gave way to glowing red, and the following year lava and glowing boulders were tossed out with explosions heard in Granada. In 1944 ashfalls as far as Rivas were just a warning; six months later lava flows consumed hectares of crops. In 1957 tongues of flame 15m high leapt from the summit following months of ashy exhalation. And although no lava burst forth, ashes inaugurated another two years of activity between 1983 and 1985.

In late 2005, in her first tantrum since the revolution, Concepción was showering ashes over Rivas and guides were excitedly explaining that it 'smelled like lava' at the top. It's worth noting that in 1957, when Concepción last belled fire and rock, President Somoza sent boats to evacuate. Not one person left – and not one person died. As Concepción seemed to be indulging her PMS at press time, locals were watching with anticipation – nervous, but excited – wondering whether their mountain was about to put on a show.



Volcán Concepción (guide per person US\$12-20) is a serious 10- to 12-hour hike up loose volcanic stone, so be in good physical condition and bring water, snacks and real hiking shoes. Most hikes leave from either Moyogalpa or Altagracia. Get started as early in the morning as possible, and remember that there's no shade above the tree line, it's even steeper than it looks, and it can get windy and cold, particularly if it's cloudy, at the top. And it's almost always cloudy at the top, which means your chances of seeing the fuming craters and awesome views over the lake and across Central America's volcanic spine are slim, even during dry season. But they're zero everywhere else.

There are three main trails to the top: La Concha and La Flor (the most popular trail) are both a short bus ride from Moyogalpa, while the trailhead for La Sabana is walking distance from Altagracia.

Volcán Maderas (guide per person US\$5-20) is much more accessible. It's a muddy seven-to eight-hour slog (four to five hours of climbing) to a misty cloud forest ending with a steep crater descent to a chilly jade-green lake. This climb has been tested and approved by overweight chain smokers, only some of whom took the cold and muddy swim. Though there aren't any views from the top, the halfway point of the Finca Magdalena trail, with benches, offers the money shot of Concepción.

There are three trails to the top: the original at Finca Magdalena (US\$15 per group of three) and two slightly longer trails beginning at Hacienda Mérida and Finca El Porvenir. You can also pay a trail fee at Finca Magdalena (US\$2 per person) and go solo, but do your mom a favor and get the guide. They pulled two bodies out of a muddy ravine in November 2005.

OTHER HIKES

Relatively less-challenging hikes abound, including to the halfway point up Maderas on the Finca Magdalena trail, and **Tour al Floral** (guide per person US\$10), a five-hour round-trip to a viewpoint about 1000m up Concepción.

The other classic Ometepe hike is to **San Ramón waterfall** (guide per person US\$2). This excellent four-hour hike follows a steep, clearly marked trail to the mossy, 40m waterfall that you see on all the postcards. The trail has been ravaged a bit at lower elevations by the owners of Estación Biológica San Ramón, but the payoff is still delicious. Bus service is convenient: take the bus from

Moyogalpa at 8:15am or Altagracia at 9am, then exit at the ecological station. Buses return from San Ramón at 1pm and 2pm.

On the isthmus, about 2km north of Playa Santo Domingo, the well-signed turnoff to **La Presa Ojo de Agua** (admission US\$1) begins a shady 1km stroll through the plantains to a lovely swimming hole. Bring insect repellent.

A great day trip is walking (or biking) some or all of the **circumference of Maderas** (35km) on the rough dirt road (note that there aren't any stores, restaurants or bus service between San Ramón and La Palma).

Petroglyphs, or drawings carved into the volcanic basalt, are all over the island. More than 1700 known petroglyphs, concentrated on the Maderas side of the island, are thought to have been carved between 800 and 2000 years ago, but no one knows for sure. Any hotel can arrange guided hikes (US\$10 to US\$20 per group) to different groups of petroglyphs, or go on horseback for a few dollars more. Finca El Porvenir has a well-marked hike (US\$1 trail fee)

PETROGLYPHS

Nicaragua may not have anything like the enormous stone ruins of the Maya and Aztec strongholds to the north (although there are rumors of a lost city somewhere near San Carlos), but even if its ancient architects were lagging, their artists were working overtime.

The country's petroglyphs, usually 1cm-deep linear engravings in relatively soft volcanic basalts and tuffs, are thought to have been carved between 800 and 1200 years ago. Though some are clearly meant to be very special, they are not always imbued with deep spiritual meaning; some are probably more like graffiti.

Isla de Ometepe has arguably the most impressive collection, with more than 1700 discovered petroglyphs to explore. But this is by no means the only place where you'll find these fascinating works of art. Petroglyph hounds could also check out these sites:

- Isla Zapatera, Ometepe's 'male' counterpart, and neighboring Isla del Muerto (see p129), were even more intensely sculpted into ceremonial centers.
- Museo Precolombino de Chagüitillo (see p214) is an amazing museum with photos on-site; or book a cheap guided hike to see this huge mural in real life.
- Río Blanco (see the boxed text, p242) is where artisans with a sense of humor left a big snake on a rock that's only visible when the river runs low.
- Isla Momotombito (see p178); dedicated fans may make it to Momotombo's mini-me, once a ceremonial center in Lago de Managua.
- Cailagua waterfall (see p101) has Masaya's most famous petroglyphs, which could stand to be cleaned up a bit.
- La Cueva del Duende (see p273) is the famed Islas Solentiname cave that is only above water during the dry season, when you'll see more than 160 drawings.
- San Juan del Sur (see p150): it's not quantity, it's quality that matters – and SJDS's petroglyphs are doozies.

through about 20 petroglyphs, including a sundial sometimes taken as proof that vacationing extraterrestrials think this place is pretty special, too. Don't miss the two small archaeological museums (US\$1) in Altagracia or Moyogalpa, which also have archaeological treasures on display.

SWIMMING

While it's sad that the freshwater bull shark (see the boxed text, p149) is almost extinct, take advantage of these beaches now, as the species is staged to make a comeback. Keep in mind that Lago de Nicaragua rises dramatically in the rainy season, shrinking the beaches to thin strands. By the end of the dry season in April, however, some 20m of gray volcanic sand may stretch out to the water.

The most popular beach is **Playa Santo Domingo**, on the windy east side of the isthmus and home to some of the island's best accommodations. **Playa Bancón** and the other beaches around Charco Verde are greener and perhaps prettier. **Punta Jesús María** is a spectacular jetty that stretches more than 1km into the lake during the dry season, just a few minutes south of Moyogalpa. There's no beach in Moyogalpa (though there is a fine pool), but Altagracia has a small sandy cove. There are other untouristed beaches around the island, all of which would make a fine destination for a bicycle ride.

KAYAKING

Kayaking is a great way to visit El Cogüito (Isla de los Monos, or Monkey Island), Isla de Quiste and the Río Istiam. Kayaks are available at **Hacienda Mérida** (☎ 868 8973; www.lasuerte.org) and **Hotel Charco Verde** (☎ 887 9302; charcoverde22@yahoo.es), but ask around to see if anyone else has them.

BIKING

The island's little-used roads, particularly the rough, dirt 35km loop around Maderas, are perfect for mountain bikes, or just pick one of the off-the-beaten-track beaches and go. Most population centers have a place that rents mountain bikes, but note that quality varies widely. **Hotel La Isla Vista** (per hr US\$1) in Moyogalpa, **Hotel Finca Playa Venecia** (☎ 887 0191; www.islaometepe.com; per hr US\$1), **Hotel Finca Santo Domingo** (☎ 820 2247; hotel_santo_domingo@yahoo.com; per hr US\$2) and **Hacienda Mérida** (☎ 868 8973; www.lasuerte

.org; per hr US\$8) in Mérida all rent bikes, or ask at your hotel.

HORSEBACK RIDING

Horses remain Ometepe's most common form of transportation, and any hotel can hook you up with rides (US\$2 to US\$5 per hour), plus a guide for US\$10 to US\$20 more, if you need one.

Tours

Just about any hotel can organize **horses** (per hr US\$2-5, guides per group US\$10-20 or more) and tours. Guides are highly recommended for **Volcán Concepción** (per group US\$20-30) and **Volcán Maderas** (per group US\$15-20), as well as for trips to the various **petroglyphs** (per person US\$5-40). Always be sure to tip your guide.

Guides are not really necessary for San Ramón waterfall, La Presa Ojo de Agua or Reserva Charco Verde, although it's always easier to have someone else arrange transportation. Air-conditioned **island tours** (per person US\$20-30) are much easier, but also more expensive, than doing the scenic figure eight on a public Bluebird school bus (US\$2 to US\$4).

Most tour companies keep offices close to the docks, and all employ roughly the same pool of experienced guides.

Exploring Ometepe (☎ 647 5179, 873 7714; www.exploringometepe.com) Professional, English-speaking, knowledgeable guides with tons of experience offer a variety of treks, from volcano climbs to custom trips with a scientific bent – birding, ecosystems, ecology and, of course, geology. Berman Gómez, one of the founders, was selected as expedition leader for the BBC TV show *Beyond Boundaries*, where a group of 'disabled' Brits made their way from one end of Nicaragua to the other. 'It was the first time anyone got to the top of Concepción in a wheelchair,' beams Berman. So, what's your excuse?

Ometepe Expeditions (☎ 873 1599, 825 2290; www.ometepeexpeditions.com) A Río San Juan and Solentiname specialist.

Ometepe Tours (☎ 563 0665) With guided hikes and a few other services, located at the ferry terminal in San Jorge.

Getting There & Away

The most convenient way to get to Isla de Ometepe is the one-hour, 17km boat ride from San Jorge to Moyogalpa. There are two classes of boats: smaller, less stable **lanchas** (motorboats; one way US\$1.80) and larger, less frequent **ferries** (☎ 277 5354, 278 8190; ferry@ibw.com.ni; one way US\$2.25), which can

also transport bicycles (US\$0.70), motorcycles (US\$1.50) and, with 72 hours advance notice, cars (US\$16.50).

Between November and February, winds can make the sea rough, particularly in the afternoon; consider taking the ferry. Fewer boats make the run on Sunday.

Moyogalpa to San Jorge 5:30am, 6am, 6:30am, 6:45am (ferry), 7am, 11am, 11:30am, 12:30pm (ferry), 1:30pm and 4pm (ferry)

San Jorge to Moyogalpa 7:45am, 9am, 9:30am, 10:30am (ferry), 11:30am, 12:30pm, 1:30pm (ferry), 3:30pm, 4:30pm and 5:30pm (ferry)

ALTAGRACIA TO GRANADA & SAN CARLOS

The *lancha Mozorola* (one way US\$2) usually leaves Altagracia at 11am Tuesday and Friday, returning from Granada at 11am Wednesday and Saturday; it's not reliable and not recommended for those prone to seasickness.

Larger, more reliable ferries cross the lake between Granada and San Carlos twice weekly, stopping in Altagracia (unless the weather is really bad) en route. First-class tickets get you a padded seat, less-crowded floor space, and access to the TV, which will not be turned off all night long.

Altagracia to Granada US\$3, four hours, 11pm Tuesday and Friday

Altagracia to San Carlos US\$6/4 1st/2nd class, nine hours, 8pm Monday and Thursday; also serves San Miguelito

Granada to Altagracia US\$3, four hours, 3pm Monday and Thursday

San Carlos to Altagracia US\$6/4 1st/2nd class, nine hours, 2pm Tuesday and Friday

Getting Around

The big news is that the southern loop between Moyogalpa and Altagracia, the island's two major towns, has been paved. All other roads remain atrocious. Remember when asking for directions that most locals really do consider a 3km, uphill hike in shadeless 45°C weather 'right over there.'

BUS

Bus service is solid, but schedules change frequently, and fewer buses run on Sunday. There are two routes between Moyogalpa and Altagracia: the scenic northern

loop, via San Marcos, which is shorter but takes much longer; and the paved southern route, with speedy, hourly bus service. All buses from Moyogalpa to the Maderas side of the island stop in Altagracia about one hour later, then head down the isthmus past Playa Santo Domingo.

At Santa Cruz, buses go right (south) to Mérida and San Ramón, and left (east) to Balgüe, perhaps continuing to La Palma. Buses do not serve the southeastern portion of the island, between San Ramón and La Palma, at all.

Altagracia south to Moyogalpa US\$0.75, one hour, 5:30am to 6:45pm, every hour

Balgüe to Altagracia US\$1.10, one hour, 5am (Moyogalpa), 7am, 5:45am, 6:20am, 10am, 11:15am, 1:15pm (Moyogalpa) and 5pm

Mérida to Altagracia US\$1, 1½ hours, 4am (Moyogalpa), 8:45am (Moyogalpa), 3pm (Moyogalpa) and 5pm

Moyogalpa south to Altagracia US\$0.75, one hour, 5:30am to 6:45pm, every hour

Moyogalpa to Balgüe US\$1.10, two hours, 10:30am and 3:45pm

Moyogalpa to La Flor & San Marcos US\$0.30 and US\$0.40, 30 minutes, 8am, 10:30am, 12:45pm and 4:45pm, 11 daily; buses continue to Altagracia

Moyogalpa to Mérida US\$1.25, 2½ hours, 8:30am and 4:45pm

Moyogalpa to San Ramón US\$1.10, 2½ hours, 8:30am

San Ramón to Altagracia US\$1, 2½ hours, 1pm and 2pm

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

There were no rental-car places on the island at press time, although that's almost certain to change. Contact **Hotel Ometepe** (☎ 569 4276; www.hotelesenometepe.com) to get the latest. You can rent motorcycles (US\$4 per hour) at **Hotel Castillo** (☎ 552 8744) in Altagracia, and *motos* (small all-terrain vehicles; for US\$5 per hour) from **Exploring Ometepe** (☎ 647 5179, 873 7714; www.exploringometepe.com) in Moyogalpa.

If you have your own car, consider leaving it in the inexpensive guarded parking lot by the San Jorge ferry terminal, particularly if you don't have 4WD. Ferries (see p141) can transport your car; make reservations well in advance.

TAXI

Taxis are rare and expensive, and they're all minivans with 4WD. They meet all buses and ferries, but otherwise you should have your hotel make arrangements with

a driver at least a few hours in advance. From Moyogalpa, expect to pay at least US\$15 to Altagracia, US\$20 to Playa Santo Domingo, and US\$40 to either Balgüe or Mérida. There are lots of excellent drivers, including **Sergio Rodríguez** (☎ 832 3220) at Los Ranchitos in Moyogalpa.

Moyogalpa

pop 6700

Not just the ferry terminal for hourly boats from the mainland, Moyogalpa is the nerve center for Ometepe's nascent tourist industry, with several hotels and restaurants and the fastest Internet on the island. It's also home base to most of the island's tour companies, and base camp for the climb up Volcán Concepción.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The ferry terminal is at the bottom of Moyogalpa's main street; almost all services are within one block of this street. Buses and taxis stop at the dock after 8:30am; before 8:30am, they leave from the Catholic church at the top of the street. Go left for the dirt road to La Flor and San Marcos, right for the paved road to Charco Verde, Playa Santo Domingo and Volcán Maderas.

Connections at @rcia Cyber Café, Sala Archaológica and Cyber Ometepe can be slow and unreliable. All charge US\$1.25 per hour. Minisuper Martínez, at the top of the street, is your last chance to buy film on the island.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Moyogalpa is the most popular base camp for summiting **Volcán Concepción**, which you can examine more carefully at the **Ometepe Fountain**, right by the docks, a colorful not-quite-to-scale model of the island that used to spew water from the craters. There's a pleasant park and **Catholic church** at the top of the main road or make a right for Club Campestre Casa Blanca, with a casino and **rooster fights** (admission US\$0.70; ☎ 3pm Sat & Sun).

The past meets the future...well, the present, anyway, at **Sala Archaológica & Cyber Ometepe** (☎ 569 4225; museum US\$1; ☎ 8am-9pm), a combination Internet café (US\$1.25 per hour) and family-operated museum. Your fee includes a Spanish-language guided tour of *metates* (flat stones on which corn is ground) and lots of beautiful ceramics,

including what may be the best collection of ceramic funeral jars in Nicaragua, emblazoned with bats, snakes and other emblems.

How did they fit whole people inside those itchy-bitsy funeral jars? Well, the creepy answer is that they didn't – they're just for the bones. So what happened to the...erm...meat? That's something of a mystery. The most popular (and least likely) explanation is cannibalism, a charge probably invented or exaggerated by the Spanish conquistadors. The second sounds time-consuming: locals buried the bodies, waited six years or so for them to decompose, dug them back up, put the bones in the jars, then reburied them. The most intriguing explanation, however, is that they wrapped the bodies in nets, lowered them into the water at the perhaps mythical 'Beach of the Dead,' and let the sharks (see the boxed text, p149) clean up the bones for them. But nobody knows for sure.

See p141 for details on swimming, and p141 for mountain bike rentals. **Exploring Ometepe** (☎ 647 5179, 873 7714; www.exploringometepe.com) rents *motos* for US\$5 per hour.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Moyogalpa's **fiestas patronales** (July 23 to 26) are famous for the Baile de las Inditas, a celebration of both Spanish and indigenous culture, as well as several ceremonies timed with the solar calendar that have nothing at all to do with Catholicism. Patron Santa Ana leads a long walk to Punta Jesús María, where there are fireworks and drinking.

SLEEPING

These are just a few of the perfectly acceptable hotels in town.

Hotelito y Restaurante Aly (☎ 569 4196; hotelitoaly@yahoo.com; r per person with/without bathroom US\$6/5, q with air-con US\$30; P ☎) One block up from the ferry terminal, this fine hotel has rooms in different shapes and sizes, all clean and comfortable, and arranged around an attractively lit courtyard with hammocks, tables and pretty darned good food (US\$2 to US\$5).

Hospedaje Central (☎ 569 4262; hammocks US\$1.50, dm US\$3, r with fan/air-con US\$10/17; ☎) This colorful, backpacker-friendly option is three blocks up from the dock and one

block south. Rooms are clean and basic, and there's a decent restaurant in front.

Hotel Ometepetl (☎ 569 4276; www.hotelesenometepe.com; d with fan/air-con US\$15/25; (P) (♿) (♿)) One of the island's plushest properties, Hotel Ometepetl has colorful new rooms featuring Direct TV, hammocks, a huge swimming pool and excellent service.

Casa Familiar (r per person US\$9) and **Hotel Bahía** (☎ 569 4116; r per person US\$3) also rent out basic rooms.

EATING

Almost everything grown on Ometepe is organically farmed (or close to it), simply because fertilizers are unnecessary in the rich volcanic soil, and pesticides prohibitively expensive. Their rice and beans are considered the country's best, and the papayas are certainly among the largest.

Casa Familiar (fish dishes US\$3) Two blocks up from the dock, this pleasant little *ranchito* serves great steamed fish and also rents rooms.

Hotel Bahía (☎ 569 4116; dishes US\$1-3; (♿) 7am-midnight) On the main road, this volcano-kitsch restaurant/bar serves excellent soups and fish dishes beneath the twinkling Christmas lights.

Los Ranchitos (mains US\$2-5; (♿) 7am-9:30pm) On the same block as Casa Familiar, the restaurant here also offers inexpensive open-air dining. Portions are huge – a 'medium' fish served with rice and *tostones* (thick, deep-fried plantain slices) will feed two.

Carne Asada Peli-Buey (mains US\$1.50-2.50; (♿) 5pm-9pm) On the main drag, this classic *fritanga* specializes in deliciously grilled *pele-buey*, the adorable short-haired sheep you've seen gamboling about the island.

Chido's Pizza (medium pizza US\$4) Half a block north of Casa Familiar, Chido's Pizza conveniently rents videos, but isn't quite as good as the Chido's in Altagracia.

Pandería y Repostería Balestro (snacks US\$0.30-2; (♿) 6:30am-9pm Mon-Sat) Half a block from the church, this is the best (only?) bakery on the island.

Around Volcán Concepción

This has been the more populous side of the island (despite the looming, active volcano overhead) since the Chorotega arrived, and remains so today.

ALTAGRACIA VIA SAN MARCOS

There are no real tourist facilities along the northern route between Moyogalpa and Altagracia, although the trailheads for both La Concha and La Flor, which summit Concepción, leave from the towns of the same name. La Flor also has a nice beach. Several archaeological sites, partially excavated from the volcanic ash, are rumored to be located near San Marcos.

PUNTA JESÚS MARÍA

About half an hour by bicycle from Moyogalpa, this well-signed sand spit stretches out into the lake for more than 1km at the height of the dry season, when lake levels drop and reveal what was once a natural dock for indigenous fishermen. It's still used the same way today, with the addition of a few ramshackle restaurants that may or may not be open.

Finca la Florida (☎ 822 9713; ligiamados@yahoo.com; cabinas US\$10-20; (P)) is a tobacco farm that also offers three simple cement cabins with bathrooms and a basic restaurant serving US\$2 set plates. It also rents horses (US\$5 per day) and bikes (US\$3 per day).

CHARCO VERDE & ISLA DE QUISTE

On the south side of Concepción lies a lush, less windblown clutch of beaches, centered around **Reserva Charco Verde** (admission US\$0.30). This fine green pond is accessible from a short hiking trail that begins at Hotel Charco Verde. Not only is this a lovely spot for swimming, but also the home of Chico Largo, a tall, thin and ancient witch who often appears swimming or fishing in the lagoon. His primary duty is to protect the tomb and solid-gold throne of Cacique Nicarao, buried on the banks of the water. He may also offer you a life of luxury in exchange for your soul, which would then become a cow on Isla de Ometepe. This may actually sound OK, but check out the mural at Museo de Ometepe (opposite) before you decide. Incidentally, Chico Largo doesn't like people to take pictures of his pond, either. Just so you know.

Just offshore, **Isla de Quiste** is within swimming distance of the beach, or any of the area's hotels can arrange boat service and perhaps rental tents, as it's a prime camping, fishing and birding spot.

The most comfortable hotel around here is **Hotel Finca Playa Venecia** (☎ 887 0191; www

.islaometepe.com; d US\$10-35; **P** **☼**), right on the beach with several different clean cabinas, all of them adorable. More expensive ones have air-con. The restaurant serves good inexpensive meals, and the owners can arrange trips, rent horses (US\$5 per hour, including guide) and bikes (US\$1 per hour).

Posada Chico Largo (☎ 886 4069; camping per tent US\$3, dm US\$3.50), a budget spot, is next door. It has five-bed dorms, dinner buffets (when there are enough guests), and access to Mirador del Diablo, the hill in between the two volcanoes. The hill – originally called ‘Cinacupa,’ Náhuatl for the ‘Bat Cave’ – has been featured in documentaries about vampire bats. It’s a half-hour climb to views clear to the Pacific, featuring what owner Ramiro del Diablo says is the most beautiful sunset in Nicaragua. You can camp on top (no facilities) or just come for the full moon parties.

On another fabulous beach, **Hotel Charco Verde** (☎ 887 9302; charcoverde22@yahoo.es; r per person US\$5, d cabina with fan/air-con US\$25/45; **☼**) has older, beautiful wooden rooms (stay upstairs), and a growing collection of large, modern cabinas, only some of which have a beach view. There’s no price difference, so ask.

El Tesoro de Pirata (☎ 832 2429; camping US\$2, tent US\$5, dm US\$3, q cabinas with fan/air-con US\$25/30; **☼**) is a 1km walk from the bus stop down to Valle Verde (Green Valley), an even mellower spot with excellent restaurant and basic, concrete cabinas with porches overlooking a precious beach. The owners can set you up with food, tents and transport to Isla de Quiste (US\$20), and can arrange fishing trips.

LAS ESQUINAS

All buses headed to Playa Santo Domingo and Volcán Maderas stop in Altagracia, adding perhaps half an hour to your trip. If you’re headed to Playa Santo Domingo, consider getting off at Las Esquinas (El Quino); it’s a downhill, 4km walk to the beach.

Altagracia

pop 11,191

With more natural protection from Concepción’s occasional lava flow than Moyogalpa, this is the original indigenous capital of Ometepe, and still the island’s most important town. Its parque central is much more central, and comes alive in the cool of the evening with barbecue grills, young lovers and sometimes even live music.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Buses stop at the attractive parque central. The museum and all services are within three blocks of here. To get to the ferry terminal, head north along the road in front of Chido’s Pizza and Comedor Nicarao for another 2km. Taxis make the run for US\$0.30 during the day, US\$0.60 at night.

Hotel Castillo and Su Tienda de Fashion offer unreliable Internet access (US\$2 per hour). The latter also has a book exchange and the best selection of souvenirs in town. There is a pharmacy at Posada Cabrera.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

This is base camp for the other trailhead to Concepción, called **La Sabana**, which begins about 2km from town. Both Hotel Central and Hotel Castillo can arrange guides.

The main attraction, **Museo de Ometepe** (admission US\$1; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Sat), is a block from the park. This is Ometepe’s official museum, packed with information (in Spanish) about the island. Non-Spanish-speakers will still appreciate the amazing scale model of the volcanoes (much more accurate than the Moyogalpa fountain) as well as a few stone sculptures, petroglyphs and lots of pottery thoughtfully displayed as part of a timeline. There are also photos of Concepción’s crater, in case it was cloudy the day you went, and a fairly spectacular painting of the legend of Chico Largo (see opposite).

Another place to see some of the finest remaining ancient excavated statues on Ometepe is beside the Altagracia church, close to the parque central, where a handful of softly eroding monoliths still stand sentry.

There is not much else to see in town except a small beach, **Playa Paso Real**, about 1km from town. Head toward the ferry dock, and after about 20 minutes you’ll see a trail veer off to the right, marked by a blue sign; it’s another 10 minutes to the water. Hotel Castillo rents **mountain bikes** (per hr US\$1).

Close to Altagracia, **Isla Grande** is rarely visited despite being a fantastic place for bird-watching. No one offers a tour to the island, basically a plantain *finca* (farm) gone feral, but you could certainly arrange a custom trip.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Altagracia’s **fiestas patronales** (November 12 to 18) honor San Diego, whose feast day

is coincidentally the same as that of Xolotl, the ancient city's original patron deity. The party's most famous dance, Baile del Zompopo (Dance of the Leaf Cutter Ant), was clearly choreographed long before the Christians got here. San Diego also visits the outlying towns, where believers stay up all night as part of a vigil.

SLEEPING & EATING

All the hotels have restaurants except the Posada Cabrera. The cheapest eats, as usual, are served up at the central park – during the day, a couple of kiosks serve snacks, and starting at dusk several *fritanga* (barbecue) type set-ups offer roast chicken, *tamales* (boiled or steamed cornmeal filled with chicken or pork, usually wrapped in a banana leaf), *baho* (a meat, plantain and vegetable stew) and more, until 9pm or so.

Hotel Central (☎ 552 8770; r per person with/without bathroom US\$5/4, cabins per person US\$7) Located two blocks south of the park, this attractive option has bathrooms with river-pebbled accents in the front rooms, arranged around a pretty garden. The cabins out back are super-cute, and the hotel restaurant serves cheap and good Nica food.

Hotel Castillo (☎ 552 8744; r per person with/without bathroom US\$5/4; 📺) Around the corner from Hotel Central, popular Castillo has quiet, airy rooms with screened windows. The restaurant (dishes US\$2 to US\$4) is excellent, and serves real coffee. Informative owner Julio César Castillo offers Internet access and can arrange custom tours with local guides.

Posada Cabrera (☎ 552 8753; anamariacabrera@yahoo.com; r per person with/without fan US\$3/2) Right on the park, the narrow rooms are drywall topped with tin and charm-free, but cheap and clean.

Hospedaje Kencho (☎ 820 2246; r per person with bathroom US\$3, s/d with bathroom US\$5/6) The shared bathroom at this shabby spot is actually much nicer than the private one.

Playa Santo Domingo

Windswept (sometimes a little too windswept) beaches and the island's finest accommodations lie southeast of Altagracia, on the long and lovely lava isthmus that cradles Playa Santo Domingo.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The main attraction is the **beach**, a 30m expanse of gray volcanic sand that retreats almost to the sea wall at the height of the rainy season. It's known for always having a cool breeze v some of the highest windspeeds anywhere in Nicaragua – which is why the windsurfers have been eyeing it.

Also on the isthmus is a pleasant stroll through banana plantations to the well-signed **La Presa Ojo de Agua** (admission US\$1), a shady swimming hole about 1.5km north of Playa Santo Domingo. The clear, deep pool was made by partially damming the refreshing Río Buen Suceso, which at 3km is the island's longest river.

Río Istiam, on the southern side of the isthmus, shimmers as it snakes through the island's swampy lava valley. It used to be possible to cross the isthmus entirely by canoe, in the rainy season at least, back in the late 1800s. See p141 for details of kayaking and p141 for bike rental.

If you're in the mood for more modern ecotourism, **Canopy Sendero Los Monos** (per person US\$10), across from Hotel Finca Santo Domingo, offers six platforms and 500m of zip-lines constructed by a reputable company. It's small, but these things have a tendency to grow.

SLEEPING & EATING

Make reservations for Finca Santo Domingo and Villa Paraíso well in advance during the high season. The following businesses are listed north to south.

Hospedaje Buena Vista (r with/without bathroom US\$10/8) The best budget spot on the beach has a marvelous patio surrounded by lovely gardens and lined with hammocks, all overlooking clean Cocibolca. Rooms are basic but clean, there's free coffee in the morning, and a simple restaurant in the high season.

Hotel Finca Santo Domingo (☎ 820 2247; hotel_santo_domingo@yahoo.com; r with fan US\$15-23, with air-con US\$20-35; 📺 📺) A variety of rooms, all immaculate and richly painted, are just up a rickety spiral staircase in the charming and breezy converted farmhouse; the cement cabins across the road are air-conditioned, but further from the water. The owners can arrange all types of tours, and the restaurant may be the best on the beach.

Villa Paraíso (☎ 563 4675; www.hotelvillaparaíso.com; d US\$18, ste US\$40-55; 📍 📺 📶) Ometepe's first hotel geared to tourists and still the best, the pleasantly rustic rooms have fan and shared bathroom, while elegant cabañas arranged throughout the gardens have air-con, direct TV and hammock-strewn terraces; some have kitchens. The excellent staff will arrange tours; there's Internet access and a fantastic restaurant.

Around Volcán Maderas

The lush, wilder side of the island is even less developed than Concepción's realm, and petroglyphs are much more common. They were perhaps left behind by a race of tall, elegant people who occupied Maderas as late as the 1870s, but have since drifted away.

SANTA CRUZ TO BALGÜE

The Santa Cruz split is marked by a small store. It's a pleasant 3km, downhill walk to Balgüe from here, if you're on a Mérida-bound bus.

Just past the split, **Comedor Santa Cruz** (dishes US\$2-3) serves fish dishes and ceviches on an outdoor patio surrounded by lovely gardens. **Café Mi Casita** (dishes US\$1-2; 🕒 6am-10pm), a bit further along, has fresh-brewed organic coffee from Finca Magdalena, typical breakfasts and cheap set plates.

To reach **El Zopilote Finca Ecológica** (www.ometepozopilote.com; hammocks US\$1.25, dm US\$2, r per person US\$6), on the inland side of the road, follow the trail to the left of the concrete house, then 200m up to the clutch of traditionally constructed thatched-roof huts on the grassy hillside. This Italian-run spot is super-basic, but you've got to love the amazing wooden *mirador* (lookout) and outdoor shower curtained with mammoth grasses. Cook on the wood-fired stove or purchase homemade yogurt, bread, jam and even chocolate, among other goodies, all available along with a few *artesanías* (handicrafts). It's worth stopping by to check out the *mirador* as well. You can volunteer on the farm from 6am to 10am, six days a week, and learn lots about organic farming techniques; but you don't get free lodging or food.

Balgüe, about 1km further, has a cluster of good cafés, including cozy **Palue Soda Bar** (dishes US\$2-3; 🕒 7am-7pm), with spaghetti

and a full bar, and excellent **Cafe Isabel** (dishes US\$1-3; 🕒 6am-8pm), featuring a huge fixed plate with your choice of meat. **El Ranchón** (dishes US\$2-5; 🕒 9:30am-9:30pm) has a nice, thatch-roofed dining room, and serves typical food and cold beer.

Hospedaje y Comedor Maderas (☎ 882 3553; r per person US\$2; 🕒 6:30am-8pm), at the base of the driveway to Finca Magdalena, has basic rooms that aren't quite as basic as its famous neighbors, and clean shared bathrooms, fans and walls that go all the way up to the ceiling. Pork chops are the restaurant's specialty (meals US\$1 to US\$3).

The Ometepe classic, **Finca Magdalena** (☎ 880 2041; www.fincamagdalena.com; hammocks or camping per person US\$1.50, dm/r US\$2/2.50, cabañas US\$30-40), isn't just a place to stay, it's an experience. Rooms and dorms are ultra-basic (the cabañas are pretty sweet, though), but the rambling 19th-century farmhouse has everything you need – sweeping island views, fresh organic coffee, a cheap restaurant serving farm-fresh goodies, and a handful of petroglyphs scattered around the farm, all operated by a communally owned coffee collective going strong since the 1980s.

Well known among hikers as a trailhead to Volcán Maderas, climbers started showing up here even before the Contra War was over, and often asked about food and shelter after the hike. The business began informally, but today tourism represents half the collective's revenues. You can also purchase bags of organic coffee and honey produced right here. Note that it's a 1.5km climb to the *finca* from the bus stop.

Buses are beginning to serve the region all the way to La Palma, passing the tiny town of El Corozal, where a local cooperative and US-based NGO are building **Finca Vista El Corozal** (www.paradisewithapurpose.org), a community-conscious resort – check the website to see how it's coming along.

SANTA CRUZ TO MÉRIDA & SAN RAMÓN

Just past the Santa Cruz split, **Bary Restaurant Santa Cruz** (meals US\$1.25-3; 🕒 6am-8pm), in a thatched-roof *ranchero* overlooking the bus stop, serves great jalapeño chicken and cold beer.

Almost across the road is the entrance to **Albergue Ecológico El Porvenir** (☎ 855 1426;

r per person US\$5; **P**). This sunny hilltop lodge and restaurant is a great deal, and uses solar electricity, has great volcano views and petroglyphs amid attractive gardens, and a restaurant serving organic grub grown right here. Several trails (trail fee US\$1) include a two-hour trip through about 20 petroglyphs; a four-hour trail to La Chorera waterfall, where you can swim; and the eight-hour round-trip up Volcán Maderas. It's managed by Hotel Central in Altagracia, which is a good thing.

About 1km before Mérida, look for a sign to **Playa Volcán** (**☎** 871 8303; www.playavolcan.tk; hammock or camping US\$1, dm US\$1.50), a student-run, tin-roofed, dirt-floored experiment in ecotourism that's super-basic and super-cheap. Cook on the wood-fired stove or order simple meals (US\$1 to US\$2), or even take Spanish classes (US\$4 for three hours).

Hacienda Mérida (**☎** 868 8973; www.lasuerte.org; camping per person US\$1.50, dm US\$3-4, r US\$6; **P** **📶**) is a backpacker resort that uses a wonderful dock originally built by the Somozas. It has clean and spacious rooms with well-maintained shared bathrooms. You pay once to use the Internet (US\$3), great bikes (US\$8) and OK kayaks (US\$5) for the duration of your stay. The food gets raves. This is also the trailhead for the steepest ascent up Volcán Maderas; you'll descend via Finca Magdalena.

It's worth the climb to **Hotel Omaja Restaurant Bar** (**☎** 855 1124; dm per person US\$4-10, r with fan/air-con US\$25/50; **P** **📶**), a new, upscale entry with gorgeous wooden cabins featuring Direct TV, air-con and incredible views of both volcanoes from the private porches; even the dorms are beautiful. There's an excellent restaurant, a swimming dock across the road and plans for a pool.

Monkeys Island Hostel (**☎** 844 1529; r per person US\$2.50) is about 500m south. This wonderful place is much more basic, with simple rooms, lots of hammocks and a relaxed, thatched-roof restaurant serving inexpensive typical food (US\$1 to US\$3), rum and beer. The friendly family who run the place are well loved within the close-knit Ometepe community, and the hostel has received the most reader recommendations of any business in this book. It's sort of like a homestay with the nicest family ever.

Estación Biológica de Ometepe (**☎** 563 0875; www.lasuerte.org; dm per person US\$12, ste US\$85; **📶**)

claims to be a center for research in tropical ecology, which may be true. Four bed dorms are pretty nice, and the immaculate suites have air-conditioning, huge Direct TVs and Jacuzzis. The restaurant (meals US\$2 to US\$4, open 6am to 7pm) is the star of the show, however, so make plans to eat here after your hike.

Any hotel on this stretch will organize tours past the island of **El Cogüito**, now called Isla de los Monos or Monkey Island, home to the descendants of four spider monkeys (*Ateles geoffroyi*). Spider monkeys aren't present anywhere else on the island (howler and white face monkeys are) so these guys are pretty much alone. Be careful kayaking by, as they do bite.

Also worth seeing is **Cascada San Ramón** (admission US\$3, free for station guests), a stunning 40m waterfall that is one of the jewels of the island. It's a steep four-hour round-trip on an easy-to-follow trail that's lost some of its charm since lots of trees were cut down. But it's still mossy and beautiful at the top.

SAN JUAN DEL SUR

pop 13,000

This golden sand-fringed, half moon of a cove, hemmed in by stunning cliffs and filled with boats in repose, may be the most touristed destination in Nicaragua – something you should keep in mind when planning your time here. It's easy to understand why San Juan del Sur (SJDS) is so popular. The gateway to some of Nicaragua's best and most accessible beaches, it offers the same white-sand geology, excellent surfing and sunny, dry resort weather as Costa Rica's Nicoya Peninsula, an hour south, where folks like Madonna shack up at the Four Seasons.

But this collection of beautiful beaches, 14 of them named and all of them within a few kilometers by dirt road or boat taxi, have been built up with the budget tourist in mind. Sure, there are plenty of posh pads around these days, including one of the most beautiful hotels in Central America. But here, despite the relative crowds, you're still able to walk along stretches of almost pristine shoreline and find yourself a hammock, and some rice and beans served by the beach, which is sometimes all you need.

Orientation & Information

Wrapped around a crescent bay, SJDS is easy to explore on foot, and flanked by at least six other cove beaches on a single 40km stretch of coast, all connected by a rough dirt coastal road that can be 4WD-driven mostly in the rainy season, and gets much rougher north of Majagual. If you're walking to the northern beaches, save 2km by walking along the shore (instead of the road) and taking the tiny boat (US\$0.12) across the river.

BDF Has a 24-hour Visa/Plus ATM, but does not do credit-card withdrawals; there's a MasterCard-friendly BAC ATM at Hotel Casa Blanca.

Biblioteca Móvil (☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat) This lending library lets visitors browse its magazine and book collection, with lots in English.

Casa Oro Hostel (☎ 458 2415) This private information center wants to sell you a variety of tours, but it can also point you toward independent Spanish instruc-

tors and hiking trails and surfing lessons. It can also change traveler's checks, euros and other currency for a stiff fee.

Cyber Leo's (per hr US\$1.25; ☎ 8am-10pm) The cheapest Internet in town; others charge US\$1.70 but may be less crowded.

El Gato Negro Coffee & Book Exchange New and some used books in English and other languages; also check Ricardo's Bar and Big Wave Dave's.

Lavandería (per load US\$4; ☎ 9am-4:30pm Mon-Sat) Drop-off service only.

Police (☎ 453 3732)

Post office/Enitel At the western end of the beachfront drive.

San Juan del Sur Info (www.sanjuandelsur.org.ni) English-language, traveler-savvy site that has links to several area businesses.

Tesorera Cantur (☎ 458 2473; www.cantur.org.ni; ☎ 9am-5pm) The official tourist information office makes hotel and tour reservations, and sells a pretty, if useless, map (US\$1) of the region.

BULL SHARKS, FIN SOUP & A TALE OF OVERFISHING

There was a time when the people of Lago de Nicaragua, then called Cocibolca (Náhuatl for the Sweet Sea), did not learn how to swim. From the gulf of the Río San Juan to Granada's shores, the bull shark, the world's only freshwater shark, ruled these waters, and had a taste for human flesh.

Carcharhinus leucus is among the Caribbean's most ferocious sharks, not enormous but strong, with an appetite for anything terrestrial that might fall into its realm. Small eyes, adapted to the silty water of the river mouth, are useless, but it can smell blood from 100m away. Its flattened tailfin is perfect for the punishingly shallow rapids of rivers which it, unlike any other shark, can penetrate well inland.

All sharks can modify salts in their bloodstream, to sink and float at will, but the bull shark, alone, can urinate these salts away as it heads upstream, and find equilibrium in places where they are not expected.

The shark, always itself hunted, became a major cash earner as the 20th century began. By the 1930s Chinese buyers were paying as much as US\$70 a kilogram for the fins, a legendary 'restorative.' As the market grew, Nicaraguans found buyers for the shark's liver, rich in vitamin A, and the skin, which can be prepared as fine leather. This shark's meat, however, rots too quickly to export. The bulk of this brutal catch was ground to fertilizer or dog food, or simply thrown away.

In 1969 the Somoza family decided to take full advantage of this renewable natural resource, and built a shark processing plant in Granada. By some estimates, 20,000 sharks flowed through during the decade it churned. More than 100 boats fed the facilities, even as the sharks became rarer, perhaps endangered, and ever more difficult to catch. The revolution coincided with this unprofitable decline, and the entire operation was shut down in 1979. It has never recovered.

The bull shark has not entirely abandoned these waters, however, make no mistake. Its bulk is still spotted with alarming regularity not a person's length from potential prey...but it does not bite. Some say it doesn't like the noise motorboats make, or has simply learned to avoid human settlements – this is, after all, a most adaptable creature. But you've got to wonder, as you swim these once forbidden waters, if it remembers the taste.

A great book about Nicaraguan bull sharks is the page-turner *Savage Shore: Life and Death with Nicaragua's Last Shark Hunters*, by the amazing Edward Marriot.

Dangers & Annoyances

As everywhere, flocks of tourists are attended by charming predators. Don't lend money that you can't afford to lose to your new friends, don't leave unattended valuables on the beach, double-check your bill and count your change. And remember, there's never any reason to give dealers your cash up front. Ever.

Although most tourists never experience these problems, note that the trail to Playa Remanso is well known for muggings and best avoided; at least leave your camera at the hotel. Always be alert when walking between beaches, and go in groups if possible. The beach in front of the SJDS bars can be unsafe at night, and sexual assaults have occurred on 'party' beaches.

Sights

SJDS's several square blocks of souvenir shops and businesses are worth a wander; drop by **Iglesia San Juan Bautista**, with a shady park right out front, for your cultural pit stop.

Activities

SURFING

The best surfing is generally April to December, but waves are less crowded in the off season. There's a **beach break** on bigger swells at the northern end of the beach, but most surfers hire boats or stay at the beaches north and south of town. It's always cheaper to rent your board in SJDS, where several places charge about US\$7 per day. Almost anyone with a boat can take you to the breaks.

Arena Caliente (☎ 824 1152; www.arenacaliente.com) Everyone loves this locally owned and operated shop, which rents boards and arranges inexpensive group transportation to the best breaks. It also offers budget surf packages where prices vary depending on your choice in lodging (or camping) and other options.

Nica Surf International (www.nicasurfinternational.com; per week per person US\$990, maximum 6) Perhaps the most professional surfing operation in Nicaragua, Nica Surf sets you up at a swish hotel and runs a gamut of tours during your week's stay.

Surf Nicaragua (☎ 838 3808; www.localtreasureinternational.com) In Hotel Estrella, offers three-hour surf tours for up to eight people for US\$180.

SWIMMING & DIVING

The beach right in town is only OK; head to the northern end for the best swimming.

But for real, untrammelled beauty, you'll want to visit beaches north and south of town. It's always easier to go by boat taxi; ask at Arena Caliente if you can hitch a ride with a surf group for a few dollars.

Pelican Eyes (half/full day US\$5/9) If you need a break from the waves, enjoy the stunning view at this luxury hotel's pool – no typo on those prices.

San Juan del Sur Diving School (☎ 279 8628; www.abucear.com) This dive shop offers PADI certification courses, and trips into the bay and beyond, where you'll see lobsters, moray eels, dolphins, turtles and more. Owner Fidel López Briceño also arranges diving trips to Laguna de Apoyo (see p102).

HIKING

Unfortunately, the popular 3km hike to the **old lighthouse** crosses land tied up in a property battle, which means you are currently forbidden to take the obvious trail that begins up at the fishing port, continuing uphill every time it forks, to the spectacular views all the way to Costa Rica.

Instead, try the **Antennas Trail**: ask the driver of any Rivas-bound bus to let you off at 'Bocas de las Montañas.' Follow the dirt road through jungle and pasture up to the radio antennas, from where you have similarly stunning views.

There's a **spectacular petroglyph** not far from town; if you do Da Flying Frog canopy tour (see Other Activities, p152), ask to be taken by. Otherwise, walk toward Rivas, passing the Texaco station, and make a left after the bridge. Pass a school and then a gate on your right. Continue to the old farmhouse; if anyone's around, you should ask permission to cross the land. Otherwise, follow the irrigation pipes to the river, where you'll find the stone, showing an enormous and elaborate hunting scene carved perhaps 1500 years ago. If you continue upstream, you'll come to a small waterfall.

BIKING

Both **Hospedaje Elizabeth** (☎ 458 2270) and **Hotel Colonial** (☎ 458 2539) rent mountain bikes (US\$5 per day), which are perfect for the dirt roads heading to the northern and southern beaches. You can take your bike on buses that run between SJDS and El Ostial, as well as the little river ferry at the northern end of the SJDS beach.

Both Big Wave Dave's and Zapata Vive restaurant rent *motos*.

SAN JUAN DEL SUR

Not to Scale

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	Surf Nicaragua.....(see 29)		
	SLEEPING 🏠		
	Casa Huéspedes Merced.....21 C3	DRINKING 🍹	
	Casa Oro Hostel.....22 C4	Iguana Bar.....47 B3	
	Frederica's B&B.....23 B5	Océano Maché Bar/Bar Restaurant	
	Hospedaje Eleonora.....24 C4	Flor.....48 C4	
	Hospedaje Elizabeth.....(see 24)	Otangani Disco.....49 A2	
	Hospedaje Nicaragua.....25 C4	Ricardo Bar.....50 B4	
	Hotel Casa Blanca.....26 B4		
	Hotel Colonial.....27 C4	TRANSPORT	
	Hotel El Puerto.....28 C4	Buses to Rivas, Managua & RN La	
	Hotel Estrella.....29 B4	Flor.....51 C4	
	Hotel Gran Oceano.....30 B4	Viajes Water Taxi.....52 B4	
	Hotel Joxi.....31 B4		
	Hotel Nina.....32 C4		

To Da Flying Frog (300m);
Playa El Remanso (6km);
Playa El Yanké (13km);
Playa Marsella (9km);
Playa El Coco (17km);
Playa Maderas (10km);
Bahía Majagual (11km);
RN La Flor (21km);
El Ostional (24km).

TURTLE WATCHING

Between July and December – peaking in August and September – some 30,000 female Olive Ridley turtles, and a few hundred very endangered leatherback turtles, visit **Refugio de Vida Silvestre La Flor** (La Flor Wildlife Reserve; see p157) to nest. And you just have to see turtles laying eggs on

the beach, not to mention tiny baby turtles making their death-defying run for the water, at least once in your life. Several San Juan del Sur hotels, including Hotel Nina and Casa Oro Hostel, run night-time tours, including transportation, for around US\$12. Don't forget to bring your insect repellent.

FISHING

If you look south, you'll see an enormous peninsula jutting out into the sea, a wall of rock that hems in currents and the critters that ride them, including sailfish and dorado (best June through October), yellow-fin tuna (April and May) and marlin (August and September), not to mention lots of other tasty wildlife. In addition to the pricier professional operations, you can always book a trip with local fishers more cheaply. Fishing can be difficult during the rainy season because of strong offshore winds.

Fish Nicaragua (☎ 838 3808; www.localtreasureinternational.com; half/full day US\$420/595, maximum 8) At Hotel Estrella, offers trips in its 10m diesel boat, including equipment, lunch and beer.

Pretty Baby (☎ 266 3620; www.fishing.com.ni; half/full day US\$900/1300) This totally souped-up, plushed-out 13.8m yacht takes you and all your friends fishing in style.

Superfly Sport Fishing (☎ 884 8444, in the US 888-331 7489; www.superflynica.com) A four-day, three-night all-inclusive fishing package focusing on big billfish runs from US\$2500 to US\$5500 for one to four people.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Travelers are cordially invited to pickup games of basketball, held at 4pm at La Escuela Integral, next to the post office; soccer/football, held at 4pm at El Cuadro, the stadium south of town (but on the beach at 3pm on weekends); and volleyball, held at the beach Saturday and Sunday. These games aim to bring locals, expats and tourists together.

Kayaks (per hr around US\$3) can be rented from Big Blue Safaris, Iguana Bar or Landmark Inn, among other places.

Courses

There are lots of sun-splashed SJDS Spanish schools where you can learn words like *cerveza* (beer) before heading off to your surfing lesson. Most organize volunteer opportunities and homestays with local families, as do a number of independent teachers, who generally charge less and come to your hotel. Check the bulletin boards at **Casa Oro Hostel** (☎ 458 2415) and **Tesorera Cantur** (☎ 458 2473; www.cantur.org.ni; ☎ 9am-5pm).

Academia del Baille Black Sugar (Black Sugar Dance Academy; ☎ 458 2255, 877 7957; naomi300@hotmail.com) Offers dance classes in the Casa de Cultura.

Doña Rosa Spanish School (☎ 621 8905; spanish_silva@yahoo.com – Spanish, spanish_jorvine@yahoo.com – English; per week US\$90) Reader recommended, your fee for 20 hours per week doesn't include homestay, but does include surfing and Latin dance lessons.

Escuela Español Playas del Sur (☎ 568 2233; escuelaplayasdelosur@yahoo.com; per week with/without homestay & 3 meals US\$145/95) Offers one-on-one instruction.

Latin American Spanish School (☎ 832 4668; www.latinamericanspanishschool.com) A newer choice with happy students.

Luis Vincent Lira (☎ 872 1645; lvl1948@yahoo.es; per week US\$65) This jovial independent instructor offers three-hour daily, totally customized lessons, complete with workbook, and can arrange homestays. Ask for him at Cyber Leo's.

Rubén Darío Spanish School (☎ 568 2594; darionicspanishschool@yahoo.com) Has hourly (US\$6) and weekly (with/without homestay US\$180/95) rates.

San Juan del Sur Spanish Schools (☎ 458 2115; pages.prodigy.net/nss-pmc; per week incl homestay & meals US\$195) Formerly part of the now-defunct Nicaragua Spanish Schools, this is still a professional operation.

Tours

In addition to surfing (p150) and fishing tours (left), there are lots of other ways to see San Juan del Sur.

Argonautica (☎ 270 6825; reception@morgansrock.com; half/full day US\$600/1200, maximum 15) You can go upscale on this 14.4m mahogany-trimmed yacht, or spend the night as part of your deluxe stay at Morgan's Rock (see p156).

Big Blue Safaris (☎ 458 2527; puravida2201@yahoo.com) Next door to Casa Oro, offers custom excursions, starting at US\$15 per person; fishing trips cost US\$25 per hour. Also rents kayaks (US\$10 per day).

Da Flying Frog (☎ 568 2351; tiguacal@ibw.com.ni; per person US\$25) This canopy tour has 17 platforms and 2.5km of cables, making it one of the biggest zip-lines in the country. The horseback ride up includes a peek at one of the more impressive petroglyphs in the area.

Horseback Riding Tours (☎ 868 4003; eblackb@earthlink.net; per person US\$30) Rosie's Laundry Service also organizes all-day outings on horseback that include a swim on gorgeous Playa El Coco and lunch in the village of Cangrejo.

Pelican Eyes Sailing Adventures (☎ 568 2110; www.sanjuandelsur.org.ni/pelicaneyes; per person from US\$65) Offers full- and half-day adventures on a 14m sailboat including drinks and a barbecue lunch.

Rana Tours (☎ 877 9255; per hr for 6 people US\$30) In addition to a water-taxi service, arranges private surfing,

fishing or sightseeing expeditions, including snacks, for four hours or more.

Festivals & Events

San Juan del Sur is *de rigueur* for wealthy Managuans during Christmas and Semana Santa; make reservations and expect prices to double.

St John the Baptist (June 24) SJDS's patron offers another excuse to party.

Procession of the Virgin of Carmen (July 16) The Virgin – patron saint of fishers – is taken aboard a local ship at 2pm, placed on an altar decorated with fishing nets and poles, and taken on a sailing trip around the bay to bless the boats; seafood and mariachi music are involved.

Sleeping

This is one of the few destinations in Nicaragua with pronounced seasonal rates: prices rise dramatically during the December to March high season and double for Semana Santa and Christmas. Bargain for deals during the rainy season.

BUDGET

There are lots of sandy-floored, shared-bathroom cheapies around town; these are just a few favorites.

Hospedaje Nicaragua (☎ 568 2134; r with/without bathroom US\$20/12) Light, airy, furnished and almost OCD-clean, this place is a deal for couples or groups; the wonderful upstairs rooms (with bathroom) have a breezy balcony.

Hotel Estrella (☎ 568 2210; r per person US\$5) The romantic option, this high-ceilinged (higher than the walls), century-old landmark is basic, but has balconies with beautiful views. Bathrooms are downstairs, in the backyard.

Hotel Nina (☎ 458 2302; r US\$10) Wonderful, spotlessly clean rooms with lots of light – try to stay upstairs, next to the rooftop patio – and kitchen access make Nina a solid budget choice for couples, and a good midrange option for solo travelers.

Casa Oro Hostel (☎ 458 2415; dm US\$5, r with/without bathroom US\$15/12; 🛏) This backpacker stand-by has all the amenities – great information center, discount Internet, kitchen, lounge areas – but could stand to be gussied up a bit.

Hospedaje Elizabeth (☎ 458 2270; r per person without bathroom US\$5, s/d with bathroom US\$12/15) Packed with party people, this popular joint

offers rooms that vary in size and comfort; breezy upstairs rooms facing the ocean are the best.

Hospedaje Eleonora (☎ 458 2191; r per person with/without bathroom US\$6/4) Nearby, this is the best of a string of smaller budget spots.

MIDRANGE

Hotel El Puerto (☎ 823 5729; hotel-el-puerto@gmx.net; s/d US\$18/23) Brand-new fan-cooled rooms have tasteful wooden furnishings, spotless bathroom and decent views.

Hotel Joxi (☎ 458 2483; casajoxi@ibw.com.ni; r per person US\$15; 🛏) A crowd-pleaser with lots of return clients and European flavor. Cute rooms come furnished with air-con, cable TV, attention to lighting and a decent restaurant downstairs.

Casa Huéspedes Mercedes (☎ 458 2564; r per person US\$10) Off the main strip, this family-run spot has a kitchen for guests' use and comfortable, individually decorated rooms, some with independent entrances.

Royal Chateau Hotel (☎ 568 2551; s/d with fan US\$20/25, with air-con US\$30/35; 🛏) Huge, clean and unadorned rooms have TV and bathroom, plus a little balcony outside overlooking the grassy parking lot.

Hotel Gran Océano (☎ 458 2539; hgoceano@ibw.com.ni; s/d incl breakfast US\$45/50; 🛏) Much closer to the beach and painted in juicy colors, this tropical hideaway has lots of wicker, air-conditioning and cable TV in all the rooms.

TOP END

Hotel Colonial (☎ 458 2539; www.hotel-nicaragua.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$44/50; 🛏) This plush spot is a surfing fave despite smallish rooms, which are elegantly attired in Spanish antiques and outfitted with all the modern amenities.

Frederica's B&B (☎ 847 8019; rapido1@ibw.com.ni; d with fan/air-con US\$50/55; 🛏) Enjoy Southern-style hospitality and personal attention in one of two gorgeous (one more colorful, one classier) rooms, with all the amenities.

Hotel Villa Isabella (☎ 568 2568; www.sanjuandelsur.org.ni/isabella; d incl breakfast US\$45-100; 🛏) This beautifully furnished, nonsmoking hotel is a dream, with all the amenities – except that cheaper rooms share a bathroom with one other room. More expensive suites have kitchenettes and more.

Hotel Piedras y Olas (☎ 458 2110; www.piedrasyolas.com; d US\$75-100; 🍷 🍷) With sweeping bay views and fairly fabulous cabinas, featuring mini kitchens, terraces and all the trimmings, you may not want to leave. Luckily, it has a stunning pool and arguably the best restaurant (meals US\$5 to US\$15) in town, well known for its breakfast buffet (US\$6).

Eating

The best meals in town are served in SJDS's tidy **market** (dishes US\$2-4; 🕒 6am-4pm), where four small eateries serve Nica standards and lots of options (fruit plates, granola, veggie dishes) designed to appeal to the backpacking set.

RESTAURANTS

There are several charming, thatched-roof restaurants lining the beach, all with spectacular sunsets, full bars and solid seafood, running US\$4 to US\$8 for fish, more for shrimp and lobster. Two of the best are **Restaurant Buen Gusto** (🕒 7am-10pm), where you'll want everything in the garlic sauce, and the landmark **El Timón Bar** (dishes US\$5-16; 🕒 7am-midnight), beacon for local business and political heavyweights, who come to have their egos stroked over excellent seafood and plenty of Flor de Caña rum.

El Colibrí (dishes US\$3-8; 🕒 5pm-late Wed-Sun) Serves scrumptious veggie options, organic treats, handmade bread and meatier Mediterranean fare in the beautiful gardens; there's sometimes live music.

Pizzeria San Juan (☎ 568 2295; slice/pie US\$0.75/5.75; 🕒 5:30-10pm) Taste for yourself why they call this the best pizza in town, on the relaxed patio out back or phone in for delivery.

Big Wave Dave's (dishes US\$5-8) The classic expat joint serves famously good breakfasts and wonderful comfort food – big burgers, bigger organic-leaf salads and more – all day.

Marie's Bar (dishes US\$4-7; 🕒 from 5:30pm Tue-Sun) Marie's spices up the usual seafood platters with eclectic variations, and the cappuccinos and espressos here are tops. Save room for the tasty dessert crepes (US\$2.25).

Pizzeria-Ristorante 'O Sole Mio (mains US\$4-10; 🕒 5:30-9:30pm Tue-Fri, 11:30am-9:30pm Sat & Sun) Dripping with fine-dining ambience and serving up good wine, fresh pasta (gnocchi

is a specialty) and, of course, pizza, this is a good spot to propose. It's open shorter hours in the low season.

La Cascada Restaurant (meals US\$6-25; 🕒 7am-9:30pm) This is the fanciest fine dining in town, atop Pelican Eyes' perch above the bay, where you can relax over aged USDA-quality steaks, lobster in garlic sauce or the enormous breakfast buffet.

CAFÉS

El Gato Negro (http://elgatonegronica.com; light meals US\$1-6; 🕒 7am-3pm Wed-Sat, 5-8pm Wed, 9:30am-6pm Sun) With what may be the best selection of English-language books in Nicaragua, you'll have plenty of excuses to linger over real espresso beverages and yummy pastries, sandwiches and other light meals in the comfortable dining room.

Cafetin El Faro (items US\$0.50-2; 🕒 7am-10pm) Run by the youth center, this is also the best bakery in town. Enjoy delicious fresh bread, cinnamon rolls, pizza and real coffee in the pleasant *palapa* (thatched-roof) dining area, or inside over a game of ping-pong.

QUICK EATS

Won Ton Sui (dishes US\$2-6; 🕒 11am-10pm) Show up at meal times for the freshest choices at this Chinese steam-table buffet.

Chicken Lady (roast chicken US\$3; 🕒 4-9pm) This local legend sells delicious roast chicken from her green and yellow house on the west side of the parque central.

Drinking

Start your evening at one of the waterfront bars, or check out Big Wave Dave's happy hour, with 10-córdoba (US\$0.70) beers. Ricardo's Bar, a beachfront expat institution with great gringo grub and a book exchange, is a fine place to kick back with a cold one and meet the neighbors. There are free movies on Monday and Thursday at 8pm, DJs on Wednesday, and live music when it comes around.

Another classic beachside hangout is Iguana Bar. It hosts All Those Wasted Mangos live every Tuesday night (no cover).

A late-night place is Maché Bar (it's signed Bar-Restaurant Flores), which gets packed for Tuesday's open mic; but show up anytime for a decent steak, cold brew and good conversation. This is where the

city's other bartenders relax after their last call.

Otangani Disco (☎ Fri-Sun) The original SJDS disco, the mirrored balls and colored lights start spinning at 9pm, but the in-crowd doesn't show up until at least 11pm, primed for an all-night party.

Getting There & Around

Getting to the beaches north and south of town can be expensive, so ask at the surf shops if they have a boat going with extra space for you. Majagual usually sends a truck (US\$3) to the market at 11am to bring you back to the beach.

BUS

The newly implemented bus service to the northern beaches (US\$2.50, open 6:50am and 12:50pm), serving Toro Mixcal, Nacascolo, Marsella, Los Playones, Maderas, Majagual, Ocotal and Rivas, had been suspended at press time, but should be running again by the time you read this. There is regular bus service from the bus stop in front of the market to destinations including:

Managua expreso US\$3.30, 2½ hours, 4:30am, 5am, 5:30am, 6am and 7am; **ordinario** US\$2.50, four hours, 8am to 6:15pm, at least hourly

Rivas US\$0.70, 40 minutes, 3:30am to 7pm, every 25 minutes

Southern beaches US\$1, two hours, 11am, 3pm and 4:30pm; service to Empalme de Remanso, Playa el Coco, Reserva La Flor, El Ostional; returning buses leave El Ostional at 5am, 7:30am and noon

TAXI

The Taxi Cooperative of San Juan del Sur charges US\$0.70 to anywhere in town, US\$1.25 for *colectivo* taxis to Rivas. Each driver has a list of set rates for other destinations, including Morgan's Rock (US\$10), Majagual (US\$15), Playa El Coco or Reserva La Flor (US\$30), El Ostional (US\$40), the Costa Rican border (US\$15), Masaya or Granada (US\$40) and Managua (US\$75). Taxis congregate close to the market.

WATER TAXI

Viajes Water Taxi (☎ 877 9255), part of Rana Tours, has boats leaving from Hotel Estrella (US\$8 return, departing 10am) to Majagual, stopping at the beaches along the way, and

returning at 5pm daily. It may also offer service to the southern beaches, depending on demand.

BEACHES NORTH OF SAN JUAN DEL SUR

If buses still aren't serving the northern beaches and you don't want to shell out for a taxi or boat, you can always walk (hitching is common) or bike the 8km dirt road to Bahía Majagual or Playa Madera, but don't expect beach views.

Playa Nacascolo & Playa Toro Mixcal

Although access to Playa Nacascolo is privately owned, cooler than average **Nicaragua Properties** (www.realestatenicaragua.com) actually allows visitors onto the property to cross (for now); ask at the entrance and guards will give you directions to Las Miradores waterfall.

Finca Forestal El Toro Mixcal (www.zononica.com/toromix) is a private, Marena-recognized reserve that protects a nice stretch of coastline and dry tropical forest. There are short trails, good bird-watching and no other infrastructure for tourists; contact it for more information.

On the main road (well away from the beach), **Cabinas Miramar** (☎ 278 4658; camping per person US\$3) doesn't have cabinas yet (it's all part of the plan), but does offer camping and outdoor showers.

Playa Marsella

There are two rather upscale spots to stay on this beautiful beach, about 8km north of SJDS and easy walking distance to the next two beaches. Although the best surfing is just north, at Playa Madera, there's a good estuary break right here.

El Nido Bed & Breakfast (☎ 862 5344, 879 7062; pasynch@comcast.net, cherylserra@yahoo.net) is on a hill overlooking the bay. This pleasant spot has two rooms sitting on 10 *manzanas* (blocks) of tropical dry forest, with stone-walled gardens and a great cool pool.

One mellow option, but closed for renovations at press time, **Marsella Beach Resort** (☎ 887 1337; www.marsellabeachresort.com; bungalow d US\$60, extra person US\$10, house US\$200; 🏠) has long been a good deal on comfortable, modern rooms with a pool and restaurant, as long as you don't mind the gated community ambience.

Playa Madera

This stunning beach, with rocky expanses that offer excellent tidepooling and wide, wonderful sandy stretches for sunbathing, is famed for having one of the best beach breaks in the country. Sometimes called Los Playones (which is a bit rude), it's a slow wave in fairly deep (2m) water, good for beginners, with two right and two left breaks that get hollow on a rising tide. It becomes unpleasantly crowded with locals on weekends.

If swell is really big on a low to medium tide, there's a faster, intermediate level reef break between Madera and Majagual called Panga Drops, accessible by boat only, that offers an awesome ride before dumping you onto the rocky shallows. It gets choppy and you can be caught in the shore break, so watch the wind; it also gets sneaker sets, so stay alert. Waves get big – as do crowds, and it doesn't hold a crowd well.

Surfers – locals and visitors alike – love **Madera Surf Camp** (camping/hammocks per person US\$2, r US\$3), just steps away from one of the country's best breaks. Basic meals are available, and the owners are cool. A few steps up the beach is the entrance to the **Hideout** (r per person US\$2.50), where there's 'no service,' but there is a good spaghetti dinner on Saturday nights.

Buena Vista Surf Club (www.buenavistasurfclub.com), more upscale, is about five minutes from the beach on the only dirt road. It has an absolutely stunning house for rent; contact it for rates. It also rents surfboards for US\$15 per day.

A beloved family-run option in between Maderas and Majagual, **Matilda's** (☎ 862 5727; camping per person US\$3, dm US\$7, r US\$20) rents campsites and tents, or go for the basic dorms. Relatively fancier private rooms with bathroom are also available. There's no food service, but a poorly stocked *pulpería* nearby helps keep body and soul together.

Parque Maderas (www.parquemaderas.com) is the sort of new-agey housing development that may let you trade hard work for beachside accommodations.

Bahia Majagual

This beautiful bay is perfect for swimming (watch the rip current, though), but only has OK surfing – you'll need to walk all of 10 minutes to the big breaks. It's best known as the home of **Bahia Majagual** (☎ 886

0439; majagual@ibw.com.ni; camping per person US\$2, s/d tents US\$6/8, hammocks per person US\$4, dm US\$5-6, s/d cabins US\$18/24), a backpacking and beach-cum institution.

This colorful spot has everything you need – a good restaurant, beer, lots of hammocks, surf lessons and rentals, book exchange, board games, horseback rides – all of which will be added to your running bill, which you should go over *before* waking and baking, dude. You can check your tab any time, and have 24 hours to contest any charges you're not sure about. Note that room rates rise dramatically in the high season, recently hitting US\$80 per cabin. It's still the best party spot on the beach, though.

Playa Ocotal

The best way to visit this shady cove beach is by booking a cabin at the very best hotel in Nicaragua, **Morgan's Rock** (☎ 506 296 9442; www.morgansrock.com; s/d in high season US\$240/340). Yes, that's ridiculously expensive, but you're staying in the poshest dream cabin ever, gleaming with precious woods dappled in the forest light, which filters through the parrot- and monkey-filled jungle canopy right into your screened-in porch. Crashing waves reverberate from the beach just below, which, by the way, gets nesting sea turtles. *And* you have to cross a hanging bridge through the jungle canopy on the little trail to your cabin (some trails are much shorter than others). Great service, excellent food and environmental awareness (which means no air-conditioning), and you could also get a package spending the night on its old-school yacht, the *Argonautica* (see p152).

If you don't have hundreds of dollars to blow, you can rent a boat taxi or walk to the still very public beach, which is much better for swimming than surfing. Follow the signs to Majagual and turn right after passing a black and yellow gate; continue until you get to the beach.

Arena Blanca

With some of the clearest water and whitest sand on the Pacific coast, this little inlet is only accessible by rented boat or along a very rough dirt road across very private property – ask permission. At the northern end of the beach is Punta Man-

zanillo, also called Punta Reloj, a point break that may work around midtide if swells are big enough.

BEACHES SOUTH OF SAN JUAN DEL SUR

Although there is regular bus service between SJDS and El Ostional, you'll still need to walk several kilometers from the bus stop to most of the beaches; only Playa El Coco and La Flor are close to the road. If you have a group, water taxis are generally cheaper and easier than regular taxis, and may be the only way to access private beaches as they become gated off with increasing frequency each passing month.

Playa Remanso

The most accessible in a cluster of pretty beaches, this crescent of white sand has OK surfing, interesting caves and good swimming and tidepooling. The smallish beach break would be good for beginners, if it weren't so crowded. But it is beautiful; heck, Spanish luxury chain Barceló is planning a resort nearby.

Remanso Beach Resort (☎ 458 2498; www.remansobeach.com) sprawls across much of the area, but happily lets visitors cross its private property to the beach. It rents rooms and houses at prices that vary, but may drop rates if you're interested in purchasing a retirement home.

The walking path to Remanso is known for muggings at machete point, so go in groups and leave valuables back at the hotel.

Playa Tamarindo & Playa Hermosa

The next beach south, Playa Tamarindo, a half-hour walk from Playa Remanso, is generally less crowded; surfers come with the rising tide to try for a long wave with right and left breaks, which can get hollow coming off the rock wall when swells are under 1m. It's another half-hour's walking to Playa Hermosa with another smallish, consistent beach break; it's less crowded, as only surfers usually get this far.

Playa El Yanké

Several kilometers further along, this gentle crescent of sand, spectacularly bounded by rocky points, used to have a rustic hotel. That's closed, however, and the stucco

announcement of a brand-new gated community had just gone up at press time.

There's a decent beach break on the rising tide; the right dumps you onto the rocks, but there's a mellower left on the southern end of the beach.

Playa El Coco

This is a world-class beach, a spectacular stretch of sparkling white sand punctuated by cliffs so pretty that they grace about half of the country's tourist literature. The river crossing is generally OK for regular cars, but ask ahead in the rainy season.

Parque Marítimo El Coco (☎ 892 0124; www.playaelcoco.com.ni; bungalows US\$50-400; 📍 🚗 🚲), right on the water, is a great, laid-back luxury option that's fairly affordable if you're in a big group. Several different-sized and priced houses have kitchens, separate bedrooms, little porches with hammocks – the works. Prices drop for long-term stays, and go through the roof at Christmas and Semana Santa. It also rents bikes, organizes tours, sells condos, offers on-site Internet and has good food at the attractive beachfront restaurant, Puesto del Sol (meals US\$2 to US\$10).

Across the road and up the hill, **Casa Canada** (☎ 877 9590; billhayes46@hotmail.com; s/d US\$10/15) serves excellent pizza and ceviche with a great view, and the two simple rooms come with a complimentary boogieboard.

Just south is a free, unofficial campsite long used by turtle-egg poachers. It's best to be polite, as the poachers have machetes.

Refugio de Vida Silvestre La Flor

One of the principal laying grounds for endangered Olive Ridley and leatherback turtles, La Flor Wildlife Refuge, managed by **Fundación Cocibolca** (☎ 277 1681, 458 2514; fcdeje@ibw.com.ni; adult/child US\$12/6, camping per tent US\$30), is 20km south of San Juan del Sur by a rough road; pay your entrance fee at the farmhouse. It's easy to visit on a **guided tour** (per person US\$12) from San Juan del Sur, or you can stay in the attractive campsite for a whopping US\$30 per tent – bring the biggest tent you've got. Park guards sell water and soft drinks, but there's no food or insect repellent, so come prepared.

Turtles lay their eggs here, usually between 9pm and 2am, between July and

January, peaking in September and October. Leatherbacks usually arrive solo, but Olive Ridleys generally come in flotillas or *arribadas*, when more than 3000 of them pack the beaches at a time. Some people time these arrivals by moon cycles, but no one really knows for sure until the ladies arrive; call the ranger station if you want to be sure.

Until recently, beaches just north of the reserve were packed with black plastic tents, where turtle-egg poachers collected their hauls unmolested. In October 2005, all that changed. Earlier that year, a long-standing federal law that set aside 10% of turtle eggs for human consumption was overturned. Finally able to enforce turtle conservation initiatives, Marena sent in some 25 eco-cops to patrol the reserve, with the navy standing by offshore. Dozens of poachers were caught and informed that their eggs were no longer part of the legal 10%, and more than 30,000 nests survived to hatching.

When there aren't any turtles around, the park still has an attractive, undeveloped beach and a few short trails; there's a decent beach break (right and left) at the north end. It's off-limits during turtle season.

El Ostional

This fishing village, practically a stone's throw from the Costa Rican border, has an attractive beach with a well-known point break called 'Los Senos' (the Breasts), that's best at midtide with decent-sized swells. The area is evidently being eyed by several luxury hotels, but in the meantime you can arrange accommodations with a home-grown, community-based ecotourism initiative, **Coop Genaro Pizarro Community Tours** (☎ 883 6753; s/d US\$14/27). It also offers a variety of tours, including visits to La Flor and small, indigenous fishing communities, as well as guided hikes and horseback rides.

Buses leave from the parque central to Rivas (US\$2.50, two to three hours) at 5am, 7:30am and noon.

LEÓN & NORTH-WESTERN NICARAGUA

Steamy, volcanic and intellectual, the northwest is home to Nicaragua's best museums, oldest universities and finest churches, in-

cluding the grandest cathedral in Central America (not to mention the refinery of one of the world's best rums).

Even better, if you've ever wondered what two tectonic plates smashing together looks like in real time, the Cordillera de los Maribios is this region's smoking backbone: some 60 unbroken kilometers of undulating lava and ash, from the red and black sands of Volcán Momotombo to smoking San Cristóbal's smooth, gray cone. The cordillera rises from the sweaty plains to cool crater lakes, delicious hot springs and more than a dozen peaks, five of which have erupted in the last century, and all of which can be climbed.

Bounded by more than 150km of shoreline – sandy beaches with solid surfing, to lush mangrove wetlands – and peppered with colonial towns, indigenous villages and archaeological sites, Nicaragua's northwest is one of the most accessible undiscovered treasures you'll ever find.

Climate & Geography

This is the hottest part of the country, with daytime temperatures in the low 30°Cs almost year-round, spiking in sweltering April and dipping into the relative cool mid-20°Cs in December. The Llano Nagrandana (Nagrandana Plains), which stretch from Nagarote to the Cosigüina Peninsula, are carpeted in dry subtropical forest that loses its leaves during the long November-to-May dry season, revealing the uncompromising geology beneath.

This is one of the most volcanic regions on earth, and if you look on any map (or, better, the 'flying' function on Google Earth), you'll appreciate how the steaming 60km Maribios Chain marks a great crack in the planet's crust. Volcán Cosigüina, separated by 50 relatively flat kilometers from the group, is not considered part of the chain. Its most recent eruption in 1835, which had residents believing it was Judgment Day, hurled the striking Farallones de Cosigüina, some of the oddest islets you'll ever see, into the great brown Golfo de Fonseca.

Getting There & Around

This region is relatively untouristed, despite its wealth of attractions, because it's separated from the tourist-packed Granada zone by big, bad Managua.

BORDER CROSSING: TO SAN JOSÉ, COSTA RICA

If you've booked an international bus from Rivas or Managua, the border crossing between Sipoá, Nicaragua, and Peñas Blancas, Costa Rica, will be a snap, as they do everything but hold your hand. Make reservations in advance during the high season. It's often cheaper and more convenient, however, to take local buses and cross on your own.

The 1km-long, enclosed border is fairly simple, although the sudden (and strategic) crush of 'helpers' can be intimidating. Pedicabs (US\$1) not only roll you through, they also protect you from the masses. Banks on either side exchange local currency for US dollars, while moneychangers (called *coyotes* for a reason) exchange all three currencies freely, but may try to rip you off; look for folks wearing identification badges. Exchange as little money as possible here, know about how much you're supposed to get back, and note that 1000-córdoba bills from the Sandinista administration are out of circulation and worthless.

On the Nicaraguan side, get your passport stamped at a window in the large, poorly marked cement building just east of the main road. It costs US\$7 to enter Nicaragua, US\$2 to exit, payable in córdobas. The Municipality of Sipoá charges US\$1 extra to enter or exit the border zone. There are three duty-free shops on the Nicaraguan side, but no restaurant or bathroom.

Leaving or entering Costa Rica is free. Immigration has a good restaurant, clean restrooms and a bank with an ATM. Everyone entering Costa Rica technically needs a ticket leaving the country, which is rarely asked for. If it's your unlucky day, Dendu Transport and Transnica, both located right outside, sell US\$10 tickets from San José to Managua.

Sipoá has no real lodging, other than a few dodgy unsigned guesthouses, and Peñas Blancas has none at all, so don't plan on spending the night. Although the border is open 24 hours, buses only run between 6am and 6pm, after which taxis triple their fares.

Buses from Sipoá run at least hourly to Rivas (one hour, US\$10) between 6am and 5:30pm, where you can make connections throughout Nicaragua. *Taxistas* (taxi drivers) may tell you Nicaraguan buses aren't running, or are unsafe, but they are lying.

Transnica runs buses from Peñas Blancas to San José (five hours, US\$8) at 5:15am, 7:30am, 9am (direct), 10:45am, noon, 1:30pm, 3:30pm and 6pm. Pulmitan de Liberia goes to Liberia (two hours, US\$2) at 6:30am, 8:30am, 9:30am, 12:30pm, 2:30pm and 5:30pm.

It's always faster and easier to take a taxi, which may be prohibitively expensive on the Costa Rican side (US\$45 to Liberia), but much more reasonable from Sipoá to Rivas (US\$10), San Jorge (US\$12), San Juan del Sur (US\$15) and Granada (US\$40). Find other tourists to share your taxi while you are still inside the border zone, and bargain hard.

Fear not! Take any minibus from asaya or Granada to Managua's Universidad Centro America (UCA) bus lot, where you can catch another minivan for the short, sweet trip to León. Or take a regular bus to Managua, then grab a cab to Mercado Israel Lewites, where buses and minivans leave regularly for León, less frequently for Chinandega.

Both León (92km from Managua) and Chinandega (37km north of León) are transportation hubs. Buses to more remote beaches and volcanoes can be inconvenient, with perhaps only one bus a day.

You can rent cars in both León and Chinandega; hire a 4WD in rainy season, if you plan to do much exploring. The roads of the Cosigüina Peninsula are some of the country's worst, and beach access can be a muddy mess by October.

LEÓN

pop 182,000 / elevation 110m

Refined, intense and politically progressive, León would be mildly offended if you referred to it as 'Nicaragua's second city.' Formally known as Santiago de León de los Caballeros, the country's original capital was founded by Francisco Fernández de Córdoba on June 15, 1524 – almost two months after arch-rival Granada, which has never let León forget it, and 242 years before the (ahem) quaint little fishing village of Managua was handed the prize.

León remains what many frustrated visitors are looking for in the capital: cultural center with mind-blowing churches, thriving universities, fabulous art collections and historic sites. Its thick-walled colonial architecture has yet to receive the



makeover Granada is currently enjoying (there are still bullet holes leftover from the 1970s), but this is actually the more authentically Spanish city, having been burned to the ground only a fraction of the times of its oft-sacked southern adversary.

Originally located on the slopes of Volcán Momotombo, León committed some of the Spanish conquest's cruelest excesses; even other conquistadors suggested that León's punishment was divine retribution. When the mighty volcano reduced León (see the boxed text, p175) to rubble in 1610, the city was moved, saint by saint, here, next to the existing indigenous capital of Subtiava.

The reprisals did not end there. Eager to win the civil war with Granada, which had, since independence, been contesting the colonial capital's continuing leadership role, in 1853 León invited US mercenary William Walker (see the boxed text, p55) to the fight. After the Tennessean declared himself president (and Nicaragua a US slave state), he was executed; the nation's capital was moved to Managua, and Granada's conservatives ran the country for the next three decades.

Finally, in 1956, Anastasio Somoza García (the original dictator) was assassinated in León by Rigoberto López, a poet in waiter's clothing. The ruling family never forgot, and when the revolution came, their

wrath fell on this city in a hail of bullets and bombs whose scars have still not been erased.

León has remained proudly Liberal, even a bit aloof, through it all, a Sandinista stronghold and political power player that has never once doubted its grand destiny. To hear what this sort of self-confidence sounds like set to a tune, ask any troupe of mariachis to play the city's theme song, 'Viva León Jodido' (the word *jodido* has a PG rating in Nicaragua), then climb on top of Central America's largest cathedral and contemplate anew this most volcanic of views.

Orientation

León actually has a system of clearly signed and logically numbered *calles* (streets) and *avenidas* (avenues), allowing anyone to pinpoint any address. Unfortunately, no one actually uses it, preferring the old reliable '2½ blocks east of the Shell station' method instead.

Just for kicks, this is how it works: Av Central and Calle Central Rubén Darío intersect at the northeast corner of the parque central (central park), forming the city's northeast, northwest, southeast and southwest quadrants. Calles running parallel to Rubén Darío are numbered NE (Calle 1 NE, Calle 2 NE) north of the cathedral, SE to the south. Av 1 SO (*suroeste*, or 'south-west'), one block from Av Central, forms the park's western boundary, paralleling Av 2 SO, and so on.

Calle Central Rubén Darío is the city's backbone, and runs east from the cathedral to striking Iglesia El Calvaro, and west almost 1km to Barrio Subtiava, continuing another 20km to the Pacific. The majority of tourist services are within a few blocks of the cathedral, with another cluster of museums and churches in Barrio Subtiava.

Information

BOOKSTORES & LIBRARIES

Librería Don Quijote (Calle Central Rubén Darío;

☎ 8:30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) Load up on lefty texts or dog-eared paperbacks (some in English, German and French) at this quaint used bookstore.

CULTURAL CENTERS

Casa Cultural de Subtiava (Iglesia San Juan Bautista 2c norte; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) Look for the faded

mural at the headquarters for area indigenous communities and home to Museo Adiáct, in Subtiava.

La Casa de Cultura (☎ 311 2116; Iglesia Merced 2c oeste; ☎ Mon-Fri) Come by for the inexpensive restaurant, open 8am to noon, and stay for the art collection, or perhaps sign up for Latin dance classes.

EMERGENCY

Ambulance (Cruz Roja; Red Cross; ☎ 311 2627)

Fire Station (☎ 311 2323)

Police (☎ 311 3137)

INTERNET ACCESS & RESOURCES

Fever Nov@ (per hr US\$1) Fairly expensive, but faster than others.

León Online (www.leononline.net) Useful Spanish-language portal to all things Leónese, including hotels and attractions.

LAUNDRY

Clean Express Lavandería (cnr Av Central & Calle 4 NE; ☎ 7am-7pm) Do-it-yourself machines wash (US\$2) and dry (US\$1.25 per 20 minutes) your clothes, or pay a little extra to have it done for you.

MEDIA

In addition to the free, bilingual *León & Chinandega Visitors Guide* available from Intur, which has a good León city map, Spanish-language *ServiGuia de León* (US\$1) is a bi-monthly tourist magazine worth a look; old issues are probably stacked in a corner of your hotel.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Clínica de Terápias Naturales y Orientales (☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) Offers natural remedies, acupuncture, reflex therapy and a US\$3, 45-minute massage.

Hospital San Vicente (☎ 311 6990) Out past the bus station, the region's largest hospital is a 1918 neoclassical beauty that attracts architecture buffs as well as sick tourists.

MONEY

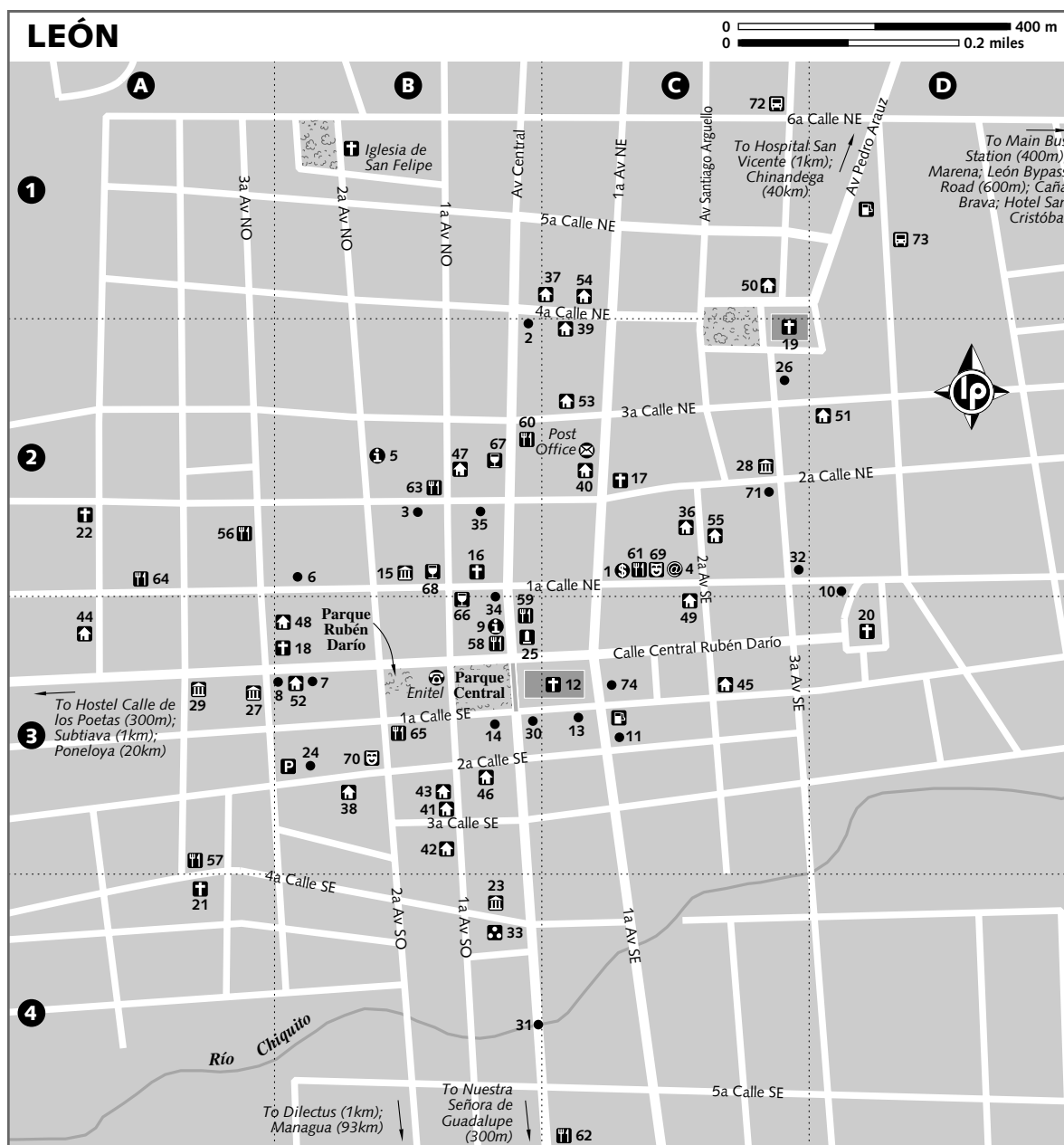
Several banks have ATMs that accept Visa/Plus debit cards.

Banco America Central (BAC) Next to La Unión supermarket, has 24-hour ATMs also on the Master Card/Cirrus system, and gives either US dollars or córdobas.

POST & TELEPHONE

FedEx (☎ 311 2426) Inside the Western Union.

Llamadas Internacionales (Calle Central; ☎ 8am-9:30pm) Just one of several spots with ultra-cheap calls to the USA and Canada (US\$0.06 per minute), Europe (under US\$0.15 per minute) and elsewhere.



Post office (1a Av NE) Opposite the Iglesia de La Recolectión.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Intur (☎ 311 3382; leon@intur.gob.ni; 2a Av NO; ☎ 8am-12:30pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) Helpful and knowledgeable staff have lots of flyers, a great free city guide, and a cutesy, distorted city map (US\$2); they can recommend hotels and services.





Marena (Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources; ☎ 311 3776; mareleon@ibw.com) Inconveniently across from the Shell station at the southern entrance to the León bypass road, it administers three volcanic national reserves: Telica-Rota, Pilas-El Hoyo and Momotombo; and nonvolcanic Isla Juan Venado. It offers general information, but your best bet for guides is going directly to the Isla Juan Venado ranger station in Las

Peñitas (see p174), or one of the private tour companies for the volcanoes.

Oficina de Información Turística León (☎ 311 3528; Av Central; ☎ 8:30am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun) Operated by UNAN tourism students, it has more information, better maps (Stadtplan; US\$2) and can book reservations at hotels, Ticabus and other businesses, arrange city tours (US\$15 per group) and find guides for almost any other adventure.

UNIVERSITIES

In 1999, León was officially declared Nicaragua's 'University City.' It has three major and several minor universities, which explains the hot nightlife; note that students are on vacation in July, December and January.

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Fever Nov@.....	4 C2	Museo-Archivo Rubén Diario.....	29 A3
Intur.....	5 B2	Palacio Episcopal.....	30 B3
La Casa de Cultura.....	6 B2	Puente Guadalupe.....	31 B4
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Universidad Cristiana Autónoma de Nicaragua (UCAN; www.ucan.edu.ni) Pricey private school offers degrees in law, international relations and tourism (oddly enough, one of the most expensive degrees to get at any university in Nicaragua).

Universidad de Ciencias Comerciales (UCC; www.ucc.edu.ni) Architecture, engineering and interior design, plus tourism-related degrees.

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua (UNAN; www.unanleon.edu.ni; contiguo Iglesia de la Merced) Nicaragua's first and most important university was founded in 1812, and today has six separate León schools with more than 6000 students; the main campus is considered one of the city's loveliest collection of buildings.

Sights & Activities

León is the most culturally rich of Nicaragua's cities; architecture and museum buffs will want to spend a few days exploring.

LEÓN WALKING TOUR

Begin at the recently refurbished **parque central**, a fine place for people-watching, purchasing a souvenir Sandino T-shirt and enjoying that most Leónese of treats, *raspados*, where small wooden carts open

to reveal a block of ice, which is shaved (with a rasp) into a cup, then topped with your choice of sticky fruit syrups.

Enjoy your treat in front of the eternal (more or less) flame at the **Mausoleo de los Héroes y Mártires** (p167), on the north side of the park, where a phenomenal and heart-breaking mural traces Nicaraguan history from the Spanish conquest to the most recent revolution, complete with smoking volcanoes. If you lose your appetite, street children back at the plaza will take any remaining *raspado* off your hands.

Dominating the plaza is **Basílica de la Asunción** (p165), Central America's largest cathedral; take your **rooftop tour** early for the clearest views of the Volcáns Maribios. Most of the thick-walled old adobe homes you're surveying were originally topped with wooden roofs and coated in *tapial*, a colored adobe that once gave León its signature hues. These Leónese-style homes are called **casas pinariegas**; as you stroll through town, look for ceramic plaques noting those with historical significance.

On the south side of the cathedral, the 1679 **Colegio La Asunción**, the first theological college in Nicaragua, was partially destroyed by fire in 1935 and rebuilt in its current Gothic style. Next door is **Palacio Episcopal** (Bishop's Palace), designed by Marcelo Targa and one of the first buildings to display Leónese neoclassical architecture. In this same group of buildings, **Archivo Histórico Dicesano de León** has documents dating back to 1674.

Continuing on around the cathedral, 1680 **Colegio de San Ramón** educated revolutionary hero Miguel Larreynaga, who drafted the first Central American constitution. It was rebuilt in 1752, and housed the Universidad Autónoma, Nicaragua's first university. Though it's been a high school since 1945, paintings of all León's bishops are still on display. Around the corner, two-story, adobe **Casa Salud Debayle** was originally constructed in 1814 as a bank, then became the first private health clinic in Central America.

Head west on 2a Calle SE one block, then south two blocks on Av Central to visit **La XXI** (pronounced '*la ventay uno*'), an old military garrison that's today home to the truly fabulous **Museo de Leyendas y Mitos** (p167); check out the mosaic tilework at the entrance. Across the street are the photogenic **Ruinas San Sebastián**; the church was bombed almost into oblivion in 1979.

Backtrack through clean and pleasant **Mercado Central** then make a right on Calle Central Rubén Darío to the early-18th-century **Iglesia El Calvario** (p166), famed for its comic-book-style facade. Close by, the **Antiguo Reformatorio de Menores** (Old Reform School) is a rare, almost all original *casa pinariega*-style building. The squat adobe has *tejas* (ceramic half-pipe ceiling tiles), plus classic corner double doors, a clever architectural trick that allows owners to adjust sunlight throughout the day without letting in too much heat.

Make another right on Av 3 NE, stopping to see if the **Museo Entomológico** (p167) is open to the public yet. Then it's on to somewhat scruffy 1625 **Iglesia de San Juan**, rebuilt in 1860 in the modernist neoclassical style. Close by is Mercado San Juan and the **old train station**, constructed in 1882 with austere lines and simple, utilitarian design.

Backtrack two blocks to 2a Calle NE and make a right for unmissable 1786 **Iglesia de La Recolectión** (p166), the ornate, ultra-baroque masterpiece one critic called 'the most important monument to passion in Nicaragua,' which is saying something.

Two blocks west on 2a Calle NE is the flagship campus of UNAN, with several beautiful buildings, and a collection of cheap restaurants and festive bars that form the heart of the student scene. **La Esquina El Movimiento** (p172) has espresso beverages if you're losing steam, and interesting *artesanías* (handicrafts) if you're not.

Make a left on Av 1 NO for the 1615 **Iglesia de La Merced** (p166), another of León's signature churches, then west on 1a Calle NE to the **Galería de Héroes y Mártires** (p167), with photos of the revolution's fallen. Continue south, stopping into **La Casa de Cultura**, with its excellent art collection (including a portrait of former US President Ronald Reagan that you'll want to photograph), then make a left on Av 3 NO.

Tired? Fortify yourself at **Hotel El Convento** (p171), with an amazing collection of colonial-era religious art and good, if pricey, restaurant. Attached **Iglesia San Francisco** was badly damaged during the revolution, but will soon be restored to its former glory.

Allow at least two hours to appreciate the best art museum in Central America, **Museo de Arte Fundación Ortiz-Guardián** (p167), then head two blocks south and one block east to see if anything's on later that night at 1885 **Teatro Municipal José de la Cruz Mena** (p173). Finally, backtrack to Calle Central Rubén Darío for the poet's home and national museum, **Museo-Archivo Rubén Darío** (p166), the city's pride and joy.

Walk (or take a taxi) 1km to Barrio Subtiava (p168) to see the hodgepodge of archaeological treasures at **Museo Adiáct**, then check if the ruins of **Iglesia Santiago**, around the corner, are open. Close by is León's other 'cathedral,' **Iglesia San Juan Bautista**, heart of indigenous Barrio Subtiava – check out the not-especially-Catholic sun god emblazoned on the roof. Next door is the 1544 **Museo de Arte Sacro**, rebuilt in 1752, that's home to a small but impressive collection of colonial-era religious masterpieces.

From here, walkers could take the 2.5km hike south to **El Fortín de Acososco** (not recommended if you have valuables on you), catch a bus to **Playa Poneloya**, or just head back to León proper for a well-deserved nap.

CATHEDRAL

Formally known as the **Basílica de la Asunción**, León's cathedral is the largest in Central America, its expansive design famously, and perhaps apocryphally, approved for construction in much more important Lima, Peru. Leónese leaders originally submitted a more modest but bogus set of plans, and then architect Diego José de Porres Esquivel, the Capitan General of Guatemala (also responsible for San Juan Bautista de Subtiava, La Recolección and La Merced churches, among others), pulled the switcheroo and built this beauty right here.

This is the cathedral's fourth incarnation. The 1610 original was replaced in 1624 with a wood and adobe structure that pirate William Dampier burned to the ground in 1685. Another adobe was used until work began on this enormous 'Antigüeno,' Central American baroque-style masterpiece in 1747. Construction, done primarily by indigenous laborers from Subtiava and Posoltega, went on for more than a hundred years.

The cathedral is a sort of pantheon of Nicaraguan culture. The tomb of Rubén Darío, León's favorite son, is on one side of the altar, guarded by a sorrowful lion and the inscription, 'Nicaragua is created of vigor and glory, Nicaragua is made for freedom.' Nearby rest the tombs of lesser-known Leónese poets Alfonso Cortés and Salomón de la Selva, as well as Miguel Larreynaga.

THE CHURCHES OF NICARAGUA

Nicaragua hasn't always been this poor – in the 1960s Costa Ricans were sneaking across the border to work here. From the first days of the Spanish conquest through the late 1800s, when Nicaragua controlled the only warm-water route between the world's two great oceans, this little country was a major power broker.

With cash to spare and a Catholic population to impress, this country has churches even devout atheists will enjoy. León may be the nation's pinnacle of religious architecture, but here are a few other must-sees:

- Cathedrals of Managua (p74): The poignant, burnt-out husk of Managua's original cathedral is off-limits, but you're welcome to ponder the new cathedral's ultramodern domes: cooling towers for a divine nuclear reactor? Homage to Islam? Eggs hatching into a peaceful tomorrow?
- Basílica de Nuestra Señora de la Inmaculada Concepción (p184): Even Pope John Paul II visited the beautiful Virgen del Trono, patron saint of Nicaragua and mistress of La Gritería, the nation's most important religious event.
- El Templo de El Sauce (p179): Quite literally a pilgrimage-worthy destination, every January thousands come to see El Señor de Esquipulas, the Black Christ.
- Moravian Church in Bluefields (p250): Faithfully rebuilt to its Victorian-era specs after Bluefields' utter destruction during Hurricane Juana, it's not just lovely, it's a symbol of hope and perseverance.
- Iglesia Catedral San Pedro (p207): This baroque 1874 beauty, known for its twin bell towers, remains one of the country's most elegant churches despite a desperate need for renovation.
- Templo Parroquial de San Rafael Arcángel (p221): This is religion as sensory overload, with beautiful architecture and truly amazing murals by Australian John Fuchs Holl.
- Nuestra Señora de Solentiname (p268): Ernesto Cardenal and the Solentiname community built this heartfelt and humble adobe church, its murals designed by children.
- Iglesia San Francisco (p116): This 1529 convent's soaring blueberry facade is one of Granada's definitive buildings.

Among the magnificent works of art within are the Stations of the Cross by Antonio Sarria, considered masterpieces, and El Cristo Negro de Pedrarias, possibly the oldest Catholic image in the Americas, brought here in 1528. Marble statues inside are beautifully crafted, most notably the elaborate Inmaculada Concepción de María. The interior is also noted for the strategic skylights, ingeniously oriented to catch sun throughout the day, then sent reverberating across the white marble interior.

If it's clear, take the **roof tour** (admission US\$0.70; ☒ 8am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Sat), with a spectacular view of the city and smoking volcanoes beyond.

IGLESIA DE LA RECOLECCIÓN

Three blocks north of the cathedral, the 1786 **Iglesia de La Recolección** (1a Av NE) is considered the city's most beautiful church, a Mexican-style baroque confection of swirling columns and bas-relief medallions that portray the life of Christ. Dyed a deep yellow accented with cream and age, the lavishly decorated facade may be what makes the cover of all the tourist brochures, but be sure to stop inside and admire the slender mahogany columns and ceiling decorated with harvest motifs.

IGLESIA DE LA MERCED

Home to León's patron saint, **La Virgen de La Merced**, this less immediately enchanting gray edifice (albeit with a glittering and ornate interior) is considered the city's second-most important church. The image, originally from Barcelona, was brought to León's original church (see the boxed text, p175) in 1528. After Volcán Momotombo erupted and forced the city's evacuation, the Leónese built a new church here in 1615, replaced with the current building in the early 1700s. The virgin's feast day, September 24, is one of León's biggest religious bashes.

IGLESIA DULCE NOMBRE DE JESÚS EL CALVARIO

A hodgepodge of neoclassical and baroque styles, 18th-century **El Calvario** stands at the top of Calle Central. The interior is nice, with predictably gory, full-sized statues of Jesus and the thieves being crucified, but you're here for the brightly painted facade

between the red-brick bell towers, with brightly colored bas-relief biblical scenes that resemble comic-strip panels.

OTHER CHURCHES

With more than 16 places to pray, including several more in Barrio Subtiava (p168), the city tourist board is lobbying to have León officially declared 'The City of Churches.'

The 1639 **Iglesia de San Francisco** is one of the oldest in the city, a national heritage site with lots of gold, a gorgeous nave, and rather rococo interior. It was abandoned between 1830 and 1881, then refurbished with two elaborate altarpieces for San Antonio and Our Lady of Mercy.

Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, built in 1743, is León's only church oriented north-south, and historically connected to the city by the 1850 Puente Guadalupe, built across the Río Chiquito. And don't let the dumpy, modernist neoclassic exterior of 1625 **Iglesia San Juan de Dios** fool you – when it's open, the interior is one of the city's prettiest, with lots of precious wood and a very human scale.

Convent San Francisco, founded in 1639, was badly damaged during the 1979 Battle for León. Most of the church, which still has two of the original altars, is being renovated, but you can check out what used to be the convent at Hotel El Convento (p171).

For something completely different, swing by ultra-Gothic 1884 **Iglesia Zaragoza**, one of the best spots for film students to stage a vampire flick. They could also use one of the several ruined churches around town, including **Ruinas Veracruz** and **Iglesia Santiago** in Barrio Subtiava, and **Ruinas San Sebastian**, near La XXI.

MUSEO-ARCHIVO RUBÉN DARÍO

Of all the museums and monuments dedicated to the poet that are scattered across his dotting homeland, **Museo Rubén Darío** (Calle Central; admission free; ☒ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sat, 9am-noon Sun) seems like the one where you'd be most likely to run into his ghost. Exhibits are displayed throughout the house where he lived until he was a teenager, ranging from everyday items – more a window into well-to-do Nicaragua in the late 1800s – to handwritten manuscripts of Darío's famous works. His Bible, the bed where he died

'an agonizing death' and the fancy duds he wore as the Ambassador to Spain (as well as for his most famous portrait) are just highlights among the historic bric-a-brac.

Another poet, Alfonso Cortés, also lived here during the 1950s and 1960s; much of that time he was chained to the bed, stark raving mad, writing poetry that, while very good, would for all eternity be compared with the home's previous resident. Which would drive anyone crazy.

Other Darío monuments in the area include **Parque Rubén Darío**, with a statue of the master, but only busts of other, lesser Leónese poets, including Alfonso Cortés (1893–1969), Azarias H Pallais (1884–1954) and Salomon de la Selva (1893–1959), all accompanied by verses. Darío's final resting place is the León cathedral.

MUSEO DE ARTE FUNDACIÓN ORTIZ-GUARDIÁN

Probably the finest contemporary art museum in all of Central America, the **Ortiz-Guardián Collection** (centrodearte@hotelesconvento.com.ni; adult/student US\$0.80/0.50; ☎ 10:30am–6:30pm Tue–Sat, 11am–7pm Sun) has spilled over from its original home in Casa Don Norberto Ramírez, refurbished in 2000 to its original Creole Civil style, with Arabic tiles and impressive flagstones. It and another beautiful old home across the street are now packed with artwork; a Spanish-speaking guide costs an extra US\$1.25, which is well worth it.

Begin surrounded by the luxurious realism of the Renaissance and spare beauty of the colonial period, then wander through romanticism, modernism, postmodernism and actually modern pieces by Cuban, Peruvian and other Latin American schools. Rubens, Picasso, Chagall and other big names make an appearance, but it's the work by Latin American masters – Diego Rivera, Rufino Tamayo, Fernando Botero, Roberto Matta and more – that define the collection. If you can't get enough, grab a coffee at nearby Hotel El Convento, owned by the same family, which displays many of their nicest religious pieces.

LA XXI & MUSEO DE LEYENDAS Y MITOS

León's most entertaining and eclectic museum is now housed in La XXI (the 21st Garrison), the **Museum of Myths & Legends**

(admission US\$0.50; ☎ 8am–noon Tue–Sun, 2–5pm Tue–Sat). What makes this museum opposite Ruinas San Sebastián unmissable is the striking contrast of its main subjects: a quirky collection of life-size papier-mâché figures from Leónese history and legend, handmade by founder Señora Toruña (also represented in glorious papier-mâché), and murals graphically depicting methods the National Guard used to torture prisoners.

You're led from room to room, each dedicated to a different aspect of Leónese folklore, from La Gigantona – the giant woman who represents an original colonist still ridiculed by a popular ballet *folklorico* – to La Carreta Nagua (Chariot of Death), which picks up the souls of those foolish enough to cross intersections catercorner.

And between each rundown of local legends, your Spanish-speaking guide will cheerfully shift gears to describe the gory human-rights abuses – stretching on racks, beatings, water tortures etc – that took place here regularly until June 13, 1979, when Commander Dora María Téllez successfully breached Somoza's defenses and secured La XXI for the Sandinistas, releasing all prisoners. It's highly recommended.

GALERÍA DE HÉROES Y MÁRTIRES

Monuments to León's more recent history include the **Galería de Héroes y Mártires** (1a Calle NE; donation US\$1; ☎ 7am–5pm Mon–Sat), run by mothers of FSLN veterans and fallen heroes. There's some signage in English and Spanish, but you're here to look into the eyes of more than 300 revolutionaries, mostly pimply faced teens with feathered disco haircuts, and wonder if you would be willing to make the ultimate sacrifice to free your country from dictatorship. A small craft shop supports the gallery.

MAUSOLEO DE LOS HÉROES Y MÁRTIRES

Another monument to the local heroes, the eternal flame of the **Mausoleum of Heroes & Martyrs** rests within a small plaza just north of the parque central, surrounded by the city's best murals.

MUSEO ENTOMOLÓGICO

Still not open to the general public at press time, biologists Jean Michel Maes and Joan Tellez have big plans to display the

largest collection of Nicaraguan insects in the world. In the meantime, you can visit the **museum** (☎ 311 6586; jammaes@ibw.com.ni; admission free) by appointment only, although you may have to root through stacks of bug trays to find your favorite insect. The specialty is *Lucanidae*, a genus of beetles where males usually display ferocious-looking pincers, but there are also heaps of butterflies and other more charismatic critters to peruse.

EL BARRIO SUBTIAVA

A regional capital long before León moved in, the barrio of Subtiava takes its name from a Chorotega tribe who still count themselves apart from León, and Nicaragua, as a whole. After refugees from León Viejo arrived in 1610, the two separate towns co-existed as equals until 1680. Flexing their rebuilt military muscle, the Spanish forced 12,000 indigenous inhabitants of Subtiava to become part of León, basically relegating them to slave labor. Tensions simmered for two generations, until a police crack-down in 1725 inspired a revolt. Although the insurrection was violently shut down by the Spaniards, Barrio Subtiava was able to remain a separate entity until 1902, when it was finally, officially, annexed to the city. The key word being ‘officially.’

About 1km west of the León cathedral, the neighborhood is centered on **San Juan Bautista Subtiava** (13 Av 50), better known as ‘Catedral Subtiava,’ the oldest intact church in the city. Built in the 1530s and reconstructed in 1710, its relatively plain beige facade and precious wood interior is largely unadorned; even the struts are there to stabilize the structure during earthquakes. With two exceptions: spirals outside, and an extraordinary sun icon mounted to the typical arched timber roof, pay homage to deities far older than the Spanish conquest.

Far simpler, the **Ermida de San Pedro**, two blocks east and one block south of San Juan Bautista, was constructed between 1706 and 1718, and is considered one of the best examples of primitive baroque style in Nicaragua. This means that it’s almost unadorned, save for three brick crosses in-laid into the adobe.

Other Subtiava churches haven’t fared quite as well. **Ruinas Iglesia Santiago**, well signed one and a half blocks away from

San Juan Bautista, was (according to local legend) cursed by *duendes* (fairies), and by the looks of it the curse worked. Enter through the corrugated tin gate and ask the family there if it’s OK to cross their front yard; they may ask for a few córdoba. The architecture is still obvious – and the bell tower still standing – and makes for an interesting wander.

A few blocks west are the ruins of 16th-century **Iglesia Veracruz**, destroyed by a volcanic eruption in 1835. It remains a spiritual center, and as the indigenous counterpoint to La Gritería on December 7, people gather here for a pre-Columbian festival involving torches and the sun deity on the roof of San Juan Bautista.

Call ahead to make sure the intriguing **Museo de Arte Sacro** (☎ 311 8288; frente Iglesia San Juan Bautista; admission US\$0.70; 🕒 8am-noon Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Mon-Fri) is open, as the curator and founder, Monsignor Ricardo Clemente Juárez Soza, sometimes needs to run errands during the day. You’ve probably noticed this neighborhood’s churches are in some disrepair, a situation that inspired Juárez to preserve the region’s absolutely beautiful 16th- and 17th-century religious art right here, where it would be safe. Faithfully detailed wooden saints (including one of the first Virgins of Guadalupe) to more ostentatious examples of baroque overkill, including lots of gold and silver artifacts, have been packed in the original Casa de Cultura Subtiava, built in 1544.

Museo Adiáct (admission US\$0.70; 🕒 8am-noon Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Mon-Fri), around the corner, is a beautifully (if faded) muraled building that also houses the neighborhood’s government; you may need to ask them to open this interesting little museum. Funeral urns, ceramic tableware, stone statues and more are on display, with very little signage or attempt at a timeline. Old copies of *La Voz de Adiáct* magazine, with news and views about the history of Barrio Subtiava, are piled on shelves toward the front.

The fine **Museo Insurreccional Luís Manuel Toruño** (Casa El Buzón; donations accepted; 🕒 Sat only) was recently relocated from León proper to this smaller Subtiava Sandinista stronghold, two blocks east and one and a half blocks south of San Juan Bautista. Also called El Buzón (Big Mailbox), this

building was a secret weapons depot during the revolution. Curator 'El Chanclazo' has kept the faith and displays his enormous collection of revolutionary mementos, newspaper clippings, and communist memorabilia; if it's not open, ask around.

El Tamarindón (Iglesia San Juan 3c sur, 2c oeste) is a huge tree where Adiáct, *cacique* (chief) of the Subtiava tribe during the Spanish conquest, was unceremoniously hung so his people would see him as weak. It didn't work, and today 'The Big Tamarindo' is a rallying point for indigenous locals, who placed a plaque there in 2003 that declares 'This tree was the cross of he who is our light,' and they sure as heck weren't talking about Jesus. There are a few benches underneath and a market every third Sunday in April.

It's a solid 20-minute walk or US\$0.70 taxi ride to Subtiava from the León cathedral, or you can take one of the covered trucks (US\$0.18) plying the streets. Catch a Subtiava-bound truck at the southwest corner of the parque central (in front of Sandinista headquarters) and yell 'Catedral Subtiava' as they haul you inside, probably while the truck is still moving. Hang on!

EL FORTÍN DE ACOSOSCO

The National Guard's last holdout in León, **El Fortín** can be reached by the 2.5km dirt road that begins on the west side of Guadalupe cemetery, on the southern border of Barrio Subtiava. The large, squat gray building was originally constructed in 1889 to take advantage of great city views. It was abandoned until the 1950s, when the Somozas realized that they needed to keep an eye on León itself. They lost the fort on July 7, 1979, and the Sandinistas still have a parade every July to celebrate.

The fortress is next to a smelly garbage dump; you'll need to ask for permission to enter. Muggings are common on this stretch, so go in a group and leave your camera and other valuables at the hotel.

Courses

Vía Vía (☎ 311 6142; www.viaviacafe.com; 2a Av NE) and **Hostel La Clínica** (☎ 311 2031; mary111994@yahoo.es; 1a Av SO) are good places to inquire about private tutors (about US\$5 per hour). Vía Vía also offers salsa classes (per hour US\$7).

Latin American Spanish School (☎ 311 5421; www.latinamericanspanishschool.com; parque central 2c oeste,

1c sur) In the big yellow house, this new school also offers classes, homestays and field trips, and teachers are willing to come to your hotel.

León Spanish School of Nicaragua (☎ 865 3579; jdflores28@yahoo.com; contiguo a Restaurant Cactus; class per week US\$175) This school was in a temporary facility at the time of research, so call ahead. Instruction is professional, materials are available, there are lots of field trips, cultural activities and volunteer opportunities. Your weekly fee includes homestay and three meals daily. It also rents bicycles.

Tours

Volcano surfing, just so you know, involves hauling yourself to the top of steaming Cerro Negro (see p178), then riding a surfboard, mattress or cardboard box down its black gravel 50-degree slopes. Hold on!

Knowing Nicaragua (☎ 866 6814; fparajon2003@yahoo.es, Lenin_obando@yahoo.com) Leónese operator Flavio Parajón offers tours to all places covered by other operators, plus Casitas, San Cristóbal, Laguna de Asososca and kayak tours of Reserva Natural Isla Juan Venado. Ask about surfing tours.

Quetzaltrekkers (☎ 843 7647; www.quezaltrekkers.com; frente Iglesia El Calvario) This outstanding operator offers recommended climbing tours of the area's volcanoes, including public transportation, big meals and camping. Try Volcán Momotombo (two days, US\$42 per person), Volcán Telica (two days, US\$32), Volcán Cosigüina (three days, US\$53), and a two-day Cerro Negro tour that takes in El Hoyo and Laguna de Asososca. There's also a monthly full moon climb (one night, US\$24 per person). There's usually a two- or three-person minimum, but solo travelers can check its offices or Vía Vía on ☎ 311 6142 or www.viaviacafe.com to see what's coming up. All profits go to Las Tias, a charity that helps problem kids learn to build their own lives; volunteers are very welcome.

Sampson Expeditions (☎ 311 3306; rsampson@ibw.com.ni; Calle Central Rubén Darío) Headquartered at Hostel Calle de los Poetas, Rigo Sampson speaks fluent English and offers personalized and athletic tours of volcanoes and kayaking in Reserva Natural Isla Juan Venado (US\$25). He also offers oddball trips, including a three-week 'Footprints of William Walker' tour, and can also arrange visits to Las Minas and Bosawás.

Servitour León (☎ 311 1927; hectournica@yahoo.com; catedral ½c norte) Offers city tours (US\$15 per person), a Cerro Negro/Laguna de Asososca combo day trip (US\$40) and several other tours, usually with a two-person minimum.

Va Pues Tours (☎ 277 4628, 611 8784; vapuestours@hotmail.com; frente Iglesia El Calvario) In addition to volcano tours and Reserva Natural Isla Juan Venado, this tour operator, at CocinArte, offers city tours of León and

treks to León Viejo and Matagalpa; it can also organize sunset barbecue parties at PoneLOYa, returning via El Pelón, the open-air disco bus (see p172).

Festivals & Events

Every Saturday, from early afternoon till midnight, the parque central comes alive for the *Tertulia Leonesa*, inviting everyone outside to eat, drink and dance to music played by local combos. León's annual celebrations include:

Semana Santa (late March or early April) The Leónese Semana Santa is something special, with Barrio Subtiava's colorful sawdust 'carpets,' temporary and beautiful images that the funeral procession for Jesus walks over, and a sandcastle competition in PoneLOYa.

Masacre del 23 Julio 1959 (July 23) One afternoon in 1959, local school children staged a demonstration against Somoza. As they chanted 'Freedom! Freedom!', the National Guard fired into the crowd, killing four students and wounding several others. Those wounded, some in wheelchairs, still lead a parade, right after every single marching band from the area has announced that their generation will not forget.

La Gritería Chiquita (August 14) This celebration began in 1947, as an erupting Cerro Negro threatened to bury the city in ashes. The volcano suddenly halted its activity after an innovative priest, Monseñor Isidro Augusto Oviedo, vowed to initiate a preliminary *gritería*, similar to December's but changing the response to ¡*La ascensión de María!* ('The ascension of Mary!').

Día de la Virgen de Merced (September 24) León's saint's day is solemnly observed, but the preceding day is more festive: revelers don a bull-shaped armature lined with fireworks, called the *toro encohetado*, then charge at panic-stricken onlookers as the rockets fly.

Carnaval Mitos y Leyendas (November 1) See the papier-mâché crew from the Museo de Leyendas y Mitos on a parade from the cathedral and Barrio Subtiava, for this Halloweenesque fiesta.

Día de la Purísima Concepción (December 7) Celebrated throughout the country, this celebration of Nicaragua's patron saint is the occasion for the *gritería* (shouting), enjoyed here with unusual vigor.

Sleeping

With tourism on the rise and hostels packed to overflowing, many local families are jumping on the gravy train and offering rooms in their own Spanish colonial dump...er, fixer-upper, at backpacker prices.

BUDGET

Vía Vía (☎ 311 6142; www.viaviacafe.com; 2a Av NE; dm/s/d US\$3/10/12) If you're looking for backpacker central, you've found it at this hotel,

complete with a book exchange, bulletin board accompanied by stacks of tourist information and updated list of Quetzal-trekkers' upcoming hikes. There's also a popular restaurant/bar (mains US\$2 to US\$5, open 8am to 11:30pm) with pool tables, vegetarian options, live music on Friday and karaoke on Wednesday, which light sleepers should keep in mind. Don't leave your stuff laying around in the dorm.

Big Foot Hostel (www.bigfootadventure.com; dm/s/d US\$4/7/10; (P)) Right across the street, the brand-new competition has fewer beds in the dorms and cheaper private rooms, but ambience was still a work in progress. The helpful English-speaking owners serve simple food and drink, organize surfing trips to PoneLOYa and Las Peñitas, and also offer volcano climbs and other tours.

Hostel La Clínica (☎ 311 2031; mary111994@yahoo.es; 1a Av 50; dm US\$3.75, d with/without bathroom US\$6/5) The friendly, family-run La Clínica has clean rooms and a pleasant vibe. It's popular, with a good mix of travelers and long-term guests.

Hospedaje El Garage (1a Av 50; ☎ 311 4195; d with/without bathroom US\$6/5) Next door to La Clínica, this spot is extremely clean and compact, and has an upstairs study loft.

Casa Ivana (☎ 311 4423; 2a Calle SE; s US\$5, d US\$7-9) Centrally located beside the Teatro Municipal, Casa Ivana is a little threadbare, but has a pretty interior garden, wicker rocking chairs and a photo gallery of old León. Rooms are neat and simple with overhead fans and decent bathrooms.

Casa Iguana (☎ 881 3493; cinquegrana@hotmail.com; Parque San Juan 75 varas este; s/d/tr US\$10/15/20) In a huge, echoing Spanish colonial mansion, its courtyard hung with hammocks and flanked by a row of toilets and showers shared by guests staying in the enormous, slightly musty rooms, this place is perfect for large groups.

Hospedaje Colibrí (☎ 889 1891) Two blocks around the corner, the owners of Casa Iguana have a house in PoneLOYa and an annex, which doesn't have a cavernous common area, but does have a kitchen.

Casona Colonial (☎ 311 3178; Parque San Juan ½c abajo; s/d US\$10/15; (X)) On the same row of colonial mansions near Iglesia San Juan as several pricier hotels, this architectural jewel has very attractively furnished rooms with bathroom and fan, great beds and a comfort-

able family-style common area, with rocking chairs and a TV. Recommended.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Colonial (☎ 311 2279; 1a Av NO; s/d without bathroom US\$10/15, with bathroom US\$30/35; (P) (☎) (📺)) Two and a half blocks north of the plaza, this fading beauty surrounds a lovely palm-lined inner courtyard with two floors of dingy but elegant wooden rooms. First-floor rooms with air-con are a bit overpriced, while the expansive upstairs cheapies, with rapidly deteriorating wooden floors, cleanish shared bathrooms and wonderful porch, seem almost nicer.

Hostel Miriam (☎ 311 0870; Museo Rubén Darío 1c oeste, ½c norte; s/d without bathroom US\$15/20, with bathroom & air-con US\$25/30; (☎) (📺)) Quite possibly the cleanest hotel in León, this spot has small, neat rooms and a colorful common area with a fully stocked kitchen and great security.

Calle de los Poetas (☎ 311 3306; rsampson@ibw.com.ni) On Calle Central Rubén Darío, two blocks west of Museo Rubén Darío, this popular property offers spacious rooms surrounding attractive gardens; make reservations in advance.

Hotel San Juan de León (☎ 311 0547; www.hsanjuandeleon.com; frente Iglesia San Juan; tr with fan/air-con incl breakfast US\$30/40; (P) (☎) (📺)) This tidy Spanish colonial gem has lovely common areas with interesting murals and other art, wireless Internet (also machines on-site) and a kitchen you can use, but rooms are only comfortable, not spectacular.

Posada del Doctor (☎ 311 4343; www.laposadadeldoctor.com; Parque San Juan ½c oeste; s with fan US\$25, d with fan/air-con incl breakfast US\$30/40; (P) (☎) (📺)) Close by and under the same ownership, this colonial mansion also has a kitchen and wireless Internet, but is even nicer, with a manicured courtyard and bigger, more nicely furnished rooms.

Hotel Los Balcones (☎ 311 0250; www.hotelbalcones.com; esquina de los bancos 1c este; r US\$40-55; (☎) (📺)) This fairly luxurious property inhabits a Spanish colonial mansion furnished with attractive antiques and lots of old religious art. Rooms are small, but the ones upstairs (well worth the higher price) are great, with gleaming wooden floors and the promised balconies.

La Casa Leonesa (☎ 311 0551; www.lacasaleonesa.com; Catedral 3c norte, 15 varas este; s/d US\$35/45, ste

US\$55, incl breakfast; (☎) (📺) (📺)) Colonial Leonese luxury with a bit more attention to detail, this attractive old home's 10 converted rooms have patterned tiles, high ceilings and religious-themed art, plus air-con and a small pool in the central gardens.

TOP END

San Cristóbal (☎ 311 1606; www.sancristobalhotel.com; s/d US\$40/50, ste US\$55; (P) (☎) (📺) (📺)) Away from it all on the bypass road (but close to several good restaurants), this attractive property has clean, modern rooms, a popular Italian restaurant, and a to-die-for pool surrounded by thatch-roofed *rancheros* where you can enjoy a cold beer.

Hotel Austria (☎ 311 1206; www.hotelaustria.com.ni; catedral 1c sur, ½ abajo; s/d/tr r US\$36/50/59, s/d/tr ste US\$45/59/70, incl breakfast; (P) (☎) (📺)) The most convenient place to stay in town, modern and comfortable with all the amenities – cable TV, hot-water bathroom, phones and air-con. Suites have kitchenettes and come with a full breakfast. German is spoken.

Hotel El Convento (☎ 311 7053; www.hotelconvento.com.ni; continuo Iglesia San Francisco; s/d/ste incl breakfast US\$69/87/111; (P) (☎) (📺)) Not just the best hotel in León, but one of the best in the country, this architectural dream surrounds impressive, almost English gardens with spacious rooms replete with amenities; the suites are much nicer, with huge windows. You're surrounded by precious paintings and carvings (the owners also operate Museo de Arte Fundación Ortiz-Guardián), some of it among the finest colonial religious art you're ever likely to see. The fancy on-site restaurant, El Victoriano (mains US\$4 to US\$12, open 11am to 11pm), is predictably pricey, but may be worth a cappuccino just so you have an excuse to check this place out.

Eating

The best place to eat on the cheap or buy fresh veggies is the beautiful, clean **central market** (🕒 6am-5pm), with several inexpensive eateries serving *comida corriente* (a mixed plate of different foods typical of the region) made from whatever's fresh that day. After-hours, two of the best *fritangas* (sidewalk barbecues) in town set up right outside, on the corner closest to the cathedral, where you can enjoy a huge meal for around US\$2.

RESTAURANTS

CocinArte (frente Iglesia Laborío; mains US\$2-4; ☎ 11am-10pm) Worth the trek across a pretty part of town, particularly for falafel lovers, this wonderful spot has traditional Nica food, real coffee, plus all sorts of vegetarian options, good juices and a beautiful wooden table with an oversized, built-in chessboard. Try the spinach empanadas for a treat.

El Sesteo (Calle Central; dishes US\$3-5; ☎ 11am-10pm) A León institution, you can't beat the location (although you can beat the prices) of this pleasant plaza-side café, with spectacular people-watching, fresh-brewed espresso beverages, a very full bar and a long menu of carefully prepared Nica classics.

Italian Pizza y Comida Lebanesa (pizza US\$5-7, Lebanese dishes US\$7-10) Half a block north of the cathedral, this Lebanese-owned restaurant makes good pizza, but travelers aching for quality Middle Eastern grub (vegetarians take note) will be stoked on the great hummus and babaghanoush.

Mediterraneo Ristorante Pizzeria (☎ 882 4924; Iglesia Guadalupe ½c norte; meals US\$5-10; ☎ 3pm-late) Consider making reservations at this more authentic Italian restaurant, with an attractive outdoor dining area and live music on weekends, including bands from all over the country.

Casa Vieja (3a Av NO; meals from US\$5; ☎ 4-11pm) *Churrasco* (grilled meat) is the specialty at this romantic old bohemian haunt, where the fine bar and candlelit ambience attracts an eclectic mix of people.

Taquezal (2a Av SO; dishes US\$3-6; ☎ 4pm-late) Opposite the Teatro Municipal, many people think this relaxed restaurant/bar has the best food in town, with signature salads, Mexican specialties and the 'Taquezal cocktail,' which involves whisky, vodka, coffee liquor and orange. Drink specials on Monday and Tuesday nights guarantee a crowd.

Los Pescaditos (Iglesia San Juan Bautista 1c Sur, 1½ oeste) This Subtiava landmark, close to the PoneLOYA buses, may look like a modest, unassuming, moderately priced seafood restaurant, but it's famous throughout the country as the best place to eat in León.

CAFÉS & QUICK EATS

Plaza Siglo Nuevo (☎ 11am-midnight; dishes US\$1-5) This strip-mall-style eatery is home to Tip

Top, with fast chicken, and Eskimo, with ice cream and burgers.

Hollywood Pizza (☎ 311 0636; slice US\$1, pie US\$4-6) Eat in at Plaza Siglo Nuevo, or have delivered for a US\$0.70 fee.

La Esquina El Movimiento (buffet US\$2-3; ☎ 7am-10pm) Run by a youth collective, this interesting shop has *artesanías* on sale out front, plus a decent steam-table buffet at mealtimes, and an espresso machine, which your server may or may not feel like bothering with.

Puerto Cafe Benjamín Linder (1a Av NO & 2a Calle; comidas corrientes US\$1; ☎ 10am-11pm Mon-Sat) This lively, breezy café serves decent coffee, *comida corriente* and cold drinks. A large indoor mural depicts the life of Ben Linder, an American volunteer who built small hydroelectric dams and entertained children on his unicycle – until the Contras gunned him down in 1987.

GROCERIES

Supermercado Salman (1a Calle NE) Just west of La Casa de Cultura, Salman is half grocery store, half superstore, with everything you need and lots you don't, plus the cheapest cup of (Presto) coffee in town – US\$0.12!

La Unión Supermercado (1a Calle NE) The best supermarket in town, this place has more gringo brands than anywhere else in the Pacific Northwest.

Panadería El León Dorado (☎ 6:30am-1pm & 1:30-6pm) Delivering delicious starches since 1958, this well-known bakery sells great sweet stuff plus sandwiches and other savory goodies as well.

Drinking

Even more so than Granada, León is a party town, thanks to all those university students, plus it's much easier and safer to bar-hop here than in Managua.

El Bus Pelón (US\$0.50; ☎ 6pm-late) Follow the thumping disco beat to find 'The Bald Bus,' its classic Bluebird styling enhanced by having the entire roof torched right off, all the better to share its impressive sound system with the people. Adult beverages are also available. You can catch it at the parque central, or as it runs around the city until the wee hours.

Don Señor (☎ 311 1212; 1a Calle NO; cover US\$1-3) One block north of the plaza, this place is more than just a hot nightspot – it's three.

There's a disco upstairs, a relaxed bar (with dance floor) downstairs, and the restaurant/pub El Alamo around the corner. It's open till 4am.

Payitas Bar & Cafetín (1a Calle NO) Catercorner from Don Señor, this after-hours drinking spot is a landmark and tradition, and has a terrace with a view. Fried food that may be several days old is also available.

Disco Bohemio (6pm-late Wed-Sun) Almost always packed, this hot spot, close to Don Señor, is popular with locals and tourists alike. Nearby, Salon Estrella may be an Old West-themed casino, complete with staff in ten-gallon hats, but mosey on past the slot machines to the popular bar in the back.

Caña Brava (Pista de Circunvalación León; cover US\$3-10) Out on the ring road toward Chinandega, this elegant spot claims to have the best steak in town, and the 'filete bravo,' in chili sauce, may convince you. There's live music and dancing on the weekends, and outdoor seating if that's a bit much for you.

El Matchico (catedral 2½c norte; admission free; ☎ 8pm-2am) A comfortable, relaxed spot to get your drink on, with a 'What if the Aztecs discovered Europe first?' theme. Jazz music, sometimes live, and French *bocas* keep things interesting.

Dilectus (☎ 311 5439; cover US\$2) The fanciest spot to see and be seen, this place has expensive drinks, a killer dance floor, mariachi Thursdays and sometimes celebrity DJs and/or live music.

Entertainment

Teatro Municipal José de la Cruz Mena (2a Av 50) Check the board in front of this attractive 1885 theater to see what's on during your visit. It's been impressively restored, and for less than US\$2 you may be able to catch anything from Salvadoran rock groups to art films to the national ballet on the very accessible stage. Hey, 14-year-old Rubén Darío did his first poetry here; who knows what sort of up-and-comers you'll catch. The board often lists other cultural events going on in the city.

La Casa de la Cultura (contiguo Iglesia Merced) often has folk music and other events, while **Plaza Siglo Nuevo** (1a Calle NE; tickets US\$3), León's cinema, shows mostly big-budget American films.

Shopping

There are a few souvenir stores in town, but this isn't exactly Masaya.

La Esquina El Movimiento (☎ 7am-10pm) For politically correct gifts, including certified *artesanías* and a selection of books.

Las Tejedoras Manuales de León (nhleon@tmx.com.ni; Ermita Dolores 1c norte, ½c abajo) Pick up an all-cotton, vegetable-dyed tapestry at this women's collective, which makes all manner of woven goods on big wooden looms, some dating from the Spanish colonial era.

Enterprising area teens sell poems (US\$0.70 each) on the street, often illustrated with hearts and unicorns, the perfect gift for the nonmaterialist in your life.

Getting There & Away

There are several international bus agencies, including **Ticabus** (Calle 6a NO; ☎ daily) and **King Quality** (☎ 311 2426; cnr 2a Calle NE & 3a Ave NE). There are three main bus lots.

MAIN TERMINAL

Most buses leave from León's chaotic **bus station** (☎ 311 3909; 6a Calle NE), about 1km northeast of the center.

Chinandega bus US\$0.80, 1½ hours, 4:30am to 6pm, every 20 minutes; microbus US\$1, 50 minutes, 5am to 7pm, depart when full

Corinto US\$1, 1½ hours, 4:30am to 6pm, every 30 minutes

El Sauce US\$2, 2½ hours, 6am to 4pm, hourly

Estelí US\$3, 2½ hours, 5:20am and 12:45pm

Hervideros de San Jacinto US\$0.50, 40 minutes, 4am to 5:30pm, every 30 minutes

Las Paz Centro US\$0.50, 40 minutes, every 45 minutes

Malpaisillo US\$0.80, one hour, 4am to 5pm, hourly

Managua microbus US\$1.30, 1¼ hours, 4:30am to 8pm, depart when full

Managua (Carr Nueva, via La Paz Centro) *expreso* US\$1.50, 1¼ hours, 5am to 4pm, almost hourly

Managua (Carr Vieja, via Puerto Sandino) *ordinario* US\$1.25, 1¾ hours, 5am to 6:30pm, every 20 minutes

Matagalpa US\$3.59, three hours, 5am and 3pm

Nagarote US\$0.90, one hour, every 45 minutes

San Isidro US\$2, 2½ hours, 6am to 5:30pm, every 30 minutes; with connections to frequent Matagalpa and Estelí buses

MERCADO SAN JUAN

This much smaller bus lot hosts *ordinario* buses to destinations including:

Las Salinas Grandes US\$0.60, two hours, 5:15am, 8:30am, 11:30am, 1:30pm and 4pm

Playa Astillero US\$0.70, 2½ hours, 12:30pm and 4pm

Rota (Cerro Negro) US\$0.60, 2¼ hours, 5:50am, 11am and 3:30pm; Rota is 5km from the base of the volcano

THE BEACHES

Buses to Poneloya and Las Peñitas (US\$0.65, 40 minutes) depart hourly 6am to 7pm from El Mercadito in Subtiava. Day-trippers take note: the last bus returns at 6:40pm.

Getting Around

The city is strollable, but big enough that you may want to take **taxis** (☎ 311 1043; per person day/night US\$0.70/1), particularly at night. You can also get taxis to Poneloya (US\$15), San Jacinto (US\$20) and Managua (US\$40).

PACIFIC BEACHES NEAR LEÓN

The most accessible beaches from León are Poneloya and Las Peñitas, both an easy 20-minute bus ride from Mercadito Subtiava in León. The road splits at the sea: go right for Poneloya proper, left for more developed La Peñitas and Reserva Natural Isla Juan Venado.

Several wilder, less accessible beaches further south are a bit more difficult to reach, including Las Salinas Grande (not to be confused with Las Salinas de Nagualapa, the surfing beach further south), with regular bus service from León and its own access to Reserva Natural Isla Juan Venado. A group of three even less explored beaches can be reached from the fractured but passable Old Rd to Managua: Puerto Sandino, El Velero and El Tránsito.

Poneloya

Although this beach has the famous name – it's highly praised in the 'Viva León Jodido' theme song – it's actually less developed than its twin. Be sure to visit during Semana Santa for the annual **Sand Castle & Sculpture Building Contest**, which makes a nice break from the sawdust carpets. There's one small cluster of hotels, all with seafood restaurants, in sight of a rocky outcropping called **Peña del Tigre**.

Hotel Locayo (r per person US\$3), a dark and dilapidated wooden hotel, may not survive the next hurricane, and who knows what's living in those mattresses, but you can basically spit from your rapidly disintegrating 2nd-story balcony into the sea. **La Terraza**

(dm/d/tr US\$6/15/20) has a great view, a small dorm and one cramped room with bathroom. A meal on the oceanfront terrace, spectacular as promised, would be great if the restaurant were open.

Across from the beach, **Posada de Poneloya** (☎ 317 1378, 311 4812; posadadeponeloya.com; d US\$25; 📞 🚻) is much more comfortable than the other two, with newly remodeled rooms (some with wheelchair access) with hot-water bathroom and air-con. There's a big, tiled porch area with hammocks out back.

La Bocanita, about 1km north, offers a collection of thatched-roof seafood shacks at the edge of an estuary. This is where you can hire a private *panga* (small motorboat) seating four (US\$60 to US\$90) up to **Corinto**, or just to explore the coastline. Meet buses to León (US\$0.65, 40 minutes, 5:40am to 6:40pm, every 50 minutes) at the *empalme* (three-way junction).

Las Peñitas

When people say they're headed to Poneloya, they usually mean the lazy beach town of Las Peñitas, a wide, sandy stretch fronted by a fine collection of hotels and restaurants. It offers the easiest access to the turtles and mangroves of Reserva Natural Isla Juan Venado (p176), and there's also good, if not spectacular, surfing here, with smallish regular waves that are perfect for beginners. Both Barco de Oro and Hotelito Oasis, as well as **Big Foot Hostel** (www.bigfootadventure.com) in León all rent surfboards and offer lessons and expeditions. Swimmers and surfers alike need to watch that undertow; people die here every year.

While it's a fine place to spend the night, you're always welcome at the restaurant/hotels lining the shore, where showers, shade and hammocks are happily provided, as long as you buy a snack. Tough life, isn't it? Just remember that the last bus back to León is at 6:40pm. The following businesses are listed north to south.

SLEEPING & EATING

Suyapa Beach (☎ 854 2699; www.suyapabeach.com; r with fan/air-con US\$21/25; 📞 🚻 🚿) The swankiest address in town, this spot was obviously on the cutting edge of luxury accommodations a couple of decades ago. Air-conditioned rooms are much nicer overall, large and comfortable if a bit worn.

DETOUR: LEÓN VIEJO

For centuries it was just another lost city. One of Spain's most important colonial capitals, León was first founded in the thickly forested skirts of a sleeping Volcán Momotombo, convenient to Lago de Managua and the indigenous city of Imabite (where they presumably realized Momotombo was Náhuatl for 'The Boiling Mountain'). In 1580 the mountain awoke.

For the next 30 years, Spanish settlers held on, though 'the city would appear a lake of lava and ashes.' In 1610 a series of eruptions darkened the sky to a perpetual burning night, and the colonists, huddled together against an almost biblical rain of smoke and fire, took the Virgin of Merced from her altar and, led by Pedro de Muniguía y Mendiola, carried whatever they could to the new home he'd found for them. When the curious returned from what's now León, to see what, if anything, remained, they found nothing but ashes.

León Viejo (admission US\$2, video/camera US\$2/3; ☎ 8am-5pm) had all but passed into legend during a four-century lapse of human memory, linked to fanciful tales of lost basilicas beneath the surface of placid Lago de Managua, or indigenous curses exacting a more final retribution. Some scientists, however, thought the city might be rather more accessibly hidden, near the tiny town of Puerto Momotombo.

In 1967 UNAN archaeologists finally located Old León, their excavations revealing the original cathedral and main plaza – and underneath, the headless remains of Francisco Fernández de Córdoba, founder of both León and Granada. According to legend, he had been beheaded 'for treason against the crown,' on orders of jealous octogenarian overlord Pedrarias Dávila, the first governor of Nicaragua. And myth was suddenly made history.

In 2000 Unesco declared the complex a World Heritage Site, and you could easily spend several hours roaming around the partially excavated city. Admission includes a Spanish-language guided tour, but detailed signs are also in English. The best time to visit is the second Sunday in November, when the Virgin of Merced leaves her comfortable new church and, leading a procession of the faithful from La Paz Centro, revisits her first home in the New World.

Almost every tour outfit in León (as well as several in Managua and Granada) arranges visits to León Viejo, which can be combined with a hike to the top of Cerro Negro, and/or a cool swim in Laguna de Asososca, both nearby. But it's easy to visit on your own. Buses run every 50 minutes between León and La Paz Centro (US\$0.80, 45 minutes), meeting buses to Puerto Momotombo (US\$0.50), less than 1km from the site. Driving, the turnoff is 3km east of La Paz Centro on the new León-Managua highway. From there it's a 15km drive along a cobblestone road; make the poorly signed right to the ruins when you get into town.

If you continue straight through Puerto Momotombo, however, you'll quickly come to a less-than-appealing beach scene on Lago de Managua, where a handful of disposable-looking restaurants and a playground enjoy a truly awesome view of Volcán Momotombo, the hydro-electric plant steaming eerily against its naked red and black slopes, and Isla Momotombito; you could rent a boat for US\$30 per hour and paddle around.

The restaurant (meals US\$3 to US\$10, open 7am to 7pm) is considered the best on the beach, and specializes in paellas (US\$30 for four people) that you'll need to order a few hours in advance.

Hostel La Palmera (☎ 317 0279; s/d US\$20/25; 📍) Across the road and giving the Suyapa a run for its reputation, La Palmera has great rooms, a huge barbell-shaped pool, excellent service...but it's the only hotel not right on the beach. Only some rooms have TVs, so ask.

Mi Casita (☎ 894 6467; inter_monsal@yahoo.com; d US\$12-15) This is a great place for lounging

day-trippers, with a comfortable, sandy-floored bar/restaurant serving excellent seafood (mains US\$2 to US\$5). There are also cramped but cheerfully painted rooms upstairs; ask for No 3.

Hotelito y Cafetín Oasis (☎ 839 5344; patrick426@caramail.com; dm/s/d/tr US\$5/10/12/15) Catering to surfers and backpackers, this super-clean spot has a great *palapa* (thatched-roof), hammock-hung restaurant serving soups, salads and seafood (dishes US\$1.50 to US\$7), all overlooking the waves. Or stay a while in one of the immaculate rooms, with small windows and foam mat-

tresses but still somehow very comfortable. It must be the feng shui. It rents surfboards for US\$5 per day.

Barco de Oro (☎ 317 0275; www.barcodeoro.com; s/d/tr US\$10/14/18, d with air-con US\$25; 🚽) The old stand-by has fine rooms with shell art, mosquito netting and fans; the ones with air-con are freshly painted. The owners organize tours of Isla Juan Venado, have a book exchange and pool table, and rent surfboards, kayaks (per day US\$5), bikes (per day US\$6), and arrange massages (per hour US\$8).

Hotel-Casa Patricia (☎ 641 9904; d with/without bathroom US\$18/12) In a beautiful brick building just a bit further down the beach, this German-run operation is a dream in progress, with beautiful rooms – you want the more expensive ones, upstairs and facing the water – gardens, and hammocks on the terrace. Surfing lessons are offered.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Buses leave from the clutch of restaurant/bars just north of Barco de Oro for León (US\$0.65, 5:40am to 6:40pm, every 50 minutes). You can also arrange private boats seating at least four to Salinas Grande (US\$70), including a tour of the reserve.

Reserva Natural Isla Juan Venado

This 18km-long, sandy barrier island (in some places only 300m wide) has swimming holes and lots of wildlife, including nesting turtles and mosquitoes galore. On one side of the island you'll find long, wild, sandy beaches facing the crashingly surfable Pacific; on the other, red and black mangroves reflected in emerald lagoons. Best of all, it's very easy to visit.

Several hotels, including Barco de Oro (which has an English-speaking guide), set up guided boat tours of the reserve, but it's generally cheaper to go through the reserve itself. You can get here by boat from less-developed Las Salinas, where you'll need to ask around for park rangers Ramón Hernández and Vilal Espinosa, who organize three-hour **guided boat tours** (for 15 people US\$50-60). Make reservations, if possible, or just show up at the **ranger station** (☎ 861 9099, in León 311 3776; infocomap@apcomanejo.com; admission US\$2). It's actually much easier to go through Las Peñitas, which has a ranger station and is closer to the turtle nesting sites.

During turtle laying season, which runs July through January, peaking in September and October, thousands of Olive Ridley, careys and leatherbacks lay their eggs in El Vivero, close to the Las Peñitas entrance; nighttime turtle tours can be arranged. You can also go fishing here, in Casa de las Peñas. But no matter what you do, just remember your swimsuit, sunscreen and mosquito repellent.

Puerto Sandino

Originally called Puerto Somoza, Puerto Sandino is, as the name suggests, a hard-working port town. It overlooks a pretty bay studded with shipping equipment and lined with salt evaporation ponds. The reason you're here is to surf.

'Hawaii-sized waves' may just be part of the promotional material, but there are a few misleadingly named breaks: 'Poneloya,' which is not actually in Poneloya (look for it at Playa Diamante), has a rocky bottom and reliable waves. The most photogenic break is at the mouth of the port, but isn't always working. The best wave around, sometimes called Miramar (although it's not actually in Miramar), is about 6km south of Puerto Sandino, a hollow, powerful left that can go well over 2m high. At low tide, there's a reliable reef break just south.

The other big reason to come is for **Hotel Yeland** (☎ 312 2256; www.hotelyeland.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$35/45; 📶 🚽 📺), a beautiful guesthouse owned by Doña Yelba Rancé. Big rooms come with air-con, bathroom and on-site Internet. Staff can organize anything from surfing trips to city tours, and run the excellent **Restaurante Chango** (mains US\$3 to US\$7), specializing in Caribbean-style seafood (including *rondón*, slow-cooked seafood stew, if you're lucky).

Buses leave for León (US\$0.70, 30 minutes) and Managua (US\$1.40, one hour) at least hourly.

El Velero

The excellent dirt coastal road continues south to El Velero, lined with the stuccoed entrances to future gated communities, as yet just untouched coastal scrub. Finally, you come to a fence with follow-through.

El Centro Turístico El Velero (☎ 312 2270; pedestrian/car US\$0.12/2.50; cabaña US\$41; 📶 Wed-Sun; 🚽), operated by the social security

administration, could be held up as proof that Nicaragua did, at some point, go communist. A handful of soulless corrugated tin cabins (sleeping seven uncomfortably) rust, alone and unloved, out there on one of the prettiest beaches you'll ever see. Don't count on the restaurant being open, either. On the other hand, it is a gorgeous beach with no one around...

From León, take a Puerto Sandino bus and get off at the gas station, where pickup trucks run hourly to El Velero (US\$0.50).

El Tránsito

If El Velero seems too synthetic, head south on the increasingly rough coastal road to El Tránsito, a fishing village with beaches carpeted with abandoned plastic water bottles. It may have been quaint before the 1992 tidal wave wiped out the town, who knows. The one *hospedaje* (guesthouse) has closed.

If you do make it here – and there's good surfing at either end of the beach – head straight to fabulous **Bar Primavera** (mains US\$2-5; ☎ daily), with great seafood and *nacatamales* (banana-leaf-wrapped bundles of corn-meal, meat, vegetables and herbs), where the friendly owner can help you arrange lodging or boats. The beach has a strong undertow, but to the south, near the lava flows, there are protected swimming holes.

Buses to Managua (US\$1, 1½ hours) leave at 5am, 6am and 7am, and return from Managua's Mercado Oriental at 2pm, 4pm and 5pm daily.

THE VOLCANOES

It's more than 60km from Volcán Momotombo, which dominates the Managua skyline, to Volcán San Cristóbal, the most dramatic volcano in León's vast collection. These mark the Maribios Chain, epicenter of one of the most active volcanic regions on earth, and a rare glimpse into the subterranean where the Cocos and Caribbean plates collide.

The chain is named for the Maribios nation, who famously wore the skins of sacrificial victims inside out to do battle with the Spaniards, scaring them senseless. Which is rather fitting, considering the nature of the geology. Four natural reserves, none more than 10% federally owned, protect 12 distinct volcanoes, several hot springs and

crater lakes, and lots of other interesting activity along the chain.

Park management is split between two Marena offices: **Marena León** (☎ 311 3776; mareleon@ibw.com) manages Reserva Natural Momotombo, Reserva Natural Telica-Rota and Reserva Natural Pilas-El Hoyo, which includes Cerro Negro; **Marena Chinandega** (☎ 344 2443; lider@ibw.com.ni) keeps tabs on Reserva Natural San Cristóbal-Casita and Reserva Natural Volcán Cosigüina.

Marena offices have excellent information about the reserves, but don't actually organize tours. The easiest and safest way to visit the volcanoes is a guided hike, arranged by several outfitters in León (see p169) and elsewhere, but there's always a way to get there on your own.

Reserva Natural Volcán Momotombo

The perfect cone of **Volcán Momotombo**, destroyer of León Viejo and inspiration for its own Rubén Darío poem, rises red and black 1280m above Lago de Managua, and is the country's most beautiful threat. It is a symbol of Nicaragua, and has furnished at its base itself in miniature, the lake island of Momotombito (389m), sometimes called Isla Rosa or just 'The Child.'

There are several other structures worth seeing in the reserve, including the 4km-diameter, 200m-deep **Caldera Monte Galán**, tiled with five little lagoons (alligators included) reflecting theoretically extinct **Cerro Montoso** (500m), but you'd need to arrange a custom tour for that sort of adventure.

Most people come to climb Momotombo, a serious eight-hour excursion that can be done in one day, though most outfitters offer an overnight involving hot springs at a nearby private *finca* (farm).

To enter, you first need a permit from **Ormat Momotombo Power Company** (☎ 270 5622; Róger Arcia Lacayo, de donde fue El Sandy's Carr Masaya 1c este, Centre Finarca, módulo 10, Managua), the geothermal plant steaming away at the volcano's base. The Israeli-owned plant, which supplies about 10% of Nicaragua's electrical power, saves around 90,000 tons of fossil fuels, offsetting 120,000 tons of CO₂ annually.

You could just show up at its gates with your hiking boots on – it's 14km on a good dirt road from Km 54 on Carr Nueva a León – but management can be famously

irritable about letting unannounced guests onto its property. In addition to operators in León, guides with the required permits include:

Cooperativo Pilas el Ojo en León (☎ 885 0844, 878 0283) Mario Muguia charges US\$25 to do the climb, which is a deal.

Ecotours de Nicaragua (☎ 222 2752; turismo@cablenet.com.ni; per person US\$45, minimum 7) Drive from Managua one-third of the way up Volcán Momotombo in a Unimog truck (a sort of mega-jeep), from where it's just two hours up the lava-strewn landscape to the crater.

Isla Momotombito is most conveniently (hah!) accessible from Puerto Momotombo, just around the corner from the ruins of León Viejo (see the boxed text, p175), on the shores of Lago de Managua. The basaltic cone has long been a ceremonial site, and a few remaining petroglyphs and statues are still visible on it and the surrounding islands. Rangers who live on the island may be able to take you on a tour once you get out there.

Although it's possible to visit the islet, it's not cheap or easy. A private boat seating four costs at least US\$100 to make the 9km trip, over sometimes very choppy water. Boat operators hang around the handful of disposable-looking restaurants at the lakeshore, all serving beer and *comida corriente*, or you could call **Miguel Narváez** (☎ 868 6279) to arrange a boat in advance.

Reserva Natural Pilas–El Hoyo

Most people come to this reserve to see the volcano that doesn't even get second billing: **Cerro Negro** (726m...and growing), one of the youngest volcanoes in the world. It first erupted from a quiet cornfield in 1850, and its pitch-black, loose gravel cone has been growing in spurts ever since. In 1992 a 6000m column of ash collapsed roofs in León and destroyed crops for kilometers around; in 1995 fountains of lava spewed forth. More recently, in 1999, an eruption following heavy rains that had collapsed the main crater opened three more craters at its base.

Almost every guide in León offers a guided hike to the top, a shadeless, two-to three-hour climb into the eye-watering fumes of the yellow streaked crater. Then – inspired by French cyclist Eric

Barone, who broke the world mountain bike speed record (not to mention his bicycle frame) in May 2002, clocking a cool 172km/h – your outfitter will offer a faster way down. **Volcano surfing** is offered on not only surfboards, but old mattresses, cardboard boxes and more. Be careful!

Other structures worth climbing include the dormant **Volcán Pilas**, which last had gas in 1954; and **El Hoyo** (1088m), the park's second-most active peak, basically a collapsed crater with fumaroles. Then it's time to relax in deliciously cool **Laguna de Asososca** (818m; also called Ajusco or El Tigre), a jungle-wrapped crater lake that's poorly signed and on private property, and therefore difficult to visit on your own. But if you book a tour climbing Cerro Negro (or are visiting León Viejo, nearby), definitely try to get this as an add-on.

Reserva Natural San Cristóbal–La Casita

This is the one that probably caught your eye, **Volcán San Cristóbal** (1745m), the tallest volcano in Nicaragua, streaming gray smoke from its smooth cone. Summiting this beauty is a serious hike, six to eight hours up, three hours down. A guide is highly recommended, as access is difficult, dangerous and requires crossing private property.

If you're game, however, rent a 4WD and head to Posoltega, then take the rough dirt road to Finca Bella, where you'll be charged a US\$2 trail fee. Ask to be pointed toward **Volcán Casita** (1405m), an eight-hour climb past fumaroles, to amazing views over Managua. From there, the trail to San Cristóbal's smoking crater should be clear.

Most tour operators in León arrange the hike, as does the **Chichigalpa alcaldía** (☎ 343 2303, 343 2232; alchichi@ibw.com.ni), where you'll take a trail that begins in the municipal park. Or check out **San Cristóbal las Finca Rojas** (☎ 341 0325, 341 0021), the coffee *finca* closest to the top, which can arrange guides and meals. There's currently hammock and tent space, plus plans for a hotel. **Hotel Casa Grande** (☎ 341 0325) in Chinandega can make reservations.

There are several other volcanic structures worth seeing, including **El Chonco** (715m), an inactive volcanic plug contiguous with San Cristóbal, and **Moyotepe**

(917m) close by, a small lagoon accessible from the Chinandega–Somotillo road.

HURRICANE MITCH MEMORIAL

Difficult to visit unless you have your own car, this sobering memorial on the slopes of Volcán Casita is 6km from the well-signed exit off the León–Chinandega road. You can tell which volcano is Casita from the highway; look for the denuded strip of earth, torn from the crater lip to the base. In October 1998, Hurricane Mitch (see p55) devastated Nicaragua; almost 4000 people lost their lives in the inundation. The vast majority of those are buried here, beneath a 3m-high tidal wave of volcanic mud that swept away the towns of Posoltega, El Porvenir and Rolando Rodríguez.

This is their headstone, a quiet pyramid of smooth rock topped with a simple white cross and surrounded by gardens. The memorial has wonderful views of San Cristóbal and, of course, Casita, once known as Apastepe, ‘The Mountain of Water.’

Reserva Natural Telica-Rota

This very active, 9052-hectare complex peaks at **Volcán Telica** (1061m), whose twin craters are a mere 9km north of León. Also called the ‘Volcano of León,’ Telica is active in four- to five-year cycles; the last really big eruption was in 1765. Most eruptions these days involve gases and a few pyroclastic belches.

There are several ‘extinct’ cones around the base, including **Cerro Agüero** (744m), **Loma Los Portillos** (721m) and **Volcán Rota** (832m), which still has constant fumaroles. There are big plans for this park, which is considered a potential ecotourism gold mine, due to its easy access from San Jacinto.

SAN JACINTO

The only town of any size on this stretch of the Ring of Fire, San Jacinto is base camp for climbs up **Volcán Telica** (1061m; six to eight hours), **Volcán Rota** (three to five hours), with great views of Telica, and **Volcán Santa Clara** (three to five hours). If you’re up for it, you can walk to Cerro Negro from here. Views from San Jacinto are at once inspiring and unsettling, with volcanoes fuming away on all sides.

Organized tours invariably stop at the famous **Hervideros de San Jacinto** (admission

US\$1; ☎ 7am–5pm), an expanse of bubbling mud puddles. They shift in size and location after a good rain, so put more faith in your pint-sized **guide** (per child US\$0.30–0.60) than the rickety fence. While you admire the simmering soil, consider asking one of the kids to grab you some fresh mud for a facial mask. You can wash it off about six blocks away at **Aguas Termales San Jacinto** (San Jacinto Hot Springs). Though not steaming hot, or even particularly scenic, this thermal cascade forms several natural pools that locals use for bathing and laundry, and it’s free. You’ll particularly appreciate the hot springs if you spend some time at **Hostel La Ceiba** (☎ 266 1018; nir@nicaralake.com.ni; dm incl breakfast US\$9.20; 📍), a simple cement structure with three six-bed dorms and shared cold-water bathrooms, operated by **Nicarao Lake Tours** (☎ in Rivas 266 1018; www.nicaralake.com.ni). There’s an on-site restaurant, and it also rents bicycles and horses.

La Ceiba can locate guides for climbing the volcanoes, or ask around for Delvin Castillo, half a block north of Colegio Sarah Maria Parrales. Guides may also be able to arrange tours of the **San Jacinto-Tizate Proyecto de Energía Geotermica**, about 1km north of town.

Buses leave for León (US\$0.50, 40 minutes) every half-hour between 4am and 5:30pm.

EL SAUCE

pop 30,000

Once a bustling and important link on the national railway, today scenic El Sauce is just a sleepy mountain town – except on the third Sunday in January. Pilgrims from all over Nicaragua, Guatemala and beyond make their way here to pay their respects to **El Señor de Esquipulas**, or the Black Christ.

The image, to which all manner of miracles have been attributed, arrived in El Sauce in 1723 from Esquipulas, Guatemala, and refused to move another centimeter upon arriving at this lovely spot. The beautiful, if not flashy, 1828 **Templo de El Sauce** was declared a national sanctuary in 1984, but burned in 1999. But the Black Christ was saved, and all El Sauce pitched in to rebuild the sanctuary.

Perhaps fittingly, the town’s most important products are milk and honey, and most visitors would agree that it is uncommonly blessed. The gateway to the Cordillera Dariense, El Sauce is surrounded by cool

green mountains strewn with waterfalls, and several **hiking trails** begin in town.

Hotel Blanco (☎ 319 2403) arranges guided hikes, or just ask around for the trailhead to the year-round green of the forest to **La Piedra de San Ramón**, which starts about 3km north of town. If you're looking for more excuses to stay, you could check out **Iglesia Calvario**, the city's other church, which is interesting for its A-frame construction, or take a taxi 6km from town to the **Río Grande**, with a swimming hole. There are no banks, although there is an **Internet café** (per hr US\$1) two blocks from the Templo.

Around the corner from the sanctuary, **Bar-Hotel El Viajero** (☎ 319 2325; r with/without bathroom US\$5/2.50) is a huge, once luxurious but now dilapidated adobe, with simple rooms with thin mattresses. **Hotel Blanco** (☎ 319 2403; s/d US\$6/9; P ♻️), two blocks downhill from the sanctuary, is a cozy spot with modern and comfortable, if not luxurious, rooms with new mattresses and plans to add a few air-con rooms. Conveniently, it's also the best restaurant in town. Owner Francisco Blanco can arrange guides for (or just point you toward) a variety of hikes, including La Piedra de San Ramón.

Finca Campestre Cárdenas (☎ 319 2329; harcaco@hotmail.com; P ♻️ 🚰) is a tourist *finca* with a small petting zoo, pool and private rooms with air-conditioning and bathroom, walking distance from town. It's also a *vivero* (plant nursery), and brings in a local crowd for their Sunday afternoon barbecue.

In addition to the hotels, other recommended eateries include Cafetín El Saucero and Comedor Falkis, both near the sanctuary.

Buses to León (US\$2.25, 2½ hours, 5am to 4:30pm, six daily) leave from the market, downhill from the sanctuary. Note that although the 28km road from the León–San Isidro highway is beautifully paved, the El Sauce–Estelí road (shown as the same 'level' of road on most maps) is 4WD-only in the dry season, if you're lucky.

NAGAROTE

pop 32,100

Not exactly a tourist attraction, this adobe enclave's main claim to fame is having been awarded 'Cleanest City in Nicaragua' three years running. But there are a few other excuses to make the pleasant

side trip, an easy 45-minute bus ride from León.

Originally called Nagrand Otle by its Chorotega founders, Spanish conquistadors changed the name to Nagarote in the late 1520s. They could do pretty much whatever they wanted at that point, having successfully secured the major intertribal trading town of the Dirian, Niquira, Chorotega and Subtiava nations. They even tastefully left the body of Cacique Nagrandano hanging from the branches of the town's largest tree, El Genízaro, to ensure that the locals would never forget.

They haven't, and **El Genízaro** is still here, surrounded by benches and looking a bit the worse for wear. In 1964, at between 700 and 1300 years old, the big tree was finally made a national monument by President Rene Schick Gutiérrez, who grew up here. It's fronted by a fallen branch (bigger than most trees) carved into a rather compelling monument, **Indito de Nagarote**.

Sightseers (hire a pedicab to take you on the grand tour for US\$1) could also take in **El Templo Parroquial Santiago**, a lovely 1600s adobe that claims to be the only church in Nicaragua with four images of the same saint. More importantly, you can buy delicious *quesillos* (see the boxed text, opposite) from the cart rolling around the pleasant parque central out front.

One block from the park is **Casa Cultural y Sala Museo El Genízaro** (🕒 7:30am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri), with Latin dance and cooking classes, and a museum filled with more statues and art carved from the branches of El Genízaro, one depicting the *cacique* with a noose around his neck. The cultural center can tell you where to find **petroglyphs**, under a bridge across Río Zayulapa, close to town.

There are no guesthouses in Nagarote, but you could grab another *quesillo* at El Guayacan, a spacious restaurant/bar about two blocks from the big tree, or Quesillos Acacia, near the main road. Buses leave the parque central every 45 minutes to León (US\$0.90, 45 minutes) and Managua (US\$1.25, one hour).

LA PAZ CENTRO

pop 36,770

You'll be changing buses here if you're headed to León Viejo (see the boxed text, p175), so why not take a long layover, just to

wander around a typical Nicaraguan town, and eat *quesillos*.

La Paz Centro is a *tejas*-making center, and several families make and fire these sunset-colored half-pipe ceramic shingles, for which Spanish colonial architecture is known. Most are actually sold in Costa Rica, where wealthy homeowners (primarily expats) have been buying them to top off their dream homes. The **alcaldía** (mayor's office; ☎ 314 2247) can arrange visits to *tejas* factories, with pit kilns so huge that they could bake paint onto a Cadillac.

Mercado de Artesanías (🕒 9am-7pm), on the highway across from the bus station, offers work by 14 ceramicists, who apparently got tired of making *tejas* and started on these heavy and appealing pots and sculptures, depicting Nicaraguan daily life. If you're up for an adventure, you could also take the one bus daily to the banks of **Río Tamarindo**, where you can't swim, but can go fishing or enjoy a big shrimp meal. The bus leaves at 6am and returns at 3pm.

There's one place to stay, **Hospedaje Familiar** (☎ 314 2340; d US\$8), two blocks from the *empalme*, with simple rooms and shared bathrooms. There are several places to eat, but only one matters: **Quesillos Guiligüiste** (quesillos US\$1; 🕒 6:30am-7pm), the original and still the best, right at the entrance to the city and conveniently close to the bus stop.

Buses leave across from the *empalme* to León (US\$0.80, 45 minutes, 6am to 6pm, every 50 minutes), Puerto Momotombo and León Viejo (US\$0.50, 30 minutes, every 50 minutes), and Managua (US\$1.25, one hour, every 45 minutes).

CHINANDEGA

Winning the title of 'Hottest City in Nicaragua' (and not in the metaphorical sense), Chinandega is primarily a service town for the country's only deepwater port, El Corinto, and a fertile agribusiness region taking advantage of all that rich, volcanic soil. Most visitors come because it's convenient to volcanoes, beaches and wetlands, but end up enjoying their time here.

Lots of lit-up signage and a healthy dose of groovy 1960s architecture give the old adobes a more modern feel, but architecture lovers needn't fret. Instead, take a tour of the country's most colorful collection of churches (again, not in the metaphorical sense), then relax with the alligators in the *parque central*.

Orientation & Information

Chinandega is on a logical Spanish grid, but note that the *alcaldía* is actually five blocks east of the natural city center at Parroquia Santa Ana.

Costa Rican consulate In the Intur shopping center.

FedEx In the Intur shopping center.

QUESILLO CONTROVERSY

It's no wonder that this is a point of pride: *quesillos*, Nicaragua's rich and refined answer to the common burrito, are the best food ever. Unless you're trying to beat high blood pressure, in which case you should still have a bite.

A thick, steaming corn tortilla is topped with a pancake of mozzarella-like cheese, then loosely rolled into a cylinder and fitted into a special plastic bag. A smiling cook will ask if you want the spicy onion chutney (you probably do), which is ladled into the tortilla's center along with a thick sour cream sauce. *Quesillos* go for around US\$1 a pop, are available alongside every paved road in the country and should not be missed.

Two towns have a legitimate claim as the *cuña*, or cradle, of *quesillo* culture: Nagarote, birthplace of innovator and originator Señora Socorro Munguía Madriz; and La Paz Centro, where she came up with the culinary triumph. In 1912, along with the Rueda sisters, she began selling *quesillos* – at both the Nagarote and La Paz Centro train stations, further confusing the issue.

As *quesillos* proliferated across the country, this original crew opened what's now an almost pilgrimage-worthy destination, Quesillos Guiligüiste (pronounced *kayseeyos wilee weestay*), so popular that it has its own freelance car-parking personnel out front. This, of course, is in La Paz Centro. But, as Nagarote natives note, Doña Dalila Lara, another early *quesillo* adherent, moved to Nagarote in the 1970s, where she opened Quesillos Acacia, also pilgrimage worthy, especially if you're still hungry.



Fundación Lider (☎ 344 2381; www.turismoconsiguina.com) The main office is in El Viejo, but there's a representative in the Chinandega Marena who can help arrange your trip to Volcán Cosigüina.

Intur (☎ 341 1935; chinandega@intur.gob.ni) Much more helpful and organized than average, Intur Chinandega keeps its collection of flyers and handy information-packed scrapbooks in a shopping center one and a half blocks west of the market. The staff here say that Granada is almost as hot, 'and often feels hotter' than Chinandega.

Lavomatic Express (per load US\$3) Does your laundry for you. It's one block north of Iglesia Guadalupe.

Marena (☎ 344 2443; lider@ibw.com.ni) Exceptionally friendly and helpful, this office keeps tabs on Reserva Natural San Cristóbal-Casita, Reserva Natural Volcán Cosigüina and Reserva Natural Estero Padre Ramos, all

with reasonable access; and Reserva Natural Delta de Estero Real, where you're on your own. Staff also keep an eye on Reserva Genetica Apacunaca (Apacunaca Genetic Resource Reserve). Marena can point you toward guides and other services, but doesn't generally arrange trips itself.

Tecnotec Internet (per hr US\$0.70; 🕒 8am-10pm; 📶) Just one of several super-speedy Internet spots, all with frosty air-conditioning.

Sights & Activities

Like many municipalities in Nicaragua, Chinandega has an enormous collection of archaeological treasures, including several jade pieces, but no real space to display them. At press time, the tentatively named **Museo de Arte Pre-Columbiano** had just been

approved; ask at your hotel to see whether it's open.

In the meantime, Chinandega really does have some seriously striking churches. Grab a bottle of water and a camera before heading to the vivid blueberry 1878 **Santuario de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe**, which despite the radiant and rather grandiose colonial-style facade has a simple precious wood interior with an exceptionally lovely Virgin. Four blocks to the north and two blocks west, **Iglesia San Antonio**, its dramatic facade steeped in a more sedate pastel yellow, has delightful Easter egg-blue and yellow columns and arches inside.

Next, it's 1586 **Parroquia Santa Ana**, three blocks north, Chinandega's most important church, with a splendid Stations of the Cross, lots of gilt and some Russian Orthodox styling that earn this one 'Best Interior in Town.' A richer yellow with white trim, it stands watch over what may be Nicaragua's best parque central, featuring **live alligators** (and turtles) in decorative cement enclosures. There's sometimes ballet *folklorico* and live music in the central kiosk. The **mausoleum of Rubén Darío's mother** is just one block east.

It's seven blocks east to **Iglesia El Calvario**, with a rust-red, rather Art-Deco exterior with a very nice bell tower, its otherwise simple interior hung with chandeliers.

Sleeping

Even Managuans complain that Chinandega is hot. Consider paying extra for air-con and keep an eye on kids to make sure they're drinking enough water.

Don Mario (☎ 341 4054; Enitel 170 varas norte; s/d with fan US\$12/16, with air-con US\$26/32; **P** ♻️) The extremely nice rooms with high ceilings, cable TV and excellent art by the English-speaking owner are wrapped around a pleasant courtyard and a kitchen that you can use.

Hotel Doña Mercedes (☎ 341 3201; s with bathroom US\$4, s/d with bathroom & cable TV US\$7/9) This hotel's clean and cheap, basic wooden rooms come with a fan and TLC; the immaculate shared toilets have puffy comfort seats.

Hotel Cosigüina (☎ 341 3636; www.hotelcosiguina.com; esquina de los bancos; s/d US\$30/40; **P** ♻️) This relatively plush property has hip 1960s accents, cable TV, hot-water bath-

rooms and even air-con so you can enjoy them.

Hotel del Pacífico (☎ 341 3841; hotelpac@ibw.com.ni; BAC 1c abajo, ½c sur; s/d incl breakfast US\$26/30; **P** ♻️) Even nicer, attractive, modern rooms are on the small side but have hot-water bathrooms and other amenities. It's the comfortable *ranchero* backyard (suitable for weddings, seriously), perfect for breakfast or hanging out, that makes this spot special.

Hotel Campestre La Terraza (☎ 341 3827; hotelcampterraza@lycos.com; s/d with fan US\$12/18, with air-con US\$26/30; **P** ♻️ 🚰) Run by the same owners as Hotel del Pacífico, right outside of town, this has equally nice rooms and a pool; for US\$1.25, you can visit on a day trip.

Hotel El Chinandegano (☎ 341 4800; raulbaca@hotmail.com; Esso El Calvario 1½c arriba; r with 1/2/3 beds US\$25/30/35; **P** ♻️ 🚰) Contender for the nicest spot in town, this place has free Internet, tasteful furniture, cable TVs and phones, plus one of the nicest restaurant/bars in the city. Avoid room Nos 1 and 2, which are right by the macaws.

Los Volcanes (☎ 341 1010; www.losvolcaneshotel.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$53/73; **P** ♻️) About 3km from town, this swanky spot has the custom toiletries, attractive lighting, fancy restaurant and Budget car-rental desk, but no pool.

Eating

The best cheap eats set up at dusk in the parque central, lined with hamburger stands. There are two great *fritangas* beside the basketball court just beyond.

Musmanni (snacks US\$1-2; ☎ 5am-9pm) Everyone's favorite chain bakery serves up sweet and savory starchy snacks around the corner from the market, next to the *alcaldía*.

Las Tejitas (mains US\$2; ☎ 6am-10:30am, 11am-2:30pm & 5-10:30pm) An institution, this *fritanga* gets packed breakfast, lunch and dinner – and mariachis could show up at any time. It's a solid steam-table buffet with a nationwide reputation.

Frank's Restaurant Bar & Grill (mains US\$4-10; ☎ 11am-10:30pm) This is Chinandega's fine-dining date night out, with white tablecloths and long-stemmed glasses. The specialty is steak with all sorts of fine imported wines on the side. It's next to Hotel El Chinandegano.

Corona de Oro (mains US\$3-5; ☎ 11am-10pm) Right in the thick of things, this spot serves large portions of decent Chinese food.

Bambú (BAC 75 varas norte; juices US\$1; ☎ 10am-11:30pm) This tiny café juices all sorts of good stuff – sugarcane, carrot, pineapple, spinach – right in front of you, with pastries, sandwiches or healthy snacks on the side.

La Colonia supermarket, five blocks east of La Bohemia, is the best place to resupply on the peninsula.

Drinking

Bar La Bohemia (☎ 5pm-midnight; ☎) In Hotel El Chinandegano, serves quality food and ‘the coldest beer in town,’ which is a draw. It’s also air-conditioned to the point where you’ll want a sweater.

There are two popular discos, and both serve food: Montserrat, on the ring road around town, gets the youth vote with reggae and Latin dance; Dialectus, even more opulent than its sister disco in León, attracts a more mature crowd. Thursday is mariachi night at both of them.

Getting There & Around

You can rent a car at **Budget** (☎ 341 1663; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat), at Hotel Cosigüina, or **Dollar** (☎ 341 2303), across from La Colonia supermarket. Taxis charge US\$0.50 in town, and also make the runs to El Viejo (US\$3) and Corinto (US\$6). There are two places to catch a bus: the big and relatively well-organized Mercado Bisne, and the more chaotic Mercadito, close to Parroquia Santa Ana. Transnica has an office in the Intur shopping center.

MERCADITO

El Viejo microbus US\$0.23, 10 minutes, 5am to 6pm, depart when full; bus US\$0.18, 20 minutes, 5am to 6pm, every 15 minutes

Machapa US\$1.30, two hours, 2:30pm

Playa Jiquilillo & Reserva Natural Estero Padre Ramos US\$0.75, 1½ hours, 7am, 10am, 11:20am, 3pm and 4:30pm; the 7am bus meets collective boats to Venecia Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday

Potosí (Volcán Cosigüina) US\$1.50, 3½ hours, 6am, 11:10am and 2:20pm

Punta Nata US\$1.50, 3½ hours, 12:10pm

MERCADO BISNE

Chichigalpa microbus US\$0.20, 15 minutes, 5am to 6pm, depart when full

Corinto bus US\$0.40, 40 hours, 5am to 6pm, every 15 minutes; microbus US\$0.60, 25 minutes, 5am to 6pm, depart when full

El Guasale (Honduran border) bus US\$1.25, 1¾ hours, 6am to 6pm, every 25 minutes; microbus US\$2, one hour, 6am to 6pm, depart when full

León bus US\$0.70, 1½ hours, 4am to 7pm, every 15 minutes; microbus US\$1.10, one hour, 5am to 7pm, depart when full

Managua bus US\$2.15, three hours, 5am to 4pm, every 30 minutes; microbus US\$3, two hours, 5am to 4pm, depart when full

AROUND CHINANDEGA

El Viejo

Just 5km from Chinandega is the ancient indigenous capital of Tezoatega, today called El Viejo and among the most symbolically important of the colonial cities. This is the site of **Basílica de Nuestra Señora de la Inmaculada Concepción de la Virgen María**, home of Nicaragua’s patron saint and mistress of its biggest national religious event, La Gritería, when troupes of *fiesteros* shout the question *¿Quién causa tanta alegría?* (‘Who causes so much joy?’) to receive the response, *¡La concepción de María!* (‘The conception of Mary!’).

The most dedicated pilgrims show up to her beautiful church a few days early for the Lavada de la Plata (Polishing of the Silver) on December 5 and 6. The devout use cotton to clean the church’s spectacular silver filigree altar, and the offerings (also usually silver) left throughout the year. The work is meditative but fun, with mariachis serenading the faithful at their brilliant task.

There’s not much else to do in this tiny town, other than check email at Ciber Center, behind the *alcaldía*, but El Viejo is home to two organizations that work together to arrange recommended guided trips to Reserva Natural Estero Padre Ramos and Reserva Natural Volcán Cosigüina; Selva offers accommodations here in El Viejo.

Fundación Lider (☎ 344 2381; www.turismoconsiguina.com) caters primarily to larger groups, and offers two-day (per person US\$80) and three-day (US\$90) trips to the volcano, including transportation, food and lodging. **Parque Ecológico Tzesuataga** (☎ 344 2381; lider@ibw.com.ni; Portón Inatec 1c norte, 1c oeste; r per person incl breakfast US\$10) has comfortable bamboo and thatch huts open to anyone,

but is usually used as an overnight orientation for the conservation organization **Selva** (Somos Ecologistas en la Lucha por la Vida y Ambiente; We Are Ecologists Fighting for Nature – *selva* is Spanish for ‘forest’). It offers recommended package tours to Reserva Natural Estero Padre Ramos and Reserva Natural Volcán Cosigüina, with an emphasis on sea turtle conservation during laying season, which peaks in September and October. The ‘park’ sits on 1.5 *manzanas* (1.1-hectare blocks) just outside El Viejo, which isn’t a bad place to be.

You could also stay in town at the very basic but clean adobe **Hostel San Joaquín** (☎ 893 5480; r with/without bathroom per person US\$5/3), two and a half blocks downhill from the basilica, with thin mattresses and walls that almost touch the ceiling. It also sells cheese.

There are a few *fritangas* fronting the market, or go upscale at **Bar-Restaurant Tezoatega** (mains US\$4-6; 🕒 11am-midnight), two blocks from the basilica, with seafood and a dance floor, or **Restaurant Piscina Olímpica** (mains US\$3-6; 🕒 11am-11pm), around the corner, which is a bit cheaper and really does have a huge pool, though it’s usually empty.

Drivers should note that this is the last chance for gas on the peninsula. All buses headed north from Chinandega to Potosí or the Cosigüina beaches stop at the El Viejo *empalme* about 20 minutes after leaving Chinandega. To Chinandega, you can get buses (US\$0.18, 20 minutes, every 15 minutes) and minivans (US\$0.23, 10 minutes, leaving when full) from in front of the basilica. A taxi to Chinandega costs US\$3.

Chichigalpa

The town with the cutest name in Nicaragua is best known as the source from which all **Flor de Caña rum** flows, in 12 beloved shades running crystal clear to deepest amber. Chichigalpa is also home to **Ingenio San Antonio**, the largest sugar refinery in the country, and cane fields carpet the skirts of **Volcán San Cristóbal**, which rises from the sweaty lowlands a mere 6km from the city center.

There’s no Intur, but the **Chichigalpa alcaldía** (☎ 343 2303, 343 2232; alchichi@ibw.com.ni), about two blocks from the exceptionally nice parque central, has a Commission of Culture that can arrange guided tours of

Flor de Caña (not open to the general public), city tours that take in the ruins of **Iglesia El Pueblito**, and guided hikes to the top of San Cristóbal via **Parque Ecológico Municipal**. This smoking city park, about 10km from town and accessible by 4WD only, preserves 50 *manzanas* of mostly primary forest including a trailhead to the top of the volcano. Guides cost US\$12 per group.

Other than the automotels at the *empalme*, there’s the ultra-basic **Hospedaje Imperial** (d US\$3) two blocks west of the park, with cement rooms, cleanish shared bathrooms and an odd smell, or very nice **Hotel La Vista** (☎ 343 2035; jbarker@nicaraguasugar.com.ni; s/d US\$25/35; 📍 🚽), where you get what you pay for: super-clean, modern rooms with tile floors, tasteful paint jobs, cable TV and air-conditioning. And the balcony does indeed have a fine volcano view.

There are lots of good places to eat. Try **Rincón Criollo** (meals US\$6-8; 🕒 daily), around the corner from the park, specializing in *churrasco* and barbecued chicken, or **Cafetín Los Antojuitos** (dishes US\$2-4), right on the park, with a great lunchtime steam-table buffet.

Microbuses to Chinandega (US\$0.20, 15 minutes) depart from the market when full, 5am to 6pm.

To Somotillo & El Guasale (Honduras Border)

It’s a smooth, paved 80km through mostly empty grazing land to the border town of Somotillo, though you will see signs for **Reserva Genética Apacunaca** (Apacunaca Genetic Resource Reserve). There’s no tourist infrastructure, which is sort of the point. It protects one of four known caches of *teosinte*, or wild corn, in the world, only discovered here in the late 1990s.

Corn, long a Nicaraguan staple food, has rather mysterious origins. *Teosinte* has a very hard outer shell, rendering it almost inedible except as popcorn – an odd choice for domestication. It, like modern maize, employs a type of photosynthesis most common in cacti and other dry-weather plants, but its roots are actually modified branches, an adaptation more common in swamps.

Both adaptations are common in epiphytes, however – tree-dwelling plants usually associated with the cloud forest. But there are also tropical dry forest epiphytes,

such as pithaya (made into a bright purple drink), which is closely related to prickly pear cactus; perhaps corn started up in the trees. But no one knows, and the cache at Apacunaca is key to this genetic sleuthing: while other *teosinte* stocks grow in dry, high-altitude areas, fast-growing *Zea luxurians* thrives at an elevation of 10m, surviving in standing water during the six-month rainy season.

If you're not deeply interested in corn, however, it's on to sunny Somotillo, more a place to get stuck than to visit. If this happens to you, hire one of the 7000 pedicabs to take you on a grand tour, perhaps of the two **churches**. You could also check your email at **CiberCafe San Lorenzo** (per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-10pm), next to the big, dirty market.

A cluster of hotels on the main road are the real attraction, however. **Hotel Fronteras** (☎ 346 2264, 602 5088; d with fan/air-con US\$10/15; 📺) is the most comfortable, with attractive furniture, cable TV and a nice restaurant. Acceptable **Hotel Nelson** (☎ 346 2579; d with fan/air-con US\$6/12; 📺) comes in a distant second. The best restaurant in town is Comedor Oasis de Julia, on the main road, but there are several others near the market.

COSIGÜINA PENINSULA BEACHES

The Cosigüina Peninsula is well on its way to becoming an island, worn away on two sides by brilliant estuaries and fringed with sandy beaches, ranging from the pearl grays of Jiquilillo to coal black at Playa Carbón.

These aren't the easiest beaches to visit in Nicaragua, but you'll be rewarded with impressive stretches of sand interrupted

only by fishing villages, sea turtles and mangrove swamps. The surfing is great, but largely unexplored; hotels are few and far between. If you make it here, once you're settled in, tanned and relaxed and ready, consider climbing what was until very recently the tallest volcano in Central America.

El Corinto

pop 20,000 / elevation 10m

Nicaragua's only deep-water port, El Corinto actually inherited the job from a much older town, Puerto El Realejo, founded on February 26, 1522, and subsequently attacked by such famous-name pirates as William Dampier and John Davis. As the centuries passed and sand filled in the estuary, the barrier island of Punto Icaço became the port, where El Corinto was founded in 1858.

This was the port that US President Ronald Reagan illegally mined in 1983, inspiring his horrified congress to pass a law specifically forbidding the use of taxpayer dollars for overthrowing the Nicaraguan government, and thus marking the beginning of the Iran-Contra Affair (see the boxed text, p30).

Today, just 19km from Chinandega, El Corinto's 19th-century wooden row houses, narrow cobbled streets and broad beaches score high on the 'adorability potential' scale, although actual adorability ratings are much lower. It's sort of sad; although some 65% of the nation's imports and exports flow through, very little of the money stays here, mostly in the dark bars and massage parlors that surround

DIY: PUERTO MORAZÁN & DELTA DEL ESTERO REAL

If you love wetlands, you're going to be disappointed: there's no tourist infrastructure at all for enormous Reserva Natural Delta del Estero Real, about 20km – two hours by bus on this terrible road – north of Chinandega in the desperately poor town of Puerto Morazán.

The worst part is that this monumental river delta, luxuriating along the Honduran border, is beautiful, with alligators lounging alongside the lush, mangrove-lined shores, views to Volcán Cosigüina and natural lagoons all aflutter with migratory birds. And threatened: its inaccessibility has emboldened poachers, loggers and dirty shrimping operations. This wetlands needs tourist.

Should you choose to accept this mission, head out early for a day trip to Puerto Morazán, or pack your mosquito net and ask at the **alcaldía** (☎ 342 2580) if anyone is renting rooms or hammock space in town. Fishing boats holding four, plus your Spanish-speaking guide, ask about US\$20 for a four-hour tour of the reserve. There are seven buses daily from the Chinandega Mercadito (US\$1, two hours).

BORDER CROSSING: TO CHOLUTECA, HONDURAS

This painless, uncrowded border crossing begins about 200m from the bus stop, with clean bathrooms (US\$0.30). Walk or take a pedicab (US\$0.70) about 1km total between the two border posts, separated by two duty-free stores, a Bancentro and a pool hall.

It costs US\$5 to enter Nicaragua, US\$2 to leave; Honduras charges US\$3 to enter, you exit free of charge. The post is open 24 hours, but buses stop running and other services are curtailed after 6pm. You can drive across this border; Nicaragua charges US\$12 to enter, while Honduras has a sliding scale; cars with US plates pay the maximum US\$32 to enter.

On the Honduran side, minibuses (US\$1.25, 6am to 6pm, every 15 minutes) run regularly to Choluteca, with hotels, restaurants and regular bus service to Tegucigalpa and the Salvadoran border. From the Nicaraguan side, buses serve Chinandega (US\$1.25, 1¾ hours, 6am to 6pm, every 25 minutes) and Managua (US\$4, five hours, 11am, 1:30pm, 3pm and 4pm), and there is one *directo* to León at 11am daily. If it's late, Somotillo is just a US\$0.70 cab ride away.

the massive docks. Cruise ships arrive in February and March, but customers are whisked away to more scenic spots.

The **parque central** is downright audacious, however, a concrete confection of fountains and turtles with a striking nautical-themed clock tower. **Alfonso Cortes-Corinto History Museum, Library & Auditorium** (admission by donation; ☎ 7:30am-noon & 1:30-6pm), in the bright blue former train station, has a handful of informative displays about Corinto's once and future greatness arranged around a few railroad artifacts, gathering dust in the grinding reality of the present.

Across the street, a squat, green Catholic church is the final resting place of poet **Azarías H Pallais**, although most literature ignores him, noting instead that **Isla El Cardón**, just offshore, inspired Rubén Darío's poem 'A Magarita Debayle.'

The **beaches** close to town are dirty, but walk just a few minutes north to find cleaner **Paso Caballos**, with a string of thatched restaurant/bars, a terrible rip current and **good surfing**. Between El Corinto and Paso Caballos, a big, hollow left is supposed to be one of the best waves in the country, but it's boat access only. North of Paso Caballos is a river mouth break and some peaks break left. The protected bay also offers world-class **windsurfing**, if you've brought your own equipment – big swells roll in toward the estuary when the tide changes, good for jumps.

El Corinto actually does get packed the first weekend in May for the **Fiesta Gastronomica del Mar**. It begins with a fishing competition and ends with every chef in the department turning out top-quality seafood

dishes for the crowd. Cultural activities, parades, beauty contests and lots of dancing help you work it off.

Stay a while at downscale **Hospedaje Luvi** (☎ 342 2637; d US\$6), a block from the parque central, with basic rooms, decent shared bathrooms and a couple of hammocks strung up inside. Better, shell out for **Hotel Central** (☎ 342 2380; s/d US\$30/40; P ☎), across from the port, with huge rooms featuring c 1965 furniture, somewhat newer air-conditioning and cable TV.

Most restaurants are on the water. Costa Azul brings in movers and shakers from León for its shrimp dishes, while El Peruano also has great seafood for under US\$5 a plate. At either one, you can hire boats for about US\$30 to take you on a **sightseeing tour** of the islands, some of them (including Isla El Cardón; sorry, Darío fans) private and off-limits.

At Puente Paso Caballos (not to be confused with the beach further north) on the road to Corinto, **Restaurante Español** (☎ 342 8055; meals US\$2-8; ☎ 11am-9pm) overlooks the estuary and serves good-quality seafood and paella. The owners' goals include a hotel with windsurfing classes.

Buses (US\$0.40, 40 minutes) and minibuses (US\$0.60, 25 minutes) depart the parque central every 15 minutes or so for Chinandega.

Playa Aserradores

Worth the bumpy ride from the well-signed exit off the Chinandega–Potosí highway, this long, smooth stretch of sand has two good lodging options, seafood *ranchos* in high season and excellent surfing. The

name of the wave is Boom-wavos (The Boom), and it's worth checking Chancletas' website to see it for yourself.

Hotel Chancletas (☎ Apr-Oct 894 4669, Nov-Mar 305 858 1914; www.hotelchancletas.com; d US\$30; 🏠) is a comfortable surfers spot offering clean rooms (some with air-con), camping space and an excellent hammock-to-guest ratio. In the end, however, it's all about the view: this grassy hill overlooks the breaks at Boom-wavos, named for the powerful, hollow beach break making all that noise. There's also a left five minutes offshore and a few other good breaks around.

Marina Puesto del Sol (☎ 276 0323; www.marinapuestodelsol.com; d US\$110-190, ste US\$400; 🏠 🚗 🚲), another 1km along the road, is a five-star, Santa Barbara-style yacht club offering great views of smoking San Cristóbal from the infinity pool, and even better ones from the enormous, fully equipped (fluffy robes, sofa beds, coffeemakers) rooms, close to the fancy sailboats in the glittering marina. Sure, the amazing private beach is really public, by law, but you won't care as you're shuttled to the oceanfront restaurant in complimentary air-conditioned vans.

The club hosts an international fishing tournament in December, and organizes yacht tours up and down the coast. Upscale outfitter **Kilambé Nature Travel** (☎ 266 9391; www.kilambetours.com) does a yoga retreat here, which would probably be pretty sweet.

Playa Jiquilillo

This endless pale gray beach (pronounced *heekeeleeyo*) frames what you thought existed only in tales that begin 'You should have seen it back when I was first here...' The picture-perfect fishing village fronts a dramatic rocky point, where tide pools reflect the reds and golds of a huge setting sun, Cosigüina's ragged bulk rising hazy and postapocalyptic to the north. The region remains largely undeveloped, despite its beauty and accessibility, because a devastating 1992 tsunami wiped this village out completely.

But it's so perfect right now. Clean and shady, there's no real rip current in the calm cove. Just beyond is a good river-mouth break, with regular peaks where you can almost always carve out a few turns; bring your own board. Most people are here to see **Reserva Natural Estero Padre Ramos**, where you

can also arrange lodging. Jiquilillo has two official places to stay, but locals are used to visitors and many have a room they'll rent cheap. Water and electricity are unreliable.

Let Nate know you're on your way to **Hospedaje Rancho Esperanza** (☎ 862 1004; hospedaje_rancho_esperanza@yahoo.com; dm US\$4, cabaña s/d/tr/q US\$6/10/14/18), a quiet collection of bamboo huts scattered across a grassy field where you can hear the waves crash. The dorm is on stilts above the common area, where meals (US\$1 to US\$3) and hammocks are available. Horseback rides, turtle tours, area hikes and even the climb up Cosigüina can all be arranged right here; there are discounts for long-term stays. It's just north of the bus stop – ask for 'El Rancho de Nato.'

Originally a health-care volunteer, Nate decided to stay on after his NGO went belly-up. He arranges all manner of volunteer opportunities, and if you have a useful skill (cutting hair, making handicrafts, baking bread) there may be people eager to learn; if you're in marketing, the Children's Club will still take you. Musicians and Spanish-language books are always welcome.

A couple of kilometers north is **Hotel Los Zorros** (☎ 860 3433; s/d US\$6/9), in the community of Los Zorros, fronting a picturesque estuary. Cabins were basic to begin with and have run way down since then; showerheads are decorative. There's an on-site restaurant that may be open.

There are several seafood shacks in Jiquilillo proper, all serving set plates for US\$1 to US\$3, seafood specials for up to US\$10. Standouts include Padre Ramos, Don Rocky and, right before the speed bump, Doña Isabelle. About 200m north of Hospedaje Rancho Esperanza, fancier (cement!) **Gemellos** (mains US\$4-9; 🏠) has a swimming pool and ocean views, plus well-prepared seafood.

Buses to Chinandega (US\$0.80, 1½ hours) leave at 6:15am, 7:30am, 9:30am, 1:30pm and 3:30pm, returning from the Chinandega Mercadito at 7am, 10am, noon, 3pm and 4:30pm, with continuing service to Los Zorros and Padre Ramos.

Reserva Natural Estero Padre Ramos

A few minutes north of Los Zorros is the community of Padre Ramos, one of 16 small towns inside the federally protected wetlands of **Reserva Natural Estero Padre**

Ramos. The river delta is part of the largest remaining mangrove forests in Central America, and is key in the proposed Reserva Biológica Golfo de Fonseca (Gulf of Fonseca Biological Corridor), a wetlands conservation agreement between Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador.

The **ranger station** in Padre Ramos offers access to a boats-only system. Rent boats with local guides or do it yourself in a dugout canoe, and explore these 8800 hectares of mangroves inhabited by alligators, ocelots, all manner of birds and an epic number of mosquitoes. You can visit Isleta Champerico, where the real Padre Francisco Ramos once lived; Isla La Tigre, with swimming beaches; or La Loma Chichihualtepec, a good spot for bird-watching.

Olive Ridley and other sea turtles lay their eggs here between July and December, peaking in October and November, when **Selva** (☎ 884 9156; selvanic@hotmail.com), based in El Viejo, arranges turtle tours and accepts volunteers. It also offers package tours of Estero Padre Ramos year-round, including comfortable bamboo huts with real beds (and mosquito nets!) in paradise, all transportation and food. Huts are in three picturesque spots: Padre Ramos, where the bus drops you off; in Machapa, with bus access from Chinandega; and Venecia, with boat access only. Packages run US\$90 for two days, including food, transportation and guides, or you can just show up and stay at any of its outposts for US\$10 per person, with meals available for US\$3 to US\$5 each.

There's other food and lodging in Padre Ramos, including **La Tortuga Boluda** (rper person US\$4), a family-run spot with shared bathrooms; they can arrange guided boat tours. Tour prices vary according to the type of boat, running from US\$30 for a motorized canoe to US\$90 for a plush 10-person *lancha* (small boat). Bargain hard. There are **collective boats** (US\$2) from Padre Ramos to Venecia and other inland villages on Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday only.

Buses to Chinandega (US\$0.80, 1½ hours) leave at 5:50am, 7am, 9am, 1pm and 3:30pm, returning from the Chinandega Mercadito at 7am, 10am, noon, 3pm and 4:30pm. There's one bus to Machapa daily, leaving the Chinandega Mercadito at 2:30pm.

RESERVA NATURAL VOLCÁN COSIGÜINA

It was once the tallest volcano in Central America, perhaps more than 3000m high, but all that changed on January 20, 1835. In what's considered the Americas' most violent eruption since colonization, this hot-blooded peninsular beauty blew half her height in a single blast that paved the oceans with pumice, left three countries in stifling darkness for days and scattered ash from Mexico to Colombia.

Today, what remains of Volcán Cosigüina reclines, as if spent, the broad and jagged 872m heart of the peninsula. It's now a very manageable (if blisteringly hot) three-hour climb up one of two trails to the top: **Sendero La Guacamaya**, which starts at the ranger's station near El Rosario; and **Sendero el Jovo**, which descends to more developed Potosí. The rare dry tropical forest, home to one of the continent's last sustainable populations of huge red macaws, as well as pumas, spider monkeys and plenty of pizotes, loses its leaves by January.

You can do the trail as a loop, and go on foot, horseback or even in a truck. Whichever way, when you arrive at the lookout you'll be able to gaze out over a 2000m-diameter, rainwater-filled crater lake, dyed a rich blue-green by continuing volcanic activity. Or descend, if you know what you're doing and have real equipment, 700m to the waterline.

And beyond all that lies the **Golfo de Fonseca**, bordered by the largest mangrove stand left in the Americas, shared by three nations whose volcanoes represent them right here: Cosigüina, Volcán Conchagua in El Salvador and Volcán Amapala in Honduras. The majestic rocky islands rising so steeply from the rich and brackish gulf, alive with squawking pelicans and frigate birds, are called the Farallones de Cosigüina; they are all that's left of Cosigüina's mighty peak.

After you come back down, you could hire a boat in Potosí to inspect the islets and Punta San José, or if you have a car you can drive along the shore – and this is a transformative experience – another 15 rocky kilometers further into no-man's-land. In the other direction, around the volcano's back, Punta Ñata overlooks cliffs that plunge 250m into the Farallones-studded sea.

Or relax at one of the many beaches, all in varying shades of dark volcanic sand. The sea turtles love this shoreline, and four Pacific species nest at pitch-black Playa Carbón. Contact **Selva** (☎ 884 9156; selvanic@hotmail.com) in El Viejo for information on volunteering along with University of León students in turtle season.

Sore muscles? Head to the hot springs; you have some choices. In Potosí, **Centro Ecoturístico Potosí** offers hot springs with shade and food service, or go wild at one of several undeveloped springs that locals will happily point out.

Tours

Several outfitters in León (see p169) also offer tours. No matter who you trek with, just remember the mosquito repellent.

Fundación Lider (☎ 344 2381; www.turismoconsiguina.com) Offers all-inclusive tours, including transportation from Chinandega or El Viejo, food, lodging and horses; two days and one night run US\$60, three days and two nights US\$90. The main office is in El Viejo, but there's a representative in the Chinandega Marena (see p182).

Petrona Perez & Yuritzia Zeas (☎ 842 2007, 865 2229; aidepc2004@yahoo.com) Based in El Viejo, these guides go to the top on foot (US\$10 per group) or horseback (US\$5 extra per person) and arrange homestays (US\$10 per person) in the community of Los Laureles, about 2km from the base of the volcano. Sleep in a hammock, share flush toilets and enjoy homemade meals (US\$2 to US\$3).

Sleeping & Eating

Fundación Lider can arrange a dorm bed or hammock (US\$3 per person) at the ranger station in El Rosario, or just show up. Other guide services can arrange homestays in Potosí or El Rosario. In Potosí, you could also stay at Hospedaje Brisas del Golfo, next to the dock, with cement rooms, fans and shared bathroom.

Hotel Cosiguina (☎ 341 2878; www.haciendacosiguina.com.ni/dm/s/d/tr/q US\$20/25/40/60/80; ☎ ☎) The best of the accommodations around are at this hacienda 65km north of Chinadega. The *finca* was originally founded in 1775, and 55 families still work together raising peanuts, sesame and sorghum. You'll stay in a century-old, precious hardwood cheese barn with a partially thatched roof that's been remodeled into comfortable, air-conditioned

rooms. Your hosts offer several tours, including a trip up the volcano in a truck (US\$22 per person), horseback rides (US\$15), guided hikes (US\$7) and hot-spring treks (US\$10).

Getting There & Away

It used to be two hours by ferry from Puerto Potosí to La Unión, El Salvador, and there's talk of reinstating the route, which hasn't run regularly since the Contra War. So far, however, it's just talk. Any tour office in León or Chinandega will be able to give you the latest.

There are at least three buses daily to Chinandega (US\$1.50, 3½ hours). One bus leaves Chinandega daily for Punta Nata (US\$1.50, 3½ hours) at 12:10pm, returning in the early morning.

NORTHERN HIGHLANDS

Nicaragua's scenery soars into the misty cloud forests of the Northern Highlands, where three ancient mountain chains conspire to fold away, into their thickly forested skirts, cathedrals and quetzales and tumbling waterfalls, not to mention some of the world's best coffee and tobacco.

The cities here are ancient, founded long before the gracefully fortified adobes were erected (as often by British pirates as by Spanish colonists), and many of them still go by their old names. The ridges and valleys between them gave local hero Augusto César Sandino the chance to start building his vision when he made his base here among the pines in the 1920s and '30s. And later, the Contras and Sandinistas who fought in his name, would bury too many of their own in these granite hills.

This is where the Río Coco is born, flowing from the cloud forest to the steaming Caribbean, past campesino coffee cooperatives and indigenous villages, and into the mighty Bosawás.

Climate & Geography

This is the region with the best climate in Nicaragua, assuming you enjoy the all-natural air-conditioning of the Cordillera Dariense, topped with cloud forests over 1200m, where 12°C isn't unusual. If



you have your heart set on a hot tropical vacation conducive to tanning, it might not be for you. It's green and muddy in rainy season (May to December), and desiccated and warmer in dry season (January to May), when things get dusty and brown.

The Segovias are Nicaragua's highest mountains, soaring up to 2106m Cerro

Mogotón, the highest point in Nicaragua and one of the last spots (unfortunately) still landmined. Sierra Dipilto-Jalapa, the Segovian Mountains and Cordillera Isabelia are all limestone and granite with acidic soils, hence the four species of pine, evergreen oaks found here, and orchids galore.

Dangers & Annoyances

The armed militias are long gone and, with the exception of Cerro Mogotón, the mines have been officially cleared. However – and this really only affects scientists and others headed away from population centers – there are still mines out there. Always hire a local guide and stay on established trails.

Getting There & Around

Bus connections in the region are excellent, and both transportation hubs, Estelí and Matagalpa, are around 2½ hours by bus from Mercado Mayoreo in Managua. There is a daily service to León, as well, but it's usually easier to take buses to San Isidro and change to a León bus there. There's a regular service to Estelí and Matagalpa until 5:30pm.

Many roads are graded dirt that ranges from excellent (Estelí to Jinotega) to impassable (Estelí to El Sauce), but these conditions can change with heavy rains. Drivers should double check with locals before heading out. There are two Honduras border crossings convenient for getting to El Salvador: mellow El Espino, close to Somoto; and busy and efficient Las Manos, just north of Ocotal.

ESTELÍ

pop 85,000 / elevation 856m

If you're one of those travelers drawn to Nicaragua by more than a bit of curiosity about the Sandinista-led revolution, particularly if you're the sort with a Che Guevara T-shirt, you really need to stop into the highland stronghold of Estelí. It's an agribusiness center (specializing in premium cigars) and principal town between Managua and the Honduran border, hence the strip of trucker-friendly business lining the Interamericana (Pan-American Hwy) as it blasts through town.

This strategic importance led to heavy fighting during the revolution and later, the Contra War; this city has been bombed too many times. Regardless, then, as now, it remained one of the Sandinista's strongest support bases in the country. This sentiment is expressed all over town, from murals and bars to the several Spanish schools that were once the first stop of the *internacionalistas* (idealistic young volunteers who came during the 1980s) before

they hit the collectivized farms. Estelí is still a popular place to learn the language, smoke a stogie – Estelí's own Tobacco Cuba-Nica Serie Padrón 1926 is one of the world's best – and just relax into one of the Northern Highlands' most storied cities.

Orientation

Estelí has two main roads running north-south through town, the Interamericana and Av Central, which runs parallel to the Interamericana some 25 blocks before rejoining the major road. The turnoff to Jinotega is marked by a monument on the main road, with both bus stations located just south.

Atypically, Estelí utilizes a street numbering system, and every block is clearly signed; this system is so universally ignored that the official city maps don't even mention it. The intersection of Av Central and Calle Transversal is the center of the system. *Calles* (streets) ascend in number north and south of Calle Transversal; *avenidas* (avenues) ascend east and west of Av Central. Streets and avenues are suffixed 'NE' (northeast), 'SO' (southwest) etc, according to which quadrant of town they belong to.

Information

CULTURAL CENTERS

Casa de Cultura Leonel Rugama Rugama (☎ 713 3021; cnr Av 1a NE & Calle Transversal) Next to El Museo Arqueologica, this Casa de Cultura offers a variety of dance, cooking and music classes (per class/week US\$0.70/3), as well as evenings of live music and other activities, notably the *peña cultural*, an evening of folkloric dance performed by its students and other activities.

Ixchen (cnr Av 3a NE & Calle 3a NE) This women's center is just north of the market.

EMERGENCY

Police (☎ 118)

INTERNET ACCESS

Casa Estelí (☎ 713 2584; Interamericana; ☎ 8am-8pm; per hr US\$0.70)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Cruz Roja (Red Cross; ☎ 713 2330)

Hospital (☎ 713 6303)

MONEY

Banco America Central (BAC; esquina de los bancos) Has a MasterCard/Cirrus/Visa/Plus ATM. Several other

banks nearby, including BanCentro and BanPro, have Visa/Plus ATMs

POST & TELEPHONE

Enitel (Calle Transversal) Two blocks east of the post office.
Post office (cnr Calle Transversal & Av Central)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Casa Esteli (☎ 713 2584; Interamericana; 🕒 8am-8pm) Associated with Turicentro Estelimar (p195), this information outlet, right on the highway, has stacks of flyers, a good city map (US\$1), lots of information and an Internet café, and arranges tourist packages.

Fider (Foundation for Rural Investigation & Development; ☎ 713 3918; fiderest@ibw.com.ni) The office is 1½ blocks east of PetroNic. Takes care of visitors to Reserva Natural Cerro Tisey-Estanzuela.

Intur (☎ 713 6799; cnr Calle 3 NE & Av 3 NE) This friendly Intur outlet has flyers and other general information about the area.

Marena (Ministry of the Environment & Natural Resources; ☎ 713 2302; delestel@ibw.com.ni) This office manages several reserves, including (nominally) Reserva Natural Mirafior and Reserva Natural Cerro Tisey-Estanzuela, which have good access, and Reserva Natural Cerro Quiabú-Las Brisas, Reserva Natural Mesas de Moropotente and Reserva Natural Cerro Tamabú, which don't. It wasn't geared to tourists at press time, but the Fider office looks after visitors to Reserva Natural Cerro Tisey-Estanzuela and the UCA Mirafior office can arrange everything for Reserva Natural Mirafior.

Unión de Cooperativas Agropecuarias de Mirafior (UCA; ☎ 713 2971; www.mirafior-uca.com; Calle 9a NE; 🕒 8am-noon & 12:30-5:30pm Mon-Sat) Looks after visitors to Reserva Natural Mirafior. The office is one block west of the Interamericana, actually inside the schoolyard. Look for the helpful mural.

Sights & Activities

Although Estelí's most impressive attractions are in the mountains surrounding the 'Diamond of the Segovias,' the 1823 **Estelí Cathedral** is worth a wander, and the murals surrounding the parque central (central park) are interesting as well. Several of the parks display **petroglyphs** that were brought down here from the mountains in the early 1900s, many of which are now badly damaged.

Be sure to stop by the **Galería de Héroes y Mártires** (☎ 713 3753; Av 1a NE; donations appreciated; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Sat), devoted to fallen revolutionaries, with walls of faded photos and personal effects, from clothing to weaponry, on display. There are spe-

cial exhibits (with a bit of signage in English) about Leonel Rugama Rugama, the warrior-poet whose last line was his best: when he and Carlos Fonseca were surrounded by 300 National Guard, with tanks and planes, they told him to surrender. 'Surrender, your mother!' he famously replied, which is one, quite literally, for the history books.

Next door, **Museo de Historia y Arqueología** (☎ 713 3753; Av 1a NE; donations appreciated; 🕒 8am-noon) has a small collection of pottery shards, shells and other miscellanea that could keep you entertained for a few minutes longer.

A good excuse for a 2km walk toward Jinotega, **Turicentro Estelimar Science Museum & Pools** (☎ 713 7453; www.asdenic.org; admission US\$1.25; 🕒 8am-4pm) has a small science museum with some fabulous solar- and pedal-operated dinosaurs made out of old car parts, plus displays involving alternative energy, gears and hydraulics. There are also three attractive pools where you can relax afterward.

About 1km south of town, **Cecalli** (☎ 713 4048; 🕒 8am-5pm) is an organic farming cooperative specializing in medicinal plants; it has a small museum with dried and fresh herbs that is well worth visiting. You can also check out the selection of herbal teas, organic shampoos, *pomada Don Juan* and other herbal remedies, or get a massage (US\$5, 30 minutes), have acupuncture, or just talk to a doctor about whatever ails you. No appointment is necessary, and it's about US\$6 per treatment. Afterward, La Casita café (p196) is right next door.

Courses

Ananda Yoga (per class US\$0.30; 🕒 5pm Mon-Fri) Yoga classes are offered at the Yoga Y Licuados Ananda health-food restaurant next to the Casa de Cultura.

CENAC Spanish School (☎ 713 2025; www.ibw.com.ni/~cenac; per week US\$140, incl homestay) Also teaches English to Nicaraguans, if you'd like to volunteer. It's 50m north of Cotran Sur.

Escuela Horizonte (☎ 713 4117; www.ibw.com.ni/u/horizont; Av 2 btwn Calles 9 & 10 SE; per week US\$165, incl homestay) This well-established program uses its extensive contacts with local development groups to get students involved in the community.

Tours

Both the Spanish schools and Intur can help arrange guides to any of the attractions, or to the wilderness just outside town.



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Cigar tours are worth doing. Estelí produces some of the world's finest tobaccos, and if you still haven't quit smoking then you really need to try one, if only to make the rest of us jealous. Most of the seeds are original Cuban stock, as are many of the curing and rolling techniques you're able to see firsthand. Tobacco is harvested March through April and *porros* (cigars) are rolled all year long. In general, you should make arrangements to visit a cigar factory at least 48 hours in advance; guides are always your best bet. **Tobacco Cuba-Nica** (☎ 713 2383), **Empresa Nica Cigars** (☎ 713 2230), **Tobacalera Perdomo** (☎ 713 6227; www.perdomocigars.com) and the huge **Estelí Cigar Factory** (☎ 713 5688; etelici@ibw.com.ni) can all arrange tours.

Casa Estelí (☎ 713 7453; Interamericana; ☏ 8am-8pm) offers several all-inclusive 'Portal to the Northern Highlands' packages (per person US\$50 to US\$70, two days) in conjunction with two of the region's plush hotels, El Pantano (p205), in the highland enclave of Jalapa, and Hotel Frontera (p202), visiting your choice of amazing outdoor attractions that are otherwise very difficult to see.

There's an Estelí Ruta de Café in the works, a grand tour of area coffee producers that will eventually take in the beans at Finca Solidaridad, Culitlán, Estelimar, Lindos Ojos, El Higo, La Garnacha and perhaps others in the area; ask at Intur for more information.

Festivals & Events

Virgen del Carmen (July 16) *Fiestas patronales* with fireworks, fiestas and masses.

Virgen de Rosario (October 7) An annual event since 1521, this was originally celebrated in Villa de San Antonio Pavía de Estelí, too close to the river and those pesky pirates, and moved here with the Virgin in the late 1600s.

Virgen de Guadalupe (December 12)

Sleeping

Very basic budget options abound in the market area; you can save money if you don't need a shower or flush toilets.

BUDGET

Hospedaje Sacuanjoche (☎ 713 2482; Av 1a NE & Calle 2a SE; r per person US\$4) Tranquil and an excellent deal on simple but very livable rooms with shelves and personal touches, this clean spot also has a quiet courtyard, paneled

TV area and dining room where breakfast (US\$1.25, including coffee) is served.

Hotel Nicarao (☎ 713 2490; Av Central; s/d without bathroom US\$10/12, s/d with bathroom US\$15/20) Clean and colorful, this lovely spot's charm is hidden behind the storefronts, but come inside to see the pleasant courtyard, murals and attractive rooms, some of which have TVs.

Hotel Mirafior (☎ 713 2003; Av Central; r per person US\$7) It's got a friendly owner, fans, foam mattresses and *comida corriente* (mixed plate) served in the thatched-roof restaurant right next door.

Hospedaje Familiar (☎ 713 3666; Av 1a NO; r US\$6-15) The sentimental favorite has deep Sandinista roots, and is an OK deal on clean rooms right next to a restaurant with lots of vegetarian options.

MIDRANGE

Hotel El Mesón (☎ 713 2655; Av 1a NE & Calle 3a NE; barlan@ibw.com.ni; s/d/tr with fan US\$12/17/23, s/d with air-con US\$25/29; ☎ ☏) The best value in this price range for comfortable rooms with hot-water bathroom and cable TV (test them both) arranged around a grassy courtyard with guarded parking.

Turicentro Estelimar (☎ 713 7453; d US\$25, ste sleeping 5 US\$35; ☎ ☏ ☏) On the unpaved edge of town, a US\$1.25 cab ride toward Jinotega, Estelimar is isolated but interesting, with an on-site science museum (p193), three pools, Internet and big cabañas that are a good deal for groups and families.

Hotel-Restaurant La Campiña (☎ 610 3510, 855 5105; r per person US\$20; ☎ ☏) Also inconveniently located (or ultra conveniently, depending on your point of view), this attractive hotel, ideal for conferences, is 5km north of town, not far from a cluster of discos and bars. The modern hotel is built to colonial specs, but spacious rooms come equipped with Direct TV, Internet access and hot water. The great restaurant (dishes US\$1 to US\$5, open 7am to 8pm) has homegrown coffee, fruit juices and healthy snacks, plus a steam-table buffet at mealtimes.

TOP END

Hotel Los Arcos (☎ 713 3830; hotelosarcos@hotmail.com; d with fan/air-con US\$35/45; ☎ ☏ ☏) The best hotel in town, Los Arcos has the dream location one block north of the

cathedral, and lots of beautiful brick arches and colorful rooms that are on the small side but attractively decorated, with quality hot-water bathrooms and free candy. There's a stylish restaurant with stunning views and free Internet on-site.

La Posada Cuautitlán (☎ 713 2446; s/d incl breakfast US\$32/42; 📍) Worth stopping in for a cup of coffee just to see the place, this shady spot offers beautiful, fully furnished cabins and a great restaurant, which is a good thing since you're at the south end of town away from everything else.

Eating

The market has the cheapest meals, but the excellent sit-down *fritangas* (barbecue stalls) that set up on the *parque central* are a much better choice. Self-caterers can visit **Supermercado Las Segovias** (cnr Calle 4a SO & Av 1a NO), a half block from PetroNic, a solid supermarket with great deals on gourmet coffee.

RESTAURANTS

Rincón Pinareño (Calle Transversal; dishes US\$2-6; ☎ 8:30am-9pm) Almost worth the trip from Managua – in an *ordinario* – this Cuban restaurant serves up crusty pressed sandwiches that skimp on nothing, truly delicious soups and more in a cozy dining room that can get packed at lunch.

Vuela Vuela (Calle 3a NE; mains US\$3-6) One of Estelí's best restaurants, serving delicious roasted meat, good salads and sandwiches, and big breakfasts (*presto* 'coffee' though... hmmm). Not the cheapest place, but worth the splurge if you've OD'd on *gallo pinto*.

Restaurante Casa Italia (Av 1a NE; mains US\$3-7; ☎ 5-10pm) Not only does the friendly owner create eight kinds of spaghetti, lasagnas and pizzas, plus good antipasti, from Italian family recipes, he also teaches Italian classes, if you need to brush up.

La Gran Via (Calle 1a SO; dishes US\$3-7) Chinese food comes hot, fresh and in large portions; the soups are great. Lunch specials are a better deal.

CAFÉS

La Casita (snacks US\$1-4; ☎ 9am-7pm Tue-Sun, 2-7pm Mon) Hidden about 1km south of town along the Interamericana, just past Cecalli (US\$0.70 in a cab), La Casita is surrounded by gardens framing a mountain stream, where you can relax amid all the jungly

loveliness over chai tea, homemade yogurt or the signature *mariedas*, a small loaf of whole-wheat bread with different toppings (veggies, hummus, cheese, whatever), then peruse the little shop selling spices, seeds, top-quality handicrafts and other interesting items in front, or (better) wander out back and enjoy the *finca* (farm).

Café-Arte Tipscayan (hearty snacks US\$1-3; ☎ 11am-11pm Wed-Mon) The family of San Juan de Limay soapstone sculptor Freddy Moreno serve ultratraditional fare (there's a menu category for 'lukewarm drinks') like *güirilas* and cheese curd, *montucas* and grilled meats, as well as excellent coffee in this amazing space, packed with gleaming art. It's well worth seeing: Freddy sculpted the cathedral's baptismal font, the Stations of the Cross and several secular public pieces displayed throughout the region, plus he's very friendly.

Juventus Centro Cultural (Calle 1a NE; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) The open-air patio offers sweeping views of the mountains to the west, making a fine setting for the excellent coffee, *licuados* and sandwiches served.

Casa de Cultura (Calle Transversal; dishes US\$1-3) Vegetarian offerings and tasty juices (along with teas, fresh yogurt and pancakes) are served in this pleasant outdoor café.

QUICK EATS

Look for Estelí's signature *montuca*, like a *nacatamale* but with *masa* made of fresh corn and a meaty center with rich mole. Too tired? **Pizza Hot** (Calle 3a NE; ☎ 713 5899) and **Casa del los Hamburguesas** (cnr Calle Transversal & Av 2a NE; ☎ 713 5264) both deliver.

Tacomex (Av 1a NO; dishes US\$1-3; ☎ 10am-8pm Sun-Fri) Tex-Mex fast food comes blunted for the sensitive Nic araguan palate but tasty nonetheless; try the 'gringa,' like a quesadilla, with salsa inside.

Repostería España (Av Central; snacks US\$0.50-3) The best bakery in town also serves fresh fruit juices and salads.

Drinking & Entertainment

Bar-Restaurant Rincón Legal (Av 1a NO & Calle 9a SO; ☎ 8pm-late) A beer-soaked shrine to all things Sandinista, plus 'The Wall of Che' for you *internacionalistas* out there, Estelí's best bar is decorated in red and black, and hosts great live music, political commentary and more.

Studio 54 sprawls beside the Interamericana and has a good dance floor plus billiards and a bar. La Hacienda and Tabú can also be fun. About 5km north of town, a group of discos and bars, including fairly swanky Paradise Discoteque, brings in folks from all over the countryside.

Cinema Estelí (Calle 1a NE; admission US\$2.25), next door to Recreativo Las Segovias, is Estelí's quaint single screen, showing Hollywood hits.

Shopping

The must-have souvenir of Estelí is a box of cigars, best purchased after a cigar tour (see p193). The region is also renowned for high-quality leather work, including saddles, boots and wallets, which you can find in shops along Av 1a NO and Av Central.

Artesanía Nicaragüense (Calle Transversal) is among the largest of several souvenir shops clustered right here, with the area's incredible pottery and crafted leather items.

La Tunoza Cooperative (☎ 844 7996), in the community of La Tunoza, about 5km north of Estelí, is a women's cooperative that makes paper out of natural fibers like tuza, rice and pine needles.

The big, bustling **market** (Calle 12a 50) is a fine place for fresh veggies, cheap thongs and much, much more.

Getting There & Away

Estelí is a transportation hub, and its easy access to two major border crossings with Honduras makes it an ideal place to catch a bus to El Salvador.

King Quality and **TransNica** (☎ 713 6574, 843 0757 on Sunday) operate out of the same office, half a block north of PetroNic. TransNica buses go to Costa Rica (US\$25, 9:30am) and Tegucigalpa (US\$20, 4pm); King Quality serves San Salvador (US\$28, 7am) and Tegucigalpa (US\$25, 7am).

Del Sol Bus (☎ in Estelí 713 3099, in Managua 270 2547, in San Salvador 503-2257 0505) has one bus that leaves for San Salvador or at 8am daily (US\$25).

Ticabus (☎ 713 7350; Av Central) offers daily buses to Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula (Honduras), Managua and Costa Rica.

Estelí has two beautiful bus terminals, Cotran Norte and Cotran Sur, located at the south end of the city on the Interamericana.

COTRAN NORTE

This very comfortable terminal had a live DJ mixing smooth 1980s soft-rock hits at the time of research.

Jalapa US\$3, 2¾ hours, 4:10am and 2pm

Jinotega (via Concordia) US\$2, one to two hours, 4:45am, 7:30am, 8:30am, 1:30pm and 4pm

La Branza (Miraflores) US\$1, one hour, 5:30am and 12:30pm

Managua expreso US\$3, two hours, 4:45am to 3:15pm, hourly; **ordinario** US\$2.25, 1½ hours, 3:30am to 4:30pm, every 30 minutes

Masaya US\$2.50, 2pm and 3pm

León US\$2.50, 2½ hours, 5:15am, 6:45am and 3pm; microbus US\$2.75, two hours, depart when full; alternatively, take the Matagalpa bus and change at San Isidro

Ocotol US\$1.50, 1½ hours, 4:10am to 5:35pm, hourly; for border crossing at Las Manos

Pueblo Nuevo US\$1.75, two hours, 7:45am to 6:30pm, almost hourly

Quilalí US\$3, 3¼ hours, 3am, 4am, 5am, 6:05am, 7:35am, 11:30am and 1pm

San Juan de Limay US\$2, two to three hours, 5:30am, 7am, 10am, 12:15pm, 2pm and 3pm

Somoto US\$1.50, 1½ hours, 5:30am to 6:10pm, hourly; for border crossing at El Espino

Wiwilí US\$4, five to six hours, 3am, 4am, 5am, 7:35am and 8:40am

Yalí (via Venecia) US\$1.60, 1½ hours, 5:15am to 4:30pm, almost hourly

COTRAN SUR

Coyolito (Miraflores) US\$0.70, 1¼ hours, 5:45am and 12:45pm; returns 8:20am and 3:45pm

La Rampla (Miraflores) US\$1, 1¾ hours, 6am, noon and 3:30pm; returns 7am, 11:30am and 4:15pm

Managua ordinario US\$2.25, 1½ hours, 3:30am to 6pm, every 30 minutes; **expreso** US\$3, 2 hours, 5:45am to 3:15pm, almost hourly

Matagalpa ordinario US\$1.25, 1¾ hours, 5:30am to 4:50pm, every 30 minutes; **expreso** US\$1.30, 1½ hours, 8:05am and 2:35pm

Murra US\$3, 3½ hours, 4:45am

San Nicolás (Reserva Natural Cerro Tisey-Estanzuela) US\$1, one hour, 7am, noon, 2pm, 3pm and 4:30pm

Sontule (Miraflores) US\$1.20, two hours, 2:15pm; returns 8:10am

Yalí (via Venecia) US\$1.25, 1½ hours, 5:15am

RESERVA NATURAL MIRAFLORES

Named for the enchanting lake at its heart, Reserva Natural Miraflores was officially declared a nature reserve in 1996, but is privately owned and communally managed. Remarkably, this haven for

orchids and trogons is very accessible thanks to the **Unión de Cooperativas Agropecuarias de Miraflor** (UCA; ☎ 713 2971; www.miraflor-uca.com; Calle 9a NE; ☒ 8am-noon & 12:30-5:30pm Mon-Sat) in Estelí. There are basically three different population centers equipped to handle guests.

Sights & Activities

La Rampla has access to trails that climb to 1400m – past amazing scenic overlooks, waterfalls and whatnot – well within the quetzal zone. Convenient buses (US\$1, 1¼ hours) run three times daily from Estelí Cotran Sur at 6am, noon and 3:30pm, returning from La Rampla at 7am, 11:30am and 4:15pm.

Sontule is closest to archaeological sites such as Cuevas Apagüise, and surrounded by coffee farms worked by a collective of 25 women, who'll show you around. One bus (US\$1.20, two hours) leaves Estelí Cotran Sur at 2:15pm, returning from Sontule at 8:10am the next morning; it may not run during rainy season.

Coyolito is the warmest and closest to Estelí, with the region's loveliest collection of waterfalls, brilliant bird-watching, English-speaking guides and trails into the cloud forest. Make reservations for accommodations through the UCA office in high season. Buses (US\$0.70, 1¼ hours) leave Estelí at 5:45am and 12:45pm, returning from Coyolito at 8:20am and 3:45pm.

Local **guides** (per day US\$10, horses per person US\$7) can take you on 20km of trails 800m to 1450m above sea level, covering a range of habitats from tropical savanna to cloud forest, with mossy oaks, monkeys galore, toucans and a few barnyard friends. Some residents charge a small fee (US\$0.30 to US\$1) to cross their land.

Sleeping & Eating

There are several choices of accommodations within the reserve, all of which need to be booked through the UCA office in Estelí. **Cabañas** (per person US\$17) have more privacy; **farmhouse rooms** (per person US\$13) allow more interaction with the people who run the cooperative, should you want to, say, milk the cows. Both options are rustic. You can also **camp** (per person US\$1.20) December to April only; bring your own tent and remember, there's no cooking.

Meals (US\$2 to US\$3) are served family style.

RESERVA NATURAL CERRO TISEY-ESTANZUELA

Smaller, less developed and some say just as beautiful as Reserva Natural Miraflor, the *other* cloud-forest natural reserve, just 10km south of Estelí, is finally developing its own tourist infrastructure. It's a bit dryer and lower altitude, ranging from 700m to 1500m, with acid soils just perfect for those murmuring pines.

Fider (Foundation for Rural Investigation & Development; ☎ in Estelí 713 3918, in Managua 249 6039; fiderest@ibw.com.ni), with offices in central Estelí, manages the reserve and offers a one-night, two-day package tour (per person US\$60) including lodging and guided trips to the park's many attractions. This is convenient, as sites are spread out all over the park's 9344 hectares and only accessible by different entrances. You pay the US\$2 entrance fee to the reserve at the Fider office.

The main entrance, near the tiny town of Garnacha, has the ranger station and lodge, and accesses the 1.2km **Mirador Trail**, with a view clear to the Cosigüina Peninsula; slightly longer, interpretive **Woodpecker Trail**; and the two-hour trail to **Cuevas de Cerro Apaguaji**, where you can see the Cave of the Duendes and Cave of La Mocuana.

About 10km from the station is the beginning of the more rugged trail to the **Mirador Segoviano**, with views over Estelí and the mountains, and **Galería de Arte El Jacalate**, where a local artisan began carving rock to help overcome his alcohol addiction, and ended up creating cliffs full of wonderful crosses and creatures, including foxes and snakes and other woodland animals.

On the other side of the park, **Salto Estanzuela** (admission free) is an amazing 36m waterfall pouring into a perfect swimming hole; it's probably the park's most visited attraction. The road to the falls starts about 1km south of town, just past the hospital, and heads about 5km southwest on a lousy dirt road to the community of Estanzuela. It's a beautiful walk, or take the Estanzuela bus from Cotran Sur (6:30am and 1:30pm). There are *pulperías* (small grocery stores) on the way, but pack a picnic just in case.

Other attractions to ask your guide about include La Tunoza Cooperative (see p197), El Quebracho's soapstone mines and, most inaccessible of all, Cuevas de la Queserita, near El Pastoreo, with petroglyphs and an abandoned archaeological dig nearby.

Sleeping & Eating

Fider offers basic wooden **dorms** (per person per night/week US\$5/25) and **camping** (per person per night/week US\$8/40, tent per night US\$2).

In addition to the ranger station, you can stay right where the bus drops you off, at **Rancho Don Luis** (no phone; cabins 1/2 beds US\$10/15). It's 5km from the park, in a beautiful property with its own incredible view over the Maribios Chain, plus two attractive wooden cabins (and plans for more) with hammocks on the porch, latrines out back, meals (*típica* US\$2 to US\$3) and – sweet – cable TV inside.

The community of La Garnacha, right by the park entrance, is a small dairy cooperative that makes artisanal Swiss and Italian-style goat cheeses. You can grab a calcium-rich snack or even stay at **Casa Pablo Patricio** (no phone; dm US\$5), a rustic dorm with goats next door, OK shared bathrooms, two private rooms, and set meals for US\$2 each.

Getting There & Away

Take any San Nicolás bus from Estelí Cotran Sur, and have them drop you at Rancho Don Luis. Buses return to Estelí at 8am, 9am, 10am, 2pm and 4pm. Drivers can go 12km south of Estelí to the turnoff in Santa Cruz, then continue 13km south to Rancho San Luis. Turn right and continue 5km to La Garnacha and the park entrance.

PUEBLO NUEVO

One of the oldest cities in the department, Pueblo Nuevo sits close to ruins that may be evidence of a long-theorized Maya incursion into Central America, as well as one of the oldest paleontological sites in the Americas. Of course, there's no money to investigate either, right now.

Sitio Paleontológico El Bosque was discovered by Rubén Olivas in 1974, just as these woods (about 11km from Pueblo Nuevo) were getting dangerous. Excavations go on sporadically when interested parties find funding, and to date people have found the bones of mastadons, bison, giant armadillos, marine

turtles (up here!) and other long-extinct critters dated to between 18,000 and 32,000 years old. There are plans for a museum, someday, but in the meantime you can arrange tours of partially excavated fossils under plastic.

In town, tourist sites are limited. The ultra-Gothic 1922 Catholic **church** is decorated with the year's harvest on May 14, for the festival of San Isidro. **Casa de Cultura Calmecatle** (admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) has great murals and a teeny-tiny museum displaying a handful of treasures from nearby San Antonio, including one real jewel: **La Princesa de Pueblo Nuevo**, a probably very pretty young lady who was between 20 and 25 years old sometime between AD 600 and 800, when she died. She was uncovered in 1997 and her skeleton has been the town's pride and joy ever since.

There's not much tourist infrastructure, but the **alcaldía** (☎ 719 2504, 719 2527; alcpun@yahoo.com) will happily help arrange guided tours, horses, lodging and trips to El Bosque. At press time, you could stay in the basic home of **Doña Selina** (no phone; r per person US\$3), two blocks from the church, with meals (US\$2) provided and guides to El Bosque arranged. **El Chino Restaurant** (mains US\$2-4) was building a *hospedaje* (in spite of the name, the food is Nicaraguan). You could also eat at Eskimo, with burgers and ice cream, or Rosti-Cafetín el Viajero, serving *comida corriente* on the park.

In the even tinier town of La Virgen, **Auxilio Mundial** (☎ 275 0066, 275 3430) has a *finca* famous for its excellent blackberries and interesting petroglyphs, and can arrange food and lodging with advance notice.

Buses take the beautiful paved road back to Estelí (US\$1.75, two hours) almost hourly from 7:45am to 6:30pm.

SAN JUAN DE LIMAY

On the brisk and breezy outskirts of **Reserva Natural Cerro Quiabú-Las Brisas**, which doesn't have much tourist infrastructure, San Juan de Limay is known for its marmolina, or soapstone, sculptures. The rock itself, a heavy, lustrous stone that seems to glow like alabaster in certain light, is mined at Cerro Tipiscayán and worked by artists all over town. You're welcome to peruse the galleries and workshops, just 44km from Estelí down a lousy road which can be closed in

rainy season. There's shrimp cultivation in the rivers and an iguana farm. Buses leave the central park for Estelí (US\$2, two to three hours) six times daily.

CONDEGA

pop 8650

Condega, usually translated from Náhuatl as 'the place of the potters,' has been a ceramics production center since long before the Spanish incursion, and remains home to some of the most important factories in the country. But not to worry, non-shopaholics: even if you have no interest in terracotta past and present, Condega's top attraction, a Somoza-era bomber downed during the strafing climax of the 1979 revolution, almost always gets a grin.

Sights & Activities

You can see classic designs at the excellent archaeological museum, or the latest models at the famed **Ducualí Ceramic Factory**, a collective of 13 women who sell their fine work all over the country, just 3km from Condega. Take any bus north. Even closer to town is the **Guacamayo Workshop**, a co-operative where they make beautiful (and more transportable) wooden crafts.

Museo Arqueológico Julio César Salgado (admission US\$0.30; ☎ 8am-noon & 1:30-4:30pm Mon-Fri) is a surprisingly good museum, right on the park. It is absolutely packed with informatively displayed ceramics, including many examples in a style popular around AD 800, when pots, bowls and incense burners were studded, like an old punk-rock jacket's shoulder. A map to some 60 unexcavated or partially excavated archaeological sites in the area is tucked into the corner, and they plan to offer tours to Sitio San Diego, 3km from town. There's also a room covering more recent Condegan history and culture, and a small library.

Condega's main claim to fame is **Airplane Park**, housing a twin-engine plane used by the FAN (Nicaraguan Air Force) to bomb the region. It was on a reconnaissance mission and flew too low and got shot down on April 7, 1979, much invigorating the desperate struggle in the mountains. This is where couples come to make out.

While the 1962 **El Templo Parroquial de Condega** isn't the prettiest church in Latin America, it gets packed December 11 and

12 for the **Virgin of Guadalupe**. Come a few days later for the **Feria del Patio**, when local women dress up as Mother Nature – in dresses made of corn husks and medicinal plants – and there's a huge party.

Sleeping & Eating

Hospedaje Framar (☎ 611 5447, 715 2393; r per person US\$3), right on the parque central, is a fine budget option with clean painted-brick rooms, thin foam mattresses and good shared bathroom. English-speaking owner Francisco Centeno has information about everything in Condega, and you can check your email next door at Cybercafé **Condeg@net** (US\$0.70 per hour).

La Granja (☎ 715 2521; r with/without bathroom per person US\$10/7), about 300m across the highway from town, is an outstanding lodging option with beautiful gardens surrounding a huge pool (per adult/child US\$1/0.70) and three high-ceilinged, wooden rooms with fans and mosquito nets; the one with private bathroom is great. The on-site restaurant (dishes US\$1 to US\$5) will serve you out by the pool.

Lateas Guacal (quesillos US\$1; ☎ lunch & dinner) serves *tiste* and *quesillos* right by the highway, or sit down at **Restaurant Lindo Vista** (US\$2-6), just out of town on the road to Estelí. This sprawling restaurant has a pretty view, which you can enjoy in any number of colorful nooks and crannies over great soups or better barbecue – they bring the sizzling hot plate right to the table.

Getting There & Away

Buses leave Condega's parque central regularly for the following destinations:

Estelí US\$0.70, 30 minutes, 6am to 7pm, every 20 minutes

Managua expreso US\$2.60, 2½ hours, 4:45am and 8:30am

Ocotol US\$1, one hour, 7am to 6:30pm, every 30 minutes

Pueblo Nuevo US\$0.70, 30 minutes, 8:45am, 9:45am, 10:45am, 11:45am, 12:45pm, 2:40pm, 4:10pm and 7:30pm

Somoto US\$1, one hour, 7:30am to 7:10pm, every 30 minutes

Around Condega

Twenty-two kilometers east of Condega, toward the town of San Sebastian de Yalí, tiny, picturesque **Venecia** is home to **Parque Ecológico Cantagallo**, a private, community-managed reserve with a comfortably rustic

lodge. **Albergue Venecia** (☎ in Estelí 713 2584; dm US\$8), operated by a local farming cooperative with deep Sandinista roots, offers clean, wooden four-bed dorm rooms, family-style meals for US\$2 to US\$3 (including excellent coffee) and eight gorgeous kilometers of trails that head through the 1500m cloud forest to Laguna Venecia. Guides cost US\$1 per hour, horses US\$2 more, or take a boat out into the lake for US\$3 per hour. Buses (US\$1, one hour) leave Condega at 2:30pm and 3pm daily, returning from Venecia at 6am and 8am the next morning.

Just south of Condega is the old indigenous capital of **Totogalpa**, today better known for its incredibly detailed corn-husk dolls. Arrange tours or lodging through **Raúl Sevilla** (☎ 829 4655; puebloindigenachorotegatotogalpa@yahoo.es), at the Comunidad Indígena de Totogalpa offices on the Totogalpa parque central. Take any bus heading south to Estelí from the Condega parque central.

OCOTAL

pop 32,000 / elevation 650m

Long known as La Sultana del Norte (Sultan of the North), Ocotal is perhaps better described by its modern moniker, 'City of Pines,' a homage to the ocote pines that surround the highland city. This is the capital of the storied Segovias, strewn with wildflowers and bristling with pillars of rock, which once tempted pirates up the Río Coco in search of gold and treasure.

It is more famed, however, for its 1927 liberation by Sandino's 'Crazy Little Army,' which seized control from federal forces and suddenly earned the undivided attention of its neighbors to the north. Ocotal would become the first city in history to be bombed by fighter planes, courtesy of the United States Marine Corps.

Sandinó adapted to this revelation in warfare with surprising ease. He became a pioneer of guerrilla warfare hidden beneath the jungle canopy, and would regain control of Ocotal and all of the Segovias before his death.

Orientation

Built on a classic Spanish grid, Ocotal is easy to navigate, and most services are located within a few blocks of the cathedral and stunning parque central, or on the

access roads connecting the city center to the highway.

The bus station is beside the highway at the south end of town, just north of where the road splits. The left branch bypasses town to the west, while the right branch heads straight north through the center. The paved road to Jalapa leaves the highway right before the Shell station and Hotel Frontera.

Information

Internet services are available all over town for US\$0.70 per hour.

BanPro Opposite the municipal market, BanPro has a Visa/Plus ATM. If you're on Cirrus/MasterCard, you're out of luck.

Cruz Roja (Red Cross; ☎ 732 2485)

Hospital (☎ 732 2491) Ocotal has the region's biggest hospital.

Intur (☎ 732 3429; ocotal@intur.gob.ni) Across from Pali supermarket, one block west of the parque central. It has information about the surrounding Segovian communities, including Jalapa, and may also be able to arrange tours of the Ocotal's nascent Ruta de Café (coffee route), visiting Finca Los Cipreses, Los Jardines and other organic and fair-trade farms.

Police (☎ 732 2333)

Sights & Activities

In the center of town, baroque-neoclassical hybrid **El Templo Parroquial de Ocotal** (1803–69), with a new tower built in 2003 and saints from Antigua, Guatemala, is a nice enough church, but you're really here for what's considered Nicaragua's finest **parque central** (☎ 6am–10pm). Former mayor Fausto Sánchez was both a botanist and avid gardener, and today more than 100 types of tropical plants, including magnolias, roses, orchids and birds of paradise, scent the air between cypress and pine trees that are more than 100 years old.

Around the corner, **Casa de Cultura** is a graceful 1890 structure whose slender wooden columns once oversaw a US Marine base, and today frame the public library. Continue west three more blocks to 1945 **Monument to San Francisco**, with a photogenic spire and great views all around. Also interesting is 1919 **Hermita San José**, with an onion dome that must have made visiting Soviets stationed along the border somewhat misty-eyed. **Parque Mirador de la Cruz**, on top of the hill with the crosses on it, is a 45-minute walk or US\$0.30 cab ride to the top.

Festival de La Virgen de la Asunción, in mid-August, is the best time to show up, when Ocotal's ranching gentry show off their horsemanship through the streets and around the plaza. Or from Thursday through Sunday, after 11pm or so, you can check them out at Discoteca Infinito, four blocks north of the cathedral, or Disco Sky Dancing, close to the Esso.

Sleeping

Hotel Francis (☎ 732 2244; r per person US\$2.50) This family-run spot, two blocks south of the park, is the city's best cheapie, with super-clean shared bathrooms, decent rooms with fans and neat little gardens.

Hotelito Familiar (☎ 847 5567; r per person US\$2.50) Across the street from the Francis, this one's a bit grungier, but will do in a pinch.

Hospedaje Segovia (☎ 732 2617; r per person US\$2) Even cheaper than the Francis or the Familiar, and in a family home two blocks north of the park, it makes lumpy mattresses and shared baths seem for some reason sort of cozy.

Hotel Frontera (☎ 732 2668; nofrosa@ibw.com.ni; s/d with fan US\$20/25, s/d/tr with air-con US\$43/54/66; 📶 🚰 🚿) Behind the Shell station, all the huge rooms at Ocotal's premier hotel have TVs and hot water, and the air-con rooms have telephones and little balconies overlooking the alley and mountain; nonguests can use the pool (per child/adult US\$2/3). It's not centrally located, though.

Eating & Drinking

Llamarada Cafetín del Bosque (dishes US\$1-3) On the south side of the park, this steam-table buffet gets raves, and justly so – if they're cooking up a big bowl of *baho* (plantain, meat and vegetable stew), you've got to stop by.

Donde La Lucilita (snacks US\$1-3; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-9pm) A very nice coffee shop four blocks south of the park, this spot makes its juices with filtered water and serves espresso beverages with light meals.

Hotel y Restaurant Deportiva (☎ 732 2009; mains US\$3-7) The hotel four blocks east of the parque central was being remodeled at press time, but the pretty thatched-roof restaurant/bar, with wine, dancing, good steaks and seafood, was tops.

La Yunta (dishes from US\$5) One block west and two blocks south of the park, La Yunta

serves Nicaraguan dishes on a pleasant outdoor patio.

Getting There & Away

Buses depart from the **main terminal** (☎ 732 3304), 1km south of the parque central. Border-bound buses stop to pick up passengers by the Shell station at the north end of town.

Ciudad Antigua US\$1, 40 minutes, 5am and noon

Estelí ordinario US\$1.50, 2¼ hours, 4:45am to 6pm, every 45 minutes; *expreso* US\$2, 1¾ hours, 4:15am

Japapa US\$2, 2½ hours, 4:30am to 4:20pm, every 1¼ hours

Jícaro (Ciudad Sandino) US\$2, 2½ hours, 6:15am, 10:45am, 3:20pm and 5pm

Las Manos (Honduran border) US\$0.75, one hour, 5am to 4:40pm, every 30 minutes

Macuelizo US\$1, one hour, 6am and noon

Managua expreso US\$4, 3½ hours, 4am to 3:30pm, 10 daily

Murra US\$3, 3½ hours, 5:15am, 7am, 8:45am, 12:30pm and 1:25pm

Quilalí US\$3, three hours, 5am, 7:45am, noon and 2pm

Santa María US\$2, 2¼ hours, 12:30pm

Somoto US\$0.80, 1¼ hours, 5:45am to 6:30pm, every 45 minutes

DIPILTO

pop 263 / elevation 880m

This tiny mountain town 20km north of Ocotal isn't just any old roadside attraction; it's home to **Santuario de la Virgen de la Piedra**, where the Virgin of Guadalupe gazes down on her adoring masses from the top of a very large rock. It's a pilgrimage site surrounded by lovely gardens, and the spring nearby may have healing properties. December 12, the Virgin's feast day, is a party – and a serenade.

While we would never recommend it, this is a good place to begin inquiring about **Cerro Mogotón** (2106m), the highest point in Nicaragua and centerpiece of difficult-to-access Reserva Natural Cordillera Dipilto y Jalapa. It's also home to one of the last minefields left in Nicaragua; locals sometimes hear 'the explosions of large animals.' But we've heard that it's possible to climb.

Parador Turístico La Cascada (☎ 732 2620, 855 0238; US\$2-8), a few hundred meters north of the shrine, has good beef dishes and great coffee (Finca El Dipilteño; it's amazing). It can also arrange a hiking tour: two people minimum (US\$5 per person) leave Ocotal

at 6am for the top of 1867m El Volcán, covered with cloud forest and quetzals – so wear long pants. As part of the tour you can spend the night at **Finca San Isidro** (r per person incl dinner & breakfast US\$15), a coffee plantation with a few spare rooms. **Distribudora Mantugales** (Banco DF, 75 varas norte) in Ocotal, a dry-goods shop signed ‘El Barratillo del Mercado’ around the corner from Intur, also arranges the trip – and sells bags of that amazing coffee.

Take any bus bound for the Las Manos border crossing (they stop at the Shell station in Ocotal) and ask the driver to let you out in Dipilto; buses run south to Ocotal and beyond every half-hour or so.

OCOTAL TO JALAPA

The smooth 65km paved road into the alpine loveliness of Jalapa traverses beautiful mountains holding any number of interesting sites, most easily accessible with a guide or your own vehicle. This is the heart of the Segovias, so count on spur roads to be 4WD only in rainy season. Buses from Ocotal serve most of these locations several times daily.

About 3km north of Ocotal, **Mozonte** is most famously home to **Colectivo de Artesanías de Mozonte** (ceramics collective; ☎ 8am–5pm), where you can watch the artisans at work using a variety of different techniques, then buy your favorites, cheap. You can arrange a tour of less well-known ceramists and other local sites, including **La Gruta de Guadalupe** (another rocktop shrine to the Mexican Virgin) or, for adventurous souls, **Reserva Nacional Cordillera Dipilto y Jalapa**, where you really should have a guide. Ask at the ceramics collective (right across from the park entrance) about guides, or contact **José Fermin Torres** (☎ 896 2169, 732 2872; puebloindigenademozonte@yahoo.com).

There’s a well-signed turnoff to **Ciudad Antigua**, a Spanish colonial masterpiece about 5km from the main road. Founded in 1536 and under almost constant attack from local indigenous groups for the next century, it was sacked in 1654 by pirate Henry Morgan, who had come up the Río Coco in a canoe. The city’s main claim to fame is beautiful **Santuario de los Milagros**, with a Christ figure brought from Austria in 1665 and backed with a facade of Spanish ships sailing up the Río Coco,

today just a trickle of its former self. Attached **Museo Segoviano** has a few fossils and pre-Columbian ceramics, plus a fairly good assortment of colonial artifacts and pirate lore. Other attractions include the ruins of Convento la Merced and ‘the best baseball stadium in Nueva Segovia.’

Back on the main road, continue through the speedbumps of **San Fernando**, with a great parque central, and consider making a left turn for the 13km road to **Salto San José**, the highest-altitude major waterfall in Nicaragua, falling from the Cordillera Dipilto into the coffee zone. Cerro Mogotón is less than 20km from town.

About 10km past San Fernando, you can make a right onto the recently graded and excellent dirt road to **El Júcaro (Ciudad Sandino)** and **Murra**, with what may be the highest and most amazing waterfall in the country. Pass **Santa María**, with beautiful Laguna Fria and the Las Brisas hot springs. Next is El Júcaro, where Minas San Albino were mined by Sandino’s military for gold. There are two cheap *hospedajes*, **El Segoviano** (☎ 735 2411), close to the El Júcaro entrance, and **Maryfer** (☎ 735 2243), and a few simple restaurants.

Eventually, you’ll come to the community of **Murra**, undulating between 820m and 1300m above sea level, where the *alcaldía* (no phone) can arrange lodging and transport 24km northeast to the municipality of **El Rosario**. Tiny Murra is home to **Finca Santa Rita**, which sits on 200 hectares of land that include the singularly spectacular Salto el Rosario waterfall, with three sections in rapid succession that total more than 200m.

About 15km south of Jalapa is the turnoff to **El Limón** and the smaller town of **Aguas Calientes**, with hot springs. Great for the skin (if a bit hard on the nose), these hot springs are saturated with sulfur and are far too hot to enter close to the source; try the pools next to the river.

JALAPA

pop 13,266 / elevation 687m

This wonderful mountain town was long isolated by a lousy, if scenic, dirt road. That’s all been paved (well, cobblestoned), and today the tropical highland town of Jalapa, in the foothills of several peak stopping 1500m, is the gateway to a rare

wilderness only recently opened to the casual tourist.

September is the **Feria de Maiz**, or the Corn Festival, when corn clothing, altars and culture all come together for corn contests, theater and dances that tell the history of corn. Also on offer are tamales, *rosquillos*, *montucas*, *elotes*, *güirilas* and more.

In addition to one bank, ProCredit, with no tourist services, Jalapa has three Internet cafés, all charging US\$1 per hour, near the park.

Sights & Activities

Access to the wilderness isn't easy, but both the *alcaldía* and El Pantano hotel (opposite) can find guides (around US\$10 per day), some of whom may speak English, Russian and/or German. The *alcaldía* also manages **La Jungla Municipal Reserve**, 40 hectares of primary rain forest right on the border, accessible by vehicle in dry season and a 3km hike from Teotiacinte in muddy season, when you should really tip the guide extra.

Other possible treks include visits to a couple of beautiful coffee *fincas* with little tourist infrastructure. **Las Nuberones**, close

to El Limón, has coffee plantations, a pine forest and guides who speak English, while **Finca Selva Verde** is a huge property with waterfalls and coffee and is trying to develop into a tourist attraction. Ask about **La Cueva del Tigre**, with a petroglyph calendar.

La Esperanza is a women's cooperative that makes handicrafts out of pine needles, which are sewn into bundles and made into Dr Seuss-style containers and sculptures. Some 70 women spread across five communities belong to the co-op, and also support one another with a variety of undertakings, from *fritangas* to farming.

Near Jalapa, the road is paved all the way to **Teotiacinte**, right on the border (with no official crossing), where ruins of a 1500-year-old town are being excavated. There are also two more wild **hot springs**, in Santa Barbara and El Porvenir, nearby; the latter is medicinal.

Tours

You can arrange guided tours through Casa Estelí (p193) in Estelí, which works with the region's best hotel, El Pantano (opposite). El Pantano's owner, Wim van der Donk,

BORDER CROSSING: EL ESPINO & LOS MANOS

From Estelí, there are two major border crossings to Honduras, convenient to getting to El Salvador.

El Espino, 20km west of Somoto, is the least used and mellowest of the two, and the scenery isn't bad either. From Somoto, buses (US\$0.40, 30 minutes) leave for the border hourly from 5:15am to 4:15pm. It costs US\$5 to enter Nicaragua, US\$2 to leave; Honduras charges US\$3 to enter, and exiting is free. Most services, including buses, only operate 7am to 5pm. You can drive across this border; Nicaragua charges US\$12 to enter, while Honduras has a sliding scale; cars with US plates pay the maximum US\$32 to enter.

On the Honduran side, minibuses (US\$0.60, 7am to 5pm, every 30 minutes) run regularly to San Marcos, with hotels, restaurants and regular bus services on to Tegucigalpa (US\$3, 4½ hours, almost hourly). From the Nicaraguan side, buses serve Somoto (US\$0.40, 30 minutes, every 15 minutes) and Managua (US\$4, four hours, 7am to 5pm, hourly). Somoto is a 20km, US\$4 per person cab ride away.

Las Manos, about 15m north of Ocotol, is the major Honduras–Nicaragua border crossing, and mountains are even more dramatic. This is a true 24-hour border, though bus service only runs 6am to 6pm. All crossing fees are the same as at El Espino. This crossing has two tiny duty-free stores, a *casa de cambio* on the Honduran side, and *coyotes* offering lousy exchange rates – know how much you should get back ahead of time. There's even lodging on the Nicaraguan side, **Hospedaje/Comedor Los Laurales** (☎ 840 4198; r US\$3), with very nice owners and terrible cement rooms.

Minibuses to the Honduran town of Paraíso (US\$0.70, 30 minutes) run every half-hour 6am to 6pm, from where you can catch a bus to Tegucigalpa (US\$3, 2½ hours, five daily), or more convenient Danlí (US\$2, 1½ hours, 6am to 5:45pm, almost hourly), with hotels and other services. In Nicaragua, buses run to Ocotol (US\$0.75, 30 minutes) every half-hour.

speaks Dutch, Spanish and English, and can arrange guides to all the sights as well as specialty tours of cigar factories and Finca Cerro de Jesús (1793m), in the community of El Escambray, with 600 *manzanas* of organic coffee, a nature reserve and an 8m waterfall. The *alcaldía* can also help with tours.

Sleeping & Eating

El Pantano (☎ 737 2231; hotelepantano@yahoo.com; s/d US\$10/17). Cabins spread across the wilderness, about six blocks from the city center (look for signs down the dirt side roads), are cute and clean. Warm up over amazing coffee at the restaurant (dishes US\$2 to US\$6, open 7am to 11pm) serving good *típica*, including the house specialty, 'boca Pantano,' which might be better known as *bitter ballen*. Two-day all-inclusive packages have a two-person minimum and cost US\$50 to US\$70 per person, depending on your plans.

Hotelitón No 1 (☎ 737 2229; d without bathroom US\$4, d with bathroom US\$10-20; 🚻 📺 📺) Truckers love this sprawling hotel, where rooms with private bathroom are much nicer. Some come with air-con and cable TV.

Hotel Jonatan (☎ 737 2210; s US\$10, d US\$7-15; 📺) This spot spoils its guests with a variety of very clean, well-kept rooms surrounding the guarded parking lot. For a little extra, you get cable TV and more natural light.

Típico del Norte (dishes US\$2-5; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Across from Hotel Jonatan, this local fave does good, meaty mains and a brisk trade in beer after dark.

Restaurant Luz de Luna (dishes US\$3-8) One block from the park, this is a relatively up-scale dining option, serving Nica classics, that turns into a disco after dinner.

Getting There & Away

Although the dream trip to Jalapa would end with a rapid bicycle descent down the smooth paved road, you'll probably be taking the bus; the station is just south of town, near the cemetery.

El Jícara (Ciudad Sandino) US\$1.25, 1½ hours, 6am to 4pm, hourly; meets buses to Murra

El Porvenir US\$0.80, 45 minutes, six daily

Estelí US\$4, 4½ hours, 3:45am and 10am

Managua US\$7, 5½ hours, 4am, 9am and 2pm

Ocotal US\$2, 1½ hours, 5am to 4pm, hourly

Teotecacinte US\$0.60, 30 minutes, 5am to 5pm, hourly

SOMOTO

pop 28,000 / elevation 705m

Somoto was once just another quaint colonial border town, a little bit war-torn but friendly, your last stop for a big plastic bag of delicious *rosquillos* (cornbread rings) before entering Honduras. Then, in 2003, a pair of Czech scientists working for Ineter (Nicaragua Institute for Territorial Studies) stumbled across the discovery of a lifetime: a mere 75 million years after these solid granite peaks were first forced up from the sea, Europeans laid eyes on appropriately inspiring **Somoto Canyon**, where the Río Coco, Central America's largest river, is born.

Powerful from the get-go, the young mountain stream is currently wearing away a ribbon-thin canyon – 3km long, sometimes 160m tall and less than 10m wide – from the solid granite heart of Namancambre Canyon. The town's original inhabitants probably knew all about it: Somoto is the Spanish corruption of *Tepesomatl*, or 'Mountain of Water.'

Today protected as part of **Reserva Natural Tepesomoto-Pataste**, the gorge is phenomenal, with steely gray cliffs and graded peaks carved from the dry forest and pockmarked with caves. It's a 3km hike into the canyon from a trailhead that leaves from a well-signed exit 15km north of Somoto. A taxi can take you there for US\$4. **Guides** (US\$6-10) are highly recommended, because the hike is slippery and the water tricky, but they're not required. You need to be in good physical condition for this hike. Nearby, in the community of Macuelazo, there are also the **Hervideros de Macuelazo**, basically bubbling mud springs.

Somoto itself, the capital of the Madriz department, is a small, easily navigable Spanish colonial grid, centered on the graceful 1661 **Iglesia Santiago**, a pretty adobe with a Black Christ inside, fronting a shady *parque central*.

Information

BDF Less than a block from the park, the only bank in town changes only US dollars.

Cybernet Sylva (per hr US\$0.80) Next to Hotel Colonial.

Hospital (☎ 722 2247)

Marena (☎ 722 2431) Tourist infrastructure is still pretty seat of your pants, but Somoto's Marena, a block and a half south of the church, can help you find

information, guides and, perhaps, *burros*. Any hotel should be able to help, too.

Police (☎ 722 2359)

Sleeping

Hotel Panamericano (☎ 722 2355; r with/without bathroom per person US\$10/3; P) Even if you don't stay here, right on the plaza, staff can arrange guides to the canyon, and there's a solid souvenir shop. There's a range of rooms, from super-simple boxes with shared hot-water bathrooms to spacious, better private rooms, some with refrigerators and/or TVs.

Hospedaje La Providencia (☎ 722 2089; r per person US\$3.50) This family-run budget option has lots of doves, a parrot and a cat, plus simple, very clean rooms (with shared bathrooms) with thin mattresses, hammocks out front and winning hostesses.

Hotel Colonial (☎ 722 2040; s/d/tr US\$18/24/30; P) As close to luxury as this town gets, they've gone all out gold satin bedspreads, with mock-Louis XIV furniture, hot-water showers and a pool, right around the corner from the church.

Finca La Virgen (☎ 719 2445; cabañas US\$15) You could stay closer to Reserva Natural Tepesomoto-Patate at this cooperative (day admission US\$5) close to Pueblo Nuevo Macuelizo, with trails through coffee plantations, neat cabañas and guided treks on foot and horseback into the canyon.

Eating

Carne Asada el Buen Gusto (meat dishes US\$1-2) Across from Marena, this tiny purple spot has cheap, good *típica* and better pork plates.

Don Chu (US\$4-10) Go upscale one block west at Don Chu, with real tablecloths and good steak and fish dishes.

Bar y Restaurant El Almendro (US\$3-9) Everyone's favorite, across from Hotel Colonial, with high-quality *típica* and a festive vibe.

Somoto is most famous for *rosquillas*, which at their simplest are crusty corn-bread rings, hard baked and served with black coffee. You may have sampled them elsewhere, but even if your experience was a bit gritty and tasteless, it's time to try again. In Somoto, somehow richer *rosquillas* are baked plain, with cheese and/or herbs, or sweetened with cinnamon and molasses. They come in different shapes and sizes

(with different names like *rosettes* and *tostaditas*, though all will eventually answer to *rosquilla*). The best *rosquilla* restaurants are roadside cafés, inconvenient to town, but you can buy a baggie of those babies anywhere – try the Somoto bus station.

Getting There & Away

The bus station is on the Interamericana, a short walk from the center of town.

El Espino (Honduran Border) US\$0.40, 30 minutes, 5:15am to 4:15pm, hourly

Estelí US\$1.25, 1¾ hours, 5:20am to 4pm, every 45 minutes

Managua ordinario US\$4, 4½ hours, 4am to 5pm, almost hourly; *expreso* US\$4.25, four hours, 5am, 6:15am, 7:30am, 2pm, 3:15pm and 3:45pm

Ocotol US\$0.70, one hour, 3:45am to 4:30pm, every 45 minutes

MATAGALPA

pop 105,000 / elevation 650m

This is the gateway to Nicaragua's most impressive mountain range, and as such one might think this would be a misty and untouched mountain village. Nope – that'd be Jinotega, just up the road. Matagalpa, Náhuatl for 'Ten Cities,' is a bustling and cosmopolitan regional capital, a sea of urban sprawl straining against the natural reserves and mountain barriers that hem it all in. Cars honk and sidewalks bustle in the cool mountain air as rural visitors run their big-city errands. This is the nerve center for Nicaragua's vital and gourmet coffee-growing industry, and these are the people who make sure you get your fix.

If it's all a little too overcaffeinated for you, wild nature – and lots of it – is just a short hike away. Matagalpa makes a very comfortable, even sophisticated, base for cloud-forest reserves and coffee-related tours, including one organization that will put you up in a grower's home so you can see firsthand what that few cents extra for a cup of Fair Trade coffee really buys. And when you come back to the big city, you'll appreciate the great restaurants, hotels and nightlife even more.

Orientation

Bordered on its western edge by the Río Grande de Matagalpa, the city sprawls between two principal plazas, Parque Morazán on the north side and the

scruffier Parque Rubén Darío to the south. The cathedral faces Morazán; budget accommodations are concentrated around Darío. The two main bus stations lie at either end of the city, almost 2km apart.

Information

EMERGENCY

Police (☎ 772 3870)

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access is available for around US\$0.70 per hour at Internet cafés all over the city.

Cyber Moagüina (per hr US\$1; ☎ 9am-8pm) More expensive, but has big screens, great coffee and fruity beverages.

Downtown Cyber (per hr US\$0.70) Close to Hotel Apante.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital (☎ 612 2081)

Cruz Roja (Red Cross; ☎ 772 2059)

MONEY

BanPro and BanCentro, both with Visa/Plus ATMs, are clustered with several other banks two blocks south of Parque Morazón.

BAC With an ATM on both Visa/Plus and Cirrus/MasterCard networks, half a block east of Parque Morazón, across from the Toyota dealership.

POST & TELEPHONE

The Enitel office is a block east of the cathedral. There is a post office one block south of Parque Morazán and another opposite Parque Darío.

TOURIST INFORMATION

CIPTMA (Center for Tourist Promotion of Matagalpa; ☎ 8am-12:30pm & 2-7pm) The Museo de Café (p209) operates a CIPTMA desk, which can make hotel reservations and has information about visiting area coffee plantations.

Intur (☎ 612 7060; matagalpa@intur.gob.ni) Two blocks north of Parque Darío, this unusually professional Intur outlet has flyers and information on tour guides, hotels and coffee *fincas*. It sells a useful map for US\$3, and also has a good, free, bilingual visitors guide.

Marena (☎ 772 3926) Despite managing easy-to-access Reserva Natural Cerro Apante and Reserva Natural Cerro El Arenal, as well as undeveloped Reserva Natural Guabule, Reserva Natural Cerro Pansacán, Reserva Natural Cerro Sierra Quirriagua, Reserva Natural Fila Cerro Frio-La

Cumplida and Yucúl Genetic Reserve, this Marena was not particularly useful for tourists at the time of research. The Secretaria de Ambiental office, around the corner, may also have information.

Sights & Activities

The 1874 **Iglesia Catedral San Pedro** is considered one of the country's most beautiful buildings. It's a solid neoclassical structure that has simply seen one too many bombing runs. Originally founded by the Jesuits, who were later run out of the country, this fading beauty fronts **Parque Morazán**, where most of the city's public events take place. Across the street, 1938 **Palacio Episcopal** is architecturally interesting and now houses the high school.

Iglesia San José was originally constructed in 1751 and used as a jail for indigenous rebels in the late 1800s, then rebuilt to its current glory in 1917 by Franciscan friars. It fronts **Parque Rubén Darío** and has a nice baroque altar. The 1751 **Iglesia Molagüina**, in the center of town, is the plainest of the churches but has nice gardens.

Just east of the city are two outstanding cemeteries, if you're into that sort of thing; the **Foreigners Cemetery** and the **National Cemetery**. There are great views, a break from the traffic and the headstone of Benjamin Linder, an American hydroelectric engineer and unicycle clown who was killed by Contra forces in 1987.

CASA MUSEO COMANDANTE CARLOS FONSECA

This low-budget but heartfelt **museum** (donations appreciated; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) honors Commander Carlos Fonseca, the intense and bespectacled architect of the Sandinista Movement. He grew up in this humble adobe with his single mother and four siblings, like Sandino, caught between abject poverty and relative wealth after his coffee-scion father finally admitted paternity when Carlos was in grade school.

At age 19, in 1955, Fonseca joined the PSN (Nicaraguan Socialist Party) and started publishing Marxist tracts. After the 1959 Cuban Revolution he was invited to a journalists' convention in Havana, where he ended up staying to host Sandino discussion groups. This sort of thing didn't sit well with the Somozas, who had him jailed

MATAGALPA

<p>INFORMATION</p> <p>BAC ATM.....1 B3</p> <p>BanCentro ATM.....2 B4</p> <p>BanPro.....3 B4</p> <p>Cecocafen.....4 C4</p> <p>CIPTMA.....(see 17)</p> <p>Cyber Moagüina.....5 B4</p> <p>Downtown Cyber.....6 A5</p> <p>Enitel.....7 B3</p> <p>Intur.....8 B4</p> <p>Marena.....9 B4</p>	<p>Post Office.....10 B4</p> <p>Post Office.....11 B5</p> <p>Secretaria de Ambiental.....12 B4</p> <p>SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES</p> <p>Casa Museo Comandante Carlos Fonseca.....13 B5</p> <p>Iglesia Catedral San Pedro.....14 B3</p> <p>Iglesia de Molagüina.....15 B4</p> <p>Iglesia de San José.....16 B5</p> <p>Museo de Café.....17 B4</p>
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<p>SHOPPING 🛍️</p> <p>Cerámica Negra Tradicional....42 C3</p>	<p>TRANSPORT</p> <p>Agencia Tica Bus.....43 A5</p> <p>Budget Rent -A- Car.....44 B3</p> <p>Dollar.....(see 1)</p> <p>Texaco.....45 A5</p>
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when he returned, forcing him to sit still long enough to write the widely published letter, 'From Jail I Accuse the Dictator.' After a few years of exile in Costa Rica, Fonseca returned to the fight. In 1976, during a National Guard ambush in the tiny town of Zinica, Matagalpa, Fonseca was gunned down.

But, as with Che Guevara and Obi-Wan Kenobi, killing Fonseca only made him stronger. He was already the revolution's semiofficial philosopher; his heroic death made him its face (which is good PR, considering it could have been Ortega). His childhood home is dominated by his most famous image, a painting of him looking every inch

the disco swinger that he absolutely was not. If you can read Spanish, you'll appreciate the two rooms full of newspaper clippings and water-stained original documents that chronicle this remarkable man's life; anyone can contemplate his glasses and typewriter. And machine gun. Curious? The best biography available in English is *Sandinista: Carlos Fonseca and the Nicaraguan Revolution*, by Matilde Zimmermann.

MUSEO DE CAFÉ

There's a lot of information in this **museum** (Av José Benito Escobar; admission free; ☎ 8am-12:30pm & 2-7pm), almost all of it in Spanish, and very little actually pertains to coffee. Staff, however, who also operate a tour desk, are highly caffeinated, offer free cups of coffee, and also sell bags of the stuff. This is actually more of a Nicaragua and Matagalpa history museum. It begins with a nice archaeology display, then segues into high-school-quality exhibitions about the city and region, from photos of beauty-contest winners past and present through a list of Latin America's great liberators, from Bolívar to Martí.

HIKING

Hiking maps (US\$1.50 each) with maps and precise instructions ('after going under the barbed-wire fence, take the small path to the left of the big bend in the stream...') are sold by Centro Girasol café (p213). Routes include:

Ruta Cerro El Toro (three to six hours) See the bull-shaped rock (really!) and wonderful city views.

Ruta de Cafe (2½ to seven hours) Climb up into the organic coffee farms in the mountains around town.

Ruta de la Guerra 1978 (1½ to five hours) When Matagalpans fled the city in 1978, they hid at Cerro Buena Vista and Cerro Apante; there are fine views.

Ruta de la Guerra 1979 (1½ to four hours) The National Guard later retreated to scenic Cerro El Calvario, along paths now lined with pottery studios and forests.

Ruta Santuarias de Chagüitillo (two to seven hours) Keep going when the museum's petroglyph guide turns around.

RESERVA NATURAL CERRO APANTE

This must be among the easiest-to-access reserves in Nicaragua, with walking access (for hearty souls) right from town. Or, you could even hitch most of the way to the top of the cool, misty 1442m peak on the access road.

Either Intur or Marena may be able to find guides, if you'd prefer, and Matagalpa Tours (below) offers guided hikes (US\$10 to US\$16, five hours) to the top.

There are two other entrances to different sectors of the park; one is just north of town on the road to El Tuma, the other on the road to Guadalupe-Samulali, off the Matagalpa-Muy Muy road.

Tours

Matagalpa Tours (☎ 772 4581; www.matagalpa-tours.com) does rural community tourism, and takes you to tiny towns (perhaps on mountain bikes?), such as the indigenous community of El Chile, known for its beautiful fabric arts. Among other offerings, it arranges one- to six-day guided hikes through the mountains; gold-mine tours (US\$25 per person) and a Matagalpa City Tour (US\$16); it has English- or Dutch-speaking guides, too. Spanish lessons are also offered.

Festivals & Events

Anniversary Party (February 14) This may be the biggest party in the Northern Highlands, a fireworks-splashed extravaganza with live music, parades, beauty contests and lots of *chicha bruja* (fermented corn liquor). The region's biggest handicrafts festival, Fair Nicamer, takes place in the weeks leading up to the event.

Fiestas Patronales (September 24) Rather more sedate festivities and *hipicas* (horse parades) honor the Virgin of Merced.

Festival of Polkas, Mazurkas and Jamaquillos (mid-October) It's sort of like Oktoberfest, but with *chicha bruja* instead of beer and *güiillas* instead of sausages. More traditional Oktoberfest celebrations go on at Selva Negra (p215), where there's also a coffee harvest celebration later in the month.

Sleeping

There are a handful of *hospedajes* near Cotran Norte where privacy and security, not to mention flush toilets, are nonexistent, with beds for under US\$2 per night.

BUDGET

Hotel Apante (☎ 772 6890; s/d without bathroom US\$6/9, d/tr with bathroom & air-con US\$12/15; 🚻) This excellent budget choice has clean, simple rooms with high ceilings, lots of light and great security – and free coffee all day. Some of the better rooms with private bathroom also have cable TV, and

the bubbly owner knows a lot about the region.

There are two inexpensive options by the river: claustrophobic **Hotel Soza** (☎ 772 3030; r per person US\$5), with clean, if institutionally furnished units with private bathrooms; and more basic, but much more spacious, **Hospedaje El Sosiego** (no phone; d US\$6), with big, wonderful beds inside dark, cool, cement rooms that may make you feel like you're

in a castle – the haunted kind. Shared bathrooms use bucket-flush technology.

Hotel Bermúdez (☎ 616 7073; s/d US\$3/5) This somewhat smelly entry, east (up a steep hill) of Parque Rubén Darío, prides itself on being the cheapest place in town – grab a sagging mattress and make a deal.

Hotel Matagalpa (☎ 772 3834; d with/without bathroom US\$6/4) One block east of Parque Rubén Darío, thin walls and fan-cooled

COFFEE ROADS OF THE HIGHLANDS

La Ruta de Café

There must be a dozen *Rutas de Café* (Coffee Trails) promoted throughout the Northern Highlands. Matagalpa's is the best developed, and you can do it on your own with help from Intur or the Museo de Café, or go through Matagalpa Tours (p209). Coffee is harvested between October and February, when beans are picked, soaked, cleaned, dried and prepared for roasting; come in April to enjoy the tiny white blossoms. Plantation tours are usually followed with free samples or a visit to a 'cupping room.'

There are several official members of the Ruta de Café, all offering slightly different angles on coffee tours. Two of the best-organized options, easy-to-visit Selva Negra (p215) and award-winning Finca Esperanza Verde (p216), are covered later. Others include:

Finca La Ponderosa (bookings through Intur or the Museo de Café) Four kilometers north of Matagalpa, this ecological *finca* offers horseback tours through organic coffee, after which you can swim beneath a chilly waterfall.

Finca Shamballa (☎ 772 3195, 852 5424) Located inside Reserva Natural Cerro El Arenal (p216), this swish spot offers tourist packages from US\$12 to US\$20 per day that include not just food and horseback riding, but also aromatherapy and massage.

Finca la Leonesa (☎ 772 2049) This San Ramón *finca* has camping, lodging and horseback rides to abandoned gold mines. You can explore 1500m-long tunnels, so bring a flashlight.

Finca San Antonio (☎ 772 3819) There's a simple, four-room *hospedaje* on this dairy and coffee farm, which has some of the best access to Reserva Natural Cerro El Arenal, including a waterfall on Río El Ocote.

Cecocafen & the Fair-Trade Coffee Trail

Like the Ruta de Café without the luxurious haciendas, this community-based initiative for small-scale, sustainable tourism arranges visits and homestays in small coffee-producing villages. **Cecocafen** (Organization of Northern Coffee Cooperatives; ☎ 772 6353; turismo@cecocafen.com), three blocks east and one block south of the Museo de Café, not only arranges tours, but also supports women's groups and builds schools while it promotes Fair Trade coffee. Homestays cost US\$5 per person, plus US\$2.50 per meal.

Although it can work with individuals, Cecocafen is set up for large groups, who usually contact them well ahead of time about visiting communally operated coffee producers, who work small family plots (averaging only five *manzanas*), such as Cooperative El Roblar, a women's organic coffee and veggie-growing collective. You can do this as a day trip for around US\$25 per person, meeting the growers, enjoying homemade *nacatamales* (corn masa formed around a savory meat filling then wrapped in banana leaves and steamed) and folkloric music for lunch, then testing coffee in the 'cupping laboratory' of SolCafe Dry Mill. Or stay on for a while in family homes, where you'll bathe in *pelas* (cement washbasins), use latrines and perhaps do some work, particularly if you're here during harvest time. You'll also walk untried trails, swim in wild waterfalls and finally meet the folks you've been thinking about every time you opted for the more expensive cup of joe.

rooms (better ones are upstairs) offer decent value for the money; soap and fresh towels are included. It may be moving, so call ahead.

Hotel Alvarado I (☎ 772 2830; s/d without bathroom US\$7/9, d with bathroom US\$12) Downright frilly, with doilies on the tables and skirts on the beds, this adorable budget option has OK rooms with clean shared bath, and spacious, pretty rooms with private bath, all upstairs by the TV nook and terrace overlooking the park.

Hotel Central (☎ 712 3140; Av José Benito Escobar; s/d without bathroom US\$6/9, d with bathroom US\$14) Right in the middle of town, this hotel is better than it looks outside, with clean, colorful rooms scattered around an attractive courtyard. The owner, Lupe, speaks English and is hysterical.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Fountain Blue (☎ 772 2733; s/d without bathroom US\$9/15, d with bathroom US\$17-21, incl breakfast; Ⓟ) This excellent-value, 11-star property has simple rooms of varying sizes (some with windows) with great beds that share a clean hot-water bathroom, plus several much better rooms with private bathroom, cable TV and other amenities. The delightful owner provides free sweetbread and coffee in the morning, but can serve full breakfasts with advanced arrangement.

Hostel Molino Norte (☎ 865 2519; s/d incl breakfast US\$20/30; Ⓟ) About 5km north of Matagalpa on the road to Jinotega, comfortable modern rooms have little extras like furry floral toilet covers in the private hot-water bathrooms, and huge cable TVs. Meals are available for US\$3, which is a good thing, since there's not much else around except for the two *manzanas* of coffee planted right out back and several trails worth wandering into the mountains. From town, it's a US\$0.18 bus ride until 7pm, a US\$3 cab ride after 7pm.

Hotel La Pradera (☎ 772 4365; s/d US\$15/18; Ⓟ) This hotel next to the Girasol café was so new that you could smell the paint drying in the brightly colored rooms. Hot water, cable TV and new beds – can't complain.

TOP END

Hotel Lomas de San Tomas (☎ 772 4189; www.hotellomasnthomas.com; d incl breakfast US\$35-45; Ⓟ) A huge step up, this place is un-

missable. Several hundred meters above the city, it has spacious, airy rooms, the more expensive ones with balconies, and an upscale ambience that is surprising given the very reasonable prices. The on-site restaurant is great and has the best view of town around.

Eating

Matagalpa has a few good restaurants, but you'll need to look to the smoky booths that set up at sunset just north of Palí and the cathedral for the regional specialty, *güirilas*. Made with a fresh corn *masa*, they are sweeter and thicker than your average tortilla; a *servicio* includes a hunk of crumbly, salty *cuajada* cheese and *crema*, or cream sauce and costs about US\$1. For self-caterers, there are two grocery stores. Supermercado Matagalpa is near Parque Darío, and has a better selection; Palí, close to Parque Morazón, has better prices.

RESTAURANTS

La Vita é Bella (☎ 772 5476; pasta dishes from US\$4; ☎ 2-11pm Tue-Sun) If you can't find it, take a taxi; if they can't find it, tell them 'Parañas Billares,' which is at the entrance to the narrow alley where this hidden gem serves up tasty Italian and vegetarian specialties in an intimate setting. Try the pizza (some of it on focaccia) or spaghetti vitabella, with a bacon and mushroom white sauce with olives, but start with a bruschetta and finish with an espresso beverage.

Rosticería La Posada (dishes from US\$3.50) Half a block west of Parque Darío, this popular eatery specializes in chicken dishes, like the tasty *pollo en salsa jalapeño* (chicken in jalapeño sauce).

Pescamar (dishes US\$3-6; ☎ 11am-10pm) Excellent seafood – the soups are impressive – is served on a great porch overlooking the city.

La Hora del Taco (dishes US\$2-6; ☎ 11am-11pm) Serving the same great Mexican food as its sister restaurant in Managua – it uses spices! – one can only hope that this place becomes a full-blown chain. Just south of town on the highway to Managua.

El Pullazo (dishes US\$3-8; ☎ 10am-11pm) A see-and-be-seen spot for Matagalpa's upper crust, this place serves the spectacular and eponymous cut of marinated beef and delicious steaks, served alongside fresh *güirilas*.

FAIR TRADE & CAFFEINE DREAMS

More fiercely traded than any global commodity other than oil, black coffee makes up half of Nicaragua's exports and is the jittery engine upon which the economy turns. Until 1989, coffee prices were regulated by the International Coffee Organization (ICO), after a drought in Brazil doubled prices several years before. But the USA pulled out of the ICO about the same time that Vietnam and other new producers were beginning to flood the market with beans. By 1999 coffee prices had dropped from a spike of more than US\$3 to only US\$0.42 per pound, less than it cost to produce.

In Nicaragua, small farmers abandoned their land; of Matagalpa's 25 major haciendas, 20 of them closed, putting 36,000 people out of work. Some went to Costa Rica or other parts of the country to work; most were stuck here, begging for change by the sides of the road. A union, ATC (Rural Workers Association) formed, and former coffee workers shut down the highway four times until the government fell back on an old Sandinista tactic and agreed to give each family a plot of land, for which they would need to pay half.

Some farmers, with the help of international organizations, began growing organic coffee. It was relatively easy to become certified in Nicaragua, as agriculture has never relied on fertilizers and pesticides (because farmers couldn't afford them). It was expensive, however. No single organization certifies coffee 'organic' or 'Fair Trade.' Starbucks, for example, has its own certification program, but there are dozens of others, including Rainforest Alliance and Utz Kapeh. A cooperative of 150 farmers pays around US\$2500 per year to be certified, which is still a good deal considering how much more the coffee earns.

Organic coffee, however, is still subject to volatile market forces, and could easily glut in the future. In the past decade, Fair Trade coffee has been guaranteeing these farmers a set price independent of supply or demand, around US\$1.25 for conventionally grown coffee and US\$1.40 per pound for organic. About one-third of that goes back into the Fair Trade cooperative, for certification fees and other communal expenses.

Despite the fact that Fair Trade basically asks consumers to voluntarily pay extra (who thought that would work?), it's now the fastest-growing segment of the coffee market. Some 800,000 farmers in 40 countries are working Fair Trade plots. In Nicaragua, communities often still work together as Sandinista-style cooperatives, making group decisions and encouraging women to participate. These often work in conjunction with NGOs, which provide support like microcredit from international banks and help coordinating the vital 'wet processing' stage, when the red, pulpy fruit is removed from the coffee bean, which must be done immediately, at the farm, before shipping.

But farming is something like gambling, and one major problem that even Fair Trade can't solve is that producers in Costa Rica pay two or three times what the average picker in Nicaragua makes, which means that there's often a labor shortage right around harvest time. In 2005 the situation – exacerbated by roads being washed out by Hurricane Stan – became so desperate that President Bolaños ordered the army to pick coffee, which they did, probably just happy that they weren't in Iraq with the Salvadoran military.

It's not as though these growers are getting fat off Fair Trade – most make around US\$2 per day. But in a desperately poor region where electricity and running water are luxuries, a better and more reliable price for their coffee means three meals a day – by no means universal in Nicaragua – plus the chance to plan for the future.

It's just south of town on the highway to Managua.

La Pradera de San Francisco (mains US\$2-8; ☎ 10am-10pm) This elegant spot is at once out of the way, at the *empalme* to San Ramón, and also easy to get to, just a US\$2 taxi from Matagalpa (or US\$0.30 bus ride).

Restaurante El Disparate del Potter (Km 142; mains US\$2-5; ☎ 9am-9pm) On the road to Jinotega, this ridge-top restaurant marks the spot where driven road builder Charles Potter blasted his way through a wall of solid rock. Renowned for its onion *quesillos* and *repochetas* (a corn and cheese torta), the real reason you're here is the

view. If it's a clear day, pay the US\$0.30 to climb the spire of rock and check out the moutaintop view.

CAFÉS

Rincón Don Chato (batidos under US\$1, mains US\$1-3; ☎ 7:30am-8pm Sun-Thu, 7:30am-5pm Fri) It looks like a regular formica diner on the main drag, but this nifty nitch has the best *batidos*, or fruit shakes, in town – the pineapple and celery in orange juice is amazing. Also on the menu are Nica classics with your choice of meat, plus veggie burgers and other vegetarian options. Good breakfasts.

Centro Girasol (☎ 612 6030; snacks US\$1-3; ☎ 6:30am-9pm) More than just an outstanding source of great coffee, fabulous baked goods and sweet treats, the Girasol is part of Familias Especiales Julia Biliarte, an organization that supports disabled kids and their families. Around the corner, Casa de Yogurt has fresh, frozen and/or flavored yogurt for the same great cause.

Café Picoteo (dishes US\$2-4; ☎ 10am-10pm) This cozy wood-paneled hangout is a Matagalpa classic, serving espresso beverages alongside affordable Nica snacks like *nacatamales*, *vigarón* (mashed yucca topped with coleslaw and pork rinds) and the excellent *enchiladas suizas* (with ham and cheese).

Cyber Moagüina (snacks US\$1-3; ☎ 9am-8pm) Named for one of the original 10 indigenous settlements of the valley, this cybercafé's coffee, *batidos* and pastries are so good that it's almost worth the slightly higher Internet prices to enjoy them. Or just come for the coffee and surf elsewhere.

QUICK EATS

Buffet Shangrilah (☎ 612 3074; mains US\$2-4; ☎ 7am-8pm) Show up at regular mealtimes for the best selection at this solid steam-table buffet, with a better-than-average salad bar and selection of vegetarian entrees. Bonus: they deliver.

Maná de Cielo (Av Central Don Bartolomé Martínez; meal US\$3-4; ☎ 7am-9pm) This popular steam-table buffet is even better than Shangrilah's (but doesn't have the salad bar), with lots of meaty entrees.

Fritanga Campeche (US\$1-3; ☎ sunset-sunrise) The best spot for grease to counter all the alcohol is this all-night *fritanga*, which sets up across from the Texaco.

Drinking & Entertainment

Grupo Venancio (☎ 772 3562; ☎ Fri & Sat) When you tell your taxi driver 'Grupo Venancio,' three blocks east and three blocks south of Parque Morazán, he may ask why you want to hang out with lesbians and witches (*brujas*). But there are so many reasons! One of Matagalpa's best nights out, this women's collective runs an excellent bar and restaurant which shows movies, has live music and hosts all manner of woman-empowering events. It's usually only open Fridays, with movies and a quieter crowd, and Saturdays, which get packed if the band is good; there's usually no cover. This is a good place to start looking for Matagalpa's thriving gay and lesbian scene, but respectful heterosexual men can and have scored here, too.

MetroCinema (Av Central Don Bartolomé Martínez; movie US\$1.25) This cheap, air-conditioned theater changes movies (probably to another Hollywood action flick) on Thursday, but only charges US\$1 to see it on Monday and Tuesday.

La Casona has live music on Friday nights, while Gran Faraon, a block from the Texaco, lets you put on the show with its karaoke machine.

Shopping

Keep an eye open for brightly colored, almost Guetamalan-style fiber arts from El Chile, an indigenous village 12km east of town, where four workshops sell this stuff all over Central America.

Matagalpa, along with Jinotega, is known for its smooth, heavy black pottery, an effect achieved by specially preparing the volcanic clay, firing it until red hot, then removing bowls and pots with tongs and tossing cedar ashes over them. Cerámica Negra Tradicional, two blocks east of the cathedral, offers pieces by Doña Ernestina Rodríguez, including jewelry and tiny tea sets. There are several other shops nearby.

La Vita é Bella (p211) and Centro Girasol (left) also have a carefully chosen collection of high-quality *artisanias*.

Getting There & Around

There's a **Budget Rent-A-Car** (☎ 772 3041; budgetmt@ibw.ni) close to the cathedral, and another desk at **Hotel Apante** (☎ 772 6890).

There's a **Dollar Rent-A-Car** (☎ 772 4645) two blocks south of Parque Morazón.

Make reservations at **Agencia Tica Bus** (☎ 612 4502) for buses from Matagalpa to San Pedro Sula, Honduras (US\$10, 6:40am); you'll need to head back to Managua for Costa Rica, Panama or Guatemala.

There are two main bus terminals in Matagalpa, Cotran Sur and Cotran Norte/Cotramusun.

COTRAN SUR

Clean, well-organized **Cotran Sur** (☎ 772 4659), attached to the main market, is about 800m west of Parque Rubén Darío, and in general serves Managua and points south.

Chinandega US\$3, 3½ hours, 2pm

Estelí ordinario US\$1.25, 1¾ hours, 5:15am to 5:45pm, every 30 minutes; *expreso* US\$1.40, 1½ hours, 10am and 4:30pm

Jinotega US\$1.25, 1½ hours, 5am to 7pm, every 30 minutes

León US\$2.75, 2½ hours, 6am; alternatively, take any Estelí-bound bus and transfer at San Isidro

Managua ordinario US\$2, 2¾ hours, 3:35am to 6:05pm, every 30 minutes; *expreso* US\$3, 2¾ hours, 5:20am to 5:20pm, hourly

Masaya US\$3, three hours, 2pm and 3:30pm

Sébaco & Ciudad Darío US\$1, one hour, 5:30am, 7:30am, 10:25am, 11am, 11:25am and 12:55pm

COTRAN NORTE/COTRAMUSUN

Much sloppier, this is your basic market-side bus lot, with buses for destinations including:

Cerro Colorado US\$4, 2½ hours, 5:30am, 7:45am, 11:45am and 1:30pm

Escipulas US\$1.50, 1½ hours, 5:30am, 7am, 8am, 9am, noon, 1:30pm, 3pm, 4:30pm and 5:30pm

Río Blanco US\$3, four hours, 4am to 4:30pm, at least hourly; *expreso* 11:15am and 2:15pm

San José de Bocay US\$4, six hours, 4am to 3:30pm, almost hourly

San Ramón US\$0.40, 30 minutes, 5am to 7pm, every 15 minutes

Waswah US\$3.50, 5½ hours, 3am to 2pm, hourly; *expreso* 5:30am and 3:45pm

SOUTH TO MANAGUA

The smooth paved road from Matagalpa to Managua drops from stunning peaks into the epic lowlands of lakes and volcanoes, passing an excellent museum, two historic sites and three lovely lagunas.

Chagüitillo

Just 20 smooth kilometers south of Matagalpa is Chagüitillo, with the very worthwhile **Museo Precolombiano de Chagüitillo** (☎ 775 2151; adch@ibw.com.ni; admission US\$2), a striking stucco that would seem more at home in California than this rural community. The museum itself is pretty typical, with a room dedicated to a local Sandinista farming cooperative, lots of Chorotegan pottery, and an exhibit on local hero Domingo Sánchez Salgado, aka 'Chagüitillo.' Construction worker and leader of the CGT (Confederation of General Workers), a union that won its members vacation time and basic social security, Chagüitillo founded the Socialist Party of Nicaragua in 1945. He was arrested by the Somozas more than 130 times, inspiring a generation – including his son, Efraín Sánchez, one of the original Sandinistas.

But the reason you're here is to take a guided stroll through two incredible **petroglyph sites**, one right in town, one 1.5km away. The one further out, Santuario Sitio el Mico, is downright epic, 3m long and 2m high, a swirly sort of calendar with moons, snakes and dancers. Make reservations for hikes in advance, if possible, at the museum.

There are no hotels or restaurants in Chagüitillo, but ask at the museum about **homestays** (r per person US\$7.50, incl all meals) and a local swimming pool that's open on weekends. **Comedor Popular** (dishes US\$1-2) serves fried favorites close to the parque central. Any Managua-bound *ordinario* from Matagalpa (or vice versa) stops in town. If you're driving, make a right at the arrow for 'Pre-Columbian Art.' It's the modern yellow building that looks hopelessly out of place.

Sébaco

The economic engine of the Northern Highlands, this agricultural stronghold was an important trading town long before the Spanish arrived. It's still a bustling town, with plenty of lit-up signage and convenient banking. There are a few decent *hospedajes* and plenty of simple *comedores*, but no reason for most travelers to stay.

Still, the 'City of Onions' does have its charms, including the colorful vegetable stands for which it is famous. Attractive wooden **Church of Immaculate Concepción** has

a small museum with pottery, *metates* and literature that talks about the town's copious historical mythology, including information about a lost temple to Cihua Coalt (Serpent Woman), a Chorotega goddess, at the bottom of Laguna Tecomapa.

On June 25, the curious tradition of **Santiguito de Sébaco** takes place. The saints are taken to the city's humblest homes, and the rest of the neighborhood prays for them to enjoy a harvest – which benefits everyone in this agribusiness powerhouse.

The mountains behind Sébaco appear to many people to have a distinctly feminine silhouette, and with good reason. These are said to be the remains of Oyanka, an indigenous princess who in 1590 fell in love with a Spanish soldier named Joseph de Canterero, who dumped her. She was so depressed that she collapsed into the mountains behind town.

Ciudad Darío

This pretty town, originally known as Metapa, lies well off the main road, in a crease of the Cordillera Dariense carved out by the Río Grande de Matagalpa.

You're probably here to see **Casa Natal Rubén Darío** (☎ 776 3846; admission US\$0.70; ☎ 8:30am-4:30pm), where Rubén Darío was born. It's actually the house of Darío's aunt, which was as far as his mother got en route to León before the contractions started. Although the baby poet didn't spend more than a few weeks here, the museum is worth a look, furnished with mid-1880s kitchenware and a tiny wooden altar. There's also a chronology of Darío's life (in Spanish), plus a pretty outdoor auditorium that hosts the occasional poetry reading and other events. There's a pretty park in front with a statue of Darío as Orpheus.

The parque central, fronted by the fairly impressive Spanish colonial **Iglesia San Pedro**, has another statue of Darío, as Ambassador to Spain, atop a green, sort of abstract fountain. The park also has a better-than-average playground. There's a third bronze Darío statue at the southern entrance into town.

La Casa de Agricultor (☎ 776 2379; r per person US\$2; 📍) has basic, clean cement rooms with very firm beds (cement pedestals with foam mattresses), but only some with private bathrooms. There's a handful of res-

taurants and *fritangas*, most close to the park or bus stop, but fancier Los Gamelos has dance parties some weekend. Buses for Managua and Matagalpa leave the bus station, two blocks downhill from La Casa de Agricultor, every half-hour.

Continuing south, you'll drop back into the steaming lowland plains, passing three lagoons, **Las Playitas**, **Moyoá** and **Teconapa**; a trail leads from a cluster of fried fish restaurants, if you want to explore. Bring insect repellent.

Further along, you'll pass lots of folks vending everything from parakeets to truly amazing wooden birds, the last worth pulling over for if you're in your own car.

Hacienda San Jacinto

You've got to be a committed history buff to appreciate this tiny **national monument** (admission US\$2; ☎ 8am-4pm), isolated and inconvenient, a shadeless 3km walk from the closest bus stop. It commemorates the Battle of San Jacinto, when William Walker's filibusterers (see the boxed text, p55) and León Liberals were met by stiff resistance from the southern Conservative crew. Most famously, a 23-year-old Granadino by the name of Andrés Castro ran out of ammunition, but undaunted, began throwing rocks instead, killing one of the filibusterers. Walker lost the battle, and later the war, and this gorgeous early-1800s Spanish hacienda has a couple of murals depicting the event, plus a few busts depicting the participants and a handful of artifacts.

Hacienda San Jacinto is about 25km south of Ciudad Darío. Any bus can drop you off at the entrance.

SELVA NEGRA

One of the most comfortable ways to experience Nicaragua's vast and largely untamed cloud forests, hung with bromeliads and rare orchids, is **Selva Negra** (☎ 612 3883; resort@selvanegra.com; admission US\$3). Named after Germany's Black Forest, Selva Negra was founded in the 1880s by German immigrants who came at the invitation of the Nicaraguan government to grow coffee, and their descendants still manage the 850-hectare estate, over half of which is protected rain forest.

Day trippers can do coffee tours at 9am and 3pm, or just hike several kilometers

of trails, and visit the museum and ‘terrocarril’ (a rail-less train that ran between Corinto and Matagalpa in the early 1900s). Black coffee and a pastry are included with your fee, or enjoy a meal with lots of German options. The hotel may be overpriced (US\$10/40/62.50 per dorm bed/single/double), particularly the dorms, but the Bavarian-style cottages (US\$100 to US\$150) have charm to spare, with miniature forests growing out of the roof and Saxon interior styling, and you can’t beat the backyard.

Take any bus heading north from Matagalpa and get off at the signed turnoff, 12km north of town, marked by an old military tank. From there it’s a pleasant 1.5km walk.

RESERVA NATURAL CERRO EL ARENAL

Despite its proximity to Matagalpa and Jinotega, this tiny (575 hectares) reserve remains a relatively difficult park to access. The easiest way is to organize a tour through Selva Negra (p215), whose property abuts the park; guests or visitors can hire a guide (US\$12). Finca San Antonio (p210) also has lodging and guided tours of the park.

If you’re feeling adventurous and have a 4WD, head 8km north of Matagalpa on the road to La Dalia, where there’s a signed turnoff to the park entrance. A good road leads through the *fincas* and past the San Antonio coffee-processing facility, abandoned except during the coffee season. This is a good place to park in rainy season, when the rest of the road is impassable. It’s another 1km to the tiny town of San Antonio, with *pulperías* and a couple of *comedores* where you can ask about guides up the 3km trail to the top of El Arenal. Matagalpa Tours (p209) leads a two-day trek up the mountain.

FINCA ESPERANZA VERDE

About 35km east of Matagalpa toward the town of San Sebastian de Yalí, sitting on 100 cool green *manzanas* at 1190m, this is the official edge of the cloud forest, a peaceful **preserve** (☎ 772 5003; www.fincaesperanzaverde.org; camping per person US\$6, s/d/tr US\$30/45/60; 📍) and organic coffee *finca* that in 2004 was named the world’s best ecolodge by *Smithsonian* magazine. You can visit for the day and hike three short

but lovely **trails** (admission US\$1.25; guides per group US\$4). Or stay in one of the ultracomfortable lodges, with hot-water private bathrooms and hammocks where you can watch the sun set over the impossibly pretty mountainscape.

In addition to guided hikes and horseback tours they’ll take you to **Río Wabul** (US\$100 per group), in otherwise inaccessible Reserva Natural Guabule. There is also a great on-site restaurant (dishes US\$5 to US\$6), where musicians from nearby Yucúl are invited to perform for US\$35 extra per diner.

Reservations are needed in dry season, when birders book the place weeks in advance. Staff may be able to arrange transportation from San Ramón, but most likely you’ll be hiring a taxi from San Ramón or taking any Río Blanco-bound bus and getting off in Yucúl, home to **Yucúl Genetic Reserve**, with a rare species of pine but no tourist infrastructure. It’s a steep 3km climb from the *empalme* to the reserve itself, which really is worth it.

EL TUMA-LA DALIA

If the potholed road from Matagalpa to La Dalia starts getting too hot, get off the bus (or pull over) at Km 149, the community of Santa Emilia, and ask about **Balneario Santa Emilia** (US\$1). A short, steep hike from town, this is a fine 15m waterfall that may be OK for swimming, and most certainly makes a good photo op.

But the reason you’re probably coming all the way out here is to see amazing **Reserva Natural Macizos de Peñas Blancas** (☎ 772 5746; admission US\$2, guide US\$6). If you won’t be staying at the lodges, talk to Marena (p207) in Matagalpa about arranging a guided hike to the unforgettable peak of La Cordillera Isabelia, an enormous mesa rock surrounded by sheer 100m cliffs. You’ll need to have (or pay for) a group of three people to warrant a guide. This is high-altitude exploring in intact primary cloud forest, where some 48 discovered waterfalls pour from the mists into swimming holes; at least one of them is almost 50m tall. Matagalpa Tours (p209) arranges a three-day guided trek into the reserve, all inclusive, from Matagalpa.

There are a couple of very basic *hospedajes* in La Dalia, and one fabulous hotel. **La Sobra Eco-Lodge** (☎ 772 3733, 846 3500;

sombra-ecolodge@yahoo.es; per person incl 3 meals US\$40; (P), associated with Finca Esperanza Verde (opposite), has opened this gorgeous place with 220 *manzanas* of forest and coffee *finca* right on the border of Bosawás. Daytrippers (admission US\$10) can use the 3km of trails past to lovely waterfalls, El Edén and El Gavilán, or just ask about arranging guides further into the park.

Nearby, the much more basic, less-developed **San Rafael Private Reserve** (☎ 772 2229) offers bird-watching tours and other guided hikes into Peñas Blancas; you can camp or arrange to stay in the main house, about 7km from La Dalia proper, in the even smaller town of Yasika Norte.

La Canavalia (d US\$45-60), a rural development organization 19km from Matagalpa toward El Tuma, offers comfortably rustic cabañas with private bath, as well as several trails and a variety of nature tours, as well as horses and bicycles for rent. Meals are available for US\$2 to US\$3. To find this place you really have to just turn up and ask around.

Buses leave La Dalia for Matagalpa (US\$1.25, 1½ hours) almost hourly 6am to 6pm.

JINOTEGA

The City of Mists, this is one of those places kept pristine by conflict, where high-altitude forests have hidden warriors within their dramatic ridges and gorges since at least AD 596, when the first Náhuatl-speaking people arrived. They called this valley Xinotoga, the Place of Refuge, the Eternal City, embraced in green and granite peaks ascending another 200m into the sky all around.

First settled by the Spanish in the 1500s, Jinotega's architecture remains well preserved, if pockmarked by bulletholes here and there; it saw some of the heaviest fighting in the revolution and Contra War. But when the mists flow through the cobbled streets, blurring the harsh lines of reality, it is almost as though there was always peace in this most poignantly beautiful of places.

Peace *has* arrived, and Jinotega is beginning to receive a trickle of visitors from the steaming lowlands to this rarified world, with good hotels and restaurants at the gateway to an almighty swath of almost untried nature.

Orientation & Information

Jinotega's nickname, City of Mists, is a gentle reminder to bring a jacket and pants – the average temperature is a chilly 20°C and it can get 2600mm of rain annually. The ride up here from Matagalpa is stunning; it's worth hopping off the bus at the high-altitude pass to pick up some produce from one of the colorful stands, and continue north on the main road to San Rafael del Norte and Wiwilí. Jinotega sprawls a bit, with most services (but not all) within a few blocks of the *parque central*. BanCentro and BanPro banks both have Visa-plus ATMs, while BAC accepts MasterCard debit cards.

Hospital (☎ 782 2626)

Intur (☎ 782 4552; jinotega@intur.gob.ni) This branch, right on the *parque central*, not only has English speakers on staff and a fine collection of flyers, it also helps organize trips to ecological *fincas*, finds guides for Reserva Natural Dantalí-El Diablo and offers information about the entire department.

J&M Internet C@fe (per hr US\$1) Internet's pretty darned slow in Jinotega, at this shop one block from the *parque central*, and at several other cafés in town.

Jinotega (www.jinotega.8k.com) This helpful city website has promise.

Marena (☎ 782 2719; sinap@ibw.com.ni) nconveniently located 2km from the town center on the road to San Rafael, this Marena isn't really set up for tourists yet. It may be able to arrange guides for Reserva Natural Dantalí-El Diablo.

Police (☎ 782 22150)

Sights & Activities

The Jinotega **archaeology museum** closed several years ago, but the collection is currently in storage, awaiting the restoration of heroic former president Benjamin Zeledón, here it will hopefully be displayed before this guide is on the shelves. Ask at Intur for up-to-date information.

Jinotega's 1805 **Cathedral San Juan** suffers a bit because it's in competition with heavy-weight churches in San Rafael del Norte and Matagalpa, but the arched white interior is quite literally lined with beautiful saints – including a very nice Virgin of Guadalupe – and several subtle artistic paeans to both Russian Orthodox and indigenous beliefs. **Iglesia de los Angeles**, on the other side of town, is also pretty, but run-down.

Across the plaza from the church, fading murals on the walls of the old Somoza jail (now a youth center) serve as reminders of the revolutionary years. One portrays coffee pickers with rifles slung over their shoulders; another depicts young people at war.

CERRO LA CRUZ

This town's top tourist attraction and can't-miss hike is up to the gently glowing cross (it was illuminated a couple of years back, and floats rather eerily in the night-time mists), from a trail that starts by the cemetery. Originally placed here in 1703 by Franciscan Fray Margil de Jesús, it's become the focus of Jinotega's biggest party, **Fiestas de la Cruz** (April 30 to May 16), which peaks on May 3 when everyone and their grandmother scales the mountain en masse. There are trails to the top of most of these hills, too, if you need another challenge.

Tours

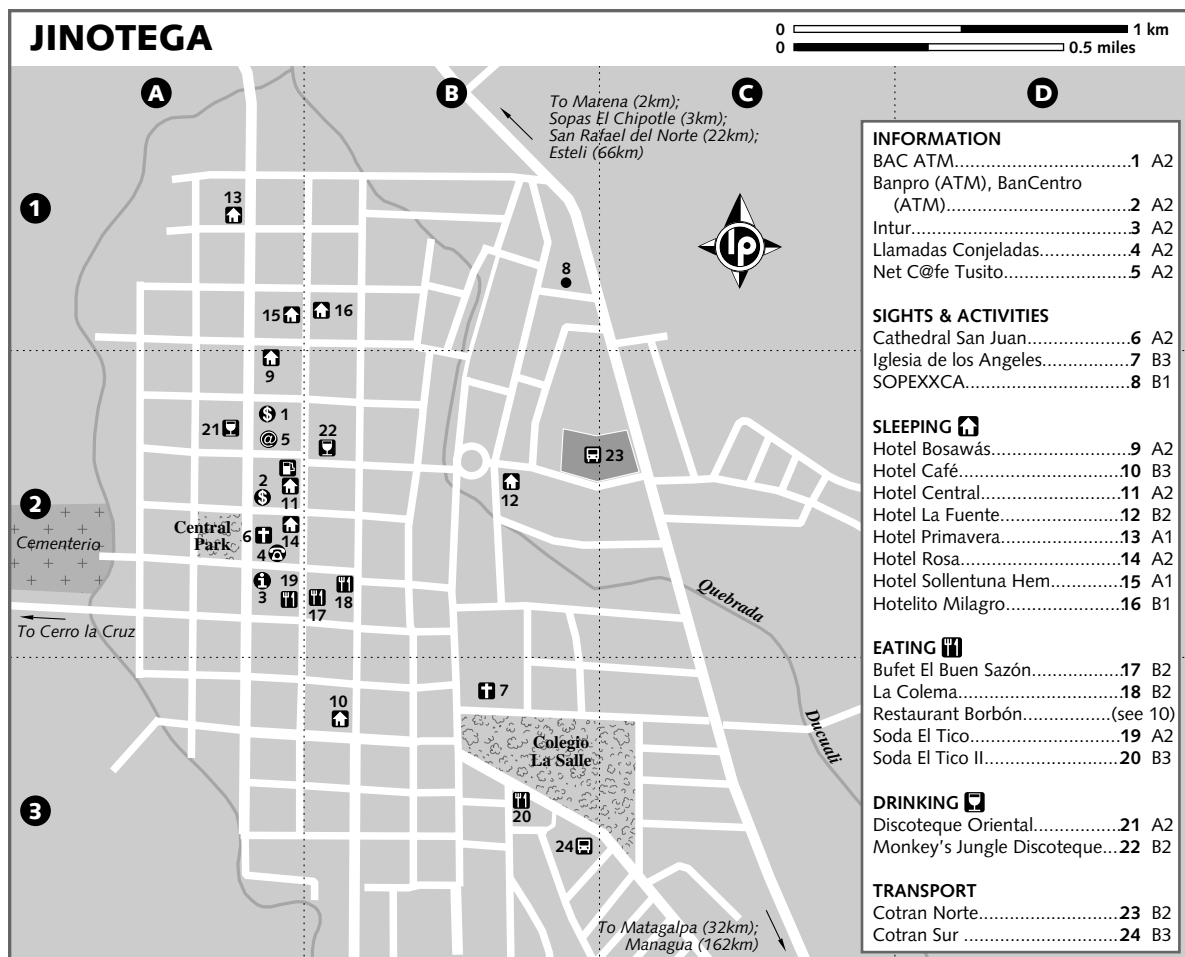
SOPPEXCCA COFFEE COOPERATIVE

The same concept as Cecocafen (see the boxed text, p210), this **coffee cooperative**

(Society of Small Coffee Producers, Exporters & Buyers; ☎ 782 2617; www.soppexcca.org/en) offers a variety of tours throughout the area, as well as homestays, horseback rides and more. The group is consistently recognized for growing some of the highest-quality coffee in the world, and some of its best comes from **Cooperative Luis Hernandez** (r per person incl 3 meals US\$20), with lodging in pastoral San Pedro de Buculmay, about 12km from Jinotega. The Soppexcca office is north of Cotran Norte.

ECOLOGICAL FINCAS

Jinotega has a handful of 'ecological *fincas*,' offering a variety of different tours and services on the misty fringes of the department. Two of the most professional are listed under Reserva Natural Datanlí-El Diablo (p221), or you can have Hotel Sollentuna Hem (p220) arrange an 8km guided trek (hiking/horseback per person US\$15/25) through the coffee fields to **Finca El Laurel**. You'll climb the ring of mountains around town then descend to the shimmering lake-shore, where you'll be picked up for the drive home – or not. There are two basic,



DIY: WIWILÍ, BOCAY & RESERVA DE BIOSFERA BOSAWÁS

Jinotega offers access to two routes into Reserva de Biosfera Bosawás (Bosawás Biosphere Reserve; see the boxed text, p230), neither of them simple or easy. But if you're game, head either to Wiwilí, about 100km north of Jinotega on a rocky dirt road, or through El Cuá and San José de Bocay (the 'Bo' in Bosawás), accessible on an even worse road headed northeast.

Wiwilí is the youngest city in Nicaragua (1989), and is actually two neighboring cities on either side of the Río Coco, with the same name. At just 300m, it can get hot, but it's still a mountain town, in the shadow of Cerro Cantagallo (1485m). It has a couple of *hospedajes* and one good hotel, clean **Hotel Central** (no phone; r with/without bathroom per person US\$4/8). Around the corner is excellent Faisan Dorado restaurant, the best of several *comedores*. Either of these places can find you guides and boats for the Río Coco; Wiwilí is about five or six hours by boat to the Honduran border. The Wiwilí *alcaldía* can also arrange guides; it doesn't have a phone but a nearby house (☎ 273 3209) does, and will call over someone from the *alcaldía*.

The tiny town of **El Cuá** is actually inside Bosawás itself, and is the closest population center to Reserva Natural Macizos de Peñas Blancas (p216). The town itself has a couple of *hospedajes* and simple eateries, as well as **Guardianos del Bosque** (no phone; cabinas per person US\$6), a cooperative with simple lodging, or just come on a day trip and hire a guide from the cooperative for the 'Waterfalls of Peñas Blancas Trail.'

There's a ranger station further up the road at **San José de Bocay**, closest to **Reserva Natural Cerro Kilambé**, preserved for its incredible cliffs and profusion of waterfalls, which feed the Yakalwas, Pijinero and Wamblam Rivers. At 1750m, Kilambé is the tallest mountain in the department and covered with pine trees up to about 900m; this cloud forest and dwarf cloud forest is where you may see resplendent quetzals.

How adventurous do you feel? About 50km northeast of San José de Bocay, from a trail starting at the Tunowalan Ranger Station, is the **Cuevas Belén de Tunowalan**, an incredible riverside cave system that may be developed for adventure tourism. At present, it's just an adventure; in San José de Bocay, ask around for Henry Taylor, a Miskito guide who speaks some English; he has hats and lamps, as well as a boat for the 5km trip up river to the cave, which has petroglyphs and bats, and according to some legends may be home to the devil himself.

concrete rooms with private bath (US\$6 per person), and meals are provided for US\$2 each. The hike itself is a four-hour trip, and they may be able to find a guide who speaks English. Sollentuna Hem also arranges city tours and other trips.

Lácteos Santa Martha (☎ 782 4063; lactosam@ibw.com.ni) has been making great cheese and other dairy products since 1993, and can take you on a tour. You can arrange it with them or Intur.

Festivals & Events

Festival de la Cruz (May 3) One of Nicaragua's most athletic fiestas, since 1703 visitors have been shamed into climbing to the cross by area octogenarians. Breath...

San Isidro Laborador (May 15) Both Jinotega and Condega honor the patron saint of farmers by building altars out of fruits and veggies.

Fiestas Patronales (June 24) Solemn processions, rodeos, beauty queens and more celebrate the feast day of San Juan Bautista.

Festival de Musica Vernacula (mid-October) This folk-music festival brings in bands and dance troops from throughout the region, showcasing polkas, mazurkas and other colorfully warped German traditions at venues all over town.

Sleeping

There are a number of very simple US\$2 *hospedajes* geared toward campesinos right around Hotel La Fuente and Cotran Norte; don't expect flush toilets.

Hotel Bosowás (☎ 782 3311; r per person US\$4) Besides offering the best deal in town on big, clean, tiled rooms with nice bedspreads and a hot-water shared bathroom, owner Lenin Castro is absolutely in love with Reserva Bosawás and can offer tips on visiting via Wiwilí. Breakfast can be arranged for US\$2.

Hotel Central (☎ 782 2063; s/d US\$10/12; P ♻) Pretty fabulously remodeled large rooms have private hot-water bathroom and cable TV; ask about cheaper rooms that have yet

to get the full makeover. The location is great, and it's excellent value for couples.

Hotel Rosa (☎ 782 2472; s/d US\$2/4) Among the dingy but clean cheapies, Rosa deserves special mention: Jinotega's oldest hotel is charmingly rustic or appallingly run-down, depending on your point of view.

Hotel Primavera (☎ 782 2400; s without bathroom US\$3, d with bathroom US\$9) Simple singles have limited floorspace and walls that don't hit the ceiling, and the ultra-clean doubles have TV and fans. It's a good deal, but note that the door shuts at 10pm sharp.

Hotel Sollentuna Hem (☎ 782 2334; s without bathroom US\$8, s/d/tr with bathroom US\$11/18/21; (P)) This pleasant hotel has the feel of a country inn, and warm blankets are supplied. Rooms range from cozy singles to roomier doubles with cable TV, private bathroom and hot water. It also organizes a variety of tours, including guided hikes to Finca El Laurel, close to the lake, and a city tour.

Hotel Milagro (☎ 610 6967; r with/without bathroom US\$9/7) Across the street from Sollentuna Hem, the Milagro has a few dark but cheerfully painted cement rooms, one with TV.

Hotel Café (☎ 782 3249; s/d incl breakfast US\$40/50; (P) (☎) (☎)) Almost luxury rooms have beautiful furnishings, big cable TVs, attractive hot-water bathrooms with little soaps, and even air conditioning, as if you'd need it. Its Restaurant Borbon (dishes US\$3 to US\$10) is gourmet and very good (try the herb-rubbed filet mignon, US\$10). The owners have hookups with Finca Kilimanjaro (opposite), and can arrange package deals.

Eating

Most Nicas head straight to the lake (opposite) for fried *guapote* (rainbow bass), one of the main reasons to come to Jinotega.

Soda El Tico (☎ 782 2059; buffet US\$2-4; ☎ 7:30am-10pm) A Jinotega tradition, this cozy restaurant gets a cast of thousands for its impressive lunch and dinner buffets, not to mention menu items – including *casados* – and it even delivers. It also sells landscape paintings from local artists. Soda El Tico II, by Cotran Sur, is much more basic.

Bufet El Buen Sazón (dishes US\$1.50-3; ☎ lunch & dinner) Dueling buffets! This winner, across the street, has fewer choices, costs less, tastes great and comes with free coffee.

Sopas El Chipotle (dishes US\$2-5; ☎ 11am-8pm) About 3km from the city center on the road to San Rafael, this locally revered spot serves up big bowls of delicious soup and other traditional fare in the attractive gardens.

La Colema (dishes US\$4-10; ☎ 10am-10pm) Candlelight dining, formal jackets on the waiters and even separate salad forks (!) almost make you forget that you're in an otherwise pretty typical Nicaraguan restaurant. The steak is melt-in-your-mouth, the fish is fresh from the lake and there's a private dining room if you're afraid your husband might walk in.

Restaurante Borbón (US\$4-10; ☎ 6am-10pm) Inside lovely Hotel Café, this restaurant doesn't quite have La Colema's cachet, but may have better food – try *pollo a la crema*, lean chicken breast smothered in a parsley and garlic white sauce.

Drinking & Entertainment

Monkey's Jungle Discoteque (☎ 8pm-3am Sat & Sun) City lights dim when this place gets going: a huge dance floor, petroglyphs on the wall and a monkey swinging from the ceiling.

Discoteque Oriental (☎ Thu-Sun) This disco attracts a more mature crowd, and also serves Chinese food.

Getting There & Around

There are two bus stations. Cotran Norte is on the highway east of town, while **Cotran Sur** (☎ 782 4530) sits near the town's southern entrance.

COTRAN NORTE

This easy-to-navigate bus station is in the very nice market, a good place to stock up on high-altitude veggies if you're headed back to the flatlands.

Estelí US\$2.50, 1¾ hours, 7am, 9am, 1pm, 2:45pm and 3:30pm

La Pita US\$4, four to five hours, 7:30am, 9am, 11am and 2:30pm

Pantasma (Lago de Apanás) US\$2, 1½ hours, 4am and 5:30am

San José de Bocay US\$4, four to five hours, 4am, 6:30am, 10am and noon; stops in El Cuá

San Rafael del Norte US\$1, 30 minutes, 6am to 6pm, every 30 minutes

Wiwilí US\$3.50, four to five hours, 4am, 6:30am, 8:45am, 11am and 1:15pm

Yalí US\$2, two hours, 6am, 8:30am, noon and 2:30pm

COTRAN SUR

Managua *expreso* US\$4.25, 3½ hours, 4am, 5am, 5:30am, 6:10am, 7:30am, 9am, 10:45am, noon, 1:30pm, 3pm and 4pm; *ordinario* US\$3.25, 4½ hours, 5am to 6:15am, every 30 minutes; stops in Matagalpa

RESERVA NATURAL DANTALÍ-EL DIABLO

With very little tourist infrastructure, this is a rewarding (if muddy) climb up into the quetzal zone at 1650m where the misty chill hovers at around 20°C. While Jinotega's **Marena** (☎ 782 2719; sinap@ibw.com.ni) may be able to arrange guides, such as **Aldea Global** (☎ 782 2237), it's actually much easier to go through one of the private *fincas* that are part of the reserve.

There are two entrances to the park. The southern entrance is 12.5km down a lousy dirt road from the signed turnoff 'Km146' on the Matagalpa–Jinotega road. Stay straight until you get to **Finca La Esmeralda** (no phone; r per person incl 3 meals US\$10; típica US\$2.50), with one of the most impressive orchid gardens you'll ever see. You can hire a guide (US\$6 per group) for trails that include the park's most impressive discovered waterfall. One bus daily leaves Cotran Norte in Matagalpa for 'Las Nubes,' stopping close to the *finca*.

If you continue through Jinotega and make a well-signed right turn on the somewhat better dirt road, continuing 20km toward El Cuá, you come to the northern entrance, close to two ecological *fincas* that offer tours.

Above the clouds at 1300m, **El Jaguar** (☎ 279 9219, 886 1016; www.jaguarreserve.orgbienvenidos.htm; per person incl breakfast & dinner US\$30) has the nicest lodging and easiest access to the reserve's best trails: Sendero La Bujona, an easy, family-friendly 1.5km loop; Sendero Quétzal, a 3.5km climb to a chilly overlook; and Sendero El Congo. El Jaguar itself sits on 45 *manzanas*, some primary cloud forest where more than 138 species of bird have been seen. There are two beautiful, if fairly basic, lodges, one separated into apartments with kitchens that sleep four, another for large groups.

Finca Kilimanjaro (☎ 782 2113, 838 9418; andres8820000@hotmail.com), about 32km from Jinotega, arranges tours and overnights through Hotel Café in Jinotega (opposite). A full day trip, including transportation,

horseback riding, cow milking, swimming and more, costs US\$50 per person. They don't have a lodge yet, but you're welcome to camp with reservations.

LAGO DE APANÁS-ASTURIAS

The third largest body of water in Nicaragua is artificial, formed in 1964 when the Mancotal dam was built on the Río El Tuma, just 6km north of Jinotega. It's actually two lakes, much larger Lago de Apanás (54 sq km) and its smaller, northern brother, Lago Asturias (3 sq km), and they are locally known for producing some of the best *guapote* in the country, on sale at lots of rickety-looking *rancheros* lining the lakeshore. If you'd prefer to catch your own, fishermen will take you out on the lake for around US\$3 per hour in a rowboat, US\$10 per hour with the motor running.

This is a hydroelectric dam, and Planta Cetroamérica produces about 50,000kw and usually holds about 324 million cubic meters of water; during Hurricane Mitch it held back 756 million cubic meters, just barely. Although it's an artificial body of water, this is one of the last remaining habitats of *nutria*, a really big rodent, left in Nicaragua. Buses leave Matagalpa for Pantasma and Lago de Apanás (US\$2, 1½ hours) at 4am and 5:30am.

There's not really anywhere to stay on the lake, but the brand-new **Carlos Augusto Private Reserve** (☎ 240 0477; carlosaugustoreserv@hotmail.com) has big plans. At press time, you could bring your own tent or just come for the day.

SAN RAFAEL DEL NORTE

pop 14,066 / elevation 1062m

In a region of peaks, this beautiful city sits the highest, buoyed by chill jungles more than a crisp, clear kilometer above the seas. Founded in the 1600s, but a backwater until the last century, there are a few five-star reasons to make your way to the very top of Nicaragua.

Sights & Activities

Templo Parroquial de San Rafael Arcángel was made a National Artistic Monument in 2000, and is one of the most beautiful churches in a country known for the same. A labor of love by Father Odorico

SANDINO: PROPHET OF THE SEGOVIAS

Born in 1895 to a wealthy Niquinohomo landowner, Gregorio Sandino, and an indigenous servant girl, Margarita Calderón, Augusto César Sandino was always painfully aware of class differences. He spent his childhood in poverty until his mother abandoned him, and the Sandinos unenthusiastically took him in.

The family eventually entrusted him with overseeing the farm, but after he almost killed the son of a prominent local Conservative politician in a gun duel, Sandino had to leave that life and flee the country. He traveled and worked in Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico, discovering yoga, communism and Seventh Day Adventism along the way, even becoming a Freemason. For seven years he primed himself for a higher path, and when the statute of limitations ran out on his attempted murder charges, he returned to Nicaragua, which was by now embroiled in civil war.

Sandino offered his services to the Liberal forces, who refused to arm the untried newcomer. A group of prostitutes loaned Sandino the money instead, and he began a tireless guerrilla campaign, attracting mostly campesino and indigenous followers, getting financial backing from Mexico, and ignoring other Liberals.

In 1927 more than 2000 US marines arrived with a treaty and orders to enforce it. 'All my men surrender,' said the Liberal commander during the formalities, tired of war and now hopelessly outgunned. 'Except One.'

On 15 July 1927 Sandino attacked the Marines in Ocotal; the US responded with aerial bombing, which worked. Realizing that traditional warfare was out of the question, Sandino retreated to the mountains and began a six-year, low-intensity war with US occupiers and the National Guard. But although he had a near-fanatical following in the mountains of Nueva Segovia, broader urban and international support was drying up.

Throughout the early 1930s, Sandino's army went from ratcheting up hit-and-run victories to controlling almost half the country. Sandino declared himself the incarnation of Caesar, saying that a horrific Managua earthquake was proof of his divinity, and delivering the *Manifiesto of Light and Truth*, which revealed that Nicaragua would be the final staging ground in the battle between good and evil. Things had gone way beyond ridding Nicaragua of US imperialism.

By 1933, despite Sandino's position as the *de facto* president of half of Nicaragua, the writing was on the wall: international support was gone, popular moderate Juan B Sacasa had just been elected president, and Sandino dreamt that he had to either make peace or commit suicide immediately. Sacasa gave the Sandinistas 36,000 sq km to homestead near Jinotega, which they operated as a commune, and Sandino seemed to settle down. But the US military, which had to pull out due to domestic pressures, suspected he still had a secret cache of weapons.

As an insurance policy, the United States began providing substantial military support to Anastasio Somoza García, a water-company official married to a niece of President Sacasa, who spoke fluent English. He was among the guests at an official dinner party celebrating the big peace treaty with the Sandinistas on February 20, 1934.

After dinner, as they left the presidential palace, Sandino and his supporters were abducted and shot, not far from where Sandino's enormous silhouette commands the Managua skyline. The bodies were never found.

'Our banner is red over black,' Sandino once explained. 'Black is death and red is resurrection.' Check out www.sandino.org to learn more.

D'Andrea (see the boxed text, opposite), construction began atop the site of a much older church in 1955, and today the church boasts a soaring interior with Italian marble, an exquisite altar and, most importantly, a series of inspiring murals set to a remarkable sky blue, painted by Australian professor John Fuchs Holl in 1967 and 1968. The story of the Bible and

the temptation of Christ, not to mention that Virgin of Guadalupe, are striking, but be sure to check out the Last Supper tile mosaic, too.

Father Odorico himself is buried a few hundred meters away, at the **Santuario Cerro Tepeyac**; it is a landmark that covers a mountainside, modeled after the Shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico. And

FATHER ODORICO D'ANDREA

Father Odorico D'Andrea was born in Italy in 1916, and anointed as a Franciscan friar in 1942. He found his way to San Rafael 12 years later, where he not only constructed the magnificent temple, but also got the first roads, running water, schools and clinic into the region. His efforts never sat well with the government; in 1959 he had to flee Somoza's forces, and he later became an outspoken critic of the Sandinistas, though he always worked for peace. And he lived to see it, just barely. On May 3, 1989, in La Naranja, he gave the Eucharist to Sandinistas and Contras together. He would die peacefully a year later.

although September 29 is the feast day for San Rafael del Norte's patron, those fireworks and festivities pale in comparison to the devotion offered here, between March 5, Odorico's birthday, and March 22, the anniversary of his death, where he was mourned by more than 10,000 people at his funeral.

Museo Sandino (no phone; donations appreciated), around the corner from the church and open 'when it's open,' is the best museum in Nicaragua to Augusto César Sandino. It's in his in-laws' home, later used as a telegraph house, and is run (one assumes Sandino would approve) without government funding or support by one devoted man, Tomás Herrera-Zeledon, who deserves a medal for pulling this place together. This tidy museum has Sandino's typewriter and guns, lots of original documents and copies of just about every existing photo of the man and his 'Crazy Little Army,' who were based right here. It's also got a library of lefty required reading, from Lenin to Brezhnev to Rugama. The anniversary of Sandino's wedding to local gal Blanca Aráuz, which took place here on May 18, 1927, is still one of the biggest annual parties in town.

Do you need more excuses to hang out around here a little longer? The **alcaldía** (☎ 652 2209) can help find guides to **Salto de El Salitre**, an area waterfall that drops 10 glorious meters into a perfect swimming hole not far from town. Further afield are a 21m waterfall, **Salto Santa María**, the

Cuevas del Hermitano, and pine-covered, climbable **Volcán Yalí** (1542m).

About 15km north of San Rafael on a rough dirt road, **San Sebastián de Yalí** has outstanding petroglyphs in the parque central, but it's 10km further north to **La Pavona**, with the really good petroglyphs, a huge scene carved into the rocks near Cerro la Cruz.

Sleeping & Eating

Casita San Payo (☎ 784 2327; r US\$9-14) This great hotel in San Rafael features very clean, comfortable rooms with lots of natural light and private hot-water bathrooms. For a few dollars more, you get cable TV and more space. The restaurant (dishes US\$2 to US\$4) has a solid baked-goods selection.

Hospedaje Aura (r without bathroom per person US\$4) Across the street, this is a much more basic option.

Getting There & Away

A bus runs from the parque central to Jinotega (US\$1) hourly 5:30am to 6pm. Microbuses run to Estelí (US\$1.25) from the *empalme* until 3:30pm.

THE ROAD TO ESTELÍ

The back road to Estelí, on a smooth, graded dirt road (better, at any rate, than the patched and potholed stretch between Matagalpa and Jinotega), has got to be one of the most beautiful drives in the country. It's just high-altitude beauty, with one town, **La Concordia** (899m), almost exactly 33km from Jinotega and 33km from Estelí.

There are two restaurants: **Restaurant Casona** (set plate US\$2; ☎ 7:30am-8:30pm), right on the road, serving decent *típica* in an enormous and probably ancient adobe; or, if you head into town, Comedor Mary, also serving set plates.

If you want to stretch your legs, you could check out the rock altar, which predates the attractive 1851 **Iglesia Nuestra Señora de Lourdes** by at least a few hundred years, or ask a local kid to show you the town's locally famous **petroglyphs**, located right outside of town. They're outstanding, carved into a cliff face at least 4m high above the river, with six huge drawings and a human handprint.

THE CARIBBEAN COAST

There are so few places left on this ever less lonely planet so beautiful and yet so untouched. This enormous region of bubbling hot springs and soaring ceiba trees, white-sand Caribbean islets and endless tropical rivers makes up roughly 70% of Nicaragua's total landmass. It is another world in so many ways, where tiny townships of Miskito and Mayangna Indians are raised from the jungle on slender wooden stilts, centered on their red-roofed and incongruously Germanic churches. From the cloud-forested peaks of the soaring Serranía Amerrique to the wide and humid Río Coco, Central America's largest river, you may encounter more challenges than usual exploring Nicaragua's Caribbean Coast, but there are some vacations destined to become adventures.

Climate & Geography

The Caribbean Coast is a broad alluvial flood plain, washed down from the central highlands by four major – and countless minor – river systems. The Río Coco, or Wangki (Miskito for 'Big River'), is Central America's mightiest waterway and forms the border with Honduras. The other three, from north to south, are the Río Prinzapolka, Río Grande de Matagalpa and Río Escondido, which you'll take between El Rama and Bluefields, because there's no road.

More than 90% of Nicaragua's rainfall ends up on the Atlantic side, between 2000mm and 5000mm annually, depending on where you are, so pack accordingly. The Serranías de Amerrique, which form the dramatic backdrop to Boaco and Juigalpa, can be brisk, but for most of this region you'll be wearing light, fast-drying clothes. Other impressive peaks include Cerro Musún (1438m) and Cerro Saslaya (1651m), both relatively accessible

ENDANGERED TURTLES

Please refrain from eating endangered sea turtles, or buying tortoiseshell jewelry, made from the shells of inedible hawksbill turtles.

and protected as natural reserves. Lowland tropical rain forest covers most of the immense region east of the mountains (except where it's been clear cut), but the northeastern corner of the country, the Miskito Savanna, is light and dry, with acidic clay soils and pine trees that can reach 30m into the cobalt sky.

Boaco and Chotales, covered here under 'The Road to El Rama' (p239), are politically and culturally part of mainstream Nicaragua; east of the mountains, things change. This huge region has been divided into the RAAN (North Atlantic Autonomous Region) and RAAS (South Atlantic Autonomous Region) since 1987, and is largely independent of the federal government in Managua. English is spoken as often as Spanish in some spots and in many areas people speak only Miskito, Mayangna, Rama or various Creoles. See the boxed text, p491, for some handy phrases. The autonomous regions are sparsely populated, with 650,000 people sharing 60,000 sq km, an area significantly larger than Costa Rica. Visitors often remark that the Caribbean Coast is almost a separate country, to which residents most heartily agree.

Dangers & Annoyances

The regions covered in this chapter are poorer and have less infrastructure than the rest of Nicaragua, which is saying something. Bring a flashlight and candles for electrical outages and be prepared to use buckets to both shower and flush.

Narcotic traffickers smuggle cocaine throughout the RAAN and RAAS, but the last thing they want to do is hurt a tourist and call attention to themselves. Regardless, stay alert and stick to big city rules: take taxis at night, watch your valuables closely, don't get too wasted, and travel in groups when possible. These are not amateurs and this is not the place for your holiday binge.

This region is conservative, and, apart from the Corn Islands, women should consider swimming in shorts and a T-shirt, as bathing suits attract a crowd.

Getting There & Around

This chapter covers two of the three overland passages from Managua to the Caribbean Coast; the third is along the Río San



Juan (p275). Most visitors take convenient and inexpensive flights, however, as there are airstrips in Bilwi, Waspám, Bluefields, Big Corn Island and all three mining towns. Note that there is no regular passenger service up and down the Caribbean Coast, although you can arrange private transport or find cargo ships. But if you want to see

the scenery, the two overland routes, diverging in Boaco, are your best option.

LAS MINASO-BILWI (PUERTO CABEZAS)-WASPÁM & RÍO COCO

The grueling journey north begins with a 10- to 12-hour bus ride from Managua, paved until Reserva Natural Cerro Musún,

where you could spend the night before taking the terrible six- to eight-hour (at least; it often closes in rainy season) 'road' to Siuna and Las Minas, with access to La Reserva de Biosfera Bosawás (Bosawás Biosphere Reserve). Bus connections within the Triangle are bearable, and from Rosita it's four to six hours on another lousy road to Bilwi. Waspám and the Río Coco are a smooth four hours north.

BOACO–JUIGALPA–EL RAMA– BLUEFIELDS–CORN ISLANDS

The much easier trip to the clear, blue Caribbean follows the freshly paved road to El Rama, with refreshing mountain side trips to Boaco and Juigalpa, or a jaunt to Nueva Guinea, just south. From El Rama, it's a convenient two-hour boat ride down the Río Escondido to Bluefields, with daily flights and twice-weekly boat service to the Corn Islands, and daily boat connections to Laguna de Perlas.

LAS MINAS (THE MINING TRIANGLE)

Most visitors only fly over the mysterious Nicaraguan interior: vast rolling hills pierced by fierce volcanic plugs, and lazy long rivers banked with sandy beaches, thick jungle and tiny villages. Largely undeveloped, this region has almost no tourist infrastructure, with three remarkable exceptions: Bonanza, Rosita and Siuna, collectively known as Las Minas, or the Mining Triangle.

The name refers to gold mines, not landmines, and the jewelry shopping is great. Or, see all that does not glitter – the natural wealth of Reserva de Biosfera Bosawás and the cultural riches of the Miskito and Mayangna communities. Tourists are rarer than jaguars around here, so you'll need basic Spanish and lots of persistence to access many of the Triangle's treasures.

Prospectors discovered gold here during the late 1800s, and by the 1930s Canadian, Spanish and US mining operations dominated the region's economy and politics. The Sandinistas nationalized the whole shebang in 1979, and whatever the former owners couldn't take with them, they sabotaged. Soviet technicians failed to get the mines up and running again, and the once relatively wealthy region became a backwater, with 80% unemployment and no rule of law.

After the Contra War ended, a group of veterans formed FUAC (Andrés Castro United Front), which ran cocaine, ambushed buses and kidnapped the children of wealthy ranchers in a bid for more investment and development in the region, which might not have been the most effective strategy. Between 1992 and 1997, almost no one risked visiting Nicaragua's heart of gold, and it wasn't until 2001 that the federal government (which still maintains a huge and visible military presence throughout the region) finally flushed out the last FUAC faithful.

Since the Canadian mining consortium Hemconic (now Hemsá) reopened the Bonanza mine in 1994, jobs and money have been flowing into the region. Although (as workers' rights groups note) most profits flow out of the country, and (as conservancy groups note) cyanide and other industrial pollutants flow in. Regardless, this newfound prosperity, compounded by Unesco's 1997 recognition of Reserva de Biosfera Bosawás, has offered the first hope these hills have seen in a generation.

Dangers & Annoyances

Although the region is allegedly landmine and paramilitary free, it's always smart to hire a guide and stay on trails and roads. Infrastructure in Siuna and, to a lesser extent, Rosita, is just atrocious: bring a flashlight and be prepared for bucket showers. No businesses in the Triangle take credit cards, including La Costeña airlines. Banks change US dollars, but don't have ATMs, nor do they facilitate credit card advances. Bring cash or send it ahead via Western Union, available in all three cities.

On the upside, this is one region where your flashy gold jewelry won't merit a second glance. Go nuts.

Getting There & Around

All three towns have airports, with flights Monday through Saturday only. Make reservations in advance and try to avoid checking bags, which will be weighed. The 12-seat plane leaves Managua International (US\$70 one way, one hour) at 9am, stops in all three towns if necessary, then continues to Bilwi (Puerto Cabezas). To catch the Bilwi flight (US\$70 one way, 30 minutes) be

at the airstrip by 11am. Planes leave Bilwi for the Triangle at 1:15pm, continuing to Managua as early as 2:15pm. There's another plane to Managua at 10:30am.

Road access is scenic but terrible, and the Río Blanco–Siuna stretch of the 12-hour ride from Managua is considered the country's worst road, and may be closed in rainy season. Rosita is a more manageable four- to six-hour ride from Bilwi, and involves a river crossing by barge and lots of ceiba trees. Although roads are 4WD-accessible in dry season, driving through this poor, sparsely populated region is never, ever recommended for casual tourists – those school buses have seriously modified suspensions. The Triangle is linked by OK dirt roads with regular bus service, and you can take taxis between Bonanza and Rosita.

Siuna

pop 20,000 / elevation 150m

Not only is this the easiest access to Reserva de Biosfera Bosawás, it's also access to its utterly untamed, undeveloped, wild nucleus at Parque Nacional Saslaya with real campsites and trails. In addition to the park, Siuna has the requisite abandoned mine surrounded by gorgeous mountain scenery, and hot springs outside of town. It's also got the Minas' best selection of hotels and restaurants, a branch of Urracan University, and what's got to be Nicaragua's most photogenic landing strip.

Siuna is also extremely poor, and only gets running water for a few hours each week, so make sure your hotel has water tanks or enjoy your bucket bath. Electricity can flicker out at any time, so carry a flashlight.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

If you arrive by plane, you land right in the middle of town. To your left, take the stairs up Siuna's small hill to the *alcaldía* (mayor's office), Western Union and Hotel Siu; a road then loops to the right, around the hill and down past the bus station, market, abandoned mine, several restaurants and *hospedajes* (guesthouses), then returns to the airstrip.

Bosawás office (☎ 8am-noon, 1:30-4:30pm) The helpful staff can arrange authorized guides and transportation to Parque Nacional Saslaya. The office is to the plane's right, on the paved road sloping slightly downhill.

Urracan University (per hr US\$1.25; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) About 2km away, has the fastest Internet in the Triangle.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Most people come to visit fairly pristine **Parque Nacional Saslaya**, the wildest part of the Reserva de Biosfera Bosawás. There are two campsites: the town of Hormiguero is the trailhead for the three-hour hike to **Camp Salto Labú**, with a stunning swimming hole that has a cave, canyons and petroglyphs; and Rosa Grande is the trailhead for the four-hour trek to **Camp Piedra Colorada**, on a lagoon surrounded by pristine forest. You can visit either on a day trip.

Guides are US\$6 per day, per group; horses US\$5 extra per day, per person. There's unpurified water at the campsites, but bring your own food. A *pulpería* (corner store) in Siuna sells large plastic sheets that work as tents in a pinch. You can also arrange guides for the four-day hike up **Cerro Saslaya** (1651m), the three-day climb to **Cerro El Toro** (1652m) and overnight trip up **El Revenido**.

Humboldt Center (☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri), close to Enitel, has maps and information about Bosawás and the surrounding area. There are several swimming holes close by: **Río Wani** has a sandy beach about 11km from town; taxis charge US\$10 round-trip, including a two-hour wait. Or, head to the **hot springs**: have a taxi take you to 'la bomba' (US\$1.50), then follow the obvious trail about 1½ hours across a private *finca* (farm) to the springs.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotelito Los Chinitos (☎ 794 2038; s/d/tr without bathroom US\$6/10/12) This bright-yellow hotel is a great deal on small but comfortable spotless rooms with cable TV, fans and mosquito screens; bathrooms have 24-hour water. The well-loved *comedor* (basic, cheap eatery; dishes US\$1.25 to US\$3, open 7am to 9pm) downstairs serves recommended Nica (not Chinese) classics.

Other cheapies include clean, secure **Hospedaje Rivas** (r per person US\$3), just uphill from the bus station, with cement jail-cell ambience and mosquito nets, and **Hospedaje Costeño** (s/d US\$3/4), close to Los Chinitos, a creaky wooden structure that's the oldest hotel in town. The owner speaks English.

Hotel Siu (☎ 794 2028; hotel_siu@yahoo.com; r without bathroom per person US\$8, s with bathroom US\$15-20, d with bathroom US\$20-25; 📍) Siuna's best hotel is at the end of a shady sidestreet near the *alcaldía*, and has cozy, nicely decorated rooms with cable TV and 24-hour water, plus a porch where you can linger over breakfast (US\$2). Cheaper rooms with shared bathroom and no TV are also nice.

Refresquería Siuna (US\$1.25-2; 🕒 6am-10pm) Across the street from Los Chinitos, serves cheap, simple meals.

Fritanga (set plate US\$1.25) This excellent place is in front of the minimarket, just downhill from the bus station.

Restaurant Hoiming (mains US\$4-8; 🕒 11am-11pm) Come here for the best Chinese food in the Triangle.

DRINKING

Disco Mia, close to the airstrip, is downscale and family oriented, while discoteca la Secreta, close to Urracan, gets the university crowd; both run Thursday to Sunday.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

La Costeña (☎ 794 2017; 🕒 8am-1pm) has offices in the 'Bienvenidos a Siuna!' building, right by the airstrip. Buses leave from the market to destinations including:

Managua US\$9, 10 to 12 hours, 5am, 3pm, 5pm and 8pm

Río Blanco US\$5, five to seven hours, 5am, 7am, 10am, noon and 2pm

Rosita US\$3, two to three hours, 5:30am to 3pm, hourly

Bonanza

pop 15,000 / elevation 200m

The crown jewel of the Mining Triangle, Bonanza is the wealthiest and most beautiful of the matched set, an architectural gem of brightly painted wooden homes threaded with cobblestone streets, all displayed in one of Central America's most impressive bezels: the emerald green mountains of Bosawás.

The whole scene, so perfect and pretty in the right light, may offer the impression of some 'Ye Olde Mining Town' theme-park confection, but note that charming shops sell subsistence goods, not souvenirs (unless you count gold jewelry as a souvenir, which your mother really wishes you would), while quaint taverns may have bleeding drunks passed out in their doorways. It's authentic.

So richly blessed above and below, Bonanza is one of the loveliest towns in Nicaragua, and could one day be a real tourist attraction. As yet, however, this brilliant stopover remains the realm of more intrepid adventurers, a diamond in the rough.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Bonanza is 29km north of Rosita on a spur road, well within Bosawás. It is compact, with three paved roads forming a small triangle around which almost all services are located. The bus terminal is 1km south of town on the road to Rosita; the Bosawás office is 2.5km north of town, past the airport on the road to Musuwas.

Hemsa (free; 🕒 7am-4pm Mon-Fri) The gold mine, on the road to the bus terminal, offers Bonanza's only Internet, primarily for residents.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The *alcaldía* (☎ 794 0001) can theoretically arrange guides all over the mountains, and will at least be able to point you in the right direction. Persistence!

Reserva de Biosfera Bosawás

The **Bosawás office** (☎ 794 0109), 2km from town towards Musuwas, has maps and information about guides and transportation to two sectors of the reserve. Much easier to visit, **Reserva Natural Cerro Cola Blanca** has one main trail, Sendero Tesoro, which starts 4km from Bonanza in the community of Panamá. The Bosawás office also maintains a **teaching finca** 12km south of Bonanza that borders the reserve. Organically grown fruit trees, a babbling brook and trails that lead into the reserve's primary rain forest are free for day trippers by advanced arrangement, and there are plans to add cabins and a restaurant; contact the Bosawás office to find out more. Any Rosita-bound bus can drop you off at the entrance.

Bonanza is also the gateway to one of Bosawás' great cultural treasures, the **Mayangna Heartland**. There are only about 9000 Mayangna (also called Sumo, the less politically correct, but more common, term) Indians left in the world, most concentrated in this cluster of about 20 very poor indigenous communities centered on the de facto Mayangna capital of **Musuwas**, about 30km north of Bonanza on a terrible dirt road. Like all Mayangna towns, Musuwas main-

tains a community shelter where travelers can stay and arrange simple meals; bottled water and other supplies may also be available, but don't count on it. From here, you can take canoes down Río Pis-Pis and Río Waspúk, climb Cerro Cola Blanca, or ride horses to smaller Mayangna communities.

Recommended guides include Arecia Generon, president of Masaku, a Mayangna organization with offices about 200m up the unpaved road from Hotel B y B (veer left at Monedero Peter's); and Professor Orlando Salamá Justo, at the Bonanza *alcaldía*. Or, you could take a truck 15km north to the Mayangna community of Suniwas (halfway to Musuwas), and look for guides Fidencio Devis and Rodolfo Amador. Bring water purification technology, trekking equipment and extra food; consider taking malaria pills. Including your guide, transportation, meals and lodging, count on spending around US\$70 per day for a group of four.

Other Outdoor Attractions

Cerro la Cruz, the big hill with the cross on it, is a 45-minute climb from downtown, but the best view around is a 1.5-hour hike or US\$4 taxi ride to **El Chiquero**, 1500m above sea level. It's a 4km walk or US\$4 taxi to **Agua Claras**, a riverside beach and swimming hole. **El Salto Grande**, 7km from town along the road to Suniwas, has a swimming area, waterfall and hydroelectric plant. **Siempre Viva** is the region's most impressive waterfall: take the bus 17km to Vesubio, then walk the last 2km.

Gold Mines

Hemsa (☎ 794 0066, ext 789; elmomendoza@hemconic.com in Spanish, amilkarramos@hemconic.com) is the most important gold mine in Nicaragua, and harvests 24,000 troy ounces annually from 14 tunnels worked by almost 500 miners – 12% of whom are female. In addition to providing gold and jobs (and waste cyanide), Hemsa offers free tours over hanging bridges, past processing equipment and into a tunnel 250m underground – using stairs, so be in good physical condition. Reserve two weeks in advance, with the dates you'll be in town, number of people (six maximum), and reason for your visit.

The *alcaldía* can arrange trips to artisanal mining operations, including small

strip and pit mines, and streams where you can pan for gold. You can also visit one of three gold-processing cooperatives, where more than 6000 artisanal miners, working more than 1000 claims, process their ore. Guides run about US\$10 per group, per day, not including transportation.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel y Restaurant B y B (☎ 794 0017; s/d without bathroom US\$4/5) Bonanza's best-loved landmark is this bright blue-and-yellow place next to the market, with small, freshly painted rooms with mosquito-proofed windows and clean bathrooms. Neither B involves breakfast (Bayardo and Bustillo were the original owners), but it has Bonanza's best restaurant (meals US\$3 to US\$7, open noon to 10pm), a casino, pool hall and Eskimo.

Hotel Bonanza (☎ 794 0177; r per person with bathroom US\$11) Across from the *alcaldía*, this hotel has modern, tiled rooms with cable TV and gleaming plastic furniture. The annex (room per person without bathroom US\$5), across the street, is also clean and pleasant.

Hospedaje Claudia (r per person US\$2) Very basic, unsigned *hospedajes* catering to miners include Claudia, just uphill from the *alcaldía*, with tiny wooden rooms, shared bucket-flush toilets and a friendly owner.

Himacar (set plate US\$2; ☎ 7am-7pm Mon-Sat, 7am-noon Sun) Have breakfast here with its solid set plates and a cozy dining room.

Restaurant El Encuentro (US\$3-6; ☎ 11am-close) Have dinner in this big lavender Victorian, a block uphill from B y B (make a right at Monedero Peter's), with a great view and recommended wild boar in salsa.

DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT

You won't go thirsty in Bonanza, and you can dance at Diskoteck El Ranchón, on the south side of the market, or join the Karaoke craze at rowdy Bar-Restaurant Serrania, nearby.

Tropical Market Video (US\$0.40) One block from B y B, this place shows movies in air-conditioned comfort on its big screen TV at 6pm nightly.

SHOPPING

With all this fresh gold everywhere, it's no wonder so much beautiful jewelry is available, dirt cheap. Keep an eye out for the delicate gold filigree work for which the Caribbean Coast was once famous, very

different from the heavy colonial styles of the Pacific. Hotel y Restaurant B y B has a great selection, or stop by one of the workshops in town.

Just uphill from Hotel y Restaurant B y B, Casa de las Mujeres offers weekend

classes where you can watch women (and men) learn goldsmithing.

Across from Iglesia Santa Teresita, an unmistakably Gothic airplane hangar of a church, Joyeria Rivera turns out fine gold jewelry all week long.

RESERVA DE BIOSFERA BOSAWÁS

Supported by three neighboring reserves in Honduras (Río Patuca National Park, Tawhaka Anthropological Reserve and Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve), **Reserva de Biosfera Bosawás** (Bosawás Unesco Biosphere Reserve; ☎ in Managua 233 1594; www.tmx.com.ni/~bosawas/reserva.htm) is the largest protected expanse of rain forest north of the Amazon, clocking in at 20,000 sq km, more than 14% of Nicaragua's national territory.

Named for three geographical features that delineate the reserve – the Río BOcay, Cerro SASlaya and Río WASpúk – enormous Bosawás is also home to more than 200,000 people, including 30,000 Mayangna and Miskito Indians, who have some claim to this land. The reserve loses 120 to 175 hectares of forest per year to farms, and more to illegal lumber operations. A 1.2 million-hectare, multi-use 'amortization area' aims to protect Bosawás by promoting sustainable economic development, such as collecting wild plants to sell, organic *cacao* (cocoa) and coffee *fincas*, and, of course, tourism.

That's the trick. Access to the reserve's 800,000-hectare wild and undeveloped nucleus, which includes Saslaya and Cerro Kilambé national parks, and Peñas Blancas and Cerro Cola Blanca reservas naturales, ranges from challenging to almost impossible, and is never cheap or risk-free. Come prepared: someone in your group (don't do this alone) should speak a fair amount of Spanish, and consider taking malaria pills for longer adventures. Water purification technology is necessary for most of the reserve. But the real key to access is persistence – you can get in, just don't count on it happening on your timetable, and expect to be following leads like: 'find Jaguar José at the *pulpería* near the *empalme* of (something unpronounceable), he's got a truck that can get through.'

During the reserve's February to April dry season, rivers (read: the freeway system) may be too low to travel, unless you help carry the canoe around the rapids.

Luckily, it's usually raining, and some spots (for instance, the Río Waspúk region) get 3200mm of rain per year – regular roads may be impassable most of the year. Temperatures average a sweaty 26.5°C, but bring a jacket for Cerro Kilambé (1750m).

You can begin inquiries at the Bosawás office at Marena Central in Managua (p73), or any of the satellite offices located in most large towns bordering the reserve, where they can arrange guides and transportation, or at least point you in the right direction. It's often easiest to access the reserve through lodges or private organizations, however, so ask around. Here are some points of entry:

- El Tuma-La Dalia (p216): an ecolodge can arrange guided trips to the stunning cliff-top mesa of Peñas Blancas.
- Siuna (p227): park rangers guide you to campsites in Parque Nacional Saslaya.
- El Cuá (p219): a women's collective runs hikes to the 'Waterfalls of Peñas Blancas' trail.
- Waspám & Río Coco (p236): take a riverboat ride into the waterfall-strewn wilderness, spending the night in a jungle paradise.
- Wiwilí (p219): hire a boat down the Río Coco, or climb lush Cerro Kilambé (1745m).
- Musuwas (p228): head from Bonanza into the heart of the Mayangna nation.
- San José de Bocay (p219): take a boat ride to mysterious Cuevas Belén de Tunowalan.
- Reserva Natural Cola Blanca (p228): these waterfall-strewn highlands were named for the white-tailed deer teeming on its forested slopes. The Bonanza Bosawás office can get you there.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

The airstrip is about 3km from town; head toward Musuwas and make a right at the stadium. **La Costeña** (☎ 794 0023; 🕒 8-9am & 4-5pm) has offices half a block uphill from the *alcaldía*.

Taxis cost US\$0.70 anywhere in town and US\$20 to Rosita. The Blue Bus (US\$0.30) runs between El Coco (the Bosawás office) and Santa Rita, passing the bus terminal, about 1km south of town, throughout the day. Regular buses leave for destinations including:

Managua US\$13, 13 to 15 hours, 10am and 2:30pm; via Rosita (US\$2, 1½ hours) and Siuna (US\$8, four to five hours)

Rosita US\$2, 1½ hours, 7:30am, 11:30am, 1:30pm and 4:30pm

Salto Grande & Suniwas US\$1.25, 1½ hours, 8am and noon; meeting trucks to Musuwas

Vesubio US\$2, two hours, 7am and 1:30pm

Rosita

pop 17,000

With potential as a stand-in for Dodge City – should Hollywood ever want to film a Western really, really cheap – this very multicultural town not only has the late-1800s clapboard architecture with horses tied up out front, and mustachioed, ten-gallon-hatted cowboys (with sidearms) sauntering around; it's got a country music soundtrack, twanging from all sides.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The dusty frontier town is stretched along one roughly east–west road running from the hospital (east) to the police station (west), with the market and bus station in the middle. Both lagunas are located about 1.5km east of the hospital. **Colegio Santa Rosa** (per hr US\$3; 🕒 1-3pm & 5-8pm Mon-Fri) offers Internet access.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Rosita is a cocaine shipping hub, and the neighborhood right behind the police station (ahem) may be unsafe after dark. The main road is patrolled and safe for strolling until the wee hours.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Sonia Garcia at the *alcaldía*, about one block west of the bus station, contiguous with the police station, can help organize tours to Miskito, Mayangna and Creole communi-

ties, down beautiful rivers, and up Yakalwás Mountain and Risco de Oro, a hill honeycombed with abandoned gold mines.

FURCA (Foundation for Unity & Reconstruction of the Atlantic Coast; ☎ 794 1045, in Managua 249 7801; furca@sdnnc.org.ni), a block from the *alcaldía*, can arrange trips to area indigenous communities with guides Juan McKenzie and Mateo Salinas. Trips usually visit Wasa King (Wasakín), with a cool new suspension bridge and river access along the Río Bambana in rainy season. Prices vary, but run around US\$60 for four people. If the office is closed, feel free to call director Brenda Jarkin-Manzares (☎ 794 1190) at home.

In town, you could enjoy the view from **Santa Rosa Catholic Church**, on the hill (stairs provided) behind Colegio Santa Rosa. A trail past rusting mining equipment leads to the top of the mountain, beginning about one block east of the church. Take a taxi (US\$0.70, 1.5km) to Bar Campestre La Laguna Verde, overlooking an allegedly pristine lake, where you could go for a swim or just enjoy a beer under one of the dilapidated *rancheros*.

There's another **laguna** near Bar 2000 (2km, taxi US\$0.70), a steely gray expanse of utterly poisoned water surrounded by huge mine tailings and rusting mining equipment;

DIY: ALAMIKANGBAN & PRINZAPOLKA

The isolated towns of Alamikangban, about 70km southeast of Rosita, and Prinzapolka, another two hours by boat along the Río Prinzapolka to the Caribbean Coast, don't get many visitors. They both have a couple of super-basic *hospedajes* and simple *comedores*, but the real reason to go is the river. It marks the southern boundary of natural pine forest that phases into tropical rain forest, with wetlands that are a haven for all sorts of birds.

Buses leave Rosita (US\$3, four hours) at 8am and 1pm daily for Alamikangban, where you can hire a private boat to Prinzapolka. Both towns, as well as the smaller communities lining the river, have indigenous government structures, so ask for the *wihta* (judge) or *síndico* (resource manager) when trying to find guides or lodging – and just hope that someone speaks Spanish.

more machinery rises ominously from the lifeless water in dry season. It's pretty at sunset, in a post-apocalyptic way.

SLEEPING & EATING

Rosita has lots of mosquitoes, so make sure to ask your hotel for a net. Basic hotels cluster around the bus station.

Cecap (☎ 794 1003; r per person US\$3) This is a great deal. In the unsigned, two-story Victorian next to the hospital, it houses medical students and travelers-in-the-know with comfortable, very clean wooden rooms, a fine porch and shared bucket showers.

Hospedaje el Sol (☎ 794 1129; s/d with bathroom US\$2.50/4) Much nicer than average, with small, clean rooms and tidy shared bathrooms. There's also a TV nook with swinging chairs that overlooks the street scene.

Hotel Los Ensueños (☎ 794 1004; r with fan/air-con per person US\$10/20; 🚽) There's one really nice hotel in town, half a block north of the *alcaldía*, with spotless, attractively furnished modern rooms and the option of cable TV and air-con, all surrounding manicured gardens and a parking lot. Breakfast (US\$2) is served on the patio.

The cheapest eats are at the outdoor *comedores* close to the bus station.

Bar-Restaurant El Escorpión (mains US\$2-6; 🕒 10am-11pm) Big-hatted ranchers prefer this place, featuring porkchops, seafood and Mexican *norteños*.

Restaurant & Video Bar Martinez (mains US\$3-7; 🕒 5pm-2am) Everyone loves Martinez, with steak, lobster and several TVs.

Bar Campestre La Laguna Verde (set plate US\$1.25; 🕒 all day) Take a taxi (US\$0.70) out to the lake for a meal overlooking the water.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

If **La Costeña** (☎ 794 1015), across from the *alcaldía*, is closed, make flight reservations at Eskimo Ice Cream, in the same building. The airstrip is a US\$1.25 taxi ride from town. Buses leave from the market to destinations including:

Alimikamba US\$3, three hours, 8am and 1:15pm

Bonanza US\$2, 1½ hours, 7:30am, 11:30am, 1:30pm and 4:30pm

Puerto Cabezas US\$8, four to six hours, 6:30am, 9:25am and 11:45am

Siuna US\$3, four to five hours, 5:30am to 5pm, hourly

BILWI (PUERTO CABEZAS)

pop 39,800 / elevation 30m

Although the capital of the enormous Northern Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN) has been officially renamed Bilwi, most residents still refer to their isolated tropical stronghold as they have for almost a century, Puerto Cabezas, or just Puerto. Or just Port.

Neither name is the original, however. Founded in 1690 by a trio of pirates who called it Bragman's Bluff, it only later came to be known as Bilwi. The port town was officially renamed in 1925 to honor General Rigoberto Cabezas, who helped put the largely indigenous and English region under full control of the Nicaraguan government in 1894 – never really appreciated by the locals.

Even after the English were forced out, English-speaking companies like banana empire Standard Fruit, which built the 1km dock in 1823, helped keep federal interference in the region minimal. The same dock was used in the 1960s to launch the failed, US-backed invasion of Cuba that has come to be known as the Bay of Pigs. Heck, most people in Bilwi still speak some English – as well as Creole, Mayangna, Miskito and Spanish – and do brisk business selling lobster tails, pine lumber and shrimp to the USA.

And there are also still plenty of pirates. Bilwi (Mayangna for 'snake leaf') is a major cocaine transit point. Keep your nose clean, take taxis at night and through Barrio El Cocal (between the city center and Restaurant Kabu Payaska) even during the day, and avoid going to beaches alone. Port has a terrible water supply, which runs for a few hours three times a week, and that water is green. Don't even use it to brush your teeth.

Information

BanPro Changes money and does cash advances on Visa credit cards.

Bilwinet (per hour US\$2; 🕒 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 3-6pm Sun) Fast computers are a half block north of the park.

Hospital (☎ 453 3301)

Intur In a dingy upstairs office at the Gobierno Regional complex, staff are just happy to see you. Resources are geared toward building area businesses, but they'll still help you out.

Marena (Ministry of the Environment & Natural Resources; ☎ 792 2201, 282 2366) One block west and three blocks south of Supermercado Monter, this helpful

office manages Reservas Nacionales Laguna Pahara, Yulu, Klingna and Laguna Karatá, as well as the Miskito Keys, but Amica (p234) is your best bet for arranging guided trips to any of them.

Police (☎ 282 2257)

Sights & Activities

The **parque central** (central park) is a little scruffy, although the giant Indian sculpture is impressive, but there's a much prettier park two blocks east, overlooking the Atlantic, with playground equipment. Across the street, enormous **Parroquia San Pedro Apostol** is worth a look for its giant murals and unusual construction.

Casa Museo Judith Cunningham (☎ 792 2225; admission US\$1; 🕒 daily), two blocks north and one block west of the Moravian church, is perhaps the best museum about regional history and Miskito culture, and was put together by Judith Cunningham, a local legend who recently passed away. In 1981 she and her family had to cross to Waspám and the Río Coco to avoid the Sandinistas, then returned after the RAAN won its autonomy in the late 1980s. You can still see

photos and artifacts chronicling her experiences from Laguna de Perlas all the way up the Caribbean Coast to Honduras; 62 of her paintings are also on display. See p235 for accommodations at the museum.

Four blocks northwest of the park, tiny **Museo Lakia Tara** (admission US\$1) has photos, woodwork displays and books about Miskito language and culture, plus a workshop downstairs where you can watch people make clothing and other crafts from *tuno*, a type of plant fiber – and you can buy it here, cheap. It also has excellent budget lodging (p235).

You could also stroll down to the disintegrating **Old Pier**, where both Sandino and the Contras received arms smuggled in from abroad and where you can watch people haul in their catches...including endangered sea turtles, which are kept on their backs, alive, with their little flippers pierced crucifixion style and tied together. Don't get all mushy: one tourist paid US\$100 to free one of them, and the fisher obliged, then recaptured it 20 minutes later. *Pangas* (small motorboats) for hire congregate just south of the pier.



Beaches south of the pier may one day be beautiful, but at press time were just trashed. Instead, head to **Kabu Payaska** restaurant (opposite), where you can use the clean, safer stretch of sand as long as you order something. North of town is **La Bocana**, at the mouth of the river, an old pirate hangout with broad sandy beaches and modern-day security issues – come in groups, preferably with a local.

Tuapí, a small community eight unsigned kilometers south of Bilwi on a good dirt road through a pine tree farm, is the area's best, safest beach, with OK surfing (but nowhere to rent a board) and good swimming, but watch out for the undertow. A cab costs around US\$20, with a few hours' wait, not including a US\$0.70 bridge toll. Public trucks (US\$1) run a few times daily from the bus lot. There's a café open Sunday, otherwise bring a picnic.

If you're feeling especially adventurous, **Alejandro Arouse** (☎ 844 8337) is a renowned hunting and fishing guide who can also arrange very non-PADI-certified lobster dives.

MISKITO KEYS BIOLOGICAL RESERVE

Just 50km, but a world, away, the Miskito Keys are a group of beautiful Caribbean islands surrounded by houses built on stilts out over lobster-infested coral reefs and crystal-blue water. The historic first meeting between the British pirate Captain Sussex Camock and his future Miskito allies took place here in 1633. It's still a pirate haven, so if you see any boats with Colombian plates, don't take photos.

There are no hotels or restaurants in the keys, and while you can rent a hammock in a private home (through Marena or Amica, or just ask around), you should bring your own food and water. Anyone with scientific credentials can visit with advance approval from Marena, while Amica arranges overnight visits for around US\$500 per group.

Otherwise, you'll need to rent an expensive private *lancha* (small motorized boat) or make arrangements with a lobster fisherman, which is sketchy. There are rumors that you need a permit, but neither Marena nor the Navy have details. It's two hours to the keys on a fast boat, perhaps five on a lobster vessel.

AMICA

The easiest way into area natural reserves and indigenous communities is through the **Association of Indigenous Women on the Atlantic Coast** (Amica; ☎ 792 2219; asociacionamica@yahoo.es; 📍 8am-noon Mon-Sat, 2-5:30pm Mon-Fri), 1½ blocks southwest of the stadium. In addition to working to stop domestic violence and promote indigenous rights, it can arrange fishing trips, expeditions to turtle-nesting sites, Tuapí (US\$80, six people), the Miskito Keys (US\$500, eight people overnight) and more, and has a few English-speaking guides. Arrange tours for two to six people in advance, if possible. Other destinations include the following:

Karatá & Wawa Bar (per person US\$40-50) This scenic Miskito village 17km south of Bilwi, at the mouth of Río Wawa, has a beautiful lagoon packed with migratory birds and alligators plus a sandy oceanfront beach with restaurants, campsites and hiking trails. Karatá has one pretty four-room hotel with good mattresses and a seafood restaurant. You could also rent a private *panga* (day trip/overnight US\$100/150) and visit on your own.

Haulover (per group US\$200-500) The first Moravian missionaries arrived here, 30km south of Port, in 1860, and named it in honor of the sand bar that boats had to cross to enter the lagoon. Protected by Reserva Natural Laguna Kukalaya and Reserva Natural Layasiksa, the town has comfortable cabinas with running water and beautiful views, and your tour includes a performance of the 'King Pulanka' dance.

Krukira (prices vary) About 20km north of Bilwi, this is the gateway to Reserva Natural Laguna Pahara, with lots of wildlife, in particular huge tarpon. Although campers are welcome and meals can be arranged, there are currently few services for visitors.

Festivals & Events

Different facets of Bilwi's multicultural population have each taken a day (or month) and made it their own.

Dance of El King Pulanka (January 6–mid-February) First performed in the late 1700s, the dance of El Rey and La Reina is today performed throughout the Mosquitia. Two groups of dancers wearing 18th-century costumes represent the king's allies and enemies, and stage a mock battle using arrows, machetes and 'triki trakas,' or firearms. The good guys win, there's a barbecue, and poets, artists and other folkloric dance troops keep the party going all month long.

Emancipation (August 28) The Creole and Afro-Caribbean population puts on a wild show – parades, floats, costumes, food – while the schools have special history classes and workshops in the Creole language.

Día de la Hispanidad (October 12) Called Día de la Raza in most of Nicaragua, this is the occasion for Bilwi's Spanish population to shine.

Día de la Autonomía (October 22) Celebrates the day the RAAAN was finally rid of those Spaniards in Managua! Well, sort of.

Sleeping

Even in the best hotels, you may have to resort to bucket showers and toilets.

Hospedaje Tininiska (dm US\$5-6) Run by Museo Lakia Tara, this pretty wooden house has several spacious dorm rooms with one to four beds in each, all with mosquito nets. Very clean bathrooms with flush toilets are shared; this is a fabulous place for backpackers.

Casa de Huéspedes Pelicano (☎ 792 2336, 828 8646; s/d without bathroom US\$9/12) Two blocks east of the parque central, simple rooms with skylights share a wonderfully muraled back porch with rocking chairs and Caribbean views.

Casa Museo Judith Cunningham (☎ 792 2225; casamuseojudithkain@hotmail.com; s/d without bathroom US\$9/12, tr with bathroom US\$24; 📶 📺 📺) In the same mahogany dream home as the museum, beautiful rooms come with fans, Internet access and a conference room; some have air-con and TVs.

El Cortijo (☎ 792 2340; s/d US\$24/27) This beautiful wooden farmhouse, one block south of the *alcaldía*, is so nice that the Sandinistas used it as their East Coast base for 10 years, something that still irritates Doña Aura. She's repaired the damage, and the attractively furnished, high-ceilinged rooms have views of the lovely gardens and fountain. Cheaper downstairs rooms (double room US\$20) have lower ceilings and private bathrooms. El Cortijo II, two blocks north, only has double beds and is super romantic, with a lovely wooden walkway right to the pretty beach; try to get one of the two rooms with porches and hammocks overlooking the backyard.

Eating & Drinking

Lobster and shrimp are the region's main (legal) business; enjoy the fruits of that labor for around US\$6 a plateful. If you're pinching pennies, the scruffy parque central is surrounded by unappealing food stands, as well as **Junior Fast Food** (US\$1-4), with a brisk business in *bocas* (appetiz-

ers) and beer, and Rosti Pollos, with roast chicken, nearby.

Comedor Mirasol (US\$1-5; ☎ 7:30am-9pm) Across from the airport, this place has great, inexpensive burgers and *comida corriente* (mixed plate of local food). At press time a group of festive English-speaking expats had plans to open an information center inside, but if they haven't gotten around to it, stop by and ask for 'Miskito' Alan, who can tell you anything you need to know, particularly if you're buying the next round.

Dragon Chino (US\$5-9; ☎ 11am-11pm) Everyone's favorite, this Chinese place two blocks to the northeast of the parque central does great fried rice and chow mein, but try the grilled lobster, on the menu's upper end.

Restaurant Wah May (US\$4-7; ☎ noon-midnight Tue-Sun) This place is the new Chinese restaurant; try the chop suey. It's close to the parque central.

Kabu Payaska (fast food US\$2-3, seafood US\$5-10; ☎ 10:30am-11pm) The best restaurant in town has a breezy dining area, great service, fabulous seafood and piped-in Miskito music, all overlooking a lovely stretch of sand. To get here, head north from town toward the airport, but make a left at the gas station and continue another 1km; this neighborhood is considered unsafe, so take a taxi (US\$.70) even during the day.

Two good seafood restaurants closer to town double as the town discos: **Bar-Restaurant El Malecón** (US\$2-6; ☎ 10am-midnight) serves lobster, seafood soups and *bocas* within view of the old dock; while **Disco-Bar Miramar** (US\$3-7; ☎ 11am-late) has better food and a more mature dance floor.

Enormous Discoteque Jumbo, close to the parque central, doesn't have food but it does have pool tables.

Supermercado Monter (☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-1pm Sun), across from the stadium, and Kupia Kumi grocery store, half a block south of the parque central, are your last chances for real groceries before Honduras.

Entertainment

Cinema Ubieta (US\$2) Around the corner from Parroquia San Pedro Apostol, you could catch the latest (well, three months ago) Hollywood blockbuster here.

Getting There & Away

Although you can theoretically catch a cargo vessel to Prinzapolka and Bluefields, most people come by plane. Once the longest airstrip in Central America, it was specifically built to launch air support for the invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, which never actually arrived. Today both La Costeña (LC) and Atlantic Airlines (AA) offer regular flights to Managua, Bluefields and the Mining Triangle. Note that while RAAN does not use daylight savings time, the airlines do.

Bluefields US\$90/140 one way/return, one hour, 12:10pm (LC), Monday to Saturday

Managua US\$100/150 one way/return, 1½ hours, 8am (AA), 8:20am (LC), 12:10pm (AA), 12:20pm (LC) and 1:15pm (LC); Monday to Saturday service to Las Minas

BUSES

Take a taxi to the bus station, 2km from town. There are no services at the bus lot, though vendors do sell snacks. Buses leave for destinations including:

Managua US\$18, 20 to 24 hours, 10am and 1pm; stopping in Río Blanco (US\$15, 16 to 18 hours) and Boaco (US\$16, 18 to 20 hours)

Rosita US\$7, six to 10 hours, 7am and 12:45pm

Siuna US\$10, eight to 12 hours, 8:30am

Waspám US\$6, four hours, 7:30am and 7:30am

WASPÁM & THE RÍO COCO

pop 35,000

Waspám is the de facto capital of 116 communities lazing along the languid lifeline of the Río Coco, around here known as the Wangki, or 'Big River,' – the cultural, geographic and economic heart of the Mosquitia. During the rainy season, it flows a fast muddy brown; in summer months, it runs crystal clear, and sandy beaches appear on either side. The longest river in Central America also forms the border between Nicaragua and Honduras, a distinction most Miskitos ignore. But if you'll be crossing into Honduras, get your passport stamped at **Bilwi Immigration** (☎ 792 2258; Bilwi; ☎ 8am-noon Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Mon-Fri), located two blocks from the old pier.

If you are coming to Waspám from Bilwi, you'll immediately feel more relaxed in this indigenous river town. Waspám isn't nearly as coked up as the rest of the coast, and women will be relieved that the Miskito culture doesn't require men to

whistle at anything with breasts. Oh, and there's 24-hour water and electricity here – go figure.

Mosquitoes are the big drawback, and if you're going to be here for more than a couple of days, particularly during rainy season (June to October), seriously consider taking antimalarials. No matter what, wear long sleeves and pants at dusk, topped with DEET and a mosquito net (or hermetically sealed rooms) at night.

Orientation & Information

Waspám is fairly small and most services are located within three blocks of the parque central and Río Coco, which is a good thing, since the town's two taxis are nowhere to be found. If you'll be exploring, remember that although the region was declared mine-free in 2004, it's always best to stay on trails.

Bosawás office In the little white house behind the market, staff can help you arrange treks into the biosphere reserve, recommending guides and destinations, and helping arrange boats.

Enitel Has one phone in the center of town.

Wangkinet (per hour US\$2; ☎ 8am-9pm) Across from the airstrip, it may have the best name of any Internet café anywhere.

Sights & Activities

Other than the fabulous river views, the attractions here are scant: there's the oddly constructed **Iglesia San Rafael**, while the rather barren parque central has the requisite **war monument** – but here, it's for fallen Contras.

The town's top attraction is a 10-minute walk along dirt roads curving away from the river; just ask anyone for the fabulous Dr Dionisio Melgara Brown and his **Museo Auka Tangki** (brownmelgara@hotmail.com; donations accepted; ☎ daily), across from INKA. The small but informative museum sells what may be the only Miskito-Spanish dictionary (US\$18) available, plus lots of photos and cultural artifacts, including tortoiseshell jewelry, traditional fishing nets, musical instruments and *Miskito batana*, a type of hair pomade made from the African palm oil. You'll also see those big, wooden mortar-and-pestle sets up close, used for making *wabul*, a very traditional Miskito power shake consisting of plantains or other starchy fruits mashed with coconut milk and/or cow milk, and a

BORDER CROSSING: WASPÁM TO PUERTO LEMPIRA, HONDURAS

This is a total adventure border crossing, and begins by getting your US\$2 exit visa (US\$7 to enter) at **Bilwi Immigration** (☎ 792 2258; Bilwi; 🕒 8am-noon Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Mon-Fri), located two blocks from the old pier. Then it's up to Waspám to find a *colectivo* motorized canoe (US\$6, two hours) to the border crossing at Leimus. You can also get to Leimus by 4WD taxi or private *panga*, both of which are much more expensive.

There's a Honduran border post in Leimus where they will process your passport (US\$3 to enter, free to exit). Then you catch a pickup truck (US\$9, three hours) through the jungle to the capital of the Honduran Mosquitia, Puerto Lempira. There are a handful of dining and sleeping options here; try basic **Santa Teresita** (d US\$6) or relatively swish **Hotel Yubaiwan** (d US\$25), with TV and air-con. There are regular flights and an inconvenient boat service from Puerto Lempira to La Ceiba, gateway to the Bay Islands.

variety of flavorings, often *cacao*. It can be served hot or cold.

Perhaps because the traditional Miskito diet doesn't include many vegetables, *yumuh*, or constipation, is a cultural preoccupation. Healers use special massages, or you can boil a *yumulah*, a smooth rock that sometimes appears when lightening hits a tree, as part of a special tea that should take care of it. Long-term visitors could consider bringing along a fiber supplement instead.

Hotel El Piloto (☎ 273 3794) can arrange horse (US\$4 per hour) and bicycle (US\$2 per hour) rental, and can find guides for area attractions, none of which are developed for tourism. Ask about **Indio Watla**, a petroglyph cave about four hours from town on horseback, in the community of Wisconsin. In dry season, El Piloto can also get you to **Bismuna**, about 70km east of town on a terrible road, with a beach, food and lodging, and lots of tarpon. From here you can get a boat to **Cabo Viejo**, a lagoon with horrible sand fleas and lots of oysters, which is a haven for migratory birds, or even **Cabo Gracias a Dios**, at the mouth of the Río Coco, one of the most remote destinations anywhere. By river, Cabo Gracias is a four-day round-trip that will cost at least US\$1200 for four people.

They can also arrange shorter tours of the Miskito communities of Ulwas, Sowpuka and Bilwas Karma by car, or visits to **Kum** (accessible by 4WD in dry season, river only in rainy season), where the former Miskito royal family still resides. If you want to see the Dance of El King Pulanka done right, this is the place.

RESERVA DE BIOSFERA BOSAWÁS

The Río Coco forms the northern boundary of the Bosawás biosphere reserve, and the park can be relatively easily accessed using scenic river routes that will cost you plenty. You can start at the Bosawás office (see opposite), in a white house one block from the bus station, or go through Hotel El Piloto, where owner Barry Watson speaks perfect English. The classic trip takes you 135km upriver to **Salto Yaho**, an enormous waterfall on the Río Waspúk, a tributary of the Wangki that forms the northeastern border of Bosawás. Always wear a life jacket when swimming under the falls. The deal includes an overnight stay at **Hotelito Ruth** (r per person US\$5) in San Carlos, with simple rooms, a good restaurant and boat tours further into Bosawás. Bring bottled water, just in case. El Piloto charges US\$150 for a group of up to six people.

Emserta Transports, located at the larger dock just east of the bus station, can arrange private *pangas* and guides to locations up and down the river, which is not cheap. In addition to fishing trips (US\$12, four hours), including all equipment, and an overnight Salto Yaho (135km, US\$300 for four people) tour, you could try Los Raudales (the Rapids, 280km, US\$700 for four people), a canyon with a waterfall and lots of petroglyphs. Keep in mind that you'll be running serious rapids in a tiny wooden canoe with no life jackets. Travel upstream to Wiwilí can theoretically be arranged, but you'll be carrying canoes around the white water.

Independent operators here and at the other dock (which has smaller, cheaper motorized canoes) may be less expensive.

THE MOSQUITIA

Some legends say that the Miskito Nation, which for two centuries controlled more territory than any other indigenous group in American history (after the Maya), originated in the Miskito Keys and only then took control of the Miskito Coast of Nicaragua and Honduras, more properly known as the Mosquitia. The keys first appeared on a European map in 1630, labeled the Musquitú Islands, '14 leagues from Cabo de Gracias,' where the Miskitos first made contact with pirate captain Sussex Camock in 1633.

The Miskitos quickly grasped the potential for firearms, and in return for the new technology aided in the sacking of Spanish strongholds up and down the Río San Juan and Río Coco. In 1687 the English monarchy was pleased enough to help found the Miskito monarchy, and by the mid-1800s most of the Caribbean territory between Central Honduras and Limón, Costa Rica, was under Miskito and British control. And when the Crown hosted King Jeremy in England, his tutors were surprised that he looked more African than Indian.

Miskito culture has historically embraced outsiders, and not always figuratively. Most trace their obviously African roots to a Portuguese slave ship that wrecked on the keys in 1640, though waves of escaped slaves and West Indian banana workers are almost certainly part of the mix. Other important outside influences include the German Moravian church, whose missionaries arrived in 1849, and built pretty red-roofed wooden churches that are now at the physical and cultural heart of most Miskito communities. To this day many Miskito festivals and handicrafts have a distinctly Saxon flavor.

The Mosquitia did not submit willingly to Nicaraguan rule in 1894, and their discontent at domination by the 'Spaniards' in Managua was brought to a head by one of the most horrific chapters of Sandinista rule. President Somoza had been popular since 1960, when Miskito refugees poured into the country following a border dispute – instead of turning them away, Somoza ordered houses and churches built. Regardless of this, few appreciated the apartheid system Somoza maintained, which required Miskitos to obtain a passport before traveling to the Pacific Coast, where the jobs were.

Sleeping

Hotel El Viajero (r per person US\$3) Located right on the park, simple clapboard rooms come with mosquito nets and fans, shared working showers and bucket-flush toilets.

Hospedaje Waspám (r per person US\$4) A cheapie with small, dark rooms at least have a sweet little porch with hammocks overlooking the river.

Hospedaje La Cabañas (cabinas per person US\$5, r per person US\$9; **P**) Popular but unsigned behind a red and white house four blocks from the docks, this place has bamboo huts on the verge of collapse and a modern, cement building with four better rooms.

Hotel El Piloto (**☎** 273 3794; d/q with bathroom US\$18/24; **☺**) Just one block up from the docks and bus stop, this hotel is as luxurious as it gets, and its large, immaculate rooms have lots of light. There's an on-site restaurant and free coffee all day, and the English-speaking owners here can arrange tours, boat transportation and other activities.

Eating

Although authentic Miskito cuisine is hard to find, keep an eye out for delicacies like *wabul*, *pihtu talla laya* (fermented pineapple-rind drink), *twalbí* (corn liquor), *takrú* (fish and yucca baked together in banana leaves) and *auhbi piakan* (Miskito for 'mixed together'), which involves plantains, meat and coconut. The Central Market should at least have a few stands selling coconut bread, fresh fruit and bags of lukewarm rice with meat.

Coco Bar (meal US\$3-5; **☺** 10am-10pm) Half a block from the airport and often referred to as 'La Negra,' Coco Bar serves good Chinese food and even better curried chicken.

There are two riverfront restaurants: popular **El Ranchito** (set plate US\$3; **☺** 6am-10pm), where you walk through the owners' living room to get to the screened-in dining area with great views of the Big River and little boats, and an outstanding hot sauce; and **Bar y Comedor Linda Vista** (set plate US\$2-3; **☺** 8am-close), which also has fine views.

Thus the Miskitos' loyalty was split, though when the revolution triumphed many joined the FSLN-backed group Misurasata (Miskito, SUMO, RAMA, SANDINISTA & ASLATALANKA), hoping to help with the literacy campaign. Volunteers were soon informed, however, that the Sandinista-led government had decreed Spanish the official language, which few people spoke, much less read. The FSLN then declared the Mosquitia's natural resources to be public property, 'to be exploited efficiently and reasonably.' Tensions built.

At the same time, Somoza's National Guard was regrouping in the Mosquitia. The Sandinistas got intelligence that they would be meeting in San Carlos on December 23, 1981, and put two and two together. Some 7000 troops received their orders: evacuate the people, burn the houses, kill the animals and destroy the wells. No one had time to pack, or think, just flee the columns of smoke rising from the riverbanks and the squeals of dying animals. Every single town on the Río Coco was burned to the ground, and no one knows how many civilians died. It is remembered as Red Christmas.

Some 20,000 people became refugees, moving to Honduras, Bilwi and San José de Bocay, and what's now known as Tasba Pri or 'Free Land,' the impoverished string of towns clinging to the road from Rosita to Bilwi. Many others joined the Contras.

The Sandinistas backpedaled and apologies were issued, but it was too late. In 1987 the National Autonomy Law granted the RAAN and RAAS official independence in response to local pressure, though in reality the central government continued to exploit the region's natural resources without providing federal infrastructure. Unemployment hovered at 50%, and the regions remained the poorest in the nation.

Shortly after autonomy, former Contras and Misurasata members formed Yatama (Yapti Masrika Nani, or 'Descendants of Mother Earth'), a political party that probably gets about 90% of the indigenous vote in every election. Barred from participating in the 2000 elections because of The Pact (p58), Yatama called on its constituency to abstain, and a Sandinista actually became mayor of Bilwi. The World Court ruled that the elections were tainted, and in 2005 Yatama got on the ballot and won big, taking the mayorships of Waspám, Prinzapolka and Bilwi. It was a historic victory, and one that matters, as the Mosquitia rises once again.

Drinking & Entertainment

Japanese-themed Discoteca Kufu is currently the more popular of the two discos, both of which are open Thursday to Sunday.

Video Bar Freddy (snacks US\$2-4; ☎ noon-midnight) Shows DVDs on its big-screen TV, and if you're nice you may be able to choose the movie.

Getting There & Away

La Costeña is open on flight days only, right across from the airstrip, which means that it is difficult to make the recommended reservations. The flights leave from here for Managua (US\$90/160 one way/return, 70 minutes) at 12:10pm on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, and 10:40am on Fridays.

Buses (US\$6, four hours) leave for Bilwi at 6:30am and 7:30am daily, a surprisingly pleasant trip through the pine savanna on a smooth graded road, with latrine break at the halfway point.

THE ROAD TO EL RAMA

This region is much cheaper and easier to visit than most destinations in this chapter, as it's connected to Managua by a smooth, perfect strip of cement that takes about six hours – in an *ordinario* (slow bus) – from the capital to the river port of El Rama, with boats to the real Caribbean Coast. A rental car or even bicycle would be a fine way to explore Boaco and the Chonatales, which, unlike the two autonomous regions, is part of Nicaragua proper and shares the dominant culture's history and Spanish language.

Boaco

pop 45,000 / elevation 390m

It calls itself 'The City with Two Floors,' because two communities, each with its own beautiful church, have grown together from the hill and valley, intersecting in such a way that it could be better named 'The City of Stunning Views.' The town sprawls into the shallower valley to the south (the 'lower floor') and continues to grow. And

to the north and west the upper floor is perched at the edge of a 400m drop into the deeper and more beautiful valley below.

But more than anything, Boaco is a cowboy town; really, *the* cowboy town, and if you're lucky, some enterprising farmer will bring his or her cow right to the green and breezy parque central to sell fresh-squeezed milk, almost direct from the udder to you.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Boaco is easy to get around – once you figure out the whole 'two floors' thing. Most tourist services are concentrated on the upper floor. The town does sprawl but most services are within three blocks. A handful of restaurants and discos are located just out of town; take a cab.

BanCentro, If you arrive by bus, at the main market, head downhill then back up, toward yellow Santiago Apóstol Church; you'll pass this bank with a Visa/Plus ATM on the way. The road passes Hotel Alma on the right; take the stairs and end up at the parque central.

Centro de Internet (per hr US\$0.70) Across from the park.
Hospital (☎ 842 2301) Located just out of town; take a cab.

Marena (☎ 843 1677) Two blocks north of the *El Bailante* statue, this very helpful office manages Reserva Natural Cerro Cumaica–Cerro Alegre, with relatively easy access via Santa Lucia and San José de los Remates (p242); and Reserva Natural Cerro Mombachito-La Vieja and Reserva Natural Filas de Masigüe, which have ecotourism projects in the works. Marena can tell you the latest, and point you toward guides for the hike to La Cebadilla, a nearby mountaintop shrine, and other outdoor activities.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

If you're driving, it's worth a stop in **Boaco Viejo**, the original, one-floor site of Boaco, which was an indigenous stronghold (hence the relocation) but still has a beautiful old church housing La Virgen Auxiliadora.

Other than the **mysterious mushroom statue** in the parque central (perhaps homage to what's growing beneath the cow patties?), Boaco's not exactly teeming with tourist attractions. There are very nice Catholic churches: classic and very yellow **La Parroquia de Santiago Apóstol**, on the upper floor, and, perhaps more interesting, Russian Orthodox-style (but still very Catholic) **Parroquia de Nuestra Señora del Perpetuo Socorro** downstairs.

Museo Antropológica Arturo José Suarez Miranda (admission free; ☎ afternoons), two blocks west of the park, has a handful of archaeo-

logical treasures, photos of several Boaco mayors, and adult reading classes at night.

Time is better spent taking in the views from **Parque El Cerrito del Faro**, two blocks north and 1½ blocks west of the parque central, with the climbable 1895 'lighthouse' above the city; you'll see a pretty hill rising from the other side of town, with a farmhouse at the base, where a breezy, popular 45-minute climb begins (ask permission).

A block west (uphill), then north, of Marena, the street ends at **Paseo de los Poetas**, which honors Boaco's four Rubén Darío Literary Prize winners – Antonio Barquero, Julian Guerrero, Hernan Robleto and Diego Sequeira – with an appropriately romantic vista. Nearby, the statue of *El Bailante*, a dancing clown, is a reminder to show up for Boaco's biggest party, the **Procession of Santiago Apóstol** (July 24–25), when all the men dress like that.

Cooperativa San Isidro (☎ 542 1822; snisidro@ibw.com.ni), located one block north of Enitel, can arrange free guided tours, including transport, visiting members of its 152-strong cooperative of small organic coffee growers (with advance notice). Nearby, in Teustepe, **Comunidad Asiento Viejo** (☎ 542 2609; per person US\$7) offers all-day tours of area caves, petroglyphs and wild hot springs.

SLEEPING

Hotel Alma (☎ 542 2620; r without bathroom US\$6, r with bathroom US\$9-12; ☎ ☎) On the road between the floors, this place is super clean, and a few extra dollars buys a TV and/or air-con; the US\$9 rooms have awesome views.

Hotel Santiago (☎ 829 0671; r without bathroom US\$7-9) Two blocks from the park, this big, cool, clean, tiled colonial has huge rooms with lovely shared bathroom and a TV area that the English-speaking owner, Carlos Obando, had just started remodeling. He had plans to add a tourist information desk, so stop by.

Hotel Bosquesa (☎ 542 1675; dm US\$4, r with bathroom US\$10; ☎ ☎) Take a taxi to the rain forest and great rooms – air-con, TV – plus pool and recommended restaurant.

EATING

Boaco is a beef town, with cheese on the side; vegans can consider themselves warned.

El Paladar (US\$1-4; ☎ 9am-midnight) This popular spot serves all your meaty favorites

including the Plato Paladar: ham, cheese and beef wrapped in a thick flour tortilla and arranged over mashed potatoes, all smothered in a mushroom-cream sauce. With a salad.

El Borbonne (US\$2.50-4; ☎ 10am-9:30pm) Across from Marena, this is the other favorite, with a mellower atmosphere and more meaty entrees.

Take a taxi to recommended Chinchilla Restaurant and Restaurante La Bosquesa, both serving steak and other beefy meals beneath *palapas* (thatched-roof huts) in the woods.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Boaco is actually 12km from the Empalme de Boaco, on the main Managua–El Rama highway; to get to Juigalpa, Nueva Guinea, San Carlos or El Rama, you'll need to take any Managua-bound bus to the *empalme* and flag an east-bound bus from there. Buses leave from the market to destinations including:

Camoapa US\$1, one hour, 6:30am to 5:15pm, almost hourly

Managua ordinario US\$2, three hours, 3:45am to 5:25pm, every 30 minutes

Managua minivan US\$2.50, two hours, every 1½ hours or so, depart when full

Río Blanco US\$3.25, 2½ hours, 5:30am to 5:45pm, every 45 minutes

San José de los Remates US\$2, 1½ hours, 8:15am; returns 2:15pm

Santa Lucía US\$1, one hour, 10:30am, 12:10pm, 1:15pm, 4pm and 5pm

Aguas Claras Hot Springs

This region may not be the easiest place to travel, but **Aguas Claras** (☎ 244 2916; adult/child US\$1.25/0.70; ☎ 9am-6pm Wed-Sun; P ♿ ♿) is waiting to sooth those volcanoes away. Nicaragua's premier hot spring resort is a relatively inexpensive place to stay – air-con rooms (US\$29) with hot showers, and use of a couple of guest-only pools, sleep three comfortably. The Hawaiian-shirted crew provides impeccable service, the 10 pools are spotlessly clean and food (US\$4 to US\$6), served anywhere beneath the *palapa* ranchos, is excellent. Although the water – with assorted healing properties – isn't absolutely boiling, there are two small 'therapeutic pools,' that you're welcome to fill with fresh, steaming volcano juice on demand, about as hot as

you'll want in this climate (elderly or infirm visitors have dibs on these, however).

From Managua, take almost any east-bound bus from El Mayoreo (US\$1.50, 45 minutes, every 15 minutes) and ask the driver to let you off; the springs are right by the highway. Taxis charge US\$4 from Boaco. Make reservations, especially on weekends.

Santa Lucía

Just 12km north of Boaco, at the heart of a 1000-year-old volcanic crater surrounded by rain-forested peaks, the lovely Spanish colonial town of Santa Lucía is part of **Reserva Natural Cerro Cumaica–Cerro Alegre**.

The **alcaldía** (☎ 273 3600; santaluciaalcaldia@yahoo.com) makes visiting a cinch. Contact Mayor Adiel Obregón in advance to set up **guided tours** (US\$6 per group, horses extra) to rivers, waterfalls and more attractions including a difficult 4km hike to 15km-deep **Cueva Santo Domingo**, an old Sandinista stronghold with rusting military equipment, plus scores of petroglyphs left by the previous residents. **Homestays** (per person including all meals US\$6) are included. There are more petroglyphs at **Piedra de Sapo**, at the top of the volcanic rim, from where you can see Masaya, Managua and the lakes on a clear day. Less arduous adventures include tours of area *fincas*, medicinal plant hikes, and tortilla-making (and eating) demonstrations.

Camoapa

pop 32,300

The rough-and-tumble cow town of Camoapa is best known for producing an excellent souvenir: flexible, woven **pita hats**. If you've got a hat, no problem – pita handbags, dolls and other crafts are also available.

The parque central has excellent park benches and pre-Columbian statues, and **CyberCafé Camoapa** (per hr US\$0.80; ☎ 8am-2pm Mon-Fri) is next door.

The reason why you're probably here is to access **Cerro Mombachito-La Vieja Reserve**, with hikes up awesome **Cerro Mombachito**, **Cerro La Vieja** and **Cuisaltepe Peak**, perhaps the most dramatic outcropping in the range. Theoretically, you can arrange guides in Camoapa; ask at **Hotel Las Estrellas** (☎ 549 2240; r with fan/air-con US\$10/20; ♿), which at the very least has comfortable, modern rooms featuring great beds, private hot-water bathrooms, cable TV and a well-loved on-site

restaurant (dishes US\$3 to US\$9), where the specialty is bull testicle soup.

Other good spots include recommended **Restaurant-Discotek Atenas** (US\$3-6), a block from the church, where a sign warns, 'Absolutely no guns allowed inside.' Just so you know.

San José de los Remates

pop 2000

Impossibly scenic, peacefully pastoral and light years from anything you're used to,

San José de los Remates has relatively easy access to **Reserva Natural Cerro Cumaica-Cerro Alegre**, and probably the country's best developed, most easily accessible, experiment in alternative tourism.

Begin at the **alcaldía** (☎ 542 2359; geosan jose@yahoo.com, geosan jose@hotmail.com), where the youthful mayor Jorge Isaacs and his team of fresh-faced government officials have put together six different one-day **tourist packages** (per person US\$14-20), which

DETOUR: RÍO BLANCO & RESERVA NATURAL CERRO MUSÚN

Although Cerro Musún is actually closer to Matagalpa, the road from Boaco is newly paved and much faster, breezing by Muy Muy, with a handful of nice *campestre* restaurants, then through the rapidly growing town of Matiguás, also not a tourist mecca, though **Hotel Dulce Sueños** (r per person US\$4) would work in a pinch. About 3km from Río Blanco, you'll pass thatch-roofed **Güirilaria** (*servicio* US\$0.80) which serves one thing: two of the best *güirilas* (thick, fresh and aromatic tortillas made with fresh corn) on Earth, a hunk of *cuajada* cheese, a bowl of thick cream and a tiny cup of over-sweetened coffee.

Thus fortified, enter **Río Blanco**, a town of 26,000 dwarfed by the enormous volcano that it claims is Nicaragua's geographical center (maybe), and which does mark the end of the paved highway system and beginning of the wild, wild RAAN.

Reserva Natural Cerro Musún (☎ 278 3041; fundenic@ibw.com.ni, infocomap@apcomanejo.com) has almost a dozen peaks over 1400m and as many dramatic waterfalls. Head uphill from the Texaco *empalme* to find the excellent **Marena** (per hr US\$1), which in addition to offering Internet access can arrange guides (US\$3 to US\$6 per day) with one days' notice. A two-day package, including guided hikes, one night at its biological station and all meals, costs US\$34 per person.

Two short trails lead into primarily secondary lower-elevation humid tropical forest, Sendero Río la Golondrina (1.2km), with great views and a nice swimming hole, and Salto Los Valles, with cascading 5m tall falls. More ambitious hikers are rewarded with Cascada Bilampi, a 40m high waterfall with neat geological formations in the cave behind it, or seven-hour round-trip Sendero Mojón, which wends its way through the wilderness to the highest point (1438m) in the park. A camping area was also in the works. The park is walking distance from Marena.

While in Río Blanco check out the **Catholic Church**, topped with what appears to be a map of the world, but is actually just Nicaragua, with a three-dimensional concrete Cerro Musún rising from its geographic center, not exactly to scale. You can ask to climb the bell tower. In the dry season, ask about the short hike to the confluence of the Río Adalia and Río Viejo, where several **petroglyphs**, including a huge snake, rise from the water.

Hotel Musún (☎ 778 0103; s/d without bathroom US\$4/6) has simple, tin-roofed rooms with a fabulous, cheap steam-table buffet at mealtimes, but neighboring **Restaurant Musún II** (mains US\$5-10; ☎ 10am-1am) is considered the best restaurant in town, specializing in *churrasco* (Brazilian-style barbecue) and other hearty dishes, and seats – no joke – 1500 people. Just in case.

Hotel Bosawás (d US\$15; ☎) has the best rooms in town, with cable TV and hot water, surrounding its loud, flashy restaurant/bar; it's probably a 'love hotel' (see the boxed text, p282).

Try **Disco-Bar El Atlantico** (US\$2-4; ☎ 6am-10pm, disco goes later), serving great food on the outskirts of town. Women traveling solo should avoid this and all bars at night. It's on the eastern edge of town, about 1km east of the Texaco *empalme*.

The bus station is about 1.5km east of town; take a taxi (US\$0.50) to catch buses for destinations including the following:

- Boaco** US\$3, two hours, 6am to 4:20pm, every 1½ hours
- Managua** US\$5, four hours, 3:30am to 5pm, almost hourly
- Siuna** US\$5, five to seven hours, six daily

include three meals, a homestay and various guided tours that you can mix and match over the length of your stay.

The **Ruta de los Chorros** takes you past three 50m waterfalls (one of which you can see from town), to a *mirador* (lookout point) with views clear to the Pacific Ocean. The **Río Santa Cruz** visits a swimming hole with canyons, petroglyphs and a natural rock slide. Or try **Community Agrotourism**, which includes an organic coffee farm. They also arrange visits to **local schools** and **development projects**, and for an extra fee will teach you how to ride horses, cook Nicaraguan food and make wood carvings.

What inspired this unusual venture? Several years ago, the land around the local watershed was purchased by a Boaco-based cattle rancher, threatening the water supply. The townspeople mobilized, convinced the rancher to grow sustainable organic coffee instead, and reforested much of the property themselves. The plan required the community to come up with US\$6000 – 10 times the average Nicaraguan's annual salary – to pay off the rancher. More land is being purchased every year and is protected as a municipal park, **Reserva Ecológica Vida Silvestre Llanos de las Mesas**, adjacent to the national reserve.

There's one bus to Boaco (US\$2, 1½ hours) at 2:15pm; four buses to Teustepe (US\$1, one hour); and regular minivans (US\$0.70) to Esquipulas.

The Back Road to Matagalpa

From San José de los Remates, you can take the scenic back road to Matagalpa, a string of rural communities with strong Chorotega roots. Regular buses ply this back road, but it's much easier in a private vehicle.

Small, scenic Esquipulas, less mountainous and a bit bigger than San José, doesn't have any tour packages, but **El Hotelito** (☎ 772 9132; r per person US\$6) will hook you up. Very attractive rooms (No 4 is the best) have lovely furniture, fans, soap and towels surrounding a tree-filled courtyard, and share a very nice bathroom and on-site restaurant (dishes US\$1 to US\$3). Enterprising owners Theresa and Adacila Alcantara will happily locate guides for the 2½-hour hike to **Cerro Santa María**, with virgin rain forest, swimming holes and views

of Boaco; **Finca de Juan Gea**, with cheese; **El Cerro del Padre**, with orchids; and **La Cueva de la Mocuana** – hey, every other town in this part of Nicaragua has one, why not Esquipulas?

You could also stay at **Hotel Central** (r per person US\$3), a row of clean, windowless, one-person rooms with shared latrines. Pollo El Campero specializes in (surprise) chicken, while better **Bar-Restaurant Quelite** (US\$1.50-3) has a menu; go for anything in the jalapeño sauce. All are close to the park.

From here, it's a long and winding (and not bad, for dirt) road through volcanoes that are draped in a patchwork of farms and *fincas*, their rocky spines still cloaked with tropical dry forest left intact because you just can't plant beans at that angle. **San Dionisio** is the biggest city on this stretch of road, with two basic *hospedajes*, and then it's on to **El Chile**, known for its brightly colored textiles worked into handbags and dolls. You can visit any of the four workshops, after which it's just 12km to Matagalpa.

Juigalpa

pop 50,800 / elevation 117m

Juigalpa is blessed with well-preserved Spanish-colonial architecture that predates its 1669 foundation, and an incredible mountain backdrop, so you may be surprised to have such a lovely spot to yourself. The almost untouristed capital of Chontales department also boasts an excellent museum and a fine church with colorful mosaics that spill over from the shrine and throughout the shady *parque central*, not to mention all manner of adventures just outside the city.

INFORMATION

On the southeast side of the park, a brand-new Intur was just getting started; it can recommend hotels and has big plans for organizing guided tours to the Salinas Caves, El Monolito de Cuapa and undeveloped hot springs.

BanPro Next door to Intur, with a 24-hour Visa/Plus ATM.

Hospital (☎ 812 2332) Chontales' biggest hospital is outside of town.

Llamadas Heladas (☎ 8am-10pm) Cheap, international calls, around the corner from BanPro.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The main reason why it's worth getting off the bus for at least a couple of hours is to visit **Museo Archaológico Gregorio Aguilar Barea** (☎ 512 0784; admission US\$0.70; 🕒 8am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat), two and a half blocks east of the park, and right around the corner from the bus station. The outdoor hangar houses the most important collection of stela in the country, with more than 120 examples of these basalt statues, probably carved between AD 800 and 1500, some reaching 5m tall. *La Chinita*, recognizable by her early 1990s Madonna-style brassiere, is also known as the 'Mona Lisa of Chontales,' and has appeared at the Louvre.

Originally organized by the namesake Professor Aguilar (or 'Goyito') and a group of his students in 1949, the museum's current structure went up on January 8, 1967, Rubén Darío's 100th birthday. In addition to the stela, it contains hundreds of pre-Columbian pots, incense burners, funeral jars, art objects and the largest *metate*, or corn grinder, ever found. Paintings of famous locals, stacks of old cash registers, and (Ripley, eat your heart out) *two* two-headed calves – not to mention a seven-legged bull, a one-eyed pig and a one-eyed human fetus that one hopes is a hoax – round out the collection.

Museo de Arte Taurina (donations appreciated; 🕒 afternoons), across from Supermercado San Antonio, is a roomful of cattle-related

art, rusting mess kits and news clippings involving all things bovine.

One of two zoos in the nation, the predictably depressing **Jardin Zoológico Thomas Belt** (admission US\$0.30; 🕒 8am-6:30pm) has lots of local wildlife and a few non-native species, including a lone chimpanzee caged next to a sign that more humanitarian smokers may want to ignore: 'please don't give this species cigarettes.'

Juigalpa has two excellent parks. Get your shoes shined at the **parque central** next to *La Lustrador*, better known as 'Chaco,' the beloved statue of a shoe-shine boy; El Templo de Cultura, the kiosk in the center, occasionally hosts live music and poetry readings. **Palo Solo** park, five blocks east, has a good restaurant and one of the best views in Nicaragua of the Serranía Amerisque and broad valley below.

It's a US\$2 taxi or US\$0.30 bus ride to **Pozo el Salto**, 4km north on the road to Managua. This absolutely stunning, partially dammed swimming hole framed in clean cascades of water has been popular with picnickers for generations; on weekends and during Semana Santa there may be a US\$1 entry fee.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Juigalpa's **fiestas patronales**, held from August 11 to 18, are nationally known for their *hipícas*, or horse parades and shows, and are definitely worth making a special trip for.

WANTED: AN UNCONVENTIONAL TOURIST

Intur calls ecotourism that is off the beaten track in this part of the country 'Unconventional Tourism,' and it is truly your welcome to the unroamed delights of the region.

Despite access to everything from 70m waterfalls and 1200-year-old petroglyphs to 15km-deep caves and loads of luxuriant hot springs, the majority of Nicaraguan towns simply don't have the resources to develop normal tourist infrastructure. Which means they can't bring in tourist dollars. It's a feedback loop.

Enter Unconventional Tourism. Basically, entire backwoods towns are working together co-operatively to offer tour packages, usually through their *alcaldía*. It's low-tech, with guided hikes and horseback rides to the petroglyphs and gold mines, and homestays and home cooking in between. It's never air-conditioned and often physically demanding, but you could well see wilderness never captured in photographs; or find cliffs that have never been climbed. Better, your money goes straight to Nicaraguan communities that need it the most.

This sort of tourism isn't for everyone. In general, you should be in good physical condition, speak at least survival Spanish, have a high tolerance for *gallo pinto* (rice and beans) and potentially uncomfortable beds (or hammocks). But the infrastructure, while basic, is ready and waiting – they just need unconventional tourists.

SLEEPING

Several budget options in the city center and on the road to Puerto Díaz function as bordellos and are best avoided.

Hotel Casa Country (☎ 512 2546; r with fan/air-con US\$15/20; 🏠) With a great location across from Palo Solo park, this is easily the best hotel in town, with attractive wood furnishings, hot water and cable TV.

Hospedaje El Nuevo Milenio (☎ 512 0646; r without bathroom per person US\$4, s/d with bathroom US\$12/15; 🏠) This family-run option one block east of the church has OK tiled rooms; the ones with private bathroom also have air-con and cable TV.

Hotel El Bosque (☎ 512 2205; r with/without bath US\$15/8; 🏠) Right on the highway, this nice spot has clean little rooms and a central garden that absorbs most of the car noise; the more expensive rooms also have air-con and cable TV.

La Quinta (☎ 512 0920; r with fan US\$10-15, r with air-con US\$16-20; 🏠) Also on the main road, this place has small, dark, overpriced cement rooms with easy access to a good restaurant and the best disco in town.

EATING & DRINKING

Several good *fritangas* (sidewalk barbecues) are set up around the parque central.

Casa de Queso/Restaurante 24/7 (☎ 812 2295; mains US\$2-8; 🕒 24hr) A popular, loud and reliable spot for fast food, Chinese cuisine, espresso beverages and even upscale seafood dishes served to your plastic booths. Dine in or call for delivery, and be sure to check out the dozens of different local cheeses on sale out front.

La Embajada (US\$2-5) The classic cheapie is this tiny place close to the cemetery, with grilled meat, served by weight, tortillas and cheese.

Palo Solo (US\$4-6; 🕒 10am-10pm) The unmissable meal with a view is in Palo Solo park, where you can dine on slightly overpriced steak and other upscale offerings.

Restaurante El Chupis (mains US\$2-4; 🕒 10am-10pm) Five blocks north of the park, it's worth the walk for *pupusas*, bull testicles in garlic sauce, foosball and air-hockey.

For fine dining, it's **La Quinta** (mains US\$4-10; 🕒 7am-late) or **Restaurante Tacho** (US\$2-6; 🕒 10am-11pm), with great grilled chicken and sometimes live music, both on the highway.

There are two supermarkets here: **Supermercado San Antonio** (🕒 8am-8pm), one block west of the parque central, has a better selection and local goodies like homemade jams from Hermanas Trapenses; while **Palí** (🕒 7:30am-8pm), close to the market, is bigger, cheaper and has an Eskimo.

Party with the locals at popular **La Quinta** (🕒 Thu-Sun), or slightly more downscale **Hotters**, both on the highway.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Managua-bound minivans (US\$3, 2½ hours) leave from beside the church at 10am, noon and 5pm, arriving at the Mayoreo bus terminal in Managua. Buses leave from the local market, less than one block from the archaeology museum. Destinations include:

El Rama US\$4, six hours, 7am, 8am, 9am, 10:30am, 11:45am and 2:30pm

Managua US\$7, four hours, 4am to 6pm, hourly

Nueva Guinea US\$3, four hours, 6:30am, 7:30am, 8:45am, 10am, 11am, noon, 1:05pm and 3:15pm

Puerto Díaz US\$1, one hour, 9:30am, 11am, noon, 1pm and 2pm

San Carlos US\$7, seven to nine hours, 8:05am, 9am, 1:15pm, 1:30pm and 2:45pm

San Miguelito US\$6, five to seven hours, 2:15pm

Santo Domingo US\$3, 2½ hours, every 1½ hours

Puerto Díaz

pop 300

Just 28km from Juigalpa, the lakefront village of Puerto Díaz doesn't have a beach right in town, but you can swim in the cement pools of **Mirador Vista Linda** (☎ 512 2699; adult/child US\$0.70/0.30; 🕒 sunrise-late), on the hill just above. This friendly spot serves fish (US\$3 to US\$6) any way you want, and offers spectacular views of Isla de Ometepe's back side (check out Concepción's crater from this angle!) and the Nancital Archipelago, three of the least-visited islets in the lake. Vista Linda also rents the only room (US\$12) in town, a huge, bare cement space with one double bed, but feel free to pack in the whole gang. There are plans for more.

The village and port are just downhill, where a handful of restaurant/bars serve rum and fish dishes. You can easily arrange a private *panga* seating six people to the three islands of the archipelago for about US\$90. **Isla Redonda** is the most

appealing destination, with sandy beaches, lots of wildlife and private homes where they'll rent you a hammock for the night. Bring bottled water and food, just in case. **Isla Grande** and **Isla El Muerte** are both home to tiny farming communities.

About 20km further north along the lakeshore, a fairly luxurious resort-style hotel, **La Bocana Mayal** (☎ 512 1766, 512 2322; www.ameriquetour.com.ni), with several well-appointed individual cabins, was being finished at the time of research. Contact the hotel for the latest.

Buses (US\$1, one hour) run to Juigalpa at 4:30am, 5am, 7am, 3pm and 4:30pm. If you're driving, the good dirt road leaves the highway just south of Hotel El Bosque in Juigalpa.

La Libertad & Santo Domingo

A good excuse for spending some time among the granite peaks of the Serranía Amerrisque is visiting these two century-old gold-mining towns, connected to Juigalpa by a decent dirt road and regular bus service.

La Libertad, the 'Birthplace of Religious and Historical Figures,' is hometown of famed Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo, who has at least two statues, and perpetual Sandinista presidential candidate Daniel Ortega, who doesn't have a statue yet, though the life-size likeness of Sandino in the pleasant parque central is something of a stand-in. The town always votes Liberal. There are no services for tourists, but this is your last chance for gas.

At a crisp, cool 1000m, the Santo Domingo *alcaldía* offers several guided tours (US\$6 per group) through the mountains; guide Santiago Urbina-Sosa is highly recommended. The 2.5km hike to **Peñas Blancas**, a spire of white rock rising from the cattle ranches, is a must for the incredible views; unscrupulous guides may take you elsewhere. This hike is not recommended on windy or rainy days.

Santo Domingo Mine, less than 1km from town (listen for the grinding rocks), produces 60 grams of gold per day using machinery from 1913. Ask for Modesto Allestas, who'll show you the sluices and *rastras* – a centuries-old technology involving flat boulders on chains being dragged across moist ore. You need a guide to visit the other mine, which is next to a stun-

ning, if polluted, 70m cascade; you'll get to the mine via a 30m mining tunnel drilled through the rock beneath the falls.

Reserva Montañosa Santo Domingo is actually the private property of Raúl Valenzuela, who will take you on a tour of his organic coffee farm, swimming hole and some allegedly virgin forest. It's gorgeous, and camping can be arranged.

There's one pleasant hotel in town, **Bar Hotelito San José** (☎ 855 6217; r per person without bathroom US\$4), with simple rooms; the ones by the second-floor balcony have windows – plus a good restaurant (dishes US\$1.50 to US\$4) that's known for its jalapeño steak. Soda-Café Mama Lila, by the park, does good burgers.

Buses return to Juigalpa (US\$3, 2½ hours) almost hourly.

Cuapa

pop 11,000

This small mountain town is a pilgrimage-worthy destination for two reasons. The first is the miracle of the **Virgin of Cuapa**, whose statue, currently enshrined a scenic 2km walk from town, began glowing and then appeared five times to local tailor Bernardo Martínez in 1980, telling him that all Nicaragua would suffer without peace (read the entire transcript, in English or in Spanish, at www.apparitions.org/cuapa.martinez). This, of course, turned out to be true. Pilgrims pack the place the first week in May, when they make the relatively easy and scenic hike to the shrine en masse.

The other reason people come is to climb **El Monolito de Cuapa**, a strenuous, three-hour, nontechnical hike that begins in town and ends up on top of that enormous rocky outcropping you saw from the highway.

Note that any single man who successfully climbs the monolith will be enchanted into marrying a Cuapeña woman and live the rest of his days in this gorgeous mountain enclave, which doesn't sound too bad. The Monolito is also well known for its tribe of *duendes* (elves), who fell for a pretty little girl named Florita back in the 1930s, like Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, but creepier. They put the family donkey on top of El Monolito, refusing to return it until the parents promised them Florita. Frustrated, they agreed – but decided to flee with the donkey and their daughter.

They made their escape, when the mother realized she'd forgotten something, and turned around. And there were the *duendes*, missing items in hand, who smiled maliciously: 'Don't worry, ma'am, we didn't forget anything.'

Ask about reliable guides at the **alcaldía** (☎ 812 3206) or **Hospedaje la Maravilla** (r without bathroom per person US\$4), with good-sized cement rooms.

Nueva Guinea

pop 80,000 / elevation 184m

As you continue toward El Rama, you'll see a cluster of vegetable stands and cheap *comedores* on your right, marking the turnoff for San Carlos (see p262). It's another 50km to **El Chillamate**, with more vegetable stands and basic eateries, plus the turnoff to Nueva Guinea.

The good paved road heads southeast, past very groovy **El Coral Central Park**, with excellent snake art, about 20km along. **Puente El Rama**, another 35km further, has refreshing cascades and swimming holes close to the road. It's just a few more minutes to the town of Nueva Guinea, which really is brand-new, founded in the 1960s as part of a federal homesteading initiative with the unfortunate acronym Prica.

The Somoza government successfully directed the refugees of the 1972 Managua earthquake and 1973 Cerro Negro eruption to this isolated experiment, over a month's journey from Managua in ox-carts. The homesteaders, no slouches, got busy razing pristine rain forests to graze cattle, an economic success and 'agricultural disaster.'

In 1984 Prica decided to transform the region into a 'Cradle of Nicaraguan Alternative Agriculture' and started La Esperanzita, a teaching *finca* where unconventional crops, organic agriculture and alternative technologies were researched and taught to area campesinos. It has been joined by a handful of other alternative agriculture experiments, and Nueva Guinea also offers rather difficult access to surrounding natural reserves founded to protect the remaining wilderness.

ORIENTATION

Nueva Guinea sprawls along Calle Central, about 12 blocks that run from the high-way turnoff to the one-*manzana* (block)

market, where the blue-and-white 'monument' is the landmark from which all area addresses are measured.

INFORMATION

At the Marena, ranger Abel Torrez Hernandez can help organize guides and transportation to Reserva Biológica Indio-Maíz (Indio-Maíz Biological Reserve), which isn't easy. Take a truck to Puerto Principe (US\$1.50, twice daily) – you may need to walk the last two muddy kilometers in rainy season. From there, catch a boat to Atlanta (US\$3, 6.5km), with food, lodging and boats further into the reserve. There's also access from Fonseca, 20km south of Nueva Guinea, but this involves a two-day horseback ride. Both Finca Esperanzita and Auxilio Mundial can arrange trips into the reserve; make reservations in advance.

Bancentro Two blocks from the monument; changes dollars but has no other tourist services.

CyberCafé Nueva Guinea (per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-9pm) One block from the monument.

Marena (☎ 575 0220) Two blocks north and three east from the monument.

ACTIVITIES

The main attraction in Nueva Guinea is alternative agriculture. The *alcaldía* may be able to find guides, or locate **Marisol Robles-Jarquín** (☎ 575 0090; jlmorero2004@yahoo.es) at Hotel Nueva Guinea (p248), who can arrange guided tours of the *fincas* for around US\$25 per day, per group, including transportation.

La Finca Esperanzita (☎ 575 0174, 843 5010; esperanzita84@yahoo.com), a 13km, US\$3 taxi from town, is the original teaching *finca* and best prepared for ecotourism, with packages that include tortilla-making classes, hiking 5km of trails and getting a good look at organic valerian and pepper, and an underground tank that turns cow manure into natural gas, used to cook your *gallo pinto* if you spend the night. It can also arrange tours into the Indio-Maíz. Packages are designed for groups; it's US\$42/62 for two-/three-day packages including dorm beds, food and tours, for up to 15 people. It can accommodate individuals, too, but make advanced arrangements.

Auxilio Mundial (☎ 275 0066, 275 3430) is a beautiful (and cattle-free) 716-*manzana*

demonstration *finca* and has some 30,000 plants, including weird stuff from Australia, Ecuador and other exotic spots, as well as a Brazilian aphrodisiac called *borrojo* (ahem; did we mention Auxilio Mundial was a Christian organization?). All are being tested for climate adaptability and economic viability. There's also a reforestation project, hydroelectric dam, trails and a swimming hole, and it can arrange guided hikes throughout the region, including Indio-Maíz. Auxilio Mundial has an office two blocks from the monument, near Llamas del Bosque, where you can make reservations.

Several regular private farms hoping to get in on the ecotourism tip offer tours and camping, at least theoretically:

Finca Pedrito Figuera Has rustic camping, guided tours of pineapples, oranges and spice trees, for tips only.

Finca El Verdún (☎ 854 0589) Has similar services, plus a shower and a reforestation project (also with camping) about 15km from town.

Lecheria Zapote (☎ 844 8265) Offers free tours of its cheese-making facility from 8am to 9am only; make reservations.

SLEEPING & EATING

Nueva Guinea is a business center, so make hotel reservations in advance. Try to arrive on the first or third Friday of the month for the big organic vegetable market.

Hospedaje Central (☎ 620 8949; r per person without bathroom US\$2) The best cheapie, right at the market, has tiny singles and much nicer doubles, all super clean with lots of murals and a kiosk outside with cable TV.

Hotel Nueva Guinea (☎ 575 0090; s/d with fan US\$7/12, d with air-con US\$40; 🚿 📺 📺) The best hotel in town, it's got big, clean rooms sleeping three, with little tables and chairs, cable TV, plans for a pool and a solid restaurant (dishes US\$4-6, open 6am to midnight); there's also an annex across the street with tiny, US\$3 rooms with shared bathroom and no mosquito screens.

El Peñon (pizza slice US\$1, set plate US\$2; 🕒 6am-7pm Mon-Sat) On the main drag, sells pizza slices, set plates, and baked goods for pennies.

Pizza Hot (☎ 575 0109; pizzas US\$3-7; 🕒 9am-10pm) This place delivers.

Llamas del Bosque (US\$4-6; 🕒 10am-midnight) Two blocks from the monument, this spot is everyone's favorite place for steak

and shrimp, and becomes the town's hottest disco after 8pm, sometimes with live music.

Ristorante Las Brisas (US\$3-7; 🕒 11am-11pm) In the *palapa* at the turnoff from the main road, it also gets raves for steak and fish.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The airport shown on most maps is primarily decorative, a war relic that still sees the occasional helicopter. The road from Managua is beautifully paved (watch those speed bumps, though) and the bus station is at the market.

Juigalpa US\$3, four hours, hourly

Managua *expresso* US\$10, six hours, 7:30am, 9:30am, 11:30am and 1:45pm; *ordinario* US\$8, seven hours, 2am to 9pm, every two hours

San Carlos US\$7, seven to nine hours, four daily

EL RAMA

At the confluence of the Río Rama and Río Escondido, an international thoroughfare that empties into Bluefields Bay, this beautifully paved road was recently improved for a reason other than tourism: the newly inaugurated Rama International Port will ship some 2000 containers in 2006, 10 times that by 2010. This is Nicaragua's first heavyweight Atlantic port, despite over 80% of imports coming from Europe and the USA's East Coast. These goods currently come through expensive Costa Rica and Honduras, which is just about to change.

El Rama is getting itself all gussied up for the event, with newly paved streets and a refurbished church, as well as infrastructure for visiting **Parque Municipal Mahogany**, halfway to Bluefields. Most people are just passing through, of course, but it's an

CAUTION ON THE CARIBBEAN COAST

Remember that El Rama is a port town, with lots of young men, thus women traveling solo should stay alert. Several of the cheapest hotels cater to young workers and pretty prostitutes, many of whom may be hanging around in your hotel lobby looking for easy marks; men traveling solo should also stay alert. And remember, no matter how cool you are back home, it's OK to wear your life jacket on the riverboat ride to Bluefields.

interesting place to spend the night, if only to enjoy that misty-morning *panga* ride through the jungle.

Orientation & Information

El Rama hugs the riverbank, forming a rough 'L,' with the Catholic Church at the curve. Everything is located within five blocks of the church, except the international port, which is 1.5km east.

Bancentro Behind the church, changes dollars but provides no other services.

Cyber Café (per hr US\$1.25; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Sat) Four blocks east of the church.

Sights & Activities

There's no tourist office, but look for river guides (US\$6 per hour, plus gas) at the *alcaldía* or municipal dock. In town, the humble, wooden **Catholic Church**, about two blocks east of the main bus stop, with nifty stained-glass windows, was being renovated at press time, as was the *parque central*. The big hill just east of town, **La Loma** or **Cerro de Rama**, is definitely climbable (through some very poor neighborhoods); ask anyone where the one-hour round-trip walk begins. You could also take a canoe (US\$0.30) from Hotel Amy's dock across the Río Rama to the tiny, strollable, muddy town of **La Palmera**, with lots of cows and wildlife.

About 5km west of town in the community of El Recreo, a big ecotourism project – hanging bridges, guided rain-forest hikes to the waterfalls of **Salta Mataka** and accommodations – was in the works.

Eco-Hotel El Vivero (see right) arranges guided tours of Mahogany Tropical Reserve (US\$500 for eight people) and Laguna Perlas (US\$700, US\$30 extra to stay overnight).

Sleeping & Eating

New Hotel Oasis de Caribe (☎ 517 0264; r with fan US\$6-12, r with air-con US\$20-30; ☎ (P)) Several configurations of clean, modern rooms, with TVs, air-con, different sizes of beds etc, are all cheerfully painted; secure parking and a breakfast (US\$2) nook are just bonuses. It's one block north of the main drag, close to the bus station.

Hospedaje García (d US\$9) In a big, white Victorian one block west and just south of the main bus station, this spot's clean and simple, but safe wooden rooms are just fine.

Hotel Johana (☎ 817 0066; d with fan/air-con US\$8/16; ☎) A big step down, larger cleanish wooden rooms share somewhat less clean bathrooms, plus a few bored-looking but buxom gals in the restaurant.

Eco-Hotel El Vivero (☎ 517 0330; teknisa@ibw.com.ni; s/d with bathroom US\$12/15) A 3km, US\$1 taxi west of town, big, pleasantly rustic wooden cabins have porch and mosquito nets all sitting on a very pretty 164-*manzana* plantation, which you can tour on a day trip for US\$20 per group.

In town, the market has the cheapest eats. **Pollo El Fogón** (US\$2-5), a standout cheapie, serves up yummy roasted chicken and lots of sides, while **Comedor La Mita** (US\$2-3), across the street, has cheap, good set plates.

Locals are split on which is El Rama's best restaurant. **El Expreso** (US\$3-6; ☎ all day) is a big open-air place located two blocks north of the main drag; it's known for its huge servings, steak and the seafood stew. Meanwhile, **Casa Blanca** (mains US\$1-7; ☎ 11am-midnight), located on the riverfront, has great fish dishes as well as karaoke on weekends.

Getting There & Around

Getting around El Rama is a stroll, but consider taking a pedicab (US\$.30) the 1.5km to **Rama International Port** (☎ 517 0315). Primarily for cargo shipping, you can still catch the *Captain D* to Bluefields (US\$9, seven hours) at 1pm Monday, with continuing service to El Bluff, Big Corn, and perhaps Prinzapolka and Puerto Cabezas. *Ferry 1* leaves for Bluefields (passenger/car US\$9/60, eight hours) at 8am Monday, Wednesday and Friday, with continuing service to Big Corn Island.

The **Municipal Dock** (☎ 517 0073), close to the *expreso* buses, has a faster, more convenient collective *panga* service to Bluefields (US\$11, 1½ hours); boats leave 'when full,' almost hourly in the morning and less often as the day wears on.

BUS

The road to El Rama has finally been paved, cutting travel time dramatically, but bus schedules still seem designed for a 12-hour ride. Check for new bus schedules at Managua's Mayoreo. *Expresos* leave from in front of Hotel Amy, *ordinarios* two blocks inland.

Juigalpa US\$4, six hours, 5am to 3pm, hourly
Managua *expresso* US\$9, five hours, 9pm and 10pm;
ordinario US\$7.50, eight hours, 7:30am and 9am

BLUEFIELDS

pop 39,208

As with Bilwi and the RAAN, the South Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS) has no official capital, but Bluefields is the largest city, the seat of both regional and indigenous governments, and until El Rama International gets up and running, Nicaragua's principal Caribbean port.

Bluefields is no beauty; the town's prim Victorian charm was blown away in 1988 by monster Category IV Hurricane Juana.

'What neighborhoods were affected?' a journalist asked one survivor, after phone lines were restored.

'There are no neighborhoods,' the witness replied. 'Everything is gone.'

The city was rebuilt with little thought for aesthetics, and visitors may feel a sense of unease walking its gritty streets. But with comfortable hotels, great restaurants and a very multi-ethnic party scene, it makes a good base for visiting the very rainy (up to 4400mm per year) rain-forest reserves surrounding the city on all sides. Most locals also speak English.

Named after the Dutch pirate Blewfeldt, who made his base here in the 1700s, Bluefields is still home to plenty of shady characters. Big city rules apply: avoid going to bars solo and don't walk around with valuables at night.

Orientation & Information

Most of Bluefields' commerce, *hospedajes* and restaurants are found in a nine-square-block area between Parque Reyes and the Caribbean. The airport is about 3km south of downtown. There are several banks; unofficial moneychangers are found near the banks.

Bacentro With a Visa/Plus ATM.

Central Computer Service (per hr US\$1; ☎ 9am-10pm) Around the corner from Intur, this is just one cybercafé of several.

Intur (☎ 822 0221) One block west of the Moravian church, this helpful outlet can make reservations for hotels and airplanes.

Marena (☎ 572 2324) Next door to Intur, has basic information for people organizing trips to Reserva Natural

Cerro Silva and Reserva Natural Punta Gorda, neither of which has much tourist infrastructure.

Police (☎ 822 2298)

Post office Two blocks south, 1½ blocks east of Enitel.

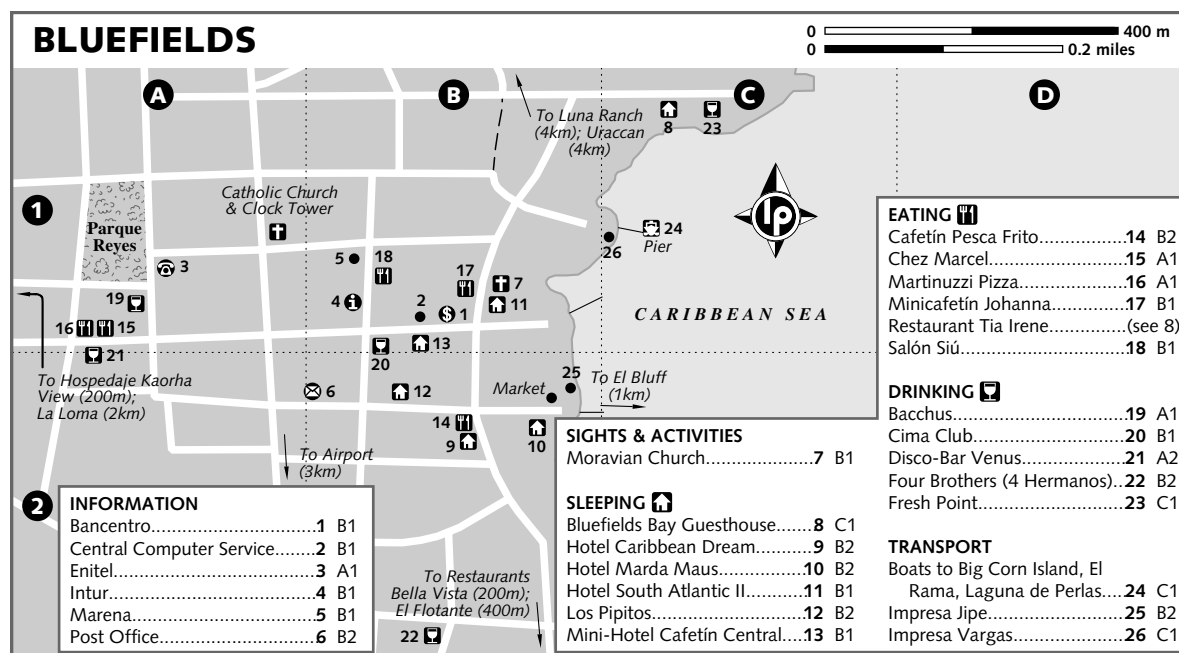
Sights & Activities

Activities in town are sparse, but do stop by the **Moravian church**, built to the exact specifications of the 1849 original, which was destroyed in Hurricane Juana. Friendly and simple with nice columns, it has the typical stained glass of the order, depicting a chalice. But chances are, you're eager to explore the constellation of wilderness areas and other attractions just a boat ride from town.

Come to **El Bluff International Port** for enormous oil tanks and some interesting machinery; all just a US\$3 boat ride from town. Hot and sort of sad, El Bluff's one **hotel** (d US\$6) is dark and dirty, and the town restaurant is open afternoons only.

Parque Municipal Mahogany (www.eco-index.org/ong/agcoma-ni-esp.html; admission US\$10) is on the curvy Caño Negro, a tributary of Río Escondido as it runs between El Rama and Bluefields. This 278 sq km reserve is a convenient side trip as you travel between them. Either town's **alcaldía** (☎ in El Rama 517 0316; in Bluefields 822 5202) or, better, **Bluefields Indian & Caribbean University** (BICU; ☎ 572 1116, ext 40; gonzalrojas@yahoo.com), can arrange tours through the Volunteer Park Rangers Association. A boat seating six plus a guide will cost around US\$100. The park, which is contiguous with both Reserva Natural Punta Gorda and the Indio-Maíz, is boat access only, and has waterfalls, several species of migratory birds and lots of other wildlife – including tarpon and bass. Fishing is definitely allowed.

Rama Key, a barbell-shaped island 15km southeast of Bluefields, inside the bay, is home to around 800 people – over half of all remaining Rama Indians. Isolated by the dominant Miskito culture, they still speak their own language and use their traditional government structures. **Casa Historia** (donations appreciated) may be the only museum that chronicles their story. But the real reason to come is **Hotel Surprise Dream** (☎ 572 1116, ext 34, 628 1112; castrofrancis@hotmail.com, otobeloto@hotmail.com; per person all-inclusive US\$80), a hotel and eco-tourism project run by the Rama Nation in conjunction with BICU. The package deal



includes transportation from Bluefields, three meals and guided tours, which could include trips to Wairu Cay for crab catching, or canoeing to Gwilling Cay Creek. There's currently no regular boat service to Rama Key, so independent travelers can choose a pricey private *panga* (US\$80 return) or try to hitch a ride with a Rama fisher, who may or may not speak Spanish.

Reserva Silvestre Greenfields (☎ 268 1897; www.greenfields.com.ni; s/d two days all-inclusive US\$184/247), a privately managed, 284-hectare wildlife reserve near Kukra Hill, offers a variety of pricey but plush package deals that get better as you add people and days. You can go canoeing, swim on virgin beaches, hike through the orchids and butterflies, or just relax at the pool. A real road to Kukra Hill is currently being built.

Fundesos (☎ 572 0617; eahodgeso@yahoo.com, fundeso@ibw.com.ni) arranges guided trips to Reserva Natural Cerro Silva and indigenous communities around Laguna de Perlas. Take a taxi to Barrio New York to find this small white house. Guides and lodging (in ridiculously tiny bamboo cabins) are organized for **Orinoco** (p253) and **Kakabila**, a beautiful little community just across a sandy inlet from the town of Laguna de Perlas. Fundeso can also find guides for climbing 635m **Cerro Silva**, about the only way into the natural reserve.

Collective boats leave El Bluff to points north twice weekly, stopping in **Tasbapauni**, a kilometer-wide strip of sand with one

hospedaje and beaches on either side; **Sandy Bay Sirpi**, a Miskito-speaking community that also has a *hospedaje*; and Rio Grand Bar, Caraguala, Cara, Tazapapone, San Nivel (which may have a *hospedaje*) and finally Set Net Point, the cheapest place to find a boat to the Pearl Keys.

Festivals & Events

Palo de Mayo (Maypole Festival) is one of the biggest events in Nicaragua – all 30 neighborhoods compete to create the most extravagant street show, with scantily clad dancers, floats, live music, you name it; and a dance party that goes for weeks in May. The centerpiece is, of course, the maypole, but you've never seen spring celebrated like this. Hotels can be booked weeks in advance as the month-long festival comes to a climax on May 31.

Other big parties are on October 11, Bluefields' birthday, and the *fiestas patronales* between September 30, for San Jerónimo Doctor, and October 5, for la Virgen El Rosario.

Sleeping

Los Pipitos (☎ 572 1590; d with fan US\$15, s/d with air-con US\$18/25; ☺) About 1½ blocks west of the market, this is a good deal on four clean, livable rooms with desks, nice lamps, and discounts for long-term stays.

Mini-Hotel Cafetin Central (☎ 572 2362; d with bathroom and fan/air-con US\$12/25; ☺) At the rear of a lively and much loved café (dishes US\$2

to US\$6, open 8am to 10pm), very neat if cramped rooms come with tiny bathroom, cable TV and phone.

Hospedaje Kaorha View (☎ 572 0488; r without bathroom and 1/2 double beds US\$13/16) This handsome hotel, three blocks north of Parque Reyes, has beautiful furnished rooms with a kitchen you can use, and a great porch. Try to stay upstairs.

Hotel Caribbean Dream (☎ 822 0107; s/d with bathroom US\$25/30; 🚿) In a pretty green house with excellent security two blocks south of the Moravian church, super-clean and cool tiled rooms have air-con.

Bluefields Bay Guesthouse (☎ 572 2143; kriolb@hotmail.com; dm US\$20, s/d with bathroom incl breakfast US\$28/45; 🚿) Homey-feeling but spacious, the relaxing common area has shipwreck views, a book exchange and photos of most black US historical figures, and there's also hot water, air-con and a kitchen. Breakfast is included at attached Restaurant Tia Irene.

Eating

Almost no one comes to Nicaragua for the food, but that's because almost no one knows about the Caribbean Coast. Fresh seafood, particularly lobster and shrimp, is inexpensive and exquisitely prepared, most famously as *rondo*; a one-pot meal in which seasoned fish is steamed atop plantains and vegetables, letting the flavor 'run down,' then coconut milk, the Caribbean Coast's secret ingredient, is added halfway through cooking. Coconut milk, considered the key to good health and digestion in these parts, is added to bread, *gallo pinto*, and almost any other dish on your mind.

Minicafétin Johanna (US\$3-5; ☎ 8am-9pm) Up the street from the Moravian church, this spot has the cheapest shrimp cocktail in town and good fried-fish dishes.

Bella Vista (US\$2-8; ☎ 10am-10pm) Overlooking the waves at the south end of town, this joint is one of the best spots for shrimp, done your way, in town. And what a view.

Restaurante El Flotante (meals from US\$5) Four blocks south of the Moravian church, where the bayside street meets the water, El Flotante has dining on a covered patio with a marvelous view of the bay.

La Loma (mains US\$3-6; ☎ 11am-1am) Across from BICU on a hill overlooking the city, this thatch-roofed, open-air restaurant is

known for its lobster and shrimp almost as much as the party scene it becomes after dark (8pm or so).

Restaurant Tia Irene (US\$4-8; ☎ noon-9:45pm), At Bluefields Bay Guesthouse, try the fish filet with a sauce made from vegetables and little shrimps here.

Chez Marcel (mains US\$5-11; ☎ 11:30am-3pm & 5:30-10pm) One block south of Parque Reyes, this is the swankiest date night in town, specializing in lobster cocktails and great service.

Pizza Martinuzzi (medium pizza US\$5-7; ☎ 11am-2pm, 4:30-10pm) Chez Marcel's lower-key sibling next door also gets rave reviews.

Luna Ranch (US\$2-8; Barrio Pancasan, frente Urracan; ☎ 10am-10pm) Take a taxi (US\$0.70) if you want to splash out at a really neat place; an outdoor *palapa* decorated with everything from photos of Hurricane Juana (before and after) to costumes for *El Macho Ratón*. Choose from cheap fast food or full seafood plates, and try to come on Sunday at noon, when it hosts ballet *folklórico* (cover US\$0.70 per table).

Drinking

Discos and bars can be rough, so go in groups and try not to get too plastered. La Venus and Bacchus, both just south of the park, are *the* discos, with lots of security and a good mix of people.

Four Brothers (☎ Thu-Sun) Six blocks south of the park, Four Brothers has a big wooden dance floor pounding reggae and calypso till late.

Fresh Point is unsigned (look for Bodega Transport Acuatico) but worth seeking out for a great patio overlooking several shipwrecks, which turns into an outdoor dance floor when the music strikes.

Getting There & Away

Take a taxi (US\$0.70) to the Bluefields Airport, where **La Costeña** (LC; ☎ 822 2500) and **Atlantic Airlines** (AA; ☎ 822 1299) both have daily flights to Managua and Big Corn Island; La Costeña also flies to Bilwi.

Big Corn Island US\$60/90 one way/return, 20 minutes, 7:40am (LC), 8am (AA), 3pm (LC) and 3:25pm (AA)

Bilwi (Puerto Cabezas) US\$90/140 one way/return, 50 minutes, 12:10pm (LC), Monday to Saturday

Managua US\$90/125 one way/return, 70 minutes, 7:30am (LC), 9:10am (AA), 9:30am (LC), 12:10pm (LC), 3pm (LC) and 4:35pm (AA)

BOATS

The international port is in El Bluff, with cargo ships that you could theoretically take to Prinzapolka and Bilwi, but not San Juan de Nicaragua. The municipal dock has collective *pangas* to El Rama and Laguna de Perlas, larger boats to the Corn Islands and private *pangas*. The smaller docks behind the market also have private *pangas*, and this is where you may be able to hitch a ride to Rama Key.

Both **Impresa Vargas** (☎ 572 2247; Municipal Dock) and **Impresa Jipe** (☎ 572 1879, 607 3702; Market Dock) offer private *pangas* seating eight to Laguna de Perlas (US\$200), Sandy Bay Sirpi (US\$500) or the Corn Islands (US\$1000), among other destinations. A four-hour fishing trip for up to six people, not including equipment (which can be easily arranged), runs about US\$90. Several independent operators offer similar deals. Public boats leave the municipal dock (unless otherwise noted) to:

Corn Islands US\$10/5 adult/child, four hours, Wednesday 9am, returning Thursday 9am

Corn Islands Ferry 1; US\$12, 10 hours, 10pm Friday and maybe 2pm Wednesday

El Bluff US\$4, 30 minutes, hourly

El Rama (☎ 572 2247) US\$10, two hours, *colectivos* leave when full, and definitely at 6am and 3pm to connect with Managua buses

Laguna de Perlas US\$7, two hours, *colectivos* leave when full (10 people), and you can count on one before 7am daily – get there early; stops in Kukra Hill (US\$4), with continuing service to Orinoco (US\$12)

Sandy Bay Sirpi US\$18 one way, 80km, *colectivos* leave El Bluff at 9am Wednesday and Friday, returning Thursday and Monday

LAGUNA DE PERLAS

pop 1500

Laguna de Perlas (Pearl Lagoon) forms where the Río Kurinwas meets the sea, about 80km north of Bluefields. Along its mangrove-lined and sandy-shored perimeter, 18 small indigenous communities make a living off abundant fish, shrimp and lobster. You could easily spend a few days getting away from it all up here, walking to nearby beaches, visiting fishing villages and enjoying the best country and reggae music in the world in Pearl Lagoon's ramshackle collection of restaurant/bars.

And if you find yourself longing for the clear, blue Caribbean instead of the admit-

tedly murky lagoon, just off the coast are the beautiful Pearl Keys, with white-sand beaches, coconut palms and turtle nesting sites, all with very little development and lots of fairly healthy coral reef. Getting here isn't cheap, but this is one picnic that you'll never forget.

There are no banks or other services in Pearl Lagoon, though there is an **Enitel** (☎ 822 2355; 📞 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri).

Sights & Activities

Take a *panga* for a few dollars or walk about 45 minutes north of town to **Paisaje de Awas**, the best swimming beach near Pearl Lagoon. Waves are small, water is clear, and there's a sandy beach with tiny bamboo huts (US\$2) that get packed around Semana Santa. Green Lodge Guesthouse (p254) rents bikes for US\$1 per hour.

Endangered hawksbill turtles nest from May to November in the Pearl Keys, peaking in August and September. Traditionally hunted by the locals for their shells, as opposed to the meat of their tastier cousins, hawksbills are now also under pressure because of developers that have compromised their laying grounds. **Wildlife Conservation Society** (WCS; ☎ 572 0506; clagueux@wcs.org) is helping, by hiring fishermen to help watch turtle nests, which seems to be working – from their estimations, egg poaching now takes about 10% of the total, as opposed to 97% six years ago. WCS does not formally organize outings for visitors, but may be able to offer advice for seeing the lovely ladies on your own. It's worth dropping by the WCS office, close to the dock, just to learn more.

Pearl Lagoon Snorkeling & Sport Fishing Alliance (☎ 821 8047, contact person Kelvin Bernard) is a newly formed group of local boat owners that can find boats and guides for fishing, snorkeling or combo trips in the lagoon or keys.

Make a right as you get off the boat to find professional, American-owned **Atlantic Adventures** (☎ 572 0367), with guided trips that include a deep jungle hike (US\$45 to US\$60) and trips to Kukra Hill (US\$20 to US\$30), with waterfalls; per person prices drop as groups grow.

You can rent private *pangas* and visit other villages around the lagoon, and one of the most interesting is **Orinoco**, a Garífuna

stronghold so isolated that it was discovered during the National Literacy Campaign of the early 1980s. There are 450,000 Garífunas, a mix of African and Native American cultures and bloodlines, in the world; most live in the USA and Canada, but about 7000 live here and still practice cultural traditions more closely related to those of the Yoruban people of Nigeria than anything from this continent. It's a US\$90 *panga* (seating six) round-trip, and Fundeso (see p251) offers very basic lodging.

And then, you could charter a private *panga* (about US\$120 for six people) to the **Pearl Keys**, 18 perfect tropical islands, with sand as white, water as clear and coral reefs as packed with stripy little fish as you'd want, all communally owned by the Miskito Indians. Technically. At least one of the islands has been developed into a resort-style hotel, which is hard to recommend not only because the WSC says it's built on top of an important hawksbill turtle nesting site, but also because the whole operation is embroiled in a legal suit and is not open for business. Nicaraguan law guarantees that all the Pearl Islands are communally owned by Miskito people, in perpetuity. Not that this has stopped anyone from selling the islands online (www.tropical-islands.com), without mentioning to potential buyers that their deeds will be subject to vicious legal battles, in perpetuity.

Sleeping & Eating

Green Lodge Guesthouse (☎ 572 0507; r without bathroom per person US\$4-5) Three rooms have TVs, and there's a shady courtyard with hammocks, but Green Lodge is more than just a pleasant guesthouse – manager Wesley Williams is a knowledgeable source of information on local history and culture. You can get breakfast (US\$2), too.

Hotel Estrella (☎ 572 0523; s without bathroom US\$5, d without bathroom US\$7-9) This fine spot, with different room configurations that could include twin beds and/or TVs, all have fans. At the time of research, competing beauty queens had booked the hotel during their pageant; if it's good enough for them, it's probably good enough for you.

Casa Blanca (☎ 572 0508; s/d without bathroom US\$15/20) Laguna de Perlas' premier lodging is two long blocks inland from the cellular tower, and is a lively household headed by

a Danish-Nica couple with probably the best restaurant (most dishes US\$2 to US\$4, lobster US\$7) in town. Double rooms have screened windows and woodwork crafted in the proprietors' own shop.

Getting There & Away

Boats run to Bluefields (US\$7) at least once each morning before 7am; after that, it's all luck. Wake up with the chickens and get your name on the list at the dock.

CORN ISLANDS

Once a haven for British buccaneers (and still a frequent stopover for Colombia-based pirates), Big and Little Corn Islands are now low-key vacation spots in an isolated corner of the Caribbean. The two *Islas del Maíz* retain in many ways the magic associated with the Caribbean – clear turquoise water, white sandy beaches fringed with coconut palms, excellent fishing, phenomenal coral reefs to explore and an unhurried, peaceful pace, as yet uncluttered with Cancún-style resorts. Little Corn in particular lives up to this elusive image.

Christopher Colón breezed through in 1502, but it wasn't until 1660, when a French pirate by the name of Jean David Nau arrived, that continuous contact was made with the local Kukras-Mayangna Indians. In the 1700s British pirates and African slaves arrived, and both groups mingled with the Kukras. Although the British were asked to leave the islands in 1786, as part of a treaty with the Spanish, they returned in 1841 after independence from Spain; an event still celebrated after August 27 with crab soup and dancing.

Dangers & Annoyances

The Corn Islands are ports of call for Colombian drug boats, which combined with a history of bare-bones law enforcement and a growing, youthful tourist industry, has led to serious problems. Petty theft is common, and muggings, hotel break-ins and even sexual assault have been reported. Solo female travelers should get a hotel room (as opposed to a bamboo shack) with real locks and doors. Anecdotally, crime happens mostly to tourists who have purchased cocaine earlier; your cool new friends know you're high and have money.

Police presence was radically increased in late 2005 in response to these problems, and many issues were being resolved at press time. Regardless, be careful and ask locals for the latest.

Diving & Snorkeling

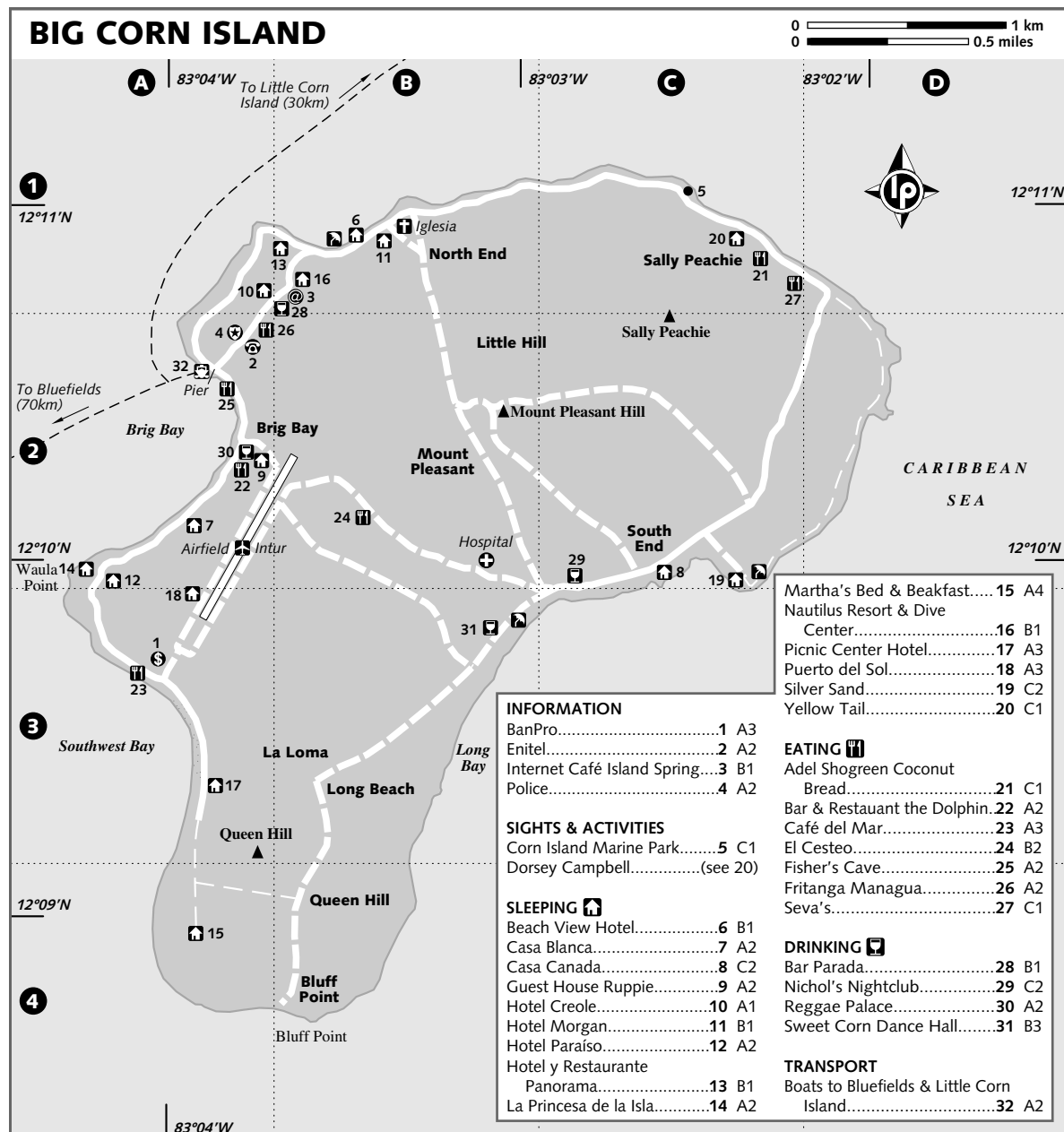
Both islands have excellent diving and snorkeling, with some coral damage and lots of wildlife, including 40 species of coral and, in December and January, hammer-head sharks. Most diving sites are within 20 minutes of shore and fairly shallow (well under 30m), normally with 30m to 50m visibility. The world-class cave diving on the east side of Little Corn is sometimes too windy to dive.

Big Corn Island

pop 5970

Bigger and more urbane (this is, of course, all relative), Big Corn makes a good choice for people who want more upscale accommodations and more island to explore on bicycle or on foot. You'll arrive at the small town of Brig Bay, and while there's OK swimming and lodging right here, there are many more options around the island, with some of the most secluded beaches stretched between the North End and Southwest Bay.

Collective taxis cost US\$0.70 per person regardless of distance traveled, and there's also a bus (US\$.30) that makes the loop of the island.



ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Big Corn is located 70km from El Bluff and measures about 6 sq km. The airport and main dock for the Corn Islands are located on Big Corn. It's a 40 minute *panga* ride to Little Corn.

May 15 to September 15 is the rainy season, when it rains almost every afternoon and is muddy all day. There are no ATMs or banks with credit card withdrawals, and very few businesses accept credit cards; bring lots of cash. Almost everyone speaks English.

Atlantic Airlines Airport desk does Visa card advance (7% commission).

BanPro Changes dollars but has no other services for tourists.

Big Corn Island (www.bigcornisland.com) Good English-language website with tips, listings and links for Big Corn.

Internet Café Island Spring (per hr US\$2; ☎ 10am-10pm Mon-Fri, 2-10pm Sat & Sun) Just north of the dock on Big Corn.

Intur Has a booth at the airport with a handy bulletin board.

Police (☎ 575 5201)

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Other than work on your tan or get into the water, there are few attractions, *per se*, though you could climb **Mount Pleasant**.

Nautilus Dive Center (☎ 575 5077; www.divebigcorn.com) offers a variety of diving tours (US\$35 to US\$65) and package deals – get 10 dives for US\$250. You could also get PADI certified for US\$250, or just rent snorkel equipment, bikes or book a fishing trip. Most hotels also rent snorkel gear and can probably arrange horses with a few hours' notice.

Dorsey Campbell (☎ 575 5059), at the Yellow Tail guesthouse (right) on Big Corn, offers guided snorkeling trips, with equipment; US\$10 per person for 'as long as you want.'

Anastasia's by the Sea, an overpriced restaurant on stilts above the coral reef, rents snorkeling equipment and offers a suggested swimming path through the reef at the **Corn Island Marine Park**. The route is punctuated by little thatch-roofed platforms where you can climb out of the water for a bit.

SLEEPING

These hotels are listed geographically, clockwise around the island, beginning at the airport. Several decent, if not charming,

budget options geared toward fishers clustered in Brig Bay may offer long-term rates.

Hotel Paraíso (☎ 575 5111; cabañas US\$35-55; 🏠) Excellent thatched-roof bungalows are paired with good food in the lively restaurant bar. Larger, more expensive options include two beds and air-con, but everyone can rent snorkel gear, horses or just hang out with the resident spider monkey, Irma, and her pet tabby cat.

Casa Blanca (s/d without bathroom US\$8/10) This breezy budget option in a neat green-and-white clapboard house has simple rooms with mosquito nets, big windows, and a couple of hammocks strung up next to the decent bathrooms.

Hotel Creole (☎ 848 4862, r per person US\$9) North of the dock, the festive owners of the Creole have small rooms, some with private bathroom, and a fine porch for kicking back.

Nautilus Resort & Dive Center (☎ 575 5077; www.divebigcorn.com; r per person without bathroom US\$10, house US\$45) Just up the road from the Creole, this charming old house has three spacious rooms and guests have access to a large, sunny living room and a kitchen. Make reservations in advance for the whole house, a steal at this price.

Best View (s US\$20, d US\$25-30) Clean, modern rooms have good beds and a fine view of the coral reef out front. The attached restaurant (dishes US\$5 to US\$7, open 9am to 10pm) is a popular local watering hole.

Hotel Beach View (☎ 575 5062; r US\$5-20) The small, cement cheap rooms are rough, but make fine budget lodging if you just want to sleep on the beach; bring your own mosquito net. Across the road, owners are renovating huge, more expensive rooms with quirky extras – cement dolphins, mahogany ceilings etc – that should be ready by the time you read this.

Hotel Morgan (☎ 575 5502; r US\$35) A vision in Pepto Bismal-pink, sterile but comfortable rooms have all the modern amenities, and room No 6 has a great sunset view. The compound also has a pleasant restaurant/bar with sunset views.

Yellow Tail (☎ 575 5059; US\$10) Snorkel guide Dorsey Campbell rents this one little yellow cabina in paradise, with a kitchen, double bed and sweet ocean view.

Silver Sand (campsite US\$7, tr US\$20) Everyone loves the owner of this palm-studded point

on the north end of Long Bay, where rustic, high-ceilinged cabins with private flush toilets sit just a stone's throw from the water's edge. There's country music in the laid-back bar.

Casa Canada (☎ in the USA 306 861 9224; www.thecornislands.com; r US\$60-75) It had to happen: the Corn Islands' first real resort, with beautifully furnished 278 sq meter condos overlooking the infinity pool, was almost completed at press time.

Martha's Bed & Breakfast (☎ 835 5930; d/tr US\$45/55; 🚿) This potpourri-scented and family-run option has homey rooms with cable TV and little desks, generators for 24-hour electricity, and your choice of a manicured backyard or a breezy porch where you can pass the time just gazing out over the Caribbean. But there's no breakfast.

La Princesa de la Isla (☎ 854 243; www.la.princesadelaisla.com; d US\$40, bungalow US\$55) At secluded Waula Point, close to the airport, this really special spot is constructed with local rocks, shells and timber that fell during Hurricane Juana. Rooms are beautiful and eclectic, the mahogany honeymoon bungalow (make reservations) is outstanding, and there's also food and real coffee. You can rent canoes or snorkeling gear (there's a fine reef right out front).

EATING

Several of the Big Corn Island hotels also have restaurants. On both Corn Islands, tipping is as common as in the USA and

service as slow as the sea turtles on the menu.

Fritanga Managua (set plate US\$2-3; ☎ evenings) This place offers cheap and greasy *comida corriente* while waiting for your *panga* to come in.

Bar & Restaurant The Dolphin (set plate US\$1.25-2; ☎ 10am-close) Across from the dock, this place has the cheapest food in town, and bubbly staff won't blink if you order a beer with breakfast.

Fisher's Cave (seafood US\$4-7) Slow service and great seafood come standard at this breezy restaurant overlooking the bay.

Seva's (US\$3-5) Another highly recommended restaurant, on the other side of the island, this spot serves hearty breakfasts and bowls of lobster soup none too quickly.

Adel Shogreen Coconut Bread (per loaf US\$2) About 100m north of Seva's, Adel sells fresh-baked coconut bread and other goodies out of her house; look for the spider monkey.

DRINKING

Bar Parada, near Nautilus, is a colorful space that offers nights of live music. On the weekends, islanders crowd the dance floor at Reggae Palace, a sweaty hot spot on Brig Bay.

Island Style Tiki Bar holds open-air dance parties on weekend nights and on Sunday afternoons, while Nichol's Nightclub, on Long Beach, gets going on Sunday.

DIVING NICARAGUA

With 1040km of coastline, most of it untainted with overdevelopment, it's no wonder that people are interested in getting all wet. The best Pacific diving is between December and April, but the Caribbean's clear anytime – and don't forget those crater lakes! Here are a few options if you're eager to dive right in:

Dive Little Corn (www.divelittlecorn.com) Get PADI certified in underwater caves!

Dive Nautilus Nicaragua (☎ 575 5077; www.nautilus-dive-nicaragua.com) Go for it on Big Corn.

Abucear (☎ 279 8628; www.abucear.com) San Juan del Sur's best (only?) dive shop does the Pacific Coast and Laguna Apoyo.

Spanish School Laguna de Apoyo (☎ 825 1409; www.guegue.com.ni/eco-nic) Dive Laguna Apoyo while learning the subjunctive tense.

Oceanica Dive Center (☎ 278 4022; www.diveoceanica.com; Los Robles Etapa II 56, frente a Pastelería Margarita) Managua dive center puts together custom tours with all sorts of activities.

Scuba Dive Nicaragua (☎ 882 2067; Clínica Tiscapa ½c abajo) Also based in Managua, this outfitter does both coasts and Laguna Apoyo.

Little Corn Island

pop 515

This tiny *isleta*, as it's also known, is thickly jungled at its heart and fringed in lovely, deserted white-sand beaches interspersed with rocky coves lining the eastern shore. In the center of the island a climbable tower affords fine panoramic views of the tiny settlements below, shaded with palms and mangoes.

Don't let the *tranquillo* vibe lure you into complacency, however. Big-city security rules definitely apply: watch your stuff, watch your back and travel in groups, especially at night. Caribe Town, just north of the village, is a bit sketchy.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Little Corn is located 85km from El Bluff and is to the northeast of Big Corn. It's only about 1.5 sq km, and you can walk end to end in an hour. It's a 40-minute *panga* ride to Big Corn.

See p256 for more information about services on the Corn Islands.

Internet Café (per hr US\$12; ☎ 8am-midnight) At Casa Iguana (see opposite).

Police (☎ 575 5201)

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The highest point on Little Corn has a nifty, climbable **mirador** where you can risk vertigo for an awesome view.

In the village, the recommended **Dive Little Corn** (www.divelittlecorn.com; ☎ 8:30am-5:30pm) has similar prices to Nautilus (p256), with deals if you're coming from Honduras' Bay Islands. It also rents snorkel gear (US\$5 per day) and kayaks (US\$15 per day).

SLEEPING & EATING

You can either stay in the village, which is convenient and offers most restaurant and nightlife options, or in one of the more secluded bits of paradise hidden around the island. Most businesses have signs in the village telling you which path to take.

The Village

The cluster of businesses around here includes a handful of hotels as well as several inexpensive dining options, such as Sweet Oasis and Café Alejandro, both of which serve up inexpensive local favorites and seafood.

Lobster Inn (r with bathroom US\$20) Stuffy rooms come with a double bed, thoughtfully furnished with a condom.

Hotel Sunshine (☎ 836 4589; d US\$40; 🏠) A huge step up, this almost luxurious spot has pretty, modern rooms with good beds and cable TV – one has a DVD player. The restaurant (dishes US\$3 to US\$10, open 8am to 9pm) gets good reviews.

Hotel Los Delfines (☎ 892 0186; hotellosofines@hotmail.com; s/d/tr with bathroom US\$30/40/45; 🏠) Larger, equally comfortable rooms with all the amenities – air-con, hot-water bathrooms, TV, good beds – fronted by little porches with rocking chairs. Attached Cueva Los Lobos is the hottest disco on the island.

Cuban Restaurant (mains US\$6-10) Little Corn's standout restaurant, this is the place to splurge on lovingly prepared shrimp and lobster dishes; you'll need to order Cuban classics like the recommended roast pork and *ropa vieja* (spicy shredded beef combination served over rice) in advance.

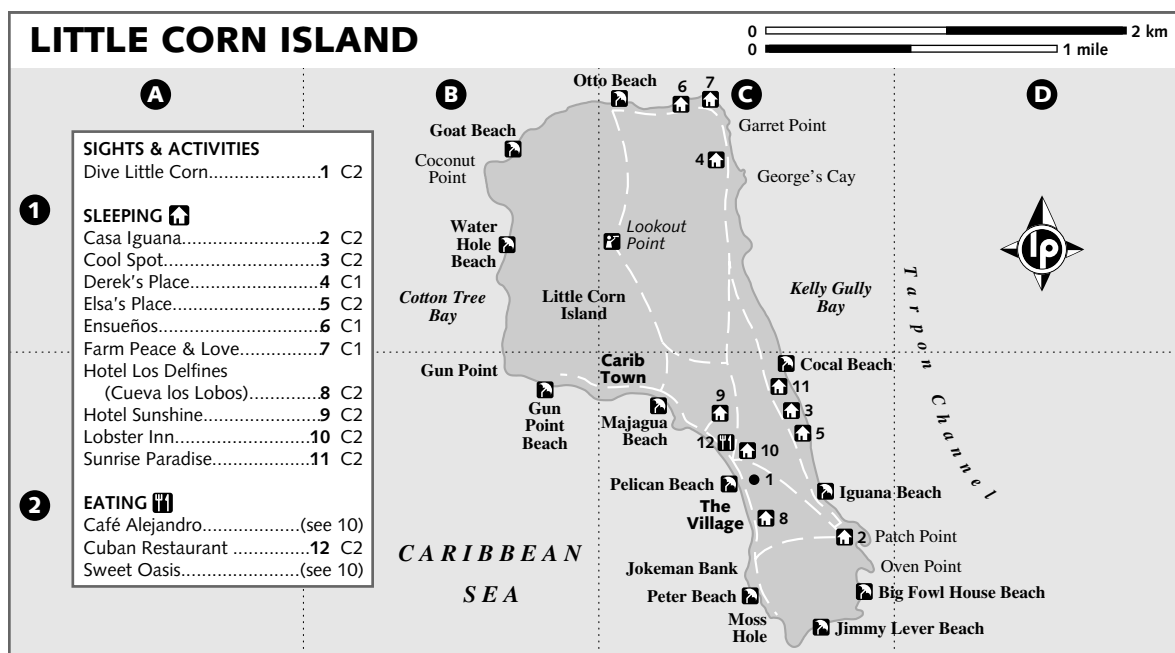
Garret Point

The northeastern corner of the island has a cluster of budget accommodations and some of the island's best dining. It's a solid 40-minute hike from the village.

Derek's Place (huts US\$15-25) A backpacker favorite that's headed a bit upscale, Derek's offers pretty bamboo huts and better wooden houses on stilts scattered around a grassy, isolated point. Energy is solar, hammocks are provided and snorkeling equipment is available. Let them know if you'll want breakfast (US\$3) or a tasty dinner (curries and pastas US\$7 to US\$10).

Ensueños (dm or hammock US\$5, cabaña d US\$15, house d with bathroom US\$25) Hidden in the forest, this groovy budget spot has architecturally fascinating cabañas and houses, the latter with kitchenette. The shared bathroom is especially fabulous, with a trippy outdoor shower. There's snorkel gear available, and they'll prepare meals (US\$6 per person) with advanced arrangement.

Farm Peace & Love (www.farmpeaceandlove.com; d/tr US\$40/50, cottage q US\$65) Make reservations in advance (drop by or have Iguanas or the Dive Shop radio ahead) for a fabulous traditional Italian meal (per person US\$12) – the menu depends on what's ripe in owner Paola Carminiani's garden, and vegetarians are happily accommodated; a



good wine selection is extra. Too stuffed to leave? Paola rents a beautiful room with private entrance and a fully equipped cottage.

Cocal & Iguana Beaches

This beautiful stretch of beach offers a cluster of budget lodging with bamboo restaurant bars where security may be an issue, so be careful.

Sunrise Paradise (☎ 820 2923; cabañas with/without bathroom US\$20/15) Pleasant, green, tin-roofed wooden shacks seem like they might get hot, but they do lock.

Elsa's Place (r without bathroom US\$5-8, per month US\$50) A backpacking fave, Elsa's place has a great restaurant, a kitchen you can use and simple rooms.

Casa Iguana (no phone; www.casaiguana.com; cabañas d US\$25-80) South of the crowd and atop the rocky headline, this is the classic Corn Islands experience. This largely self-sufficient ecolodge has more sophisticated facilities than the other places. Perched on a cliff with incredible sea views, it features two simple cabins with shared bathrooms and six luxury cabins equipped with flush toilets and showers. The restaurant serves fresh-cooked, family-style meals. It's often booked; don't expect to stay without reservations, which are accepted only by email.

Getting There & Around

Both islands are eminently strollable, but on Big Corn you might get tired. Take a collective taxi (day/night per person US\$.70/

US\$1.50) or cute little bus (US\$.30), which blasts roots reggae as it zips counterclockwise around the island. Nautilus (p256) rents bikes (US\$6/10 half/full day). The only vehicles navigating Little Corn's jungle trails are wheelbarrows.

AIR

At press time, Big Corn's airport had just been approved for international flights, and locals were looking forward to connections with Miami and Houston as early as November 2006 – but they've been promised that for years.

In the meantime, the small airport is served by **Atlantic Airlines** (☎ 575 5055) and **La Costeña** (☎ 575 5131), which run flights to Bluefields (US\$65/100 one way/return, 20 minutes), with continuing service to Managua (US\$110/180 one way/return, 70 minutes), at 8:10am (LC), 8:35am (AA), 3:40pm (LC) and 4pm (AA).

BOAT

Collective *pangas* between the islands (US\$6, 40 minutes) leave from Big Corn at 10am and 4:30pm; if you're staying on the far side of Little Corn, you need to take the morning boat. Boats leave Little Corn at 7am and 2pm, meeting each round of flights. It can get choppy. The main dock on Big Corn is 1.5km from the airport; take a taxi.

Boats make the four- to six-hour trip to Bluefields Sunday (US\$12, 9am), Tuesday

(US\$6, morning) and Thursday (US\$9, 9am). The *Captain D* may go to Puerto Cabezas on the 15th and 30th of each month; talk to the Port Authority for more information.

SAN CARLOS, ISLAS SOLENTINAME & THE RÍO SAN JUAN

Rain forest and wetlands, rivers and islands: this lush swath of jungle is wholly protected as the Reserva de Biosfera Río San Juan (Río San Juan Biosphere Reserve), one of the richest ecosystems on Earth. Most travelers start their exploration where the Río San Juan begins its journey, on the shores of Lago de Nicaragua, beneath the Spanish fortress of San Carlos. Though it's not Nicaragua's most photogenic town, it offers comfortable accommodations and easy access throughout this new biosphere reserve.

Much of it is inviolable, and visitors are forbidden to enter the realm of massive red macaws that is the Indio-Maíz. Other regions are preserved for their cultural wealth, including the tropical artists' colony of the Archipiélago de Solentiname and 1724 El Forteleza, above scenic El Castillo, where a teenage girl once held a fleet of British pirates at bay.

The Río San Juan may seem almost mythic, a vast jungle river where pirates and conquistadors once battled for the hemisphere, surrounded by human-eating sharks. But today, it and the Archipiélago de Solentiname are among the easiest places to navigate in Nicaragua, with inexpensive collective boats running fairly regularly through one of the world's last wild places.

Information

This is basically a cash-only destination. Some of the nicer hotels take credit cards, but San Carlos' sole bank offers no services other than changing US dollars. This region has Nicaragua's best souvenirs plus relatively expensive lodging and food, including monster lake shrimp – bigger than some lobsters, topping a cool kilogram

(no joke) – that you'll probably need to try. Bring more cash than you think you'll need.

Pricey but reliable Internet access is available in San Carlos and El Castillo. Note that many phones (those with the prefix '506') are on the Costa Rican system.

Climate & Geography

This is one of the wettest regions in the world, getting anywhere between 2500mm and 5000mm of precipitation annually, including at least one day when you'll be here. Even during the dry(er) season, roughly February to April, make sure your pack is lined with plastic bags and you're wearing clothes that will dry quickly during the usually sunny mornings.

The Río San Juan is carving away at sedimentary rock dragged from the Cordillera Chantaleña, and deposited atop the remains of ancient volcanoes. This geological layer cake is thickly frosted in humid tropical jungle comprising 19 separate ecosystems, all of which were recognized in 2003 as the Reserva de Biosfera Río San Juan.

The biggest, wildest area is the Reserva Biológica Indio-Maíz (Indio-Maíz Biological Reserve), with one of the two remaining macaw populations in the country (the other is in Reserva Natural Volcán Cosigüina; see p189).

Other protected areas within the reserve include: Monumento acional Archipiélago de Solentiname, home to Nicaragua's most famous art colony; Monumento Histórico Forteleza La Inmaculada, at 375 sq hectares the smallest piece; and Refugio de Vida Silvestre los Guatuzos (Los Guatuzos Wildlife Refuge) and the Refugio de Vida Silvestre Río San Juan (Río San Juan Wildlife Refuge), which run along the border with Costa Rica. Despite its protected status, the reserve's human population has grown from 21,000 in 1970 to more than 70,000 today.

Almost 70% of Nicaragua's bird species can be found right here: toucans, trogons, hummingbirds, parrots, aningas, jacanas, egrets, great blue herons, striped tiger herons with their impressive neck ruffs, and the massive black-billed and white-bodied jabiru are just the most impressive. Huge tarpon, ancient gaspar fish and gigantic river shrimp (wait until you see their

claws!) are other attractions. Of course, the region's most famous underwater species is the bull shark (see the boxed text, p149), which is almost extinct in these waters. The key word being almost.

Most of the reserve was originally protected in 1990 as part of SI A PAZ ('Yes to Peace'; International System of Protected Areas for Peace), a proposed international biological corridor in conjunction with famously ecological Costa Rica. Unfortunately, most lands set aside for the project in Costa Rica have instead been developed by ranchers, though the Nicaraguan side remains wild. The irony has been duly noted and commented on.

Getting There & Around

Most destinations in this chapter are accessible from San Carlos primarily by boat, and you'll be hard-pressed to decide which journey is the most beautiful. See the individual Getting There & Away entries for details.

SAN CARLOS

pop 28,600 / elevation 40m

San Carlos, the capital of the isolated Río San Juan department, gets a bad rap – which, all in all, is probably OK, as it keeps expectations manageably low. So first, the bad news: it's probably going to be hot and muggy while you're here, and there's not that much to do other than swat mosquitoes.

On the upside, you've got a festive lakefront lined with small fishing boats you can hire for lake expeditions, restaurants

on stilts above the water (this mitigates the mosquitoes) where you can relax, plus a fairly happening party scene. Or, just walk the steep cobbled streets running between the ramshackle wooden buildings to a couple of centuries-old Spanish monuments, including San Carlos' newly refurbished 1724 Spanish fortress.

Orientation & Information

Although San Carlos sprawls inland several kilometers, most tourist services are concentrated on the headlands, a dozen blocks of wooden buildings draped over a small hill topped with the Spanish fortress. The main road to Managua passes Enitel, the *alcaldía* (mayor's office) and finally the hospital; the airport is another 2km, so take a taxi.

BDF The region's only bank changes dollars but provides no other services for travelers.

Cantur (☎ 583 0126; 📧 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) In the kiosk close to the Solentiname boats, it has stacks of flyers, makes hotel reservations and arranges private transport and tours.

Hospital Felipe Moncada (☎ 583 0238) About 1km from town.

Internet café (per hr US\$1.50; 📧 8am-10pm) Across from Hotel Carelhys is this brand-new business.

Intur (☎ 583 0301; riosanjuan@intur.gob.ni) This unusually helpful office has flyers and other information, and can book tours with accredited guides from San Juan de Nicaragua to the Islas Solentiname.

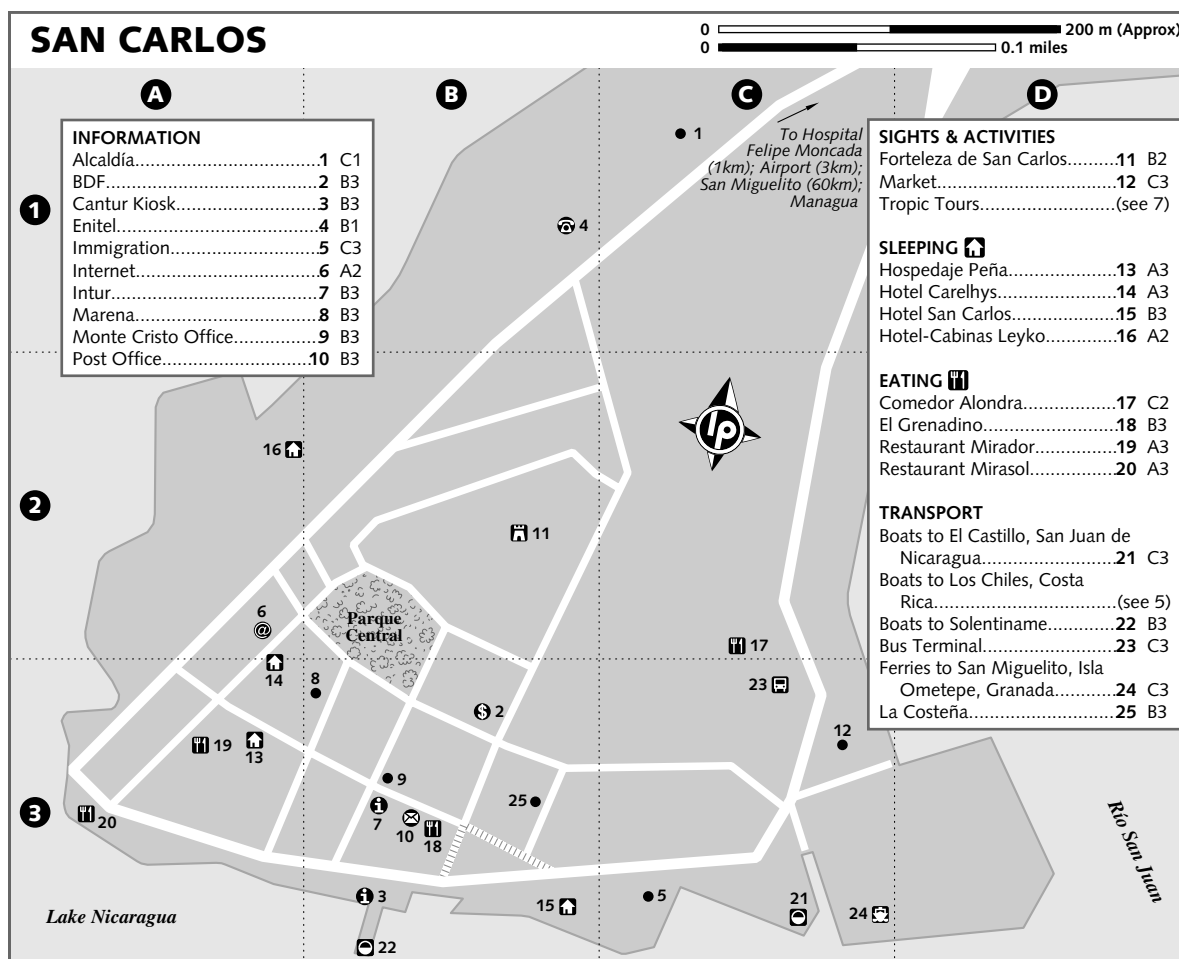
Marena (☎ 583 0296) This office isn't really geared for tourism, but it offers limited information about the Reserva de Biosfera Río San Juan and processes fishing licenses, technically required on the Río San Juan. Ready? Apply in writing (Spanish only) to this or the Managua

AURACARIA

The best economic news this river's had since they decided to build the canal in Panama, Auracaria is a Spanish-Nicaraguan development program with a focus on sustainable tourism. Auracaria, named for a type of flower, has been working with the Río San Juan Intur and Marena offices since 2003, training local guides, printing up maps and flyers, and otherwise professionalizing regional tourist infrastructure.

The result? The Río San Juan and Archipiélago de Solentiname are now two of the easiest-to-travel-around destinations in Nicaragua, with exceptionally helpful Intur offices that book a variety of great tours with guides who carry first-aid kits and radios. Auracaria even fixed up San Carlos' old Spanish fortress, which is sort of fitting.

It's all rather inspiring, and small local businesses are for once reaping most of the rewards. Now, if only Auracaria could get its hands on some ancient spare parts and a Soviet-trained engineer to get the fast boats from Granada (see p127) running again, San Carlos might actually become the brightly colored, sort of cheesy tourist trap it has such obvious potential to become.



Marena office (see p73), noting when and where you'll be fishing, what equipment you'll be using, and which species you plan to catch. If your documents are in order, Marena will have your free fishing permit ready within three weeks or so. Or, just pay a guide.

Police (☎ 583 0397)

Sights & Activities

The main tourist activity in San Carlos is waiting for your ship, or *panga* (small motorboat), to come in; consider bringing a book. The **market** is worth a wander, and there are a handful of stores along the *malecón* (waterfront) selling sexy clothes, rubber boots and a small selection of Solentiname handicrafts.

Yep, San Carlos has a Spanish fortress, too, even if 1724 **Fortaleza de San Carlos** (admission free; 🕒 24hr) monument isn't quite as photogenic as El Castillo. It does have fantastic views, of the Río San Juan and Río Frio flowing into Lago de Nicaragua, and the Islas Solentiname. Those volcanoes illuminated in the radiant San Carlos sunsets aren't Isla de Ometepe, by the way. That's Costa Rica, the volcanoes being from west

to east Rincón de la Vieja, Miravalles, Tenorio and smoking Volcán Arenal.

Now a cultural center, the *fortaleza* is ringed with covered benches overlooking the river and lake, all connected by pleasant stone walkways lined with informative displays about natural and human history, with a focus on pirates. There are occasionally ball games and ballet *folklorico* exhibitions here, and there's a small selection of *artesanías* (handicrafts; from Masaya) that you can peruse. There's another old **Spanish observation post**, with cannons, at Restaurant Mirador.

Restaurant Mirasol (p264) can arrange **artisanal fishing trips** (US\$10-20, extra person US\$5) using *barritas* (hand lines) or homemade nets, which your Spanish-speaking 'guide' will attempt to teach you to use. The restaurant will cook your catch and serve it up with all the fixin's for US\$3.

In September, however, step aside for the professionals, who have come from all over the globe annually since 1955 for the **San Carlos International Sportfishing Competition**, in search of the elusive 100kg tarpon.

Tours

Both Intur and Cantur keep a list of dependable tour guides and *panga* operators, or ask around at the docks, where you'll have more room to bargain.

José Miguel Bermudez (☎ 839 7469, 848 0505)

Private tours of San Miguel and the lake beaches, Los Guatuzos, Solentiname and the Río Frío.

José Piñeda (☎ 506-301 880; gsolentiname@amnet.com.ni) Look for this excellent, Solentiname-based guide at the San Carlos docks or Hotel Cabañas Paraíso on Isla San Fernando.

San Juan Express (☎ in Nicaragua 505-823 5233, in Costa Rica 506-842 7672) Based at La Esquina del Lago jungle lodge in Los Guatuzos, provides private transport and specializes in tarpon fishing.

Tropic Tours (☎ 583 0010; www.tropictours.net in Spanish) One of the most professional outfits in town; make reservations at Intur.

Viajes Turísticos A Ortiz (☎ 283 0039) Runs tours to El Castillo, Río Papaturro and the Centro Ecológico de Los Guatuzos, Solentiname and the Reserva Biológica Indio-Maíz.

Sleeping

San Carlos has unreliable water and electricity, so shower when you can and keep candles or a flashlight handy.

Hospedaje Peña (☎ 583 0298; r per person US\$2) Humble but clean and pleasant, make sure your spring mattress hasn't already sprung, then grab a rocking chair and relax with the friendly owners and their assorted tabby cats. Shared bathrooms have bucket-flush toilets.

Hotel San Carlos (☎ 583 0265; r per person US\$6) It's got a back porch over the water and a front porch over the street scene, plus a row of large, spotless wooden rooms with shared bathrooms; Nos 3 and 4 have windows.

Hotel-Cabinas Leyko (☎ 583 0354; leyko@ibw.com.ni; d with/without bathroom & fan US\$15/11, s/d/tr with air-con US\$30/40/50; P ♿) Excellent service and a variety of clean, polished-wood rooms make this a winner. Larger, upstairs rooms with shared bathroom are rather nicer than the expensive rooms. The owners also arrange visits to Reserva Esperanza Verde in Refugio de Vida Silvestre los Guatuzos.

Hotel Carelhys (☎ 583 0389; d US\$12) Spacious tiled rooms, great mattresses and spotless bathrooms (but not 24-hour running water) make this San Carlos' most comfortable option. Storing your backpack here costs US\$0.70 per night, a service other hotels provide for free.

Eating & Drinking

The cheapest eats in town are at the popular *comedores* (basic eateries) right by the bus station; try **Comedor Alondra** (set plate US\$1.25; ☎ 7am-10pm), with a solid *comida corriente* (mixed plate of typical food), while you wait for your bus.

Restaurant Mirasol (seafood US\$2-4; ☎ 10am-midnight or later) Jutting out over the water, with a cool breeze and an occasionally used dance floor, this place specializes in *bocas* (appetizers), fried food, good music and cold beer. If you catch a fish, they'll clean, cook and serve it with side dishes for US\$3.

Restaurant Mirador (mains US\$3-5; ☎ 10am-10pm Mon-Sat) Atop an old Spanish overlook of the Río San Juan leaving the Sweet Sea, complete with strategically placed cannons, this restaurant serves pretty darned good seafood and tasty pork chops.

El Granadino (mains US\$3-8; ☎ 10am-midnight or later) Considered the best restaurant in town, El Granadino has an amazing mural, good music, cold beer and an incredible fish filet in garlic sauce. Steak, chicken and other dishes are priced according to size, and cooked to order. Have another beer.

This being a port town, there's plenty of nightlife – much of it scary, so take care – in the string of basic bars lining the waterfront between the docks and market.

Getting There & Away

San Carlos is isolated from the rest of Nicaragua, unless you book a fairly pricey flight, take a nine-hour ferry, or suffer the bumpy 12-hour bus ride from Managua. But keep in mind that it's a smooth, 3½-hour, US\$8 bus ride from San José, Costa Rica, to the border at Los Chiles; from there it's a gorgeous two-hour riverboat trip up the Río Frío to San Carlos. If you're coming from Costa Rica, consider starting your adventure right here.

AIR

The San Carlos airport is a 3km, US\$1 cab ride from downtown San Carlos, but you can make reservations in town at the **La Costeña office** (☎ 283 0271; ☎ 7:30am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 7:30am-noon Sat). Flights leave for Managua (US\$80/120 one way/return, 45 minutes) at 9:15am Monday through Saturday, 2:30pm Sunday through Friday. Flights leave Managua for San Carlos at 8:30am Monday

BORDER CROSSING: TO LOS CHILES, COSTA RICA

One of the simplest and most scenic border crossings in Central America, this could almost be listed as an attraction. Begin at friendly **San Carlos Immigration** (☎ 8am-5pm), one and a half blocks from the municipal docks.

Collective boats (US\$10, two hours, 10:30am and 4pm Monday to Saturday, noon and 4pm Sunday) leave directly from behind the Immigration office; a 1:30pm boat may be added if there are at least nine passengers, but don't count on it. You can rent a private boat seating eight to Los Chiles for about US\$120.

It costs US\$7 to enter Nicaragua, US\$2 to exit. Entering or leaving Costa Rica is free. When you arrive in Los Chiles, go to customs first, one block from the dock, to have your bags searched, then another building about two blocks away to have your passport stamped. The mellow river town has several hotels and restaurants.

Buses leave from the terminal, about five blocks east of the dock, to San José (US\$8, 3½ hours, 5am to 6pm, hourly) and less frequently to Parque Nacional Caño Negro (US\$3, one hour, 5am and 2pm). There are also boats from Los Chiles to Caño Negro, where you can find food and lodging, for US\$25 per person, including a two-hour wildlife tour.

through Saturday, 1:30pm Sunday through Friday.

Flights should be reserved as far in advance as possible, particularly during the rainy season, when the road may be closed. Get to the airport early, as flights are always overbooked.

BUS

The road from Juigalpa to San Carlos is one of the worst in the country, and never recommended for casual tourists in rental cars. If you must, it's 4WD-only in dry season, and pack a spare tire – or two.

Buses (which are modified to deal with these conditions) take seven to nine hours to grind 100 bladder-bouncing kilometers from Juigalpa to San Carlos, and may not be able to make it in the rainy season. The one bathroom break involves bushes by a plastic-bag-strewn river – you go in the open or not at all. Buses leave from opposite the San Carlos market for the following destinations:

Juigalpa US\$7, seven to nine hours, 9am, 10am, 11am, 12:40pm, 1:30pm and 2:30pm

Managua US\$10, 10 to 12 hours, 2am, 6:30am, 8am, 11:45am, 6pm, 8pm and 10pm

Nueva Guinea US\$7, seven to nine hours, 4am, 11:50am, 2pm and 5:15pm

San Miguelito US\$3, two to four hours, 1pm, 2:20pm and 4:30pm

BOAT

Your hotel or any tourist office can arrange private boats seating around six from San Carlos to the Islas Solentiname (US\$110,

one hour), Boca de Sábalos (US\$160, one hour), El Castillo (US\$180, 1½ hours) and San Juan de Nicaragua (US\$900, seven hours).

Granada, Isla de Ometepe & San Miguelito

Promises of a fabled 'fast boat' between Granada and San Carlos (see the boxed text, p127) may have been fulfilled before you read this, but at press time your only option was the slow ferry. A private *panga* from San Carlos to San Miguelito costs around US\$40 and takes about an hour.

Show up at the San Carlos ferry terminal, half a block from the market, for boats leaving at 3pm Monday and Friday to San Miguelito (US\$2, two hours), Altagracia (Isla de Ometepe; US\$6/3 1st/2nd class, nine hours) and Granada (US\$6/3 1st/2nd class). First-class seats, on the upper deck, have padded chairs and access to the TV, which will be on all night. Stake out a sleeping spot early and don't forget your seasickness medication. Ferries return from Granada at 3pm Monday and Thursday, stopping in Altagracia (except during very rough weather) at 7pm.

SAN MIGUELITO

About 60km from San Carlos (and much closer by boat, although you can take the bus) is one of Nicaragua's newest and least visited refuges, the **Sistema de Humedales de San Miguelito** (San Miguelito Wetlands). Fronted by a fishing village, the wetlands'

main claim to fame is the enormous number of birds, many of them migratory, and reptiles – in particular, loads of alligators.

Three rivers meander through the reserve – Río Tepenaguazapa, Río Camastro and Río Tule – but the best swimming hole in the area is right offshore on **Isla El Boquete**, a sandy spot popular with the locals. You can also visit **Los Guanabanos**, a private *finca* (farm) with a beautiful old hacienda and an iguana farm, plus spectacular lake views.

There's one hotel geared to tourists, the Italian-owned **Hotel Cocibolca** (☎ 552 8803; hotelcocibolca@yahoo.com; r per person US\$12), with 16 comfortable rooms featuring fans, mosquito nets and awesome views of the back of Ometepe, plus breakfast service in the morning. The owners can arrange private transport and tours throughout the wetlands, as well as to Solentiname and down the Río San Juan.

Getting There & Away

See p265 for details on taking a boat to San Miguelito.

You can also take the bus. It's an 8km walk to town from the San Carlos–Managua road, so take a direct bus from Managua (US\$9, nine to 11 hours, 6:30am) or one of three daily from San Carlos (US\$3, two to four hours, 1pm, 2:20pm and 4:30pm), delivering you right to the dock and hotel.

ISLAS SOLENTINAME

pop 800 / elevation 40–250m

Almost forgotten for 500 years, and almost destroyed in a single day, the Archipiélago de Solentiname does not seem entirely of this world. Isolated by the cleanest, purest waters of Lago de Nicaragua – an epic translucence that somehow amplifies each sunset – the beauty of these ancient volcanic islands has been famously captured, in luminous full color, by the work of its world-famous art colony.

Until the 1960s, the Islas Solentiname didn't even appear on Nicaraguan maps. Metal tools for hewing wood seemed impossibly expensive to these families of subsistence farmers and fishers; homes and churches were made of palm thatch. Then, in 1966, an idealistic young poet priest named Ernesto Cardenal (see the boxed text, opposite) arrived on the islands, built

a church, and recorded the remarkable *La Misa Campesina*, or Peasants' Mass, when the islanders themselves stood up and spoke the word of God.

Largely because of Cardenal's socialist leanings, in 1977 a group of Sandinista supporters attacked San Carlos, and failed. On October 3, as retribution, the National Guard burned every structure on the islands to the ground. Survivors fled to Costa Rica, leaving the archipelago all but abandoned.

When the revolutionary government took power, the islanders returned and rebuilt, raising a new church, and began painting and sculpting again. And Solentiname, for so long a commune in the purest sense, remains more staunchly committed to the most extreme ideals of the revolution than perhaps anywhere else in the country. 'It's just hard to get used to capitalism,' explained one artist.

Orientation & Information

There are 36 islands in the Archipiélago de Solentiname, most arranged in a graceful arc about 17km west of San Carlos. Tiny Islas Zapote and Zapotilla are closer to the mainland, with easy access to Los Guatuzos Wildlife Refuge, while Isla Zanata is about 25km northwest, almost halfway to Isla de Ometepe.

Most tourist services are located on Islas Mancarrón and San Fernando (officially Isla Elvis Chavarría). There are also services on Islas Mancarroncito, Atravesada and Venada (officially Isla Donald Guevara). Note that while everyone misses, and remains very proud of, revolutionary martyrs Elvis Chavarría and Donald Guevara, they usually use those islands' Spanish names.

Auracaria (see the boxed text, p262) plans to build an Intur kiosk at the Mancarrón dock, with information on tours and homestays. In the meantime, your hotel or the San Carlos **Intur** (☎ 583 0301; riosanjuan@intur.gob.ni) and **Cantur** (☎ 583 0126) offices can find guides and transportation.

Most hotels offer two prices: just lodging, or a package deal including meals. Light eaters can save by bringing snacks, or purchasing them at the poorly stocked *pulperías* (corner stores), and buying meals separately. Many families offer **homestays** (per person US\$5-10) in their spare rooms – which vary widely in quality and may be full of

half-carved balsa toucans when you arrive. Plan on giving your hosts a couple of hours to clean up. Many families also offer meals (US\$3 to US\$5) with advance notice.

Getting There & Around

You need time or money to visit the archipelago, as inexpensive public boats only run three times a week, leaving San Carlos at 2pm Monday (US\$2) and 1pm Tuesday and Friday (US\$3.50), with

stops at San Fernando and Mancarrón. They leave Mancarrón, stopping about 15 minutes later at San Fernando, at 5am Monday (US\$2), 4am Tuesday and Friday (US\$3.50).

If that doesn't work with your schedule, you'll need to hire a private boat (seating at least six) for around US\$100 between San Carlos and the islands; hotels will try to find cheaper transportation if you ask ahead of time. You'll also need to hire private *pangas*

ERNESTO CARDENAL & REVOLUTIONARY CULTURE

As a poet, his subject matter ranges from theoretical physics to Marilyn Monroe; as a sculptor, from the creatures of the jungle to the life of Christ. A Trappist monk originally committed to nonviolence, Ernesto Cardenal came to fully support the Sandinista-led revolution, by any means necessary. He was Nicaragua's original liberation theologian, the revolutionary government's Minister of Culture, and remains its unofficial ambassador of the arts.

Like many Marxists, **Ernesto Cardenal** (www.ernestocardenal.org in Spanish) was well born and well educated, at the University of Mexico and University of Columbia in New York City. After the failed 1954 'April Revolution' against Somoza, he felt called to a Trappist monastery in Kentucky, where he found peace in meditation and silence. He returned to Nicaragua in 1966, to Solentiname, perhaps seeking the same solitude.

Instead, he found a community all but forgotten by the modern world, impoverished, poorly educated, but where a special wisdom had been born. Cardenal helped erect the islands' first simple adobe church, where he gave Mass. Here, the people of Solentiname interpreted the Scripture through their own eyes and lives, a living word of Christ, which Cardenal recorded and published as *El Evangelio de Solentiname* (Gospel of Solentiname). It would later be rendered in song by legendary artist Carlos Mejía Godoy (see p84) as *La Misa Campesina* (Peasants' Mass).

One day, a grateful islander named Eduardo Arana presented Cardenal with an elaborately decorated jícara shell, which impressed the priest into giving the young man paints and a canvas. Those first few paintings, some on display in the Biblioteca y Sala Archaeologica on Mancarrón (p268), launched Nicaragua's Primitivist Art Movement, internationally recognized for the vibrant colors and expert lines that so accurately capture this tropical paradise. One artist, Ufredo Argüello, began applying the same saturation of color to balsa-wood carvings, which also caught on.

Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, families worked together painting and sculpting, sending their work to market in Managua. There, trouble was brewing, and even this peaceful hippy haven could not isolate itself. In October 1977, inspired by Cardenal, the islands rebelled; retribution by the National Guard was swift and complete. Solentiname was abandoned and Cardenal was denounced as an outlaw.

When the Sandinistas took power in 1979, however, they appointed Cardenal the Minister of Culture, a position he used for almost a decade to successfully preserve and enrich Nicaraguan arts and folklore.

The Catholic Church was not happy with its wayward son; in 1983 Pope John Paul II publicly chastised the prostrate priest on the tarmac of the Managua airport; many Nicaraguans sided with Cardenal. In his recent book, *The Lost Revolution*, Cardenal writes that 'The people lacked respect for the Pope, it's true, but it's because the Pope first lacked respect for the people.' In more recent years, he's even fallen out of favor with the Sandinistas, after he criticized frontman Daniel Ortega's 'Stalinist' control of the party.

At 80 years old, Cardenal still works and travels, and remains on the board of directors for Casa de los Tres Mundos in Granada (see p117) and Managua (see p117).

And when he grows tired of his wandering, this is where he returns. Islanders point out the tidy wooden house with pride, saying simply 'that's where Ernesto Cardenal comes to write.'

between the islands; it's at least US\$6 between San Fernando and Mancarrón.

Note that Refugio de Vida Silvestre los Guatuzos is closer and cheaper (US\$45) to Solentiname than San Carlos, so consider doing this as a triangle, springing for one private *panga* between the archipelago and Río Papaturro, and taking public boats to and from San Carlos.

If you've been waiting for that one rewarding splurge, a boat tour of Solentiname (prices vary widely according to what you want to see) is highly recommended. You'll never look at those paintings as being at all abstract again.

Mancarrón

The largest of the islands cradles the archipelago's most famous historic treasure: **Nuestra Señora de Solentiname**. The original thatch-roofed, bamboo church was first constructed in 1935, then replaced in the late 1960s with a sturdy adobe built by communal effort. It was here that each person would stand and speak on Sunday, their thoughts recorded by the priest, Ernesto Cardenal, as *La Misa Campesina*.

The church was destroyed, like everything else, in October 1977. With the end of the war two years later, however, the people returned to rebuild what you'll see right here. There is no gold, not much in the way of earthly riches at all. Just one beautiful cross above a simple altar, both designed by Cardenal, and dirt floors, wooden beams and imperfect adobe walls. These are covered with brightly colored drawings of birds and fish, mothers and trees, which were originally children's paintings, reproduced by painters Róger Pérez and William Agudelo where the Stations of the Cross might have hung instead.

Behind the church, there's a nice **beach** (during dry season) and in front a well-equipped **playground** that centers on a plain gray boulder, often covered with wilting bouquets of flowers. This is the **Memorial to the Martyrs** of that one terrible day in 1977, and brass plaques record words from Masses given so long ago by the fallen.

About 100m uphill is the **Biblioteca y Sala Arqueológica** (admission free; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Sat), which most folks prefer to the official museum on San Fernando. It's a library where schoolchildren gather each day, but packed with archaeological treasures includ-

ing metates, ceramics and one good-sized idol, most accidentally excavated by locals.

The highest concentration of **craft workshops** on the islands are just inland in **Comunidad El Mancarrón** (also called El Refugio). Feel free to wander and watch as families work together, some hewing balsa into rough forms, which children sand smooth and the most trusted adult paints. Wooden animals cost US\$1 to US\$6, a painting for as little as US\$10, but prices rise with size and quality.

SLEEPING

Hotel Mancarrón (☎ in Costa Rica 506-393 9612, 505-583 0083; hmancarrun@ibw.com.ni; r per person US\$8, incl 3 meals US\$35) Closest to the church, this hotel offers large, simple accommodations in a sprawling, whitewashed complex. Rooms are furnished with fans, bathroom and art, and management organizes tours and private transport, and rents canoes and kayaks.

Hospedaje Buen Amigo (r per person incl 2 meals US\$12) Further up the dirt path into town, this friendly spot has five small, colorful rooms, which share clean bathrooms that usually work. There are rocking chairs and locals carving balsa-wood animals out front, and you can choose which two meals you want.

San Fernando (Elvis Chavarría)

With even fewer people, tranquil San Fernando has some of the nicest accommodations on the islands and two attractions you should make an effort to see even if you're staying elsewhere.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Museo Archipiélago Solentiname (Musas; admission US\$2; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm) is worth visiting just for the view and gardens, which attract all manner of bird and insect life; you may have to ask around town for the curator, if you want to go in. Actual information is a little thin, but the natural-history displays feature smiling balsa-wood subjects; the turtle-hatching exhibit is just adorable. There's a selection of archaeological treasures, plus illustrations of the famed petroglyphs of La Cueva del Duende (under water and inaccessible most of the year). Better yet, there's a map to more petroglyphs, well off the tourist trail, scattered throughout the islands.

(Continued on page 273)

(Continued from page 268)

Next door, the **Union de Pintores y Artesanos de Solentiname 'Elvis Chavarría'** (☎ in Costa Rica 505-277 0939; 🕒 8am-noon & 2-5pm) gallery features the work of about 50 of the islands' top artisans, including some real top-of-the-line, museum-quality paintings (US\$40 to US\$250). If you don't have that kind of cash, you should still check this place out – the view is incredible and the impressive selection of balsa-wood animals is much more affordable. And you have to see the murals.

Some smaller **galleries** and **workshops** are strung along the strand of homes between Musas and Albergue Celentiname. Residents are considering putting up signs along the rest of their extensive **walking trail** network, but until they do, don't go on your own – it's easy to get lost. Any local kid will happily show you around for a few córdoba. For more extensive tours, contact guides José Piñeda at Hotel Cabañas Paraíso or Olivia Guevara at Albergue Celentiname.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel Cabañas Paraíso (☎ 506-301 8809; gsolen@amnet.com.ni; r per person with/without bathroom US\$12/10, incl 3 meals US\$25/20) With incredible views – older, simpler rooms with shared bathroom actually have better ones – these are the most comfortable accommodations in the archipelago, with excellent food and service. You can also contact the talented owner, painter Elena Piñeda, at her Managua art gallery, Galería Solentiname (☎ 277 0939).

Albergue Celentiname (☎ 506-377 4299; r per person US\$10, incl 3 meals US\$25) Just northwest of the main dock, these remarkable gardens envelop six cute cabañas (one family-sized) with wood floors and huge bathrooms, connected by paved paths lit up with lots of tiny solar lanterns. The 32-*manzana* property has its own short hiking trail to a private petroglyph, but it may be hard to leave the comfy porch.

Mancarroncito

Mancarroncito is locally known for producing potent fruit wines – guava, pineapple – that you can pick up for about US\$1.25 per bottle. This is also where they

grow those soccer-ball-sized avocados you saw on sale in San Carlos.

Mancarroncito, separated from Mancarrón by a slender channel, is also home to what are probably the last primary forests left on the islands; others were all but grazed into oblivion and replanted over the past two decades. At the time of research, **Fundación del Río** was building a biological station and research station with trails and lodging. Ask at the San Carlos **Intur** (☎ 583 0301; riosanjuan@intur.gob.ni) to see if it's open.

Isla Venada (Isla Donald Guevara)

Most of this island is owned by a Sandinista VIP, but the northwestern shore is also home to one of the most important painting families, the Aurellanos. In addition to selling truly remarkable work, they theoretically rent out one room (US\$10 per person), which was packed solid with art supplies at the time of research.

You'll need a boat to see the most important attractions, only visible during dry season (February–April). A system of caves at the water line honeycombs the island; you can allegedly walk from one end to the other underground. On the northern shore, **La Cueva del Duende** holds the most famous petroglyphs on the island, 161 separate drawings including dancers, animals and a female fertility figure. Another enormous rock dome called **El Convento** is so big that you can fit an entire *panga* inside during the dry season.

Isla Atravesada

It's not the 'naughty island,' but so named because it's the only one oriented north-south, rather than east-west like the rest of the archipelago. It's famed for its enormous alligators, some reaching five ferocious meters, and is where you'll probably be taken on your night-time alligator tour.

The most luxurious hotel on the islands should be opening here soon – big rooms with enormous windows, a lovely porch and beautiful paved trails crisscrossing gorgeous gardens, plus an infinity pool looking over the water. Just keep a close eye on the kids, OK?

Other Islands

There are at least 36 islands in the archipelago, many privately owned and most

without much to interest the casual visitor. Just north of Mancarrón, a group of several small islands, the largest of which are **Santa Elena**, **Santa Rosa** and **Ciguëna**, are known for excellent fishing – but check out that sunken Spanish galleon, the prow of which may be visible in the dry season.

You will at least hear the residents of **Isla El Padre**, between Mancarrón and San Fernando, named for yet another priest who long ago sought solitude in these tranquil waters. Today, it's inhabited by a troupe of howler monkeys and a few families who never, ever get to sleep in.

Isla la Sevilla, just west of Mancarroncito, is a haven for bird-watchers, with thousands of cormorants, tiger herons and pelicans – not to mention the excellent fishing they're here to enjoy.

Real birders won't want to miss tiny **Islas Zapote** and **Zapotillo**, with Nicaragua's highest concentration of birds, most famously flocks of roseate spoonbills that nest in February and March. Migratory birds of all kinds converge here between December and April – more than 30,000 nests were counted in 2004. These islands are 12km from the rest of the archipelago, but a visit could easily be tacked on to a day trip to Refugio de Vida Silvestre los Guatuzos, nearby.

Landing a boat is risky business at **Isla Zanata**, a solid hour away by *panga*. But dedicated fishers are willing to risk the rocks and waves for the privilege of camping here for days on end to enjoy the best freshwater fishing in Central America.

REFUGIO DE VIDA SILVESTRE LOS GUATUZOS

Like so many national treasures, Los Guatuzos Wildlife Reserve, a 44,000-hectare band of river-streaked wilderness and wetlands wedged between the Costa Rican border and Lago de Nicaragua, was conserved quite by accident. The earliest inhabitants, the Guatuzos, were sold into slavery, their lands co-opted by farmers whose crops (rubber and cacao) could not survive without the natural shade. Just as those crops failed, inviting in the timber companies, revolution and war hit hard along the border, leaving this region as pristine as only a minefield can be. (It was declared mine-free in 2001.)

By the time it was safe for people to return to the rich ecosystem, the federal government had already taken pains to protect it. This lush band of nature inviolate, say scientists, may well be what keeps Lago de Nicaragua so clean and healthy – always something of a mystery, considering the agricultural and urban runoff it endures from all other sides.

The Río Pizote (Long-Tailed Raccoon River) and Río Medio Queso (Half Cheese River) form the eastern and western boundaries of the preserve, home to 18 rivers, 2000 people, 81 amphibians, 42 mammals and almost 400 species of bird – the big draw. During the rainy season, this is a region of tiny cascades and waterfalls; in the dry season – the northern winter – pools of water grow still and shrink around an increasing concentration of migratory waterfowl.

Sleeping & Eating

La Esquina del Lago (☎ 505-823 5233; www.nicaraguafishing.com; packages per person US\$1250-5000) Unfished since the Somoza era, it was only a matter of time before the neighbors noticed that these tarpon-infested waters were a prime spot for some serious ecotourism (the website includes a trilingual San Carlos fishing report). Plush package deals at this lodge, just 2km from San Carlos, include transportation from San José or Managua international airports, lodging, fishing and side trips to Solentiname and the Río San Juan.

Reserva Esperanza Verde (☎ 583 0354; leyko@ibw.com.ni; r per person incl 3 meals US\$30) Nearby, this reserve protects 5000 hectares of humid tropical forest, and makes a fine day trip from San Carlos (US\$20 per person, four-person minimum), including private *panga* transport, breakfast, guide and trail access, which can be arranged through Hotel-Cabinas Leyko (☎ 583 0354) in San Carlos. Alternatively you can spend the night in one of its simple, solar-operated rooms, which have bathroom and mosquito nets. The owners offer a number of tours, through the enormous trees and rare orchids, and along the Costa Rican border. They offer one intriguing night option where you'll fish for those huge river shrimp (US\$10, including cooking and eating your catch).

Centro Ecológico de Los Guatuzos (☎ 270 5434, 583 0139; www.fundar.org.ni; dm US\$12) Geared primarily to scientists and students, this tropical research station welcomes regular visitors to its dorms, and also rents tents. Breakfast is served on-site, and you can arrange other meals (US\$2 to US\$3) in advance with local families. The classic wooden center also makes a great day trip (more accessible from Solentiname than San Carlos) and offers several activities, including a two-hour guided hike on Las Guatuzos Trail (US\$5 per person), which can be combined with a trek through the jungle canopy on a hanging bridge for US\$1 more. Add a tour of the butterfly, turtle and alligator farms and the entire adventure will still set you back only US\$11. Don't skip the tours (US\$11) of Río Papaturo in wooden canoes – at night to look at alligators, during the day to watch the birds.

Getting There & Away

Private *pangas* to Reserva Esperanza Verde, about 20 minutes from San Carlos, run US\$30 to US\$50 round-trip, which can be arranged more cheaply through **Hotel-Cabinas Leyko** (☎ 583 0354; leyko@ibw.com.ni) in San Carlos. There's no public transportation, although you could theoretically take any Los Chiles, Costa Rica-bound boat – but you'd have to pay the full US\$10 ticket, and explain why you don't need your passport stamped.

It costs around US\$130/240 one way/round-trip to Río Papaturo and the Centro Ecológico de Los Guatuzos, including a four-hour wait. It's cheaper (US\$45 round-trip) to rent a boat in Solentiname. There are also collective boats from San Carlos to Papaturo (US\$4, four hours) at 7am Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, returning to San Carlos from Río Papaturo at 7am Monday, Tuesday and Thursday.

RÍO SAN JUAN

Aztec traders used this route as early as the 1200s to ship goods between the oceans, but it was not until 1521, when Cacique Nicarao told the conquistadors that Cocibolca had a 'drain' to the Atlantic, that Spaniard Diego de Machuca ran the rapids all the way to the sea. This is still the dream trip, made legend by British pirates and

history by Mark Twain, down the marvelous, mysterious Río San Juan.

There are not many places like this left in the world, you know. And rich men have been plotting to broaden this river, deepen it, straighten it into something more suitable for their mercantile whims, for almost 500 years. The thundering volcanoes and murmuring rapids may not thwart them forever.

The towns of Boca de Sábalos and El Castillo, as well as the beautiful jungle resorts strung between them, have easy access, with public boats daily. But to go into the vine-hung wilderness of jaguars and macaws, through the Indio-Maíz to the end of the river, takes commitment.

Boca de Sábalos

pop 1000

Most tourists breeze by this unassuming little town en route to nearby resorts or more tourist-friendly El Castillo. This has left it a rather unsullied shrimping village, appealing if you're eager to get off the beaten path and into the jungle. You could easily do Sábalos as a day trip between San Carlos and El Castillo – just take the morning boat into town, then catch the second boat out in the afternoon. Not that there's a lot, exactly, to do.

At the confluence of the Río San Juan and Río Sábalos (Tarpon River), you can watch the two grand rivers collide from the breezy back porch of Hotel Sábalos, over a platter of the best river shrimp in town. Another, smaller tributary effectively splits the town in half, with the inexpensive *hospedajes* (guesthouses) and main (only) road on one side, and a smaller community, threaded by a slender paved footpath through the pretty homes and gardens, on the other. It's one córdoba (US\$0.06) to cross the canal in a dugout canoe.

And that one main road heading north, into the rain forest? That dirt trail penetrates the Reserva Biológica Indio-Maíz, which is technically off-limits. Here, however, there are several small, accessible communities actually inside the reserve – 4WD taxis are lined up at the dock.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Koma Rico, right by the dock, serves as the de facto tourism office, and can find guides

RIVER OF CONTENTION *Tim Rogers*

The Río San Juan is a fluid border in every sense. It forms a 180km natural border between the southern jungles of Nicaragua and Costa Rica's northern frontier, and also provides the central artery to remote communities where daily travel from one country to the other is as easy as, well, crossing a river. It is one of only a number of border rivers in the world that's owned exclusively by one country.

Nicaragua's territorial claim to the river, mixed with historical – and sometimes paranoid – suspicions of Costa Rica's intention to steal it, makes the Río San Juan a symbol of national unity. Although most Nicaraguans have never actually seen the river that connects Lago de Nicaragua to the Caribbean Sea, the mere mention of its hallowed waters prompts patriotic citizens to stand up a little straighter and quickly blink the mist from their eyes.

Since the 1520s, the river has been a route for trade and/or attack by groups as diverse as the Zambos, Miskitos, the Spanish and British Crowns, pirates, separatist leaders, North American adventurers, Costa Rican coffee farmers and – most recently – sportfishers and tourists.

Long eyed as an ideal location for the construction of an inter-oceanic canal (there is currently a project afoot to build a shallow-draft barge canal), the Río San Juan has long played a central role in the oftentimes-tumultuous history of Nicaragua and Central America.

The current contention over the river is a re-release of an old classic: Costa Rica's navigational rights granted by a mid-19th-century treaty, which states clearly that the river is Nicaragua's property, but that Costa Rica can use it to transport commercial 'objects.'

The vague wording remained a nonissue for much of 150 years until the late 1990s, when the Costa Rican government of then-President Miguel Angel Rodriguez decided it would no longer allow Nicaraguan troops to randomly board and search Costa Rican vessels on the river. That's when the historical revisionism started, as both sides offered different versions of what was meant by the treaty's mention of 'objects.'

for the hot springs and other trips. The three resort-style hotels also arrange tours. Day-trippers will probably want to stick close to town, perhaps hiking to Sábalo Lodge or north on the main road, or renting dugout canoes at the dock for exploring mellow river tributaries.

Marena (☎ 583 0179; pmsmaren@ibw.com.ni), which is just uphill from the city center, can arrange guides and free lodging in the Reserva Biológica Indio-Maíz – if you have scientific credentials and send them a Spanish-language request several weeks in advance. The five-hour hiking trail to the lodge begins in Las Maravillas, 20km (taxi US\$35, 45 minutes) from Sábalo.

Also near Las Maravillas, **Agua Calientes Escalara** are unimproved thermal waters that vary in temperature from steaming hot to mild, and are situated along a cool river not far from the road – perfect. Take a taxi or have Intur in El Castillo (p278) arrange a guided trip, including transportation and a tour of Las Maravillas.

Reserva Privada El Quebracho (☎ 583 0035; fdrio@ibw.com.ni; admission US\$3.50), with 129 *manzanas* bordering the Reserva Biológica Indio-Maíz, offers a peek at the region's

very big trees, very small frogs, beautiful rivers and wealth of wildlife without risking karmic whiplash from sneaking in. Near Buena Vista (taxi US\$30, 45 minutes), it offers guided hikes and horseback rides along two trails through orchid-carpeted primary forest, plus accommodations (dorm including three meals US\$15).

You can also (theoretically) arrange tours of **Finca Reforestal de Cacao Indio-Maíz** (☎ 583 0179), a 425-hectare, communally owned cocoa plantation, for US\$12 per person. The office, which appeared to still be getting organized, is just uphill from Marena.

SLEEPING & EATING

Budget lodging is very basic and located in town. Less convenient and much more comfortable are three of the best hotels on the river, one in town, the other two just downstream. Just tell the *colectivo* driver where you're staying and he'll drop you off. Most hotels offer breakfast, but ask about other meals. There are a few simple *comedor* and *fritanga* (sidewalk barbecue) setups downtown.

Hospedaje y Comedor Katiana (☎ 583 0178; r per person US\$4) The best of the cheapies, clean,

Costa Rica insisted that objects included firearms – a necessary tool of the trade for 19th-century merchants. Nicaragua said that gun-toting Ticos would not be permitted in Nicaragua, and argued that tourists brought by Costa Rican tour operators could only be considered ‘objects’ if the intention were to sell them as slaves (also illegal).

Unable to agree on any meaningful solution, in 2002 the two governments decided to shelve the issue for three years, effectively dumping the problem on the next administrations.

Flash forward to 2005: the three-year truce ends and the two countries’ quaint yet politically weak presidents decide to do a little muscle flexing over the river. Costa Rican President Abel Pacheco announced in September that his government would take its case before The Hague. Nicaraguan counterpart Enrique Bolaños responded by accusing Costa Rica of having a ‘historic appetite’ for the Río San Juan, and slapped a new visa tax on all Costa Ricans to raise money for Nicaragua’s legal defense.

Nicaragua’s Foreign Minister took the issue a step further by pondering aloud his country’s historic claim to Guanacaste, the northern province of Costa Rica that annexed itself to Costa Rica in the mid-1900s. If Costa Rica was going to start questioning old treaties, perhaps Nicaragua would too. Average Nicaraguan citizens also jumped on the nationalistic bandwagon. T-shirts appeared saying ‘What’s the problem little Tico? The Río San Juan is 100% Nicaraguan.’ And otherwise leveled-headed citizens started talking openly in bars (usually after several rums) about taking up arms to defend the river against the Costa Ricans, who were probably busy watching soccer games rather than plotting an invasion.

A bumper sticker in Nicaragua reads: ‘The Río San Juan is not a topic of discussion.’ And discussion, as warned, has only made a potentially messy situation actually messy.

Tim Rogers is editor of the Nica Times (www.ticotimes.net/nicatimes)

polished-wood rooms, a nice porch and passable bathrooms make this a winner. Only some rooms have windows.

Hotel Sábalos (☎ 892 0176, 820 0494; www.hotelsabalos.com.ni; r per person US\$10, s/d with view US\$15/24) A one-córdoba (US\$0.06) canoe trip across a smaller tributary, it’s fun just getting to this beautiful lodge, which is a good deal on very comfortable accommodations. Spotless, attractive rooms have hot-water bathrooms, great beds and pretty furniture, and for a few extra dollars you get a permanent breeze, lots of light and a view of the two massive rivers meeting for the first time. It also has the best restaurant (meals US\$4 to US\$10) in town.

Sábalos Lodge (☎ 583 0046; www.sabaloslodge.com; dm per person US\$6, d US\$20-35, r per person incl 3 meals US\$35) Not quite 1km downstream, this is exactly what you dreamt your jungle adventure would be like when you were a little kid: plush bamboo cabañas with tastefully chosen mosquito netting, hammocks everywhere and an enigmatic jungle river meandering through the luxuriant tropical gardens right out front. Also rents kayaks (US\$10 per day), horses and bikes (US\$5 per day), and serves meals (US\$4 to US\$12).

Monte Cristo River Lodge (☎ 583 0197, 839 7558; www.montecristoriver.com; d incl 3 meals US\$45-60) More comfortable, these are big, clean, very civilized cabins in paradise, with great beds and one with a hot-water bathtub; there’s even a Jacuzzi (let him know that you’re coming and the English-speaking owner, Augustin, will heat it up for you). The 120-manzana finca grows coffee, fruit and cocoa, some of which you may be able to sample, and there are horses and other animals that kids are sure to get a kick out of. The lodge specializes in birding and sportfishing packages, but can arrange almost anything, including waterskiing. You can make reservations in San Carlos, right across from the post office.

Soda Hermanas Rosales (set plate US\$1.25; ☎ 7am-8pm) It’s worth the walk to this small restaurant, uphill from Marena, where your *comida corriente* (with drink) is served atop checkered tablecloths.

Koma Rico (dishes US\$1.25-6) This is the town favorite; it’s right by the dock, serving Nicaraguan-style tacos, *comida corriente* and, most importantly, river shrimp. It’s a fine spot to sit and relax while you wait for your boat.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From San Carlos, boats leave for Boca de Sábalos (US\$3.50, 1½ hours, 8am, noon and 3pm Monday to Saturday, 6am and 2pm Sunday). The last boat may be cancelled. From Boca de Sábalos, boats leave for San Carlos (US\$3.50, 1½ hours, 5:30am, 7:30am and 2:30pm Monday to Saturday, 6:30am and 3:30pm Sunday), El Castillo (US\$1.25, 30 minutes, 7:15am, 9:15am and 4:15pm Monday to Saturday, 8:15am and 3:15pm Sunday) and San Juan de Nicaragua (US\$11, 6½ hours, 7:15am Tuesday and Friday).

El Castillo

You've already seen so much beauty by the time you round that last curve on the mighty Río San Juan, tucked-in egrets hung from the misty morning jungle like lanterns on either side, that it's hard to imagine what might yet leave you in awe. Then you'll hear the roar of Raudal El Diablo (Devil's Rapids), bane of pirates for five centuries and nature's own announcement of this postcard-perfect Spanish fortress atop an emerald-green hill, weathered rock hewn into ancient arches that will forever guard the honor of its distant mistress, Granada.

Encircling the base of El Forteleza's pedestal, like brightly colored skirts, are scores of fresh-painted wooden buildings jutting out over the rushing water, all connected by tidy paved walkways. The town is easy to navigate; from the town dock, with a wonderful Intur office, go upstream, downstream, or climb the hill to the fortress.

There is an **Internet café** (per hr US\$2.50; ☎ 7am-9pm), just west of Soda Carolina, where you can make international calls.

EL FORTELEZA

Properly known as **El Forteleza de la Limpia Pura e Inmaculada Concepción** (admission US\$2; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm), this photogenic fortress was constructed between 1673 and 1675, commissioned after Granada was sacked three times in five years. The stunning views over Raudal El Diablo were key – they slowed precocious pirates down just long enough to aim the enormous cannons their way.

Proto-feminist folk-hero Rafaela Herrera was only 19 years old when her father, the fortress commander, was critically wounded

in a 1762 battle with a British fleet. Herrera stepped into command (evidently wearing a nightgown) and successfully repelled the pirates, in some versions herself shooting the cannon that sank the lead ship.

Then, in 1780, 22-year-old Brit Horatio Nelson set out to conquer the edifice, with boundless optimism and no maps. It took two hungry weeks to travel the route he'd provisioned two days for, and worse, they drank the water. The Brits were victorious despite their weakened state, as the Spanish were eager to leave – their fortress, as Nelson soon discovered, had become a breeding ground for malarial mosquitoes. Within a few months, the bull sharks had grown fat on British bodies and the Spanish were able to walk back into the abandoned fort.

The well-designed fortress was also used by William Walker's filibusterers in 1857, and both the Sandinistas and Contras during the 1980s; in one terrible battle, more than 100 Sandinistas were killed in a single night.

Restoration of the fortress began in 1993, and today the resurrected armament houses a solid museum, with informative Spanish-language displays. Your entry fee includes a tour by the enthusiastic staff, but you'll have to pay extra (US\$2/4 camera/video) to take photos of the incredible views from up top.

TOURS

Conveniently right across from the dock, El Castillo's incredibly useful Intur office arranges a variety of guided tours in conjunction with Auracaria (see the boxed text, p262). Make reservations a day in advance, although the **city tour** (US\$6; 3hr) can be arranged the same day. In addition to a variety of guided hikes and *panga* trips, tours (priced per person in a group of four) include:

Alligator Night Tour (US\$40; 2hr) No swimming.

Canoe Tours (US\$35-55; 3-4hr) Explore different rivers in wooden canoes.

El Gavilán Community Tour (US\$8; 5hr) Visit a small river town and watch tortillas being made in a wood-fired oven.

Horseback tour to the Costa Rican border (US\$10; 3hr) Explore the jungles, farms and *fincas* on horseback.

Sarnoso Canyon (US\$95; 4hr) Rapids and gold mines, together at last.

There are several private operators with signs up in town; most tours have a two-person minimum. Pulpería El Puerto, right by the dock, offers **finca tours** (per person US\$10) that include a *panga* ride, 2km hike and two hours on horseback. About 200m east of the dock, Angel Alfonso Tapia offers another **horseback tour** (per person US\$10) through Comunidad Gavilán and a private *finca*.

El Mariposario (admission US\$1; ☞ 10am-noon & 1-4pm) You could also flutter by for a tour of this butterfly garden, run by a local women's collective.

Tour in Canoa (seylaobregon@yahoo.com) Across from the police station, Seyla leads treks downstream in traditional wooden canoes, where you'll be picked up by a motorized *panga*. You could take the Río La Juana (per person US\$30, three hours) or the more serious Río Bartola (per person US\$25). She also rents the canoes (US\$8 for two hours).

SLEEPING

There are a handful of very basic but clean, pleasant *hospedajes* lining the waterfront, with a couple of solid midrange options a bit inland; only one has private bathrooms. A new midrange hotel, **Victoria** (☎ 583 0188; r with/without bathroom incl breakfast US\$15/10) was slated to open in 2006.

Hospedaje y Pulpería El Universal (r per person US\$3.50) With a wonderful waterfront porch overlooking the rapids and clean wooden rooms with shared flush toilets, this is the best of the cheapies.

Hotel Richardson (r per person US\$10) With the only private bathrooms in town, not to mention some great murals, it was a darned shame they were remodeling (including new mattresses!) at press time.

Hotel Albergue El Castillo (☎ 583 0182; herreraojoe25@yahoo.es; r per person with/without balcony incl breakfast US\$15/10) This is the best hotel in town, with gorgeous hard-wood rooms, fabulous furniture, great lighting and, if you spring for the extra US\$5, an amazing balcony with stunning views over the river and town. All with shared bathrooms. The restaurant (US\$4 to US\$8) is also tops, and has a great view.

EATING

Grab a coffee or fruit juice at the juice stand next to Intur, or head to one of several *sodas* (simple cafés) lining the waterfront, most serving both cheap set plates and pricier seafood dishes.

Soda Carolina (comida corriente US\$2, shrimp US\$10; ☞ 6:30am-8:30pm) This wonderful spot has great service, excellent fruity beverages and a plant-packed upstairs dining area where you can enjoy a meal while watching the rain fall.

Soda Vanessa (fast food US\$1-3) Two blocks east of the docks, this place specializes in cheap eats – burgers, *pintos* – served up with a million-dollar view over the roaring rapids.

Restaurante Daryzu (seafood US\$2-8) Or, go upscale another block downstream at this solid seafood joint.

If you continue east across Puente de las Tortugas (Turtle Bridge), you'll come to a group of riverfront ranchos serving seafood and cold beer.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From El Castillo, collective boats leave for Boca de Sábalos (US\$1.25, 30 minutes, 5am, 7am and 2pm Monday to Friday, 2pm and 5pm Sunday), with continuing service to San Carlos (US\$4, two hours).

Refugio Bartola & the River Eastward

About 15 minutes downriver from El Castillo, **Refugio Bartola** (☎ 880 8754, 289 3448; www.refugiobartola.com; r per person with/without 3 meals US\$50/20) is simpler than the other river lodges. But it's not really about the big, clean rooms with two beds and built-in furniture, or pleasant thatched-roof restaurant (breakfast US\$5, other meals US\$10). It's the location.

Sure, it's inconvenient to catch a San Juan de Nicaragua-bound boat (El Castillo boats don't come quite this far) or rent a private *panga* (US\$25) in El Castillo. But it's worth it to hike the four trails – ranging from one to eight hours in length – through primary rain forest, right on the border of the Reserva Biológica Indio-Maíz. Nonguests pay US\$5 per trail to hike by themselves, plus an extra US\$20 per group for an English-speaking guide, which is recommended. Wooden canoes seating eight can be rented for US\$5 a day.

The refuge, at the confluence of the Caño Bartola and Río San Juan, also marks your entry into the wildest part of the journey – well, on the Indio-Maíz side, anyway. The Costa Rican side of the border rolls primarily into ranchland. Keep your

passport handy, as you may need to show it to Nicaraguan or Costa Rican authorities.

About an hour further along from the mouth of the Río Sarapiquí, the San Juan Delta begins to weave through the wetlands, meeting up with the almost-as-enormous Río Colorado. Birding becomes increasingly more interesting, and fishing even better – but note that you have officially entered the bull sharks' territory, so no swimming.

You'll pass the rusting, wrecked steamship that made an impression on Mark Twain when he came through, and finally enter the expansive Bahía San Juan. That rusting hulk rising from the waters is an old dredger owned by Cornelius Vanderbilt's Transit Company, which kept the shipping lanes open for would-be gold prospectors en route to San Francisco. The dilapidated dock to the south marks what's left of Greytown and old San Juan del Norte, founded on what was then the mouth of the Río San Juan, now a sandy extension of dry land. Continue to cross the bay to the mouth of the remarkable Río Indio, where you'll reach the very last stop of all, San Juan de Nicaragua.

San Juan de Nicaragua (San Juan del Norte)

Though it's one of the Americas' oldest European cities, this damp monument to human perseverance has one of its newest names. Until 2003 it was known as San Juan del Norte, which (if you look at a map) doesn't make much sense...unless it was all a conspiracy involving those dastardly Costa Ricans (see the boxed text, p276)! Hence the change.

Many visitors to this little-touristed spot will wonder, perhaps out loud, why Costa Rica (or anyone else) would want it. But when it was founded in 1539, with the far more poetic moniker San Juan de las Perlas (Saint John of the Pearls), this was the future 'most important port on the Atlantic.' Its strategic significance, along with the promise of an inter-ocean canal, attracted British attention. In 1848 it was seized by Jamaican Governor Charles Grey (in the name of the Miskito Kingdom), who modestly renamed it Greytown. This was actually rather appropriate, given that it's the rainiest spot (over 5000mm annually) in the hemisphere.

Although the promised canal was not forthcoming, the river remained the fastest route between New York and San Francisco. And as the Gold Rush geared up, Greytown became a pleasantly seedy little boomtown, with whorehouses, gambling halls and hotels hewn of mahogany and precious cedar. Between 1851 and 1868, more than 155,000 travelers passed through.

After the canal was built in Panama, and Greytown was ceded to an independent Nicaragua – reclaiming its original name of San Juan – investment stopped and the once attractive Victorian town slipped into decay. The town was already in shambles when Sandinista leader turned Contra commander Edén Pastora, aka 'Commandante Cero,' burned it to the ground in 1982; subsequent efforts to rebuild were dashed to devastation by Hurricane Juana in 1988. The current site of SJDN has only been used since the early 1990s.

San Juan de Nicaragua remains a backwater, and while residents are hopeful that tourism will take off, their main economic activities involve fishing and, this being the Caribbean, narco-trafficking. Use the one **public phone** (☎ 506-384 7054), on the Costa Rican network, to contact anyone in town. Water and electricity may go off without notice, so carry a flashlight at night and shower when you can.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The must-see attraction is the swampy remains of **Greytown** – basically, a windmill, a few cement building foundations and four very interesting cemeteries: one for the British (including those members of Horatio Nelson's doomed campaign who were not fed to the sharks), another for Catholics, a third for North Americans and the last allegedly for Freemasons from St John's Lodge. Guide Hedley Acton Thomas Barss, or Chalí, who knows everyone in town, comes well recommended.

Also worth seeing is **Laguna Azul** (Blue Lagoon), where you can swim in relative safety, although people-eating bull sharks could theoretically cruise right in. Also be sure to check out the geographic oddity of the **Río Indio**, which flows parallel to the Caribbean coastline, at times separated from the sea by only a few hundred meters of sandy beaches and virgin jungle.

And, of course, there is some of the best **tarpon fishing** in the world.

The small Marena office, Restaurante Orquídea or Hotel Paraíso Virgen can arrange the following Intur-approved guided tours:

Fishing on Fish Creek (4 people US\$80; 4hr) Recently 'discovered' by every sportfishing magazine in existence, this region is the newest, hippest place to catch enormous tarpon in the Americas, which is why so many sportfishers are willing to pay the big bucks at the Río Indio Adventure Lodge. But you could just hook up a boat and some bait with these guys.

Regional Tour (6 people US\$50; 4hr) See the four Greytown cemeteries, hike a short jungle trail, visit the resting remains of the dredges of Cornelius Vanderbilt, then finish up on a broad sandy beach near beautiful Laguna Azul.

SJDN City Tour (per person US\$6; 2hr) Wander through town, meet the movers and shakers, and learn a bit about the region's rich culture, quirks and all.

Wetlands Tour (6 people US\$60; 4hr) Take a *panga* through the delta and Laguna Azul to look for manatees, then head up the Atlantic coast.

SLEEPING & EATING

In addition to the official places, you can arrange **homestays** (r per person US\$3-8), and several private cooks also offer meals – give them a few hours' notice.

Hotel El Británico (r per person US\$4) Has simple wooden rooms with OK shared bathrooms, which are just fine for some adventurers.

Hotel Paraíso Virgen (r per person with fan US\$10, d with air-con & TV US\$35; 🚻) Also known as Melvin's place, this better (but still somewhat run-down) option offers bathrooms with 24-hour water, electrical generator and an on-site restaurant (meals US\$3 to US\$12), about seven blocks from the dock.

Restaurante Orquídea (meals US\$2-10; 🍷 all day) The town's only official restaurant serves seafood and less expensive options; it's also the de facto tourist office and can arrange homestays, guides and private transportation. It's across the street from Discoteca Fantasy, the hottest (only) dance spot in town.

Río Indio Adventure Lodge (📞 in Costa Rica 506-296 4948, in the US 866-593 3176; www.rioiindiolodge.com; all-inclusive s/d US\$250/400; 🚻) One of the best sports lodges in Central America, this wonderfully plush fishing center is just south of SJDN. Package deals include all manner of fishing expeditions and inter-

esting side trips, as well as transportation from San José, Costa Rica, or Managua International Airport. Almost 80% of this Tico-owned hotel's clients come through Costa Rica, via the Río Colorado, spending thousands of dollars that don't end up in Nicaraguan pockets. This is not to criticize the lodge – which employs plenty of Nicaraguans and is a great addition to the river's attractions – but merely to explain (at least in part) why Nicas are so overprotective of the potential tourism gold mine that is the Río San Juan, which they as yet lack sufficient resources to develop properly.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The San Juan de Nicaragua air strip may begin getting regular flights before this book is off the shelves, but don't count on it.

Make boat reservations at the San Carlos municipal dock, just east of the ferry terminal, in advance for San Juan de Nicaragua, particularly if you plan to catch the always-crowded boat in Boca de Sábalos or El Castillo. The last scheduled boat to or from El Castillo is often cancelled, particularly on Saturday. Travel in the morning.

Two boats leave from San Carlos for San Juan de Nicaragua (US\$15, eight hours, 6am Tuesday and Friday) stopping in Boca

BORDER CROSSING: TO BARRA DEL COLORADO, COSTA RICA

There is a little-used – and somewhat sketchy – border crossing between Costa Rica and Nicaragua on the Río Colorado, used primarily by upscale fishing resorts and pricey packaged tours. Begin at the immigration post at San Juan de Nicaragua, where they will hopefully stamp your passport. From there, you'll need to hire a private *panga* (around US\$140, 1½ hours) to Barra del Colorado, Costa Rica.

There are no roads connecting Barra del Colorado, with one relatively inexpensive hotel (and several swanky fishing lodges), to the rest of Costa Rica, but there is an airport with daily flights to San José and regular boat service to Puerto Limón. Both towns have Costa Rican immigration offices, where you will be expected to explain why you crossed the border way the heck out here.

de Sábalo at 7am and El Castillo at 8:30am. These return from San Juan de Nicaragua at 4:30am Thursday and Sunday.

NICARAGUA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATIONS

Ranging from five-star resorts with an infinite number of pools to windowless shacks with shared latrines, you really have your choice of accommodations in Nicaragua. Well, you have your choice in more expensive and developed A-list destinations (Managua, Granada, León, San Juan del Sur, Corn Islands), anyway; top-end places start to thin out a bit as you head for the interior.

Luxury accommodations, where they exist, can be a good deal – the most expensive resort in the country (p156) clocks in at US\$150 to US\$200 per person, which certainly isn't for everyone, but is a steal compared to Costa Rica. Boutique hotels (with doubles going for US\$50 to US\$70), concentrated in Managua, generally have fewer than 10 rooms, and are creatively decorated with lots of little luxuries; **Small Hotels** (www.centralamerica-smallhotels.com) has a list of great options. Tour agencies may be able to get a third off rack rates in top-end and midrange hotels, so be sure to ask.

There's a good midrange option, with clean, modern rooms, private bathroom,

24-hour electricity and running water, hot water and/or air conditioning (this varies with elevation) and a nice setting or neighborhood, in every major town, even in isolated spots like Las Minas and Nueva Guinea. They tend to cost US\$20 to US\$35 for a double; tack on US\$10 to US\$15 for an A-list destination. Solo travelers usually get a 20% discount, tops, in this category. Also note that hotels in the midrange and top-end categories have a 15% tax tacked onto the cost.

The budget hotels, sometimes called *hospedajes*, are inexpensive compared to the rest of Central America. You can almost always get your own clean wooden room, with sheets and sometimes a window or piece of furniture, with shared bathroom, for under US\$4 per person per night. Double that and you get a bigger room and private bathroom; prices are higher in A-list destinations, where there are always cheap dorm beds (US\$3 to US\$6 per person) if you're on a shoestring. In less-developed regions, you may be using bucket-flush toilets and bucket showers in this price range. Budget travelers should always bring candles and flashlight (torch), just in case. If there's no mosquito net, just ask.

In rural areas without much development, there may not be signed guesthouses, but almost all small towns have families who rent rooms. Ask at the *alcaldía* (mayor's office) for leads on weekdays, or at any open business on weekends. Some communities have formalized homestays through Spanish schools (you don't need to be a student – just ask at the school) or as part of community-based alternative tourism, such as at Reserva Natural Miraflores (see p197).

Camping is available in a few private and natural reserves, and is also allowed free on most less-developed beaches. Budget hotels and private residences often let you pitch a tent out back.

LOVE HOTELS

Many Nicaraguan hotels aren't for travelers – they're for lovers. Sometimes called motor hotels, they generally have walled-in parking lots to discourage prying eyes, cheesy names ('Eternal Bliss,' 'Garden of Eden'), private bathrooms, flavored condoms and very special cable TV, and they may also arrange prostitutes.

They are not generally unsafe, although they may be loud (not just the sex; think romantic '80s ballads blasting from well-stocked bars), and most will bemusedly provide rooms for tourists, if you're (ahem) desperate. Note: the low price advertised outside is probably for three hours; make sure to get quotes for 'the whole night.'

ACTIVITIES

Nicaragua has almost unlimited opportunities for outdoor activities, but almost nowhere to rent or buy equipment, so come prepared. Sports with particular promise for development (once there's money invested) include **windsurfing**, with aficionados already testing the waters in Lago

de Nicaragua, Laguna de Apoyo, Corinto, Lago de Managua (yech!) and Lago Xiloá; and **whitewater rafting**, although at present you'll be running one of Nicaragua's thousand rivers in wooden canoes, which you'll carry around the Class IVs yourself. And there are some sports you really can't do anywhere else, such as **volcano surfing** (see p178) – you know you want to.

More developed activities include the following.

Canoeing & Kayaking

With all these rivers and lakes, it's no wonder that canoeing and kayaking adventures are becoming more popular. Some of the most easily accessible options include kayaking the Isletas of Granada (p118), the Río Istiam and islets around Isla de Ometepe (p141), Reserva Natural Isla Juan Venado (p176), near León, and down the Río San Juan (p278) in wooden canoes on a guided tour.

Serious adventurers can arrange to take wooden canoes on any number of rivers, including the Río Coco from Wiwilí (see the boxed text, p219), right into the heart of Bosawás.

Diving & Snorkeling

With 1040km of coastline, most of it untainted with overdevelopment, it's no wonder that people are interested in getting all wet. The best Pacific diving is between December and April, but the Caribbean's clear anytime – and don't forget those crater lakes! Divers have only just begun to exploit Nicaragua's watery riches, and the best-known dive sites are in the Corn Islands (p255) and San Juan del Sur (p150), with lower visibility but much easier access from the tourist trail. You can also dive Laguna de Apoyo (see p102), a crater lake with brownish fish and a steep, creepy drop to the bottom. For a list of Nica diving outfits, see the boxed text, p257.

Hiking

Perhaps inspired by neighboring Costa Rica, Nicaragua is building beautiful trails through its parks and reserves. Some of the most interesting and easily accessible are at Reserva Natural Miraflor (p197), Reserva Natural Cerro Musún (see the boxed text, p242) and Somoto Canyon (p205).

The climbs with the real cachet, however, are any of the dozens of volcanoes, including the Maribios Chain (p177), Volcán Cosigüina (p189) and the volcanoes of Isla Ometepe (p138).

Guides are usually recommended for hikes in all but the best developed natural parks and reserves, particularly for the volcanoes; count on US\$6 to US\$20 per group, more for private reserves. Most towns also have free trails to area swimming holes, crosses and other shrines, or even hot springs; Matagalpa (p209) is a standout, but feel free to ask at Intur, the *alcaldía* or even your hotel about other options.

Surfing

Nicaragua has some of the best (and least-crowded) surfing in the world. See p45 for coverage of Nicaragua's best-developed adventure sport.

BUSINESS HOURS

Most official government offices, including Intur, Marena and all *alcaldías* (mayors' offices), your three main sources of tourist information, are generally open from 8am to noon and 1:30pm to 5pm; Intur is usually open until noon Saturday and Sunday. Many other businesses, including corporate offices and many stores, also take an extended lunch hour. Banks, notably, do not.

Restaurants have widely varying hours, but in general, simple *comedores* (basic and cheap eateries) are open from about 6am until 8pm, and nicer restaurants may close from 3pm to 5pm. No matter what time a steam-table buffet is officially open, it's best to go in just as meal time begins (around 11:30am or 5pm). Discos usually don't get going until at least 9pm, later in Managua.

If a museum, cultural center or other office isn't open when it 'should' be, ask around to see if anyone in the neighborhood knows where the caretaker is.

CHILDREN

Nicaragua, like all Latin American countries, is relatively easy to travel around with children, despite the lack of infrastructure. Parents rarely pay extra for hotels, transportation or other services for youngsters small enough to fit in a lap comfortably,

and even complete strangers will make an effort to accommodate and entertain children.

That said, bathrooms can be very unsanitary, bus rides long and bumpy, and disposable diapers difficult to find outside of major cities – stock up and consider carrying cloth diapers if you're planning to be in a rural area for a while.

COURSES

Most population centers have a Casa de Cultura (House of Culture) where you can enroll in all sorts of classes – painting, folkloric dance, makeup and hair care – dirt cheap, often for less than US\$1 per class, or US\$6 per month. Classes will almost certainly be conducted in Spanish, although in more touristy areas like Granada and San Juan de Sur there may well be someone who can help you in your native tongue.

Nicaragua is also a good place to learn Spanish, although it's a bit more expensive than Guatemala, which is a favorite among budget-minded backpacking students. Classes cost US\$100 to US\$120 for 20 hours of instruction at a respected school, and usually include study materials and field trips; homestays, with three meals daily, are arranged for US\$60 per week. Prices tend to drop if you register for more than a week. Independent teachers will come to your hotel for US\$5 per hour, and can also usually arrange homestays, if not field trips.

There are several schools in sunny San Juan del Sur, where you can also arrange surfing lessons, as well as in Granada, Laguna de Apoyo, León and Estelí.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Despite the fact that Nicaragua has the lowest crime rate in Central America, lower than the US or Europe (or El Salvador, for that matter), as a 'wealthy' foreigner you will at least be considered a potential target by scam artists and thieves. Make sure they pick a different tourist by staying alert and taking precautions against theft and mugging. Several areas are considered dangerous enough to merit their own warnings, including Managua (p73), with big-city problems; San Juan del Sur (p148), with bohemian tourist-industry problems; and most of the Caribbean Coast, with seri-

ous cocaine-trafficking problems that you should stay well away from.

Always play it extra safe in the rural Caribbean Coast, undeveloped nature reserves and anywhere that infrastructure is limited and communications weak. Even if it's expensive or seems silly, consider taking precautions if recommended by a reliable source – hey, if they think two guides is better, maybe there's a reason. For tips on not being a target tourist, see the Safety chapter (p472).

DISABLED TRAVELERS

Before you put this book down and decide to instead go somewhere with actual wheelchair ramps, find a copy of **Beyond Boundaries Nicaragua** (www.bbc.co.uk/ouch/tvradio/beyondboundaries), a British reality-TV series that sends 11 disabled trekkers *overland* (the wheelchair got up to five punctures per day!) from Pearl Lagoon, using machetes to get through the woods, all the way to San Juan del Sur, including a climb up active Volcán Concepción.

Inspired? Unfortunately, there are few regular services for disabled travelers. But because the war left so many people in wheelchairs and otherwise disabled, people are used to mobility issues and will work with you. Still, it's easiest to go through a tour company: try **Tours Nicaragua** (www.toursnicaragua.com) and **Go with Wheelchairs** (www.gowithwheelchairs.com).

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Check at www.embajada-online.com for complete listings of all Nicaraguan consulates and embassies overseas, and all embassies and consulates in Nicaragua.

Embassies & Consulates in Nicaragua

All these offices are in Managua.

Costa Rica (Map p78; ☎ 266 3986; fax 266 3955) From the Montoya statue, two blocks south, one block east.

Denmark (☎ 268 0250) From Rotonda El Güegüense, one block west, two blocks north, and a half a block west.

El Salvador (☎ 276 0712; Av del Campo 142, Las Colinas)

France (☎ 222 6210; fax 228 1057) It's 1½ blocks west of El Carmen church.

Germany (☎ 266 3918) From Rotonda El Güegüense, 1½ blocks north.

Guatemala (☎ 279 9609; fax 279 9610; Carr a Masaya Km 11.5) There is also a consulate in León.

Honduras (☎ 279 8233; fax 279 8228; Carr a Masaya Km 12.5)

Mexico (☎ 278 4919; Carr a Masaya Km 4.5) One block east of the Carratera, contiguous with Optica Matamoros.

Netherlands (☎ 266 6175) From the canal it's 2½ blocks north, one block west.

Panama (☎ 266 8633; No 93 Colonia Mántica) From the main fire station, head one block west.

USA (Map p70; ☎ 266 6012, 266 6038 after hours; Carr Sur Km 4.5)

Nicaraguan Embassies & Consulates Abroad

Austria (☎ 403 1839; 113350.2341@compuserve.com; Ebendorferstrasse, 10-3-12, 1010 Vienna)

Costa Rica (☎ 506-223 1489, 222 2373; embanic@racsa

.co.cr; Av Central 2540, Barrio La California, Frente al Pizza Hut, San José) There's another consulate in Liberia.

France (☎ 1 45 00 41 02; fax 1 45 00 96 81; Ave Bugeaud, 75116 Paris)

Germany (☎ 228 362 505; fax 228 354 001; Konstantinstrasse 41, D-53159 Bonn/2) Also covers Switzerland.

Japan (☎ 00813 34990400; nicjapan@gol.com; Kowa Bldy 38, Rm 9034 – 12-24, Nishi – Azabu, Minato-Ku Tokyo 106)

Mexico (☎ 5 540 5625; fax 5 520 6960; Prado de Norte 470, Colonia Lomas de Chapultepec, CP 11000, Delegación Miguel Hidalgo, Mexico DF)

Netherlands (☎ 70 306 17 42; fax 70 306 17 43; Sumatrastraat 336, 2585CZ The Hague)

Spain (☎ 91 555 5510; fax 91 555 5737; Paseo La Castellana 127, 10-B, 28046 Madrid)

Sweden (☎ 468 667 1857; fax 468 662 4160; Sandhamnasgatan 40-6 tr, 11528 Stockholm) Also covers Denmark, Finland and Norway.

UK (☎ 171 409 2536; fax 171 409 2593; 36 Upper Brook St, London W1Y 1PE)

USA (☎ 202 939 6570; fax 202 939 6545; 1627 New Hampshire Ave NW, Washington, DC 20009) Also covers Canadian citizens.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Every town has its *fiestas patronales*, or patron saint-day festivities, which could run for a week or, in the case of Masaya's San Jeronimo extravaganza, three months – and most towns have two patron saints. Festivities vary, but count on parades, folkloric dance, all-night vigils, bullfights (killing the bull is illegal in Nicaragua) and live music, including marching bands (and fireworks) at 5am. Sweet.

National Baseball Championship Series (March 26-April 4) Nicaragua's national pastime comes to a head.

San Marcos (April 24, San Marcos) The saints of Carazo get together in San Marcos for the department's biggest party.

Palo de Mayo (May, Bluefields) A little more sparkle than you may be used to around the big pole.

Virgen del Carmen (July 16, San Juan del Sur) Carmen blesses boats around the bay.

Santa Ana (July 26, Nandaime) For more than 400 years, ever since she saved Nandaime from Volcán Mombacho, this saint's had one of the country's best parties.

International Fishing Tournament (September 14-15, San Carlos) How big was that tarpon again?

San Jerónimo (September 30, Masaya) The longest party of the year; for more Masaya mayhem, see p96.

Noche de Agüizotes (last Friday in October, Masaya) Even cooler than Halloween.

Carnaval Mitos y Leyendas (November 1, León) Same concept, wider variety of costumes.

Lavada de la Plata (December 6, El Viejo) Wash the Virgin's silver while you pray.

La Gritería (Día de la Purísima Concepción) (December 7) Nicaragua's most important Catholic holiday; if anyone asks, 'Quien causa tanta alegría?', just answer, 'La concepción de Maria!', and you might get a treat.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

As in most of Latin America, gay and lesbian travelers will run into fewer problems if they avoid public displays of affection, and – if there's a giant Catholic altar in the hotel lobby – by asking for two beds and pushing the m together. That said, lots of Nicaraguan gays and lesbians flaunt their sexuality, so you probably won't have much problem figuring out the scene.

Get started at **Fundación Xochiquetzal** (☎ 249 0585; xochiquetzal@alfanumeric.com.ni), a gay and lesbian advocacy group, or try www.gay.com or www.gaydar.co.uk, both with lots of Nica members. There are a handful of gay and lesbian bars in Managua (p83), while Matagalpa has a gay-friendly option in Grupo Venancio (p213). We've also heard stories that Masaya's San Jerónimo festival, which features a famous folkloric dance in drag, 'Las Negras,' has a camp component involving a 'Miss' Masaya beauty contest – but you might want to confirm this with someone on the ground before showing up in your vintage RuPaul.

HOLIDAYS

National holidays are as follows:

New Year's Day (January 1) Shops and offices start closing at noon on December 31

Semana Santa (Holy Week; Thursday, Friday and Saturday before Easter Sunday) Beaches get packed, hotel rates skyrocket and everything is closed – make sure you have a place to be

Labor Day (May 1)

Mother's Day (May 30) No one gets away with just a card – more things close than at Christmas

Anniversary of the Revolution (July 19) No longer an official holiday, but many shops and government offices close anyway

Battle of San Jacinto (September 14)

Independence Day (September 15)

Día de los Difuntos (November 2) All Souls' Day

La Purísima (December 8) Immaculate Conception

Navidad (December 25) Christmas

INSURANCE

Travel insurance is always a good idea, and your travel agent or **STA Travel** (www.statravel.com) should be able to hook you up. Keep in mind, however, that Nicaragua has cheap, decent-quality health care (a doctor's visit is only US\$6), so you're really only going to need travel insurance in the case of a big emergency. Make sure your bill covers emergency helicopter evacuation, full coverage for lost luggage, and other options.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access on the Pacific Coast is cheap (US\$0.70 to US\$1.25 per hour), fast, air-conditioned and widely available in towns with more than 15,000 people. The Caribbean Coast has slower, more expensive Internet, which is most certainly not widely available. Catch up on email before you head to the Atlantic.

INTERNET RESOURCES

CIA Factbook (www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook) Statistics and information.

IBW Internet Gateway (www.ibw.com.ni) A solid portal; also check out Xolo (www.xolo.com.ni) and Ideay (www.ideay.net.ni).

Intur (www.intur.gob.ni) The official government website is in English and Spanish, with lots of cheerful, vague information and an awesome photo gallery.

Latin American Network Information Center (www.lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/nicaragua) An excellent portal with academic and tourism-oriented offerings.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) A good online overview of the country for travelers.

Manfut (www.manfut.org) A veritable cornucopia of photos, history, myth, articles, important phone numbers

and much, much more, at this huge, messy, wonderful site covering every last corner of the country.

Marena (www.marena.gob.ni) The official site of Nicaragua's system of national parks and protected areas, this site has detailed and accurate Spanish-language information about almost all of its protected areas, but no accessibility details.

Nica Living (www.nicaliving.com) Expat network and chat room with answer-filled archives to your oddest inquiries.

US Library of Congress (lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/nitoc.html) Statistics and information.

LEGAL MATTERS

Nicaragua's police force is professional and visible, and not particularly corrupt by Central American standards. Some people advocate slipping traffic cops a 100-córdoba (US\$6) bill with your ID to smooth out minor traffic violations, but that could always backfire, and if you get caught with drugs or committing a more serious crime, it won't be that easy to get away from the law.

People coming to Nicaragua to invest in land should talk to other expats (www.nicaliving.com is fun) and get a lawyer before handing over one red cent for that beautiful beachfront property. Between the various wars, revolutions and redistributions, there could easily be two or three parties with legitimate claims to any piece of property. Do your homework, don't rush to buy, and observe all formalities.

MAPS

Most Intur offices have regional and city maps, which are sometimes too cutesy for their own good, but can get you around town. All car-rental places have good, simple country maps; even if you aren't renting a car, stop by and ask for one.

Marena Central (Ministry of the Environment & Natural Resources; ☎ 263 2830; www.marena.gob.ni; Km 12.5 Carr Norte; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri), in Managua, has the entire country in topo maps for about US\$3 per sheet, plus several colorful brochure-type maps it will let you have for free. Bring your ID to access the library.

Ineter (Nicaragua Institute for Territorial Studies; Map p70; ☎ 249 2768; frente Imigración Extranjera; ☎ 8-11:30am & 1-4pm Mon-Fri), in Managua, has the best selection of maps in the country. Most are out of print, but bring a computer disc and they'll upload the files. The

website offers free maps, but they don't scale.

InMonica (www.inmonica.com) has lots of free, downloadable maps of Nicaragua that are easier to read than Ineter's.

Guía Mananica (US\$6) is a little book with an OK pull-out political country map and poorly marked but accurate maps of all department capitals.

International Travel Maps Nicaragua (US\$6) is the most detailed road map available, but don't trust it completely for secondary roads, which may be incorrect – confirm with a local.

Surf Maps (www.surfmaps.com) updates its solid surf map (US\$8) regularly, so log on to learn about the latest discoveries.

MONEY

Nicaragua's currency is the córdoba (C\$), sometimes called a 'peso' or 'real' by locals, or a 'cord' by expats. Córdobas come in coins of C\$0.25, C\$0.50, C\$1 and C\$5, and bills of C\$10, C\$20, C\$50, C\$100 and C\$500. Bills of C\$100 and larger can be difficult to change; try the gas station.

US dollars are accepted almost everywhere, unless they are worn or damaged. All prices in this book are given in US dollars, as costs in córdoba are more likely to fluctuate with the exchange rate. That said, córdobas are usually easier to use, particularly at smaller businesses and anywhere off the beaten track, where people might not know the exchange rate or have easy access to a bank. Always keep at least 200 córdoba on you, preferably in smaller bills, just in case. And remember, even where people are happy to take your dollars, they may cheerfully charge you a fraction more by rounding that exchange rate up.

ATMs, Banks & Traveler's Checks

ATMs (*cajeros automáticos*) are by far the easiest way of carrying money in Nicaragua. They are available in most major towns and tourist regions, with the glaring exceptions of Isla Ometepe and the Corn Islands. Most smaller towns have a regular bank (no ATM), which probably won't do credit-card advances or cash traveler's checks. Most ATMs operate on the Visa/Plus system, but BAC (Banco America Central), located in most Pacific population centers and Esso stations, also accepts MasterCard/Cirrus

debit cards. BanPro is another good bet. Most banks charge US\$2 per transaction, on top of whatever your bank charges.

Many towns don't have banks or ATMs, but almost all have **Western Union** (www.westernunion.com) outlets. Traveler's checks are inconvenient, and may be changed at only some banks, for a steep fee. Leave them at home.

Coyotes

Moneychangers, or *coyotes*, are regularly used by locals to change córdoba for US dollars at about the same rates as the banks. *Coyotes*, who flash wads of cash at markets, on plazas or close to regular banks, are generally honest, but you should know the exchange rate and about how much to expect back in the exchange. *Coyotes* may also exchange certain other currencies, including euros, pounds, Canadian dollars, Honduran lempira and Costa Rican colones, for a much larger fee.

Coyotes at border crossings are much less likely to be honest (don't trust their calculators, either). Stay on your toes and avoid changing much money.

Credit Cards

Visa and MasterCard are widely accepted throughout Nicaragua – even at tiny little *pulperías* (corner stores) in the middle of nowhere – and you can almost always count on midrange hotels and restaurants to take them. In places where electricity is unreliable – for instance, most of the Caribbean Coast – credit cards may not be widely accepted, so be prepared.

Tipping & Bargaining

Tipping is expected for table service in Nicaragua, and restaurants usually include a 10% tip in the bill. Small and/or rural eateries may not include the tip, so leave behind a few coins, if you have them. You should almost always tip guides, as that's often their only salary. Tipping is optional but appreciated at hotels.

Bargaining is not really part of Nicaraguan culture, so if it's part of yours, consider toning it down. A few back-and-forths at an outdoor market or over a hotel room is acceptable; much more and it's just annoying.

Neither of these rules apply to unregulated taxis (as opposed to taxis with rates

set by their unions) – so die-hard hagglers can sharpen their claws on these guys. Ask locals what you should be paying, then bargain hard before you get in the car. You should only tip a taxi driver if service was exceptional, which sometimes happens.

SOLO TRAVELERS

Solo travelers in the midrange and luxury categories will pay about 80% of a double-room price, which is annoying. Budget hotels, on the other hand, often offer per person rates on basic rooms, under US\$5 with shared bathroom, around US\$10 for private bathroom. Because many destinations are accessible primarily on guided tours, and those tours usually have a two- or three-person minimum, your best strategy is to stay flexible and ask at various outfitters if a group is already going somewhere.

TELEPHONE

Nicaragua's calling code is 505. From outside the country, dial 00505 plus the number as it's listed in this book. When calling between cities from within Nicaragua, just add 0 to the number. Several payphones accept Enitel calling cards, sold at gas stations, Enitel offices and some stores in C\$50 and C\$100 amounts. You can also make calls (three-minute minimum) from Enitel offices, available in almost every town. Many homes and businesses 'rent' their phone, which is usually expensive and unable to call cellphones. Direct calls abroad using Enitel are also expensive, but any Internet café or a private booth at Llamadas Heladas, a chain of calling centers, are much cheaper.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Intur (Nicaraguan Institute of Tourism; Map p78; ☎ in Managua 222 3333; www.intur.gob.ni) government tourism office has branches in most major cities, which range from fully equipped, professional offices to private homes with one employee. They can always recommend hotels and activities (but not make reservations) and point you toward guides. Larger Inturs sell maps, give away bilingual guide booklets, have stacks of notebooks full of articles and clippings about the region, and can arrange all sorts of adventures.

Cantur is the other official tourist information outfit, with offices in San Carlos,

San Juan del Sur, Ticuantepe and other spots. In addition to offering stacks of brochures, they can also usually make reservations for hotels and guided tours.

Marena Central (Ministry of the Environment & Natural Resources; ☎ 263 2830 in Managua) administers Nicaragua's national parks and other protected areas, and sometimes – but definitely not always – offers tourist services, including guides and accommodations. It can help with access for scientists and researchers, and has stacks of data on the reserves that each specific office manages.

Alcaldías, or mayor's offices, are your best (sometimes only) bet in small towns without a real tourist office (ie most of Nicaragua). Although tourism is not the mayor's primary function, most will help you find food, lodging, guides and whatever you might need, on weekdays only. On weekends, try asking at hotels, *pulperías* or restaurants. In indigenous communities, there may not be a mayor, as many still have councils of elders. Instead, ask for the judge (*juez* or *wihta*), who probably speaks Spanish and can help you out.

VISAS

Visitors from most countries can stay in Nicaragua for 30 or 90 days without a visa, as long as they have a passport valid for the next six months, proof of sufficient funds (US\$200 or a credit card) and, theoretically, an onward ticket (rarely checked). Most border crossings are relaxed. Citizens of Afghanistan, Albania, Angola, Armenia, Bolivia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cameroon, China, Colombia, Croatia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, Ghana, Haiti, India, Iran, Jordan, Kenya, Liberia, Libya, Mali, Montenegro, Mozambique, Nepal, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, the Palestinian Territories, Peru, Rumania, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Vietnam and Yemen must have a visa to enter Nicaragua. The **Nicaraguan Foreign Ministry** (www.cancilleria.gob.ni) has more specifics.

The **immigration office** (Dirección de Migración y Extranjería; Map p70; ☎ 265 0014; 🕒 8-11:30am & 1:30-3pm Mon-Fri) in Managua can extend your visa for up to three months, for around US\$25 per month. Alternately, you could leave the country for 72 hours, which automatically renews your visa.

WOMEN TRAVELERS

All of Nicaragua (with the exception of Bluefields and the Corn Islands) was researched by a solo female traveler, who had no real problems, unless you count *pirópos* (catcalls) as a problem. Nicaragua is not particularly dangerous for women, but you know the drill: dress conservatively (knees should be covered, though shoulders are OK), especially when in transit; avoid drinking alone at night; and – this is the hard one – reconsider telling off the catcalling guy, as he might become violent. Sigh. The Caribbean Coast is more dangerous in general, so all this goes double there.

WORK & VOLUNTEERING

Nicaragua is one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere, with almost 50% of its adults unemployed or underemployed. Thus, finding a job in Nicaragua is difficult. Backpacker-oriented businesses may offer you under-the-table employment, usually in exchange for room and board, but this is mostly about extending your vacation.

Volunteer opportunities, on the other hand, are common. Spanish schools in León, Granada, San Juan del Sur and Estelí always know about volunteer opportunities, or check with any *alcaldía* (mayor's office).

Centro Girasol (p213) This yummy café helps disabled kids and can help you find volunteer opportunities in Matagalpa.

Donna Tabor (☎ 552 7113; donnatabor@hotmail.com) Can arrange a variety of volunteer opportunities in Granada; two-week commitment required, restaurant experience possibly put to good use.

Habitat for Humanity (www.habitat.org) Talk to them before you come about several home-building projects, most of them concentrated in the Northern Highlands.

Potters for Peace (www.potpaz.org) Spanish-speaking ceramicists can visit as part of a social-justice oriented tour, or stay and work with Nicaraguan potters.

Quetzaltrékkers (p169) Help children by climbing volcanoes. Really.

Seeds of Learning (www.seedsoflearning.org) Sends work brigades with an educational focus to Nicaragua and El Salvador.

Selva (p185) Located close to Chinandega, this group organizes volunteers to protect nesting turtles from poachers.

TRANSPORTATION IN NICARAGUA

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Nicaragua is accessible via two international airports and six major border crossings (and two sketchy ones) with Honduras and Costa Rica. International buses and flights leave Managua several times daily for El Salvador.

Air

Nicaragua's main international hub is **Managua International Airport** (MGA; ☎ 233 1624/28; www.eaai.com.ni; Km 11 Carr Norte), a small, manageable airport that doesn't get many flights, although this is improving. It's worth checking into fares from much busier Juan Santamaria Airport in San José, Costa Rica, four to six hours by bus from the Nicaraguan border, or the international airport in Liberia, Costa Rica, just two hours by bus from Peñas Blancas. Nature Air makes two daily flights from San José and Liberia, Costa Rica, to tiny Granada International Airport (p126). Recently reapproved for international flights, at press time Big Corn Island still only had domestic services.

The following airlines fly in and out of Nicaragua, and have offices in Managua. All airlines (except Aerocaribbean) also have offices at Managua International Airport, which can be reached by the second (233 or 263) phone number given in each listing.

Aerocaribbean (airline code CBE; ☎ 270 4134; Bosques de Altamira, frente el Cine 158; hub Havana) One flight Saturday to Havana, Cuba.

American Airlines (Map p70; airline code AAL; ☎ 266 3900, 233 1624/28; www.aa.com; 3c sur Plaza España; hub Dallas-Fort Worth) Daily flights to Miami.

Atlantic Airlines (airline code FLI; ☎ 222 5787, 233 3103; www.atlanticairlines.com; 2½c arriba del Busto

DEPARTURE TAX

Departure tax is a whopping US\$32 for international flights and US\$2 for internal flights, payable in cash (córdobas or US dollars) only. Overland (or over-river) travelers save a bundle, as it's only US\$2 to leave Nicaragua, and US\$7 to come back when you start to miss it.

José Martí; hub Managua) One daily flight to Tegucigalpa, Honduras, and daily services to Bluefields and the Corn Islands.

Continental Airlines (airline code COA; ☎ 278 7033, 263 1030; www.continental.com; Edificio Ofiplaza 5, piso 2; hub Newark) Daily flights to Houston, Texas, with international connections.

Copa Airlines (airline code CMP; ☎ 267 0045, 233 1404; www.copaair.com; Km 4.5 Carr Masaya; hub Panama City) Daily flights to Guatemala City; San José, Costa Rica; San Salvador; and Panama City.

Grupo Taca (Map p70; airline code RUC; ☎ 266 3136, 263 1929/31; www.taca.com; Plaza España; hubs San Salvador and San José, Costa Rica) Daily flights throughout Latin America.

Iberia (airline code IBE; ☎ 266 4440, 233 1624/28; www.iberia.com; Plaza España; hub Madrid) Daily flights to Madrid and throughout Europe, connecting through Miami six times weekly.

La Costeña (☎ 263 2142; hub Managua) The major internal carrier has regular service to Bluefields, Corn Islands, Las Minas, Bilwi and Waspám.

Sol Air (☎ 268 3928, 233 1624/2584; Plaza España) Honduran carrier has daily flights to Miami, San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa.

Land & River

BORDER CROSSINGS

The Potosí and San Juan de Nicaragua crossings are basically for *aventureros* with deep pockets, or actual pirates. The rest of these border crossings are solid, and there's more information in destination chapters. It's US\$7 to enter Nicaragua, US\$2 to leave. Costa Rica is free coming and going, while Honduras charges US\$3 entry and free exit.

Sipoá to Peñas Blancas, Costa Rica (boxed text, p159) The main border crossing to Costa Rica is a 1km stroll through mellow border weirdness; it's fast and efficient if your arrival doesn't coincide with an international bus.

San Carlos to Los Chiles, Costa Rica (boxed text, p265) Or, take an easy, breezy, gorgeous river boat ride down the egret-lined Río Frio.

San Juan de Nicaragua to Barra, Costa Rica (boxed text, p281) This expensive river adventure is usually arranged by fancy fishing lodges, but you could theoretically do it yourself.

Potosí to La Unión, El Salvador (p190) Even sketchier, you could rent a boat and follow the old international ferry route across the Gulf of Fonseca.

Guasale to Choluteca, Honduras (boxed text, p187) The fastest route from Nicaragua, an easy cruise north from lovely León.

Somoto to Choluteca, Honduras (boxed text, p187) High-altitude crossing is almost as close to El Salvador, and comes with an amazing granite canyon.

Ocotal to Tegucigalpa, Honduras (boxed text, p428) See the sunny Segovias and Honduran capital, at this major, businesslike border.

Waspám to Puerto Lempira (boxed text, p237) Challenging but definitely doable, this takes you through the Mosquitia on Central America's biggest river, then a three-hour truck ride to the Miskito capital of Honduras.

BUS

Comfy international buses have reclining seats, air-conditioning, televisions, bathrooms and sometimes even food service, and are definitely safer for travelers with bags. But it's always cheaper – and more convenient in high season (November to April), when you may need reservations for international buses – to take local buses and cross yourself.

Several bus lines serve destinations throughout Central America, including San Salvador, and all of them are convenient to Barrio Martha Quezada in Managua, and have offices or stops elsewhere in the country. Check those sections for costs and schedules.

Del Sol Bus (☎ 270 2547; San Salvador US\$25) One bus leaves Managua daily, stopping in Estelí.

King Quality (Map p78; ☎ 228 1454) Service-oriented line charges a few dollars more for plusher buses and food service; there are offices in Managua, Estelí and León.

Tica Bus (☎ 222 3031, Managua; www.ticabus.com) The most popular carrier serves national capitals and major cities from Panama City to the Mexican border, including El Salvador (US\$25, one bus daily). In addition to the sparkling new Managua terminal, there are offices in Rivas, Matagalpa, Estelí, León, Ocotal and Chinandega; check those sections for more information.

Transnica (Map p78; ☎ 270 3133; 1c west of Esso) This smaller company serves San José, Costa Rica and San Salvador, among other destinations. There are stops in Managua, Rivas, Estelí and León.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

You can only drive across one border crossing to Costa Rica, at Sipoá/Peñas Blancas. To Honduras, you can drive across the borders at Guasule, Somoto/El Espino and Ocotal/Las Manos.

Sea

There are no official border crossings by sea. Although you can theoretically cross

the Golfo de Fonseca to El Salvador, this is not a regular crossing (you'll need to hire a private boat) and you should talk to immigration in Managua (p72) or San Salvador (p315) before attempting it.

If passport stamps are not a huge concern, there are five international ports administered by ENAP (the National Port Company), where you could catch a cargo ship: Puerto Sandino and Corinto on the Pacific, and El Rama, El Bluff (close to Bluefields) and Bilwi on the Atlantic.

Tours

Most tour offices are based in Granada, León, Matagalpa or Managua. Scores of international tours come up with a simple Internet search, or try these.

Careli Tours (☎ 278 6919; www.carelitours.com)

Recommended Swiss company that runs tours in several languages to lots of destinations.

Ecotours Nicaragua (☎ 268 5299; Crowne Plaza 2c sur ½c abajo Av Bolívar, Managua; www.centralamericaexcursions.com) Offers nature-based tours.

Gray Line (☎ 266 6134; www.graylinenicaragua.com)

Offers plush, all-inclusive day trips (US\$45 to US\$90) beginning in Managua, and ending up on yachts, in canopy tours and wandering through colonial cities.

GETTING AROUND

Pacific and Central Nicaragua are blessed with a newly paved highway system and (usually) good dirt roads to most destinations covered in this book, which are easy to see using public buses, rental cars or

even bikes. The Caribbean side, however, is linked to this grid by only a few terrible roads; access is usually easier (or in rainy season, possible) by plane and/or boat.

Air

Most domestic flights are based at Managua International Airport; its occasionally chaotic domestic offices are just west of the international terminal. Other airports, many of which are little more than dirt strips outside of town (or in Siuna's case, in the middle of town), include Waspám, Bilwi (Puerto Cabezas), Las Minas (Siuna, Bonanza, Rosita), San Carlos, Bluefields and Big Corn Island. On the Pacific Coast, airports in Granada, Montelimar and near Chinandega allow charter flights.

There are two domestic carriers, **Atlantic Airlines** (☎ 222 5787; www.atlanticairlines.com.ni), with daily domestic flights to Bluefields and the Corn Islands, and **La Costeña** (☎ 263 2142; www.flylacostena.com), with regular services to Bluefields, Corn Islands, Las Minas, San Carlos, Bilwi and Waspám. Try to make reservations in advance, particularly for Managua–San Carlos and Managua–Bilwi flights, and show up early to confirm, or they may give away your seat. Domestic flights use tiny planes where weight is important and bags necessarily get left behind, so keep all necessities in your carry-on luggage. Domestic departure tax is US\$2, payable in córdobas or US dollars only.

NICARAGUA ROAD DISTANCE CHART (km)

El Rama	680 (1day 4hr)						
Estelí	498 (1day 2hr)	372 (9hr)					
Granada	576 (1day 1hr)	312 (8hr)	166 (3hr)				
León	650 (1day 2hr)	385 (9hr)	141 (2hr 30min)	138 (2hr 30min)			
Managua	557 (1day)	292 (6hr)	148 (2hr 30min)	45 (1hr)	93 (1hr 30min)		
Matagalpa	428 (1day 2hr)	353 (8hr 30min)	71 (1hr 15min)	148 (2hr 30min)	219 (4hr)	130 (2hr)	
San Juan del Sur	644 (1 day 3hr)	400 (9hr 30min)	256 (5hr)	96 (1hr 30min)	216 (4hr 30min)	141 (2hr 30min)	233 (4hr 30min)
	Bilwi (Puerto Cabezas)	El Rama	Estelí	Granada	León	Managua	Matagalpa

Bicycle

Nicaragua gets a big thumbs up from long-distance cyclists for its smooth, paved roads and wide shoulders. Bicycles are the most common form of private transport in the country, and not only is infrastructure designed to accommodate them, drivers are used to seeing bicycles on the road and usually act courteously. There are also lots of opportunities for mountain biking – just find a dirt road.

Renting bicycles is difficult outside Granada, San Juan del Sur, Ometepe and León, but your hotel can probably arrange it. Rental bikes tend to be cheap, Chinese cruisers that need TLC, so test your options.

Boat

Many destinations are accessible only, or most easily, by boat. In places without regular service, you will need to hire your own private *panga*, or light boat. Prices vary widely, but you'll spend about US\$50 to US\$100 per hour for four to six people; tour operators can usually find a better deal. Many public boats are collective, and only leave when full – which could be tomorrow. It's easy, if not cheap, to hire boat transport up and down the Pacific Coast. On the Atlantic side, it's much more difficult.

Bluefields (p253) Boats leave daily for Pearl Lagoon and El Rama, and twice weekly to Big Corn Island. Boats run between Big Corn and Little Corn twice daily.

El Rama (p249) Boats leave several times daily to Bluefields.

Granada (p126) Connected by twice-weekly ferry service to Isla Ometepe and San Carlos; it's more convenient to get to Ometepe via San Jorge, with almost hourly boat service to the island.

San Carlos (p265) This boat transportation hub has regular service to Granada, the Solentiname Islands, Río San Juan, the scenic border crossing to Costa Rica and several natural reserves.

Waspám (p239) The gateway to the Río Coco. You can arrange private boats up and down the river, including to the Honduran border crossing.

Bus

Bus service in Nicaragua is excellent if basic. Public transport is usually on old Bluebird school buses – Canadian and US visitors can keep an eye out for their old district! – which means no luggage compartments. Try to avoid putting your pack on top of the bus, and instead sit toward the back and put

your bag with the sacks of rice and beans; you could also keep it on your lap. Chances are the bus will be too crowded to keep it on the seat next to you.

Pay your fare after the bus starts moving; this is a good place to change large bills. You may be issued a paper 'ticket' on distance buses – don't lose it, as that'll be an excuse to charge you again. Some bus stations, including Mayoreo in Managua, allow you to purchase tickets ahead of time; this does not guarantee you a seat. And while buses generally cruise around town before getting under way, you're more likely to get a seat by boarding the bus at the station or terminal.

Bus stations, often huge, chaotic lots next to markets, may seem difficult to navigate, particularly if you don't speak much Spanish. Fear not! If you can pronounce your destination, the guys yelling ('Managuamanaguamanagua!') will help you find and board your bus. Note that taxi drivers may lie about bus schedules, safety and more; just ignore them.

COSTS & CLASSES

Buses cost about US\$1 per hour, 30km to 40km, a bit more for *expreso* buses, sometimes called *directos*, which only stop in major destinations and shave a few minutes off your trip. *Ordinarios* or *ruteados* stop for anyone on the side of the road, which makes them slightly less safe and more time-consuming.

More comfortable minibuses cost about 25% more, and are available for most major routes, with vans leaving 'when full' (about 10 people). On the other extreme, many rural destinations connected to large cities by really bad roads use covered military trucks with bench seats (sometimes called *ruteados*), which cost about the same as a regular bus.

Car & Motorcycle

Thanks to former President Bolaños' 'one kilometer per day' paving program, Nicaragua has some of the best roads in Central America, most of them empty because so few people can afford private cars. Driving is a wonderful way to see Pacific and Central Nicaragua, but it's best to use public transport on the Caribbean side, as roads are just terrible.

DRIVER'S LICENSE

Your home driver's license is good for 30 days from entering the country. After that, you technically need an international or Nicaraguan license. This is rarely checked by rental-car companies, but traffic cops will check and write tickets.

HIRE

Renting a car in Nicaragua is relatively inexpensive, with sedans as low as US\$20 per day, including taxes and mandatory insurance. In rainy season, if you plan to go off major roads, get a 4WD, which will cost anywhere from US\$35 to US\$120 per day. Rental companies require a driver's license and major credit card, and most want you to be at least 25 years old. Renting a car at Managua International Airport costs 15% extra, so consider taking a taxi to an off-site office.

By law, you must purchase basic insurance (US\$10 per day), which usually has a whopping US\$1500 deductible and does not cover flat tires. You'll be recommended supplemental insurance for another US\$10 to US\$15 per day, but your credit card probably already covers this; call them to make sure. Double-check your tires, including the spare, and the jack, and don't be afraid to ask for newer equipment if you think there's a problem. There is a comprehensive list of rental car agencies in the Managua chapter (p87)

PURCHASE

If you're sure you want a car, first make sure that parts are available for the car: Toyota, Nissan and Hyundai are good choices. Gas prices are about the same as in Western Europe, so if you won't need to go off paved roads often, consider a more fuel-efficient sedan.

Locals often sell cars informally, but foreigners should definitely pay a lawyer to write up an *escritura*, or sales history, then register the ride at Administración de Rentas, with offices in all department capitals. You'll need emissions and equipment checks (about US\$30), a Nicaraguan driver's license and mandatory car insurance (US\$70 to US\$100 per year). Importing a car less than five years old is possible; **Nicaraguan Customs** (www.dga.gob.ni) has details in Spanish.

If this seems like a lot of red tape, read *My Car in Managua*, by Forrest Colburn, who bought a car here in 1985. You'll be grateful for the new system.

CITY DRIVING

Driving in Managua (heck, driving period) is not recommended after dark; even if you've rented a car, consider taking taxis instead. Other sizeable towns, including Granada, León, Matagalpa and Estelí, are mazes of unsigned one-way streets that prove a boon to police officers in search of a bribe. Be careful!

ROAD CONDITIONS

There are no up-to-date maps showing real road conditions, which change every rainy season anyway. Always ask locals if you aren't sure. Older paved roads, particularly those in the Northern Highlands, are often horribly pockmarked with axle-cracking potholes. One tactic is to get behind a local driver who knows the road, and follow them swerve for swerve. Keeping an eye on older tire tracks is also helpful.

You'll often see people with shovels pointing to a dirt-filled pothole, which they just fixed for free. They're asking for one córdoba (US\$.06) from you, a good way to keep both your car and your karma clean.

During rainy season, roads flood, wash away and close. Some roads are never recommended for casual drivers, including the Río Blanco–Puerto Cabezas road and the Juigalpa–San Carlos road, two of the worst in the country. And, no matter what your map says, the road from Nueva Guinea to Bluefields is ox-cart only.

ROAD RULES

Nicaragua's traffic laws are pretty standard and universally ignored, a boon to cops on the make. Officers may wave you over to and accuse you of something as vague as 'poor driving.'

Never initiate a bribe – you may get an honest officer who just wants to give you a warning. If a bribe...er...traffic fine is requested, and you don't speak much Spanish, it may be prudent to just pay it and be done with the whole sorry mess. If you do speak conversational Spanish, consider pointing out that it's illegal to pay a fine on the spot, then asking for the officer's name

and badge number. This is called 'bluffing' and could make things worse, so use your best judgment. If you do get a ticket, pay it at any BAC or BanPro bank.

Hitchhiking

Hitchhiking is very common in Nicaragua, even by solo women – just stick out your thumb. Foreign women, particularly those carrying all their bags, should think twice before hitchhiking solo – remember that to some people, you look like a bag of money with tits. Never hitchhike into or out of Managua.

You should always offer to pay the driver, which will almost always be refused. Do what Nica hitchhikers do and leave a few coins behind.

Taxi

Almost all taxis in Nicaragua are *colectivos*, which stop and pick up other clients while taking a possibly circuitous route to your destination. They can get crowded.

Managua taxis are unmetered and notorious for ripping off tourists (see the boxed text, p74), and taxis at major border crossings may also overcharge, given the chance. Most city taxis have set in-town fares, usually US\$0.70. Ask a local how much a fare should cost before getting into the cab.

Hiring taxis between cities is a comfortable and reasonable option for midrange travelers. Prices vary widely, but expect to pay US\$10 for every 20km. As taxi quality varies widely, try to choose a comfortable, reliable-looking vehicle for longer trips.

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