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Getting Started

Where to go and what to do? Nicaragua and El Salvador offer everything from homestays and hiking trails through chilly cloud forests to relaxation and a fair amount of decadence in luxury beachfront resorts. If you're headed to San Salvador or Managua, you may want to pack a snazzy outfit or two; if you're more interested in getting into the uncharted jungle interior, malaria pills and a water purifier are perhaps in order.

But – unless you consider this part of the fun – this is one region where planning ahead isn't absolutely necessary, as crowds are thin, except during Semana Santa (Holy Week), and there are things to see and do all year round. This chapter offers an overview of your options.

WHEN TO GO

With the exception of Semana Santa, when Nicas and Salvadoreños pack the beaches and hotels, you really don't have to worry about tourist season prices or crowds in either destination – yet. The exceptions are Granada and Southwestern Nicaragua, both easily accessible from Costa Rica, and La Libertad in El Salvador, beacon to the surfing faithful, which observe the traditional Central American high season (late November to mid-March) with more gusto (and higher prices) each year.

The reason why tourists flood the rest of Central America this time of year is the excellent weather – *verano* (literally summer; dry season) falls between November and May, and is the best time for back-country hiking and driving on dirt roads into the interior, not to mention sunbathing on the Pacific beaches. The Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua is less predictable (not to mention wetter) but it's worth checking to see if the sun's out on the other coast if you're trying to decide which way to head.

Invierno (winter; the rainy season) runs roughly from May to November. Expect afternoon downpours for a couple of hours and higher humidity (especially in lowland areas), not to mention beautiful greenery in the usually dry tropical forests of the Pacific coast. Uninterrupted days of rain and flooding do occur, but with less frequency. The entire Caribbean Coast braces itself for hurricane season, technically from June to November, with the worst storms blowing through in October and November: not a good time to plan that Corn Islands diving jaunt.

COSTS & MONEY

Both Nicaragua and El Salvador are inexpensive, and serious budget travelers who limit time in pricier destinations (including San Salvador, Granada and the Corn Islands) can realistically travel on US\$15 per day in Nicaragua and US\$20 per day in El Salvador. Prices rise if you want little luxuries like private bathrooms, sit-down meals and guided tours.

El Salvador (like Ecuador and Panama) uses the US dollar as its official currency, so expect prices to remain more stable. In Nicaragua US dollars are the alternate currency, although using the Nicaraguan córdoba is usually cheaper and easier. Traveler's checks are being phased out in both countries, and it's more convenient to bring debit and credit cards. For more advice on the financial scenes in each country, see p287 and p459.

See Climate Charts (p467) for more information.

Check for travel advisories at either the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office (www.fco.gov.uk) or the even more alarmist, and therefore entertaining, US State Department (www.state.gov).

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- A flashlight (torch) for exploring caves, and your room when the electricity fails (as it often does); candles are a more romantic option.
- A mosquito net, if you plan an extended jungle adventure or will be sleeping in cheap rooms without screens.
- Insect repellent containing DEET (p488) for wet-season travels. You may want to take medication against malaria, too (p486).
- A towel; Douglas Adams knew what he was talking about.
- An alarm clock for those early-morning departures.
- Bathing suit, snorkeling gear, flip-flops (thongs) and a sarong for the coast; light jacket or sweater, and warmish pants (eg denim) for the highlands.
- A small Spanish–English dictionary and/or Lonely Planet's *Latin American Spanish Phrasebook*.
- Water purifier or iodine tablets if you're headed into the wild, wild east.
- Documents; in addition to photocopying your passport, make copies of all your important documents, including airline tickets, and stash them in at least two places (try your backpack frame, camera bag or 'secret' pocket in your favorite pants).
- A prescription for any medication you might need – hey, what if you decide to extend your vacation for a few months?
- Contact-lens solution, tampons, sunscreen and any premium-brand toiletries, all of which can be hard to find.
- Photos from home, coloring books for kids and other portable bridges between cultures.

Sleeping

Budget travelers can find a clean, basic room with shared bathroom for US\$3 to US\$5 per person in most of Nicaragua, and US\$10 per person in Granada, San Juan del Sur or the Caribbean Coast; dorms usually run to about US\$3 per person. In El Salvador the only dorm-style options are in San Salvador and Santa Ana (US\$6 to US\$8 per person); elsewhere budget rooms cost US\$8 to US\$15, single or double.

Midrange travelers pay US\$20 to US\$40 per room (single or double) in most of Nicaragua, but in El Salvador very comfortable hotels start at around US\$18 per night, some US\$12 per person, a good option for solo travelers. Luxury hotels can cost US\$80 to US\$400 per night, a good deal for that sort of thing.

Eating

Shoestringers can order up a huge *comida corriente* (set plate) for US\$1.50 to US\$3 in either country, or try a simple *fritanga* (roadside barbecue; US\$1) or a few pupusas (US\$0.30 to US\$0.50 each) for even less. Sit-down meals are US\$2 to US\$4 for a steam-table buffet or simple fare, jumping to US\$5 to US\$15 per person for fancier or international cuisine. A 10% gratuity is usually added to the bill (but rarely the menu) in both countries.

Transportation

Buses cost US\$0.50 per hour in El Salvador and US\$1 per hour in Nicaragua; *expresos* (express buses) and minivans are a bit more. Rental cars start at about US\$30 per day in both countries, more for 4WD, and gas US\$3.50 to US\$4 per gallon. Internal flights in Nicaragua run to about US\$90 a pop.

READING UP

English-language books (as well as your guidebooks and phrasebooks) are hard to find once you're there, so get them ahead of time.

Books

If you read Spanish, both countries are famed for their literature (see p61 and p305), in particular their poetry.

Before the Volcano Erupted: The Ancient Cerén Village in Central America, by Payson Sheets, tells how one evening in AD 595, Joya de Cerén (see p356) was buried by Volcán Laguna Caldera; they call it Central America's Pompeii.

Blood of Brothers: Life and War in Nicaragua by Stephen Kinzer is out of print but worth finding. This insightful book, by the *New York Times*' man in Managua during the Contra War, is recommended by the Peace Corps to its Nicaragua volunteers.

In *The Country Under My Skin: A Memoir of Love and War* by Gioconda Belli, a Managua debutante starts working undercover for the Sandinistas while discovering her own poetic and sexual power. Remarkable.

The wisdom of the beautiful Islas Solentiname, in a far-off corner of Lake Nicaragua, is translated for the world in *The Gospel of Solentiname* by Ernesto Cardenal (see the boxed text, p267).

Massacre at El Mozote, by Mark Danner, tells how the people of El Mozote (see p448), caught in the crossfire of the bloody Salvadoran civil war, thought that their neutrality would save them. They turned out to be wrong.

Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America 1977–1992, by William M LeoGrande, almost exclusively covers Nicaragua and El Salvador with a detailed, readable history and analysis of US involvement during (and leading up to) the civil wars.

Salvador by Joan Didion is a book-length essay that describes the dark, terrifying early years of the war; it's a slice of life and death during 1982.

And We Sold the Rain: Contemporary Fiction from Central America, edited by Rosario Santos, lets local voices explain indigenous political movements and activity.

Follow guerrilla DJs through the mist in *Rebel Radio: The Story of El Salvador's Radio Venceremos*, by Jose Ignacio Lopez Vigil et al, as they instruct and inspire the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), one step ahead of the military.

When the catcalls start to grate, pull out *Women & Guerrilla Movements: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas, Cuba* by Karen Kampwirth, featuring lovely ladies no one would mess with in a dark alley.

Websites

There are more website listings for El Salvador on p458 and Nicaragua on p286.

El Salvador in Images (www.4elsalvador.com) Excellent website with tons of photos, organized in galleries, virtual tours and more in Spanish and English.

El Salvador Music (www.musica.com.sv) This awesome website has five categories of 'metal,' seven of 'electronic' and so much more.

Guanaquín (www.guanaquin.com) New Spanish speakers will love this kids' website covering El Salvador with detailed and easy-to-read info and maps.

Latin America Bureau (www.latinamericabureau.org) An excellent UK-based research organization and publisher dedicated to human rights; check out its booklist online.

History junkies will get a kick out of the dry, heartbreaking yet somehow still hilarious Iran-Contra Report (www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/walsh); don't skip the Caspar Wienberger section.

Latin American Network Information Center – Nicaragua (www1.janic.utexas.edu/la/ca/nicaragua) An excellent portal with academic and tourism-oriented offerings.

Manfut (www.manfut.org in Spanish) A cornucopia of photos, history, myth, articles, important phone numbers and much, much more, at this huge, messy, wonderful site covering every corner of Nicaragua.

Nicaragua Béisbol League (www.ibw.com.ni/~beisnica in Spanish) Keep up with the schedules and stats of Nicaragua's national pastime.

Vianica.com (www.vianica.com/transportation) Log onto this interactive map and click on your route to find Nicaragua road conditions, travel-time estimates, bus fares and more.

MUST-SEE MOVIES

Unfortunately not much of either country has been captured in quality celluloid, but there are still a few movies to see.

Fire from the Mountain, based on the book by the same name, is an award-winning documentary about the Contra War that includes interviews with Omar Cabezas (the book's author) and others.

Noche Inocente (Innocent Night) is an excellent, low-budget 2005 film covering child soldiers in the Salvadoran civil war.

Romero is a heartbreaking and sometimes graphic movie with Raul Julia in the title role. It traces the archbishop's path to liberation (see the boxed text, p305).

The Oliver Stone classic *Salvador*, starring James Woods, received two Oscar nominations for its story of a reporter covering the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, and getting entangled in the war along the way.

Under Fire, a box-office sleeper starring Nick Nolte and Gene Hackman, does the Hollywood version of the revolution, built up around the murder of ABC journalist Bill Stewart by President Somoza's National Guard, which was captured on film.

Men with Guns, written and directed by indie legend John Sayles, is an allegorical tale set in an unnamed, war-torn Latin American country, where one doctor comes to terms with conflict's physical and psychological carnage.

The World is Watching is a documentary covering the media feeding frenzy during the Contra War; the makers went back in 2003 to make *When the World Stopped Watching*, to document what happened when the reporters took off for the next war.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Nicaragua and El Salvador both celebrate **Semana Santa**, or Holy Week, the week before Easter Sunday, with barbecues, trips to the beach and fiestas across both countries – know where you want to be and be sure to have reservations, especially if you're headed to the beach. More of the major festivals are listed on p285 (Nicaragua) and p457 (El Salvador).

Feria Gastronómica (weekly; Juayúa, El Salvador) Fill up on tasty Salvadoran treats at this almost entirely edible handicrafts fair.

Palo de Mayo (May; Bluefields, Nicaragua) Dancing around the maypole probably isn't this enticing in your home country.

San Jerónimo (September 30; Masaya, Nicaragua) Three months of dancing, fireworks and men in drag; for more Masaya mayhem, see p96.

Festival de Hamacas (November; Quezaltepeque, El Salvador) Easily one of the most relaxing festivals in Central America.

La Gritería (Día de la Purísima Concepción) (December 7; celebrated all over Nicaragua) You'll finally find out what causes so much happiness around here.

Central American keyboards often access the all-important *aroba* (@) by pressing 'alt gr' and '2' at the same time; or 'alt,' '6' and '4.' Otherwise just cut and paste, or ask '¿Cómo se hace aroba?'

Look for the 'Red Sostenible' (Sustainability Network) sign – with a volcano and hummingbird – in Nicaragua for quality, locally owned, community-friendly businesses.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

In both Nicaragua and El Salvador, where tourism is only beginning to gain a firm foothold – and where people are eager to show off their beautiful 'sliver of the world' for what it is, instead of what was on TV during the 1980s – you're already using developed-world *dinero* (money) in a democratic way. Educating yourself on where to spend your money – on local, green or otherwise proactive businesses (see below) – is a great way to take it further.

As part of the tourism vanguard, industry professionals and community leaders are watching your habits and preferences closely. If you can, make the effort to visit a national park or reserve (see p63 and p307), try some unconventional tourism (see the boxed text, p244), take a tour through the past (p317), or go all out and help campesinos (farmers) harvest organic coffee (p206). Other tips for treading lightly include the following:

- Take a week of survival Spanish (see p284 and p455 for courses) or bring a phrasebook. Language is your passport to the real Central America.
- If you already speak Spanish, consider volunteering; there are scads of worthy causes around (see p289 and p461).
- Just chat folks up. Outside La Libertad and the Granada zone, you're something of a novelty and people want to meet you. Accept that invitation for coffee and *rosquillas* (baked corn snacks), even if you're worried that your host can't afford it; you'll have fun.
- Get off the beaten track. This isn't for everyone, but if you've got the time, energy and inclination, step away from the crowds, share the wealth and take a piece of people's lives back home with you.
- Never litter. One of Nicaragua's tourism slogans says that 'a clean Nicaragua attracts more tourists,' and you don't want to be the one who spoils it. Pack up all trash when camping, put butts where they belong and never, ever toss garbage from bus windows.
- Stay away from the cocaine – if there's a potential tourism disaster waiting to happen in these regions, it's this one. Besides, that shit will kill you.
- Buy directly from craftspeople or artisan cooperatives; it's a great excuse to get off the beaten path.
- Avoid souvenirs (or meals) made from endangered plants or animals.

Internet Resources

International Ecotourism Society (TIES; www.ecotourism.org) Links to businesses devoted to ecotourism.

Planeta.com (www.planeta.com) Ron Mader's outstanding ecotourism website.

Tourism Concern (www.tourismconcern.org.uk) UK-based organization dedicated to promoting ethical tourism.

Transitions Abroad (www.transitionsabroad.com) Eponymous website of the magazine focusing on immersion and responsible travel.

Books

For more on how not to dent the lands we visit (as well as listings of ecotour groups), read *The Good Alternative Travel Guide* or Mark Mann's outstanding *The Community Tourism Guide*.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

THE CLASSIC NICARAGUA & EL SALVADOR **One Month to One Lifetime**

Fly into **Managua** (p68) and take in the view from **Sandino's Silhouette** (p74) and the markets of **Masaya** (p99), then head south for sunny **San Juan del Sur** (p148), Nicaragua's best beach town; **Isla de Ometepe** (p137), a volcanic lake island; and **Granada** (p110), a graceful colonial beauty whose northern neighbor, **León** (p159), offers an unrivalled collection of churches and poets, plus volcanoes. Then dive into the revolutionary culture and cloud forests of **Estelí** (p192), the peaceful beauty of **Jinotega** (p217) and the urban bustle of **Matagalpa** (p206). The Caribbean Coast offers jungle-covered Spanish fortresses along the **Río San Juan** (p275), along with the awesome diving and white-sand beaches of the **Corn Islands** (p254).

From Managua, fly or book an international bus to San Salvador – or stop in **Ocotal** (p201), and see the pine forests of **Jalapa** (p203); or cross closer to the canyon of **Somoto** (p205). Surfers and sea-turtle lovers can stretch out on the sands of **Playa El Cuco** (p417) and the wild eastern beaches, while history buffs may climb to former FMLN stronghold **Perquín** (p442) and **Ruta de la Paz** (p447). Stop in sweet **Alegria** (p429) on your way back to **San Salvador** (p311), where wonderful nightlife and cultural attractions await.

Surfers should visit **La Libertad** (p396) and the western beaches, while culture (and flower) lovers can investigate **Ruta de las Flores** (p357), paying particular attention to **Juayúa** (p363). Hikers can indulge in **Parque Nacional Los Volcanes** (p353) and **Parque Nacional El Imposible** (p375), or head north to **Parque Nacional Montecristo-El Trifinio** (p360) and **Cerro El Pital** (p392), taking time for handicrafts in **La Palma** (p389) and the artsy scene in **Suchitoto** (p377).

Roll through both countries, indulging yourself on Nicaragua's almost-forgotten coast, or just dallying as you explore Nicaragua's misty Northern Highlands. From there you can enjoy the undeveloped beaches of Eastern El Salvador. Stepping off the beaten path is one of this 1500km route's greatest pleasures.



CLASSIC EL SALVADOR

Two Weeks to One Month

Start in **San Salvador** (p311), where you can take your pick of museums – anthropology (see p323) for the history buffs or modern art (see p323) for the cool kids – but don't skip the poignant memorials to Archbishop Oscar Romero (p323). No matter what you do, finish your day at San Antonio Abad's (see p329) collection of restaurants and nightlife options.

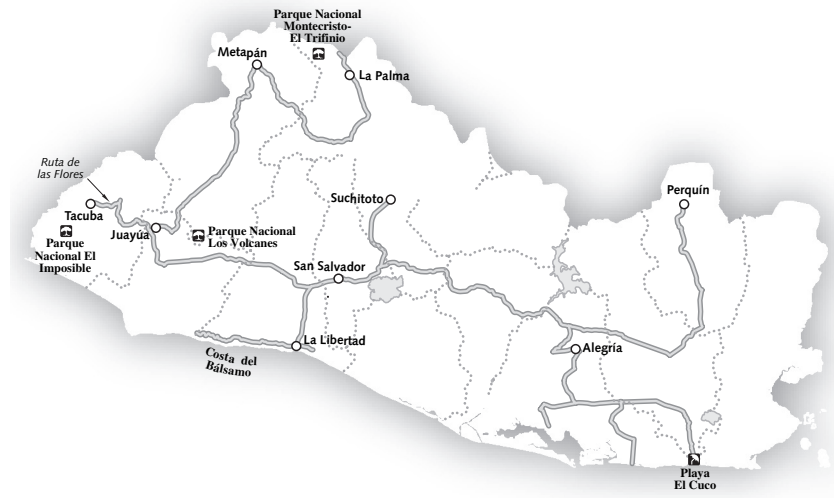
Stop and smell the flowers along **Ruta de las Flores** (p357), 36 pretty kilometers winding through El Salvador's high-altitude heartland, where you'll discover lined stands selling *artesanías* (handicrafts) and, of course, flowers – plus one beautiful orchid garden. **Juayúa** (p363), with its weekend food fair and excellent hiking, is one tiny town you won't want to miss.

From here hikers can get their fix in **Tacuba** (p373), featuring the back way into **Parque Nacional El Imposible** (p375), or up the dosage a bit at **Parque Nacional Los Volcanes** (p353), with three impressive peaks, two of them active; one erupted at the time of research.

Take one of the most beautiful rides in the country up to **Metapán** (p358), with access to El Salvador's most important park for wildlife, **Parque Nacional Montecristo-El Trifinio** (p360); **La Palma** (p389), nearby, lets you combine outdoor activities with handicrafts shopping.

Surfers will head to **La Libertad** (p396) for some of the best surfing in the world, while adventurers will go northeast to **Perquín** (p442), the FMLN headquarters during the war and home to the best museums and monuments on the subject. Stop in **Alegria** (p429) for more flowers, plus hot sulfur springs, and commune with sea turtles and sea birds; or just catch some rays at **Playa El Cuco** (p417). Be sure to leave a couple of days for **Suchitoto** (p377).

Relish tiny El Salvador's short distances as you ramble about 500km, stopping to smell the flowers (or rappel down the waterfalls) and hike across volcanoes or the northern mountains. Surfing is served up from La Libertad to the Guatemalan border.



CLASSIC NICARAGUA: SOUTHERN LOOP

10 Days to Three Weeks

Long popular with the 'escape from Costa Rica' set, this ride begins on the beaches around **San Juan del Sur** (p148), with nesting sea turtles at **Refugio de Vida Silvestre La Flor** (p157) from July to January and plenty of perfect waves at beaches like **Playa Madera** (p156), all the way from the border to **Playa Guasacate** (p135).

Then it's time for some culture in charismatic, colonial **Granada** (p110), with museums, churches and art galleries; spend the day kayaking through its 365 islets or hiking **Volcán Mombacho** (p128). Take a day trip (at least) to **Masaya** (p92) and **Pueblos Blancos** (p103) – **Catarina** (p104) is the most popular, but **Diría** (p104) is more festive – or even spend the night next to **Laguna de Apoyo** (p102). Then hop the ferry to **Isla de Ometepe** (p137) for a day or week.

Your next stop: **San Carlos** (p262). If the nine-hour ferry ride across sounds rough, you could take the plane, which gives you an excuse to investigate **Managua** (p68). Enjoy the view from **Sandino's Silhouette** (see p74) and the perspective offered by **Huellas de Acahualinca** (p76).

Check the boat schedules in San Carlos and decide where you want to go first. It's a bit tricky to get out to the isolated island-art colony of the **Islas Solentiname** (p266), which has some of the most scenic souvenir shopping you'll ever enjoy, not to mention one very pretty church. Then it's down the mighty Río San Juan, through some of the wildest rain forests remaining in Central America, to the Spanish fortress at **El Castillo** (p278); real adventurers could take it all the way to **San Juan del Norte** (p280).

This 500km tour takes you to the less touristed beaches of South-west Nicaragua, then to Spanish colonial Granada for the culture portion of your vacation. From there, tropical lake islands await, or head down Río San Juan before crossing back over the border.



In this 600km itinerary, head north from cosmopolitan Managua to intellectual León's museums and volcanoes, investigating quiet beaches and Spanish colonial treasures. Then it's up to the cloud-forest scenery and quetzals of the Northern Highlands.

CLASSIC NICARAGUA: HEARTLAND TOUR 10 Days to Three Weeks

Start with an abbreviated version of the Southern Loop, but instead of crossing Lago de Nicaragua, come back to **Managua** (p68) for a day or two, then grab a bus to **León** (p159), a culture-junky haven of museums and churches – and don't miss the original churches at **León Viejo** (see the boxed text, p175). Climb a **volcano** (p177) or hit **Playa Poneloya** (p174); heck, get way off the beaten track at isolated **Playa Jiquilillo** (p188), where sea turtles nest nearby.

From León, go east to **Estelí** (p192), perhaps stopping in **San Jacinto** (p179) for a mud facial or **El Sauce** (p179) for an amazing church en route. After your cigar tour in Estelí, you'll have to decide which cloud forest to visit: **Reserva Natural Cerro Tisey-Estanzuela** (p198), with volcanic views and goat cheese, or **Reserva Natural Mirafior** (p197), where you can stay in a farmhouse and help make breakfast. Adventurers headed north to El Salvador will want to see newly discovered **Somoto Canyon** (p205) or the wonderfully chilly wilderness around **Jalapa** (p203).

Take the dirt road to **Jinotega** (p217), the beautiful City of Mists, being sure to stop in scenic **San Rafael del Norte** (p221). Wend your way back down the mountains to **Matagalpa** (p206), enjoying **Ruta de Café** (see the boxed text, p210) as well as the city's more urban attractions, before heading back to Managua, with a stop at **Museo Precolombiano de Chagüitillo** (p214).

And if you're going to do Nicaragua right, hop on a plane – or better yet, take the **Road to El Rama** (p239) – to the **Corn Islands** (p254) where you can recover Caribbean-style.



TAILORED TRIPS

VOLCANOES & VOLCANIC CLIMBS

El Salvador and Nicaragua have almost 50 known volcanoes. Start with **Izalco** (1910m), the 'Lighthouse of the Pacific,' part of **Parque Nacional Los Volcanes** (p353). It was closed at press time due to the erupting **Ilamatepec** (2381m); you could still cool off nearby in **Lago de Coatepeque** (p352).

Keep climbing in **Juayúa** (p363), with 'wet rappelling' down a waterfall, or take on **Cerro El Pital** (2730m; p392), El Salvador's highest point; neighboring **Cerro Montecristo** (2418m), in **Parque Nacional Montecristo-El Trifinio** (p360), is tougher, but there's camping. Head east to **Chichontepec** (2182m; p435), with a helipad and great views, or **Chaparrastique** (2130m; p424), a much tougher climb to its incredible crater.

You can see **Volcán Cosigüina** (849m; p189), Nicaragua's northernmost cone, and perhaps the **Maribios chain** (see p177), with five active – and climbable – craters. Awesome nonvolcanic hiking in the misty Northern Highlands is centered around Estelí, Matagalpa and Jinotega, with **Cerro Musún** (see the boxed text, p242) a standout volcano in the nation's center.

Continue southwest for the active **Volcán Masaya** (p100), the swimmable **Laguna de Apoyo** (p102) and/or the cloud forest-topped **Volcán Mombacho** (p128). You'll need a boat for the spectacular volcanoes on **Isla Zapatera** (see p129) and **Isla de Ometepe** (p137), which also offer sunbathing.



INDIGENOUS NICARAGUA & EL SALVADOR

Amateur archaeologists will get their kicks from the petroglyphs on **Isla de Ometepe** (p137) or **Isla Zapatera** (p129). Granada's finest treasures are at **Convento San Y Museo Francisco** (p116). **Juigalpa** (p243) has even better statues, while **Museo Precolombiano de Chagüitillo** (p214) offers petroglyph hikes.

Modern indigenous cultures are strong in **Barrio Monimbó** (p97) in Masaya, **Barrio Subtiava** (p168) in León, and in **San Marcos** (p107), which has spectacular *fiestas*. On the **Caribbean Coast** (p224) the Miskito and Mayangna peoples are largely autonomous, while smaller populations of Garífuna and Rama are working to maintain their own cultures.

There's an excellent museum in **Condega** (p200), then see **Cacaopera** (p449), for cliff paintings and Maya culture, and the modest ruins at **Quelepa** (p429) or **Cihuatán** (p385).

Impressive ruins include **San Andrés** (p356), with grassy pyramids; **Joya de Cerén** (p356), suddenly buried Pompeii-style; and **Tazumal** (p357), El Salvador's finest, close to **Casa Blanca** (p358), an old ceremonial site. **Parque Nacional El Imposible** (p375) has ancient Maya writing, while **Nahuizalco** (p362) and **Izalco** (p354) have modern Maya culture. Learn more in San Salvador at one of the country's best museums, **Museo Nacional de Antropología David J Guzmán** (p323).



SHOPPERS & LUXURY LOVERS

Sure, you'd love to shop Nicaragua and El Salvador, but will there be hotels with room service, or at least hot water? Book a suite in San Salvador's posh **Colonia Escalón** (p330) and browse the **art galleries** (p320) and more. Just east, **Ilobasco** (p438) has famed – and infamous – handicrafts, while **Ruta de las Flores** (see the boxed text, p357) offers a swish resort in **Apaneca** (p366), food festivals in **Juayúa** (p363) and handicrafts shopping galore.

Suchitoto (p377) also offers upscale offerings, plus easy access to handicrafts in **Concepción de Quezaltepeque** (p388) and **La Palma** (p389); head to **Guatajiagua** (p452) for black pottery.

Need to tan? Try **Los Cóbano** (p404) or **Costa del Sol** (p407) in El Salvador; or **Playa Aserradores** (p187), **Montelimar** (p90) or **El Ostional** (p158) in Nicaragua. For Spanish colonial elegance, León's **Hotel El Convento** (p171) and Granada's **Hotel Gran Francia** (p123) are hard to beat, but **Boaco** (p239) has hot springs.

The pinnacle of Nicaraguan shopping is Masaya's **Mercado Artesanías** (Old Market; see p99), or tour **Los Pueblos Blancos** (p103). Stay in top hotels in **Granada** (p123) or **Managua** (p68). Head to the Northern Highlands, with more wonderful handicrafts at places like **San Juan de Limay** (p199); the major towns all have plush lodging, too. Or head east for fabulous tarpon fishing in **San Juan del Norte** (p280) and the world's most scenic shopping in **Islas Solentiname** (p266).



TOUGH TRAVELERS

You're not into shopping, but you enjoy vacationing in old war zones with infrastructure issues because...well...you're not sure why. Anyway, start at **Sandino's Silhouette** (see p74) in Managua, where you can contemplate **Volcán Momotombo** (p177), the toughest volcano climb in Nicaragua. After a few more Maribios peaks, take in the revolutionary collection of monuments and museums in **León** (p159). Then it's up to **Estelí** (p192) for a drink at **Bar-Restaurant Rincón Legal** (p196), a Sandinista shrine, plus more museums and murals. Sadly **Cerro Mogotón** (p202), Nicaragua's highest point, is still landmined, so it's **Matagalpa** (p206) for the Carlos Fonseca Museum and hikes following the footsteps of armies and refugees.

Explore alternative tourism in **Santa Lucía** (p241) and organic agriculture in **Nueva Guinea** (p247), then it's **Reserva de Biosfera Bosawás** (p228) – pick up your machete in **Bonanza** (p228). Cross the border at **Waspám** (p236), with one of very few Contra memorials, then hack your way across Honduras to El Salvador's FMLN stronghold **Perquín** (p442), its museums and monuments beginning **Ruta de la Paz** (see the boxed text, p447).

Just south, **Volcán San Miguel** (p424) is El Salvador's toughest volcano climb, while **Suchitoto** (p377) combines hiking and war tourism. Perhaps include **Arcatao** (p388) as a side trip. Finally, get a nice room in **San Salvador** (p311), with more thought-provoking sites.



Snapshots

CURRENT EVENTS

For two countries so strongly linked by history and poetry, El Salvador and Nicaragua are pretty much polar opposites within the narrow context of Central America. El Salvador has the highest population density in the region, a cramped 288 people per sq km, while Nicaragua's is the lowest, only 35 people per sq km – compare these to the regional average of 65. That basic inequity seems to underlie many other sharp contrasts.

El Salvador has become an economic engine over the past decade, with a rapidly rising minimum wage and standard of living. Infrastructure is solid in most urban areas, and improving elsewhere. The country is also experiencing a crime wave, largely because of gangs (see p302).

Nicaragua keeps threatening to have an economic boom, but according to most rankings remains the second-poorest country in the hemisphere (after Haiti), its economy relying heavily on small farms and self employment. Infrastructure is good on the country's Pacific side, but head into the untamed east, and really abject poverty becomes apparent. Despite the privations, crime for crime (not including most narcotrafficking on the Caribbean Coast), Nicaragua is also the safest country in Central America.

But for all their differences, the two neighbors are inextricably linked, their peninsulas stretching across the Gulf of Fonseca in a volcanic high five. Both use the informal 'vos' tense when they talk, and both speak the language of poetry. The scars of war remain: both populations are young – with an average age of around 21 – and majority female. Both have high rates of emigration, with émigrés ranging from wealthy political refugees in Miami to hunched-over coffee pickers in Costa Rica – many of whom send significant amounts of money home to Nicaragua and El

One of the best portals for El Salvador, Nicaragua and the rest of the region is the University of Texas Latin American Network Information Center (lanic.utexas.edu/subject/countries.html).

Look for *Wani* magazine, 'The Voice of the Caribbean,' with excellent and insightful articles about Caribbean Nicaragua – in Spanish and Miskito.

FIVE GREAT SMALL TOWNS

You've got to go to Granada – Juayúa is waiting – and it'd be difficult to avoid Managua or San Salvador even if you wanted to. But what about the *pueblitos*, or little towns, that the tourist trail has missed?

- Ataco (p369) Has Spanish colonial hotels, cobblestone sidewalks, crosses overlooking El Salvador and a swimmable waterfall – all without the crowds of Costa Rica or Cancún.
- El Castillo (p278) Famed for its picture-perfect Spanish fortress overlooking the languid Río San Juan, but it also makes a great base for all manner of rainforest adventures.
- San Rafael del Norte (p221) A high-altitude, easy-access sparkler with an awe-inspiring church, the best Sandino museum in Nicaragua, and much more.
- San José de los Remates (p242) Amid the granite peaks of Nicaragua's Central Highlands, this is an inspiring opportunity to experience Nicaragua's alternative tourism (p244) at its best.
- Suchitoto (p377) A colonial-era indigo boomtown, which is the perfect base for wilderness hikes and war memorials, plus it has arts festivals and an impressive cultural center.

TIMELINE 6000 BC

Clam shells left at Monkey Point, Nicaragua; among the oldest remains left by humans in Central America

AD 400

Construction of cities, including Tazumal, begins in El Salvador

Watch as the Nicaraguans (with backup from Salvadoran troops) take on William Walker in the critically panned and somewhat hallucinogenic movie *Walker*, directed by Alex Cox (*Sid and Nancy*, *Repo Man*), filmed on location in 1986.

Salvador. The respective diasporas also enrich both countries with a cosmopolitan outlook you might not expect from such small nations, which may have convinced both to gamble on Cafta (see the boxed text, p32).

They are also examples of countries successfully undergoing the transition from paramilitary conflicts to peaceful participatory democracies. In El Salvador, the FSLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) remains an important popular voice from the left, and it did well in the past two congressional elections. The Sandinistas are now a center-left party that won about 60% of the last municipal elections, while many prominent former Contras run on the Yatama ticket.

IRAN-CONTRA

On July 19, 1979, the Nicaraguan revolution marched to victory, its martyrs vindicated and its enemies in flight. The Junta of Five (p56), including FSLN leader Daniel Ortega, made ready to take power. The world cheered; even US president Jimmy Carter extended his congratulations and a generous aid package.

Two hours south of the border, Costa Rican observers had already videotaped the first US troops arriving.

In Our Back Yard

As the left-wing Sandinistas consolidated power, many of their achievements, including celebrated literacy and health-care initiatives, continued earning international accolades. Other acts, including the nationalization of more than 300 companies, convinced international observers that the FSLN – known allies of Castro's Cuba – were headed down the communist path. Finally, when the CIA confirmed that the Sandinistas were supplying leftist rebels in El Salvador, newly elected US president Ronald Reagan cut all ties with Daniel Ortega's regime and began supporting former government troops and other allies of the fallen Somoza regime.

This group called themselves the Contras, and were lauded by Reagan as 'the moral equivalents of our founding fathers.' The USA increased aid to them and to the surrounding countries, where military bases, training grounds and other support was available to the rapidly growing resistance. Reagan's goal? To protect democracy by keeping communism out of America's back yard.

After Daniel Ortega won the 1984 elections, Contras stepped up attacks on farms and crops, coordinated with a US blockade of all food and medicine. Ortega responded by expanding the Sandinista military, graciously retooled by the Soviet Union, with a hated draft. It had become a war of attrition, with well over 100,000 casualties. By the time Ortega signed the Arias Peace Accords in 1987, Nicaragua had been at war for more than a decade. Regardless, calls for a ceasefire were answered, in part because the Contras were suddenly out of bullets.

Busted

In October 1986, Sandinistas shot down a Contra supply plane originating in Ilopango, El Salvador – with an American pilot. This was in spite of the fact that in 1984, after learning that the CIA had illegally mined El Corinto Port, the US Congress had banned Reagan from spending taxpayer dollars 'for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Nicaragua.'

Two weeks later, with Reagan's spin doctors already working overtime, Lebanese newspaper *Al-Shiraa* revealed that National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane, and the then-unknown Colonel

Both nations, of course, spent the 1980s locked in battles that were, in many ways, just white-hot expressions of the so-called Cold War.

HISTORY

Nicaragua and El Salvador have been in regular contact since trade links were established up and down the Central American isthmus – probably around 2000 BC. Though El Salvador seems to have been the southernmost border of the Olmec and Maya civilizations, both countries were using variations of Aztec Náhuatl (among other languages) at the time of the Spanish conquest, indicating a migration from what's now southern Mexico.

Oliver North, had made an arms-for-hostages deal with the revolutionary Islamic government of Tehran.

The two stories would prove to be closely linked.

After Congress shut down Contra support in 1984, McFarlane and North had begun looking for alternative funding sources by soliciting third-party donations, from Saudi royals, the Sultan of Brunei and \$5 million from Saudi arms dealer Adnan Khashoggi, who later told his story on US television.

After Islamic Lebanese terrorists took seven US hostages, Iranian arms dealer Manucher Ghorbanifar (who resurfaced in 2002 with 'proof' that Saddam Hussein had yellowcake uranium) informed McFarlane and North that Iran could help – in exchange for HAWK anti-aircraft and TOW anti-tank missiles. 'America will never make concessions to terrorists,' said President Reagan on February 18, 1985. 'To do so would only invite more terrorism.'

Reagan's uncharacteristic prescience notwithstanding, more than 1500 weapons were sold to Iran over the next two years, though only one hostage was released. McFarlane and North arranged the fateful Tehran meeting to see what was wrong, where Iranian officials, surprised, said they knew nothing about a hostage deal.

As the flummoxed twosome headed home, North played the optimist, reassuring McFarlane that profits from the missiles were at least being funneled to the Contras.

It was then that McFarlane realized how deep things had gotten. 'Oh shit,' he thought, according to transcripts from the Iran-Contra hearings.

The Teflon President

Reagan denied that the meeting had occurred, but recanted a week later, still saying there was no arms-for-hostage deal. Only 14% of Americans believed him.

One administration official after another refused to testify. Reagan could 'not recall' authorizing the arms sales. Luckily, Israel had kept signed receipts, but ranking House Republican Dick Cheney felt an impeachment trial 'wouldn't be good for America.' Vice President Bush refused to turn over his diary until 1991; when the log's contents, including a passage reading 'I'm one of the few people that know fully the details...It is not a subject we can talk about,' was reviewed, it justified re-opening the case.

'On...the question of the hostages,' he had written in 1986, 'I'm one of the few people who knows the details.' His notes implicated McFarlane and other close friends, but on the eve of their trials, Bush pardoned six of them, effectively ending the investigation before he or General Colin Powell (who had signed off on the missiles) could testify.

'George Bush's misuse of the pardon power made the cover-up complete,' wrote Iran-Contra independent counsel Lawrence Walsh.

1000

Maya and Aztec migration to Central America follows the collapse of those empires

1524

Granada, León and Suchitoto founded by the Spanish conquistadors

1821

Central America becomes independent from Spain on September 15

1853

William Walker arrives at the forefront of US imperialism

CAFTA: A FREE-TRADE AGREEMENT OF SORTS

After several years of heated protests, fearmongering and spin-doctoring, the US–Central American Free Trade Agreement (Cafta) took effect rather uneventfully in 2006.

Cafta, a much-anticipated and little-understood trade pact between the United States, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua (with Costa Rica invited to the dance but yet to RSVP), was originally set to start on January 1, 2006.

But due to the last-minute insistence of Uncle Sam, who suffers sleep anxiety over first-world issues such as intellectual property rights, all the participating Central American countries were told several weeks before the planned start date that they would first have to pass new legislation to protect copyright, patents and the rights of authors.

El Salvador was quick to comply, and entered Cafta with the United States on February 1 2006. The other countries were then let in on a rolling basis, with Nicaragua joining in March.

Meaningful public discourse about what was actually being negotiated was almost nonexistent in both countries, and in Nicaragua both sides indulged in shameless fear campaigns.

The pro-Cafta camp, led by the business sector, warned Nicaraguans that failure to ratify Cafta would be like returning to the US economic embargo of the 1980s. The con side, led by the Sandinistas, warned Nicaraguans that free trade with the United States would only lead to 'misery, unemployment and death.'

Probably neither side is correct.

Cafta will be good for a few select sectors of the economy – mostly the textile factories, sugar growers and peanut farmers. Also, under Cafta, Nicaragua received preferential textile-quota options that were not extended to the other Central American countries ('free trade', you see, is not really free trade, it's just trade under different rules and quotas).

Those preferential quotas, coupled with the lowest wages in Central America, led the Minister of Foreign Trade recently to announce that Nicaragua was on its way to becoming the 'textile capital of Central America.' Look out, world.

Tim Rogers Editor, 'Nica Times'

The agricultural revolution swept through around 300AD, bringing with it the basis of the modern regional diet: maize (or corn), beans and yucca. With reliable food and imported technology, a wave of creative expression followed, with impressive stone cities like Joya de Cerén (see p356) being erected in El Salvador, and less technically advanced, but still cool, petroglyphs (see the boxed text, p140) and statues (see the boxed text, p117) popping up in Nicaragua.

The Spanish conquest got off the ground in the late 1520s. Nicaragua and El Salvador were administrated as separate units by Antigua, Guatemala. In tiny, tidy El Salvador, with more manageable boundaries and a single coast, the conquest was efficient and ruthless, leaving the modern population light-skinned and very European. In vast Nicaragua, however, indigenous groups put up waves of resistance, retaining some autonomy even on the Pacific side and effectively stopping the Spanish incursion at the Central Highlands. The British also played an important role, settling the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua (see the boxed text, p113).

After independence from Spain in 1821, the original five Central American nations (Belize, as a British colony, and Panama, then part of Colombia, were counted separately) remained linked as a series of fed-

erations and organizations, though dreams of a unified Central America never panned out. El Salvador and Nicaragua were often allies, and worked together when, for example, a foreign mercenary army (see the boxed text, p55) disturbed the peace.

Their informal political alliances caused a bit of a stir in the United States, where they inspired a shadowy collection of international double deals that remain largely veiled in history, as perpetrators lied under oath. Their informal political alliances caused a bit of a stir in the United States, where they inspired a shadowy collection of international double deals that remain largely veiled in history, as perpetrators lied under oath, received convenient presidential pardons and even died of sudden brain tumors (seriously, CIA director William J Casey – google it) right before going to trial.

PEOPLE

Both Salvadorans and Nicaraguans, rarely treated to the easiest lives, are known for their impressive work ethic, poignant literature and colorful crafts. And – this is perhaps the defining feature of recent decades – both are willing to stand up for themselves.

Lifestyle

In both countries, the income gap is tremendous; development rarely hits a nation all at once. In the capitals and major cities, an upper class – young, mobile, wired and usually English-speaking – fuels opulent malls and discos, or zips up to Miami to visit friends. The vast majority, however, live hand to mouth, with around 30% of Salvadorans and 50% of Nicaraguans surviving below the international poverty line. In the cities, begging, glue sniffing and rising crime rates seem to radiate from shanty towns, often built on ground that's geologically unstable, just waiting for the next earthquake.

In rural areas, the poverty is worse on paper, but it's mitigated by gardens, hunting and family close by. Tiny wooden shacks with no electricity or running water are common, and most employment is agricultural – ie seasonal and unstable. Consider visiting a coffee collective (see p210), just to meet the people on the other side of your latte.

Emigration

Approximately 20% of both countries' populations live abroad, often illegally. Wealthy and connected families immigrated to the USA (principally Miami and Los Angeles) during the wars. Poor Salvadorans fled to Honduras or Mexico, while Nicaraguan refugees headed south to Costa Rica.

Many longtime expats are now returning home, some for the first time as adults. Others are coming involuntarily – a notable instance was when the USA deported thousands of California gang members to El Salvador, resulting in dramatic social problems (see the boxed text, p302). This can be something of a boon to travelers, who may be in some totally untouristed corner of the country, when a local will ask, in perfect Miami English, 'So, what do you think of my little town? I live here.'

SPORTS

Both Nicaragua and El Salvador, as part of Latin America, have football (soccer) teams. El Salvador's often wins; the Nicas wouldn't know, however, since they're all busy watching (or playing) baseball (see the boxed text, p60).

Courtesy counts! 'Buen provecho' before a meal, 'con permiso' when squeezing past on a bus, or 'mucho gusto' upon introduction are all pleasantries to practice.

The disturbing 1988 documentary *Coverup: Behind the Iran-Contra Affair* lets you flashback to the Reagan years, complete with cocaine, landmines and aborted back-alley deals with Iran's fundamentalist factions.

1979

Sandinista revolution is victorious in Nicaragua; President Carlos Humverto Romero overthrown in El Salvador

1990

Violeta Barrios de Chamorro beats Daniel Ortega in Nicaraguan elections; Contra War and US-led economic embargo end

TEN WHO SHAPED NICARAGUA & EL SALVADOR

Nicaraguan President Violeta Barrios de Chamorro (president 1990–1996) The first female president in the hemisphere pulled together a fractured nation.

Carlos Henriquez Consalvi Also known as ‘Santiago,’ this Venezuelan journalist founded the FMLN’s Radio Venceremos and now runs the Museo de Imagen y Palabra (p320) in San Salvador.

Cacique Nicarao Along with Cacique Nagrandano (for whom the Llanura Nagrandano, or northwestern plains, are named) and Cacique Diriangén (still remembered on La Meseta), wise Nicarao gave the nation his name.

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega (president 1984–1990) Today he is mostly a political albatross around the neck of the moderate FSLN, but Ortega’s finest moment was his hardest, conceding the presidency in 1990 without becoming the *caudillo* (military dictator) that he could have been.

US President Ronald Reagan (president 1981–1988) Together with political philosopher Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Secretary of State Alexander Haig Jr and Fox TV personality Oliver North, he came up with the brilliant idea of arming the Ayatollah Khomeini to fight communism.

El Salvador Archbishop Óscar Romero (archbishop 1977–1980; see the boxed text, p305) The bravest name in Liberation Theology begged US president Jimmy Carter and Pope John Paul II to support the Salvadoran military, which in the end assassinated him.

Joaquin Villalobos This fearless, complex Salvadoran *guerrillero* led the ERP faction in Morazán and reportedly ordered the death of leftist poet (and accused CIA informant) Roque Dalton in 1975.

Sandino (see the boxed text, p222) His somber silhouette still dominates the Managua skyline, and his refusal to take any shit dominates the Nicaraguan collective consciousness.

The Somozas A dynasty of Nicaraguan dictators, the first installed by the United States military, and the last deposed more than four decades later by popular revolution.

William Walker (see the boxed text, p55) The Tennessean who thought he could take on Central America, but ended up in front of a Honduran firing squad.

If you enjoy playing either sport, not to mention basketball or almost anything else, look around for pickup games in area parks in the evening and represent for your home country. There’s no better way (especially for visitors with limited Spanish) to make friends.

RELIGION

Both Nicaragua and El Salvador are predominantly Catholic, with figures ranging from 55% to 70% for Nicaragua, and around 80% for El Salvador. Accurate statistics are hard to find because of the recent (over the past decade or two) mass conversion to more than 100 forms of Protestantism, collectively known as ‘*evangelismo*.’ There are at least two million converts watching famous-name US evangelists on TV (or healing live at the soccer stadiums), blasting accessibly upbeat hymns from storefront churches and passing out flyers at bus stations. It was only a matter of time until the backlash – look for stickers saying ‘We are Catholic here...our parents were Catholics and we will be Catholics forever. We will not change our religion, please don’t insist.’ Public-nuisance laws are also forcing churches to turn down the music, or at least stop singing by 9pm.

Most converts are poor and/or indigenous, and see Protestantism as more democratic, compared to Catholicism’s rigid hierarchy and association with the Spanish conquest. Not that Central American Catholicism has ever been particularly pure: indigenous rites have been interwoven with Christian festivals (see the boxed text, p97) since day two of the Spanish Conquest; the Liberation Theology movement, which supports armed struggle by the poor, never really got the Vatican’s blessing; Ernesto Cardenal (see the boxed text, p267) was defrocked for his involvement with the Sandinistas; and newly elected Pope Benedict XVI was one

According to *Ometepe en el Siglo XX*, by Hamilton Silva Monge, many Catholic saints also represent old Nahuatl deities: for instance, San Isidro, Patron of Farmers, is also Quiateot, God of Harvests.

The best of Óscar Romero’s inspiring orations from 1977 to his death in 1980, are collected in *The Violence of Love: The Pastoral Wisdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero*.

of Liberation Theology’s most vehement critics under Pope John Paul II, which sends a message.

ARTS

‘Poetry will exist as long as there is a problem of life and death,’ wrote Rubén Darío, which may explain why Nicaragua and El Salvador are tied together not only by their recent history of revolution, but also their long tradition of poetry. Both also have other cultural riches, some touched on here, that you can learn more about in the Arts sections on p61 and p305.

Literature

Nicaragua – certainly among the most prolific countries, person per person – produced (to its never-ending pride) at least one poet on par with Shakespeare: Rubén Darío (see the boxed text, below), founder of Latin American Modernism and legend of ‘immoderation.’ His mentor was Francisco Gavidia, perhaps El Salvador’s favorite poet. For a rundown on other important Nicaraguan and Salvadoran authors, see p61 and p305.

Both Nicaragua and El Salvador are also home to the peculiar cultural archetype of ‘warrior poets,’ folks who choose to go with both the pen and the sword. Among the most famous of Nicaragua’s warrior poets are Leonel Rugama Rugama, who held off the National Guard while hero Carlos Fonseca escaped; Rigoberto Lopez Perez, who assassinated the original Somoza in León; liberation theologian Ernesto Cardenal; and former Sandinista undercover agent Giocanda Belli. Meanwhile, over in El Salvador, Roque Dalton wrote rather Marxist verse that almost earned him a death sentence from the military government of the day.

Learn more about what so inspired Óscar Romero and Ernesto Cardenal in a Concise History of Liberation Theology (www.landreform.org/boff2.htm).

RUBÉN DARÍO

Comparable only to Mozart, Nicaragua’s favorite son and Latin America’s most important poet began reading at age three and had published his first poem by the time he was 12. Dubbed El Niño Poeta (the poet child) by Nicaragua’s verse-obsessed media, Rubén Darío – for whom his birthplace (Ciudad Darío; p215), the national theater (Teatro Nacional Rubén Darío; p84) and Cordillera Dariense mountain range are all named – was denied a scholarship in Europe because his work was too ‘anti-religious.’

Thus stymied, the resourceful young poet instead made his way to El Salvador, where he became apprentice poet to Francisco Gavidia (see p305), who introduced him to French poetry’s rhythmic structure, which would remain a cornerstone of Darío’s work. Later, Darío would visit Chile and discover racism, which would also heavily influence his verse.

After Darío’s first wife died, he went on a bender that barely hit a speed bump when an ex-girlfriend, Rosario Murillo, set him up – her brother ‘discovered’ them in bed together. Darío remembered nothing, married her anyway, and continued boozing his way through mistresses and muses, adventures and day jobs. All the while, he was writing some of the most beautiful poetry in the world, peaking after 1903, when Darío was named ambassador to Paris.

In 1914, Darío was both awarded his first major medal – from the Hispanic Society of America – and went bankrupt, thanks to an ill-timed bout of pneumonia. It was his fellow poets who banded together to raise enough money to pay the doctor and get Darío back home to León, where he died two years later at age 49.

Poesía en Español (luis.salas.net/indexrd.htm) has most of Rubén Darío’s poems available online, while English-language **Dariana** (www.dariana.com), a Rubén Darío tribute site, has 11 of his poems translated into English by fellow legendary Leónese poet, Salomón de la Selva.

Rock and roll with web-sites devoted to seismic activity in Nicaragua (www.sinapred.gob.ni/Noticias/Terremotos.html) and El Salvador (www.terremotoelsalvador.org.sv).

Get ecological at sites including www.garrobo.org, with a focus on Central America, or more general www.conservation.org and www.foe.co.uk.

Glittering Santa Ana, Morazán, San Miguel and La Unión in El Salvador, and RAAN, the Northern Highlands and Sierra Amerrisque in Nicaragua, all have gold deposits.

Colonial Architecture

The success of the Spanish conquest let the motherland finally break free of French architectural forms, such as Gothic architecture, and experiment with homegrown styles both at home and in the Americas.

Some of the earliest New World churches are a Moorish-Spanish hybrid called *mujédar*, with squat silhouettes, wooden roofs and geometric configurations. Influenced by Islam as well as the Italian Renaissance, are *plateresque*, or elaborate silver filigree, on alters like that in El Viejo (p184).

Baroque hit big in the mid-1600s, and was the most popular choice for major buildings over the next century. Primitivist Baroque, featuring graceful but unadorned adobe and wood columns, and common in smaller colonial towns, was followed by full Spanish Baroque style, with extravagant design (stone grapevines wending up massive pillars, for example) sometimes called *churriguera*.

The most famous examples of Spanish Colonial architecture can be found in Granada and León in Nicaragua, and in El Salvador, such as in accessible Santa Ana or adorable Ataco, with its intriguing Gothic cathedral and striking *alcaldía* and municipal theater. But Spanish colonial gems are scattered throughout both countries.

To see the original, never-bombed models, visit the original León, buried by Volcán Momotombo in 1610, or the previous site of San Salvador (see p377), occupied for only 17 years (1528–45).

Arts & Crafts

Although Guatemala gets all the press for its arts and crafts, both Nicaragua and, to a lesser extent El Salvador, are known for their beautiful, and clever, *artesanías*. El Salvador's most famous painter, Fernando Llort (see the boxed text, p306), has inspired a cottage industry with his simple, colorful scenes of pastoral Salvadoran living, while Nicaragua's most famous painters are based on the island art colony of the Solentiname Archipelago (p266).

Both countries are also justly famed for hammocks: Nicaragua's favorite place to recline is Masaya, while they even throw a hammock festival every year in El Salvador's Concepción de Quezaltepeque (see p388).

Although it's always cheaper and more fun to find handicrafts in the regions where they originate, more convenient souvenir shopping can be had at the National Artesanías Markets in San Salvador and Masaya, or Mercado Huembes in Managua. For a rundown of what to buy, check the arts and crafts sections on p62 and p307.

ENVIRONMENT

This is perhaps the greatest difference between the two countries. El Salvador is the most densely populated country in the continental Americas, and only about 6% of its original forest cover still stands. Most of this is preserved as part of 12 federally protected reserves and parks, most with 'shared use' – usually this involves organic coffee or another relatively low-impact agribusiness. A handful of other private reserves and low-profile conservation initiatives, including sea-turtle operations (see the boxed text, p48), are beginning to take hold. But it's already too late for species including the jaguar and giant red macaw, both of which are extinct in El Salvador.

Nicaragua, on the other hand, is much larger and less densely populated. It's managed to preserve 18.2% of its landmass, or 21,000 sq km, roughly

the same area as El Salvador. There are 76 different protected areas in nine categories, most of them reserves (with light protection) augmented by a wide variety of municipal parks and private reserves. Just the sprawl, however, makes most of the system impossible to protect from poachers, loggers, squatters and economic migrants just looking for a place to grow some corn. But the government has committed serious resources to enforcing the national parks in the past, mainly because of the ecotourism dollars and euros they're hoping to see someday.

The Land

Tiny El Salvador is the only country in Central America without a Caribbean coastline, and its ecosystems are therefore very similar to those of the Nicaraguan Pacific. Both have broad coastal plains (narrowing as you head northwest) and relatively long, pronounced dry seasons, when most of the vegetation turns dry and brown. Most of El Salvador's original forest is gone, as it has better soil, and is therefore more attractive to farmers than the humid tropical forest soils to the north and east.

The region's appeal to early colonists increased as they realized that the soil was further enriched by the region's most striking geological feature: a volcano chain that stretches from northern Panama to central Mexico, with some of the most dramatic cones in the world looming over El Salvador. Volcán Santa Ana (p346) exploded while this book was being researched, destroying coffee *fincas* (farms) and claiming two lives. Earthquakes and volcanoes are a part of life along the borders of the Caribbean and Cocco (see the boxed text, p65), and you'll find very few authentic colonial buildings that haven't been touched up since the 1500s.

In El Salvador's north, and running down the center of Nicaragua like an opening zipper, the mountains rise to their greatest heights as a metamorphic, granite mountain chain contiguous with the Rocky Mountains and the Andes. Topped with cool cloud forests above 1200m, these refreshing regions are home to some of the best national parks in both countries.

In addition, Nicaragua has the two largest lakes in Central America: Lago de Managua is badly polluted, but Lago de Nicaragua – more than a third the size of El Salvador – is surprisingly clean, thanks to underdevelopment. Surrounded by protected wetlands and home to the world's largest lake island, it drains to the Caribbean along one of the country's four major Atlantic lowlands river systems.

The Atlantic Coast is worlds apart, geologically as well as culturally, from the dryer, more developed Pacific side. A vast eroding plain of rolling hills and ancient volcanic plugs, around 90% of the country's rainfall ends up here. This is the region with the wildest protected reserves and worst access – and don't forget your mosquito net. The Caribbean Coast, with very few exceptions, is difficult and relatively expensive to travel, as most transportation is by boat.

Wildlife

El Salvador has about 800 animal species, mostly birds and butterflies, while Nicaragua has some 18,000 vertebrates and 30,000 species in total, including almost 700 birds. While Nicaragua is clearly the much better choice for wildlife viewing, neither country can match the bounty of neighboring Costa Rica, where peace and prosperity have kept endangered species off the menu for half a century.

Animals are slowly working their way northward, a migration of densities that will one day be facilitated by the Meso-American Corridor,

Two companies want to revive Nicaragua Canal schemes: one wants to dredge the Río San Juan, the other wants to build a 'dry canal,' or high-capacity freight railroad connecting the coasts.

In the late 1990s, ENRON wanted to build a wind farm in Nicaragua's Sierra Amerrisque, but the Alemán government was too corrupt even for them.

Wildlife watchers flocking south could read L Irby Davis' *Field Guide to the Birds of Mexico & Central America* or Adrian Forsyth's *Tropical Nature: Life & Death in the Rainforests of Central & South America*.

PUPUSAS, OVERPOPULATION AND THE FOOTBALL WAR

There are few foods as richly invested with nationalistic pride as the pupusa, though Nicaragua's *gallo pinto* (see the boxed text, p57) comes close. Every afternoon at around 4pm, in El Salvador and throughout the strongholds of the Salvadoran diaspora, pupusas are patted out.

Make Delicious Pupusas at Home

If you don't have a Salvadoran barrio (neighborhood) nearby, you can still make pupusas yourself. Begin with prepared tortilla flour, such as Maseca, and follow instructions for *masa*, or dough. For simple cheese *pupusas de quesillo*, use soft *quesillo*, or substitute three cups of shredded mozzarella mixed with cream cheese or ricotta. Add four tablespoons heavy cream and one cup of *loroco*, an edible flower native to El Salvador, or substitute chopped green pepper or scallions. Salt to taste and mix to a paste.

For *pupusas de chicharrón*, traditionally made with wild boar, sauté one cup of bacon with garlic, tomatoes and green pepper; for *pupusas mixtas*, make your favorite pot of beans, then mix with all of the above.

Pat two balls of *masa* (about two tablespoons each) to 1cm thick, then add a dollop of filling on top of one and press the other on top. Lightly grease a large frying pan and set at 350°F, then cook (this could take several flips) until lightly browned and crispy. Serve with a thin tomato sauce, some *curtido* (pickled cabbage), and enjoy the taste of Old El Salvador in your own home.

Honduras & The Football War

Old El Salvador? As with so many regional foods, the origin of the Salvadoran national snack is controversial. Some in neighboring Honduras also claim pupusas (though they freely attribute delicious *loroco* to El Salvador), and furthermore say the dish only crossed the border in the wake of the 1969 Football War.

a proposed aisle of shady protected rainforest stretching from Panama to Mexico. Other countries in on the agreement are just getting started on the project, but Nicaragua's two enormous Unesco biosphere reserves, Bosawás and Southeast Nicaragua (Río San Juan), make a significant chunk.

ANIMALS

Most people are looking for monkeys, and there are three natives: big smart spider monkeys, smaller howler monkeys (with their reverberating roar), and capuchins, which will steal your lunch while you snap photos. Pizotes, elsewhere called coatis, are the long-tailed, toothy-smiled rodents that are particularly bold on the Rivas peninsula – feed them at your own risk. Several cats – puma, jaguar and others in Nicaragua, the diminutive tigrillo in El Salvador – survive, but you probably won't see them. Baird's tapirs, 250kg herbivores, are another rare treat. At night you'll see hundreds of bats, including, if you're very lucky, vampire bats – which usually stick to livestock.

Birders are discovering Nicaragua, in particular the wild east coast's estuaries, where migratory birds flock, starting in August and packing places like the Río San Juan and Solentiname Islands by September and October. Kingfishers, swallows, scarlet tanagers and Tennessee warblers are just a few of the birds that make their winter homes around here. Local birds are even more spectacular, including the red macaw, the yellow-chested oropendola (which hangs its ball-shaped nests from the trees in oddly beautiful sacks), the three-wattled bellbird of the cloud forests, with its distinctive call, and of course the resplendent quetzal, a resident of both Nicaragua and El Salvador.

There are lots of reptiles, including five kinds of sea turtles, two kinds

Get inspired by the BBC's reality series *Beyond Boundaries I* (www.bbc.co.uk/ouch/tvradio/beyondboundaries), which followed 11 disabled people across Nicaragua (using machetes for part of it), including up the side of a live volcano.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, El Salvador's burgeoning overpopulation problem was already spilling over into Honduras, to the tune of 300,000 illegal immigrants, stressing the already impoverished country. Social tensions mounted, with Hondurans demanding that land go to citizens, and Salvadorans complaining of abuse by Honduran authorities.

The qualification stages for the football World Cup, usually a good outlet for frustrated nationalism, then ensued – with three matches between the teeth-gnashing neighbors planned. Round one in Tegucigalpa saw Honduras win, one–nil. El Salvador took their home game by halftime, three–nil. Which is about when the rioting started. Visiting Honduran fans were attacked in the stadium; Honduras threatened to retaliate by repatriating every last Salvadoran immigrant. El Salvador invaded, bombed the Tegucigalpa airport, and occupied the country for 100 hours.

Honduras unsurprisingly continued with land reforms, replacing Salvadoran immigrants with Honduran campesinos, and deporting tens of thousands of people. This sent both economies into a tailspin that eventually crashed the US-led Central American Common Market. And, unknown to the Honduran government, some of those returning Salvadorans carried with them the secrets of pupusa perfection.

Snack Attack

Though the war was a draw, with about 1000 dead on either side, El Salvador won the final qualifying match, in Mexico City. And there, as all over the world, pupusas are being readied right now in ramshackle stands and glittering restaurants, almost all owned and operated by proud, and probably homesick, Salvadorans. Heck, most Hondurans now consider pupusas authentically Salvadoran. Other unforeseen consequences of the six-day war included centralizing power with both nations' increasingly autonomous militaries, paving the way for the bloody wars of the 1980s.

Can't believe it? Learn even weirder details about this and other absurd international conflicts in *The Soccer War*, by Ryszard Kapuscinski

of iguanas, and several snakes, including the poisonous coral snake and the cascabel, also poisonous but a danger mostly to cattle. The most famous fish in Nicaragua is the world's only freshwater shark, the bull shark (see the boxed text, p149).

Insects, of course, make up the vast majority of species, including over 1000 species of butterflies shared between the countries. Tarantulas are common, but not deadly (just shocking!), and keep your eyes open for leaf-cutter ants, which raise fungus for snacks beneath massive anthills the size of VW Beetles. Acacia ants are hidden inside the hollow thorns of acacia trees – shake one of them and you'll see several hundred swarming reasons why the plant goes to all the trouble. And the weird-looking woody balls in the trees? Termites.

PLANTS

Tropical dry forests are home to more than 30 species of hardwood, including precious mahogany. Some of the most dramatic species in the region's dominant ecosystem include: strangler figs, which start out as slender vines and end up entombing the host tree in a dramatically buttressed encasement; the wide-spreading guanacaste of the endless savannahs; and the pithaya, a branch-dwelling cactus with delicious edible fruit. El Salvador and Nicaragua, along with Honduras, share the largest mangrove forest in Central America.

Farther up and east, tropical humid forest is home to the multi-story green canopies most people think of as classic rainforest. Conditions here are perfect for all plant life; almost no nutrients are stored in the soil, but there is a vast web just beneath the fallen leaves of enormous ceibas,

formed of tiny roots, fungus and other assorted symbiotes that devour every stray nutrient as soon as it hits the ground.

This, of course, does not hold true on regularly fertilized (with ash!) volcanic slopes, where the jungle has more often than not been cut down for timber and replaced with (hopefully) organic coffee. In the metamorphic highlands, the farms last a few years, and then become scrubland useless for anything except grazing a few head of cattle.

Atop the highest volcanoes and peaks are cloud forests, easily the most impressive (and rarest) biome, with some 800 species of orchids shared between the countries. There are also scores of different epiphytes and bromeliads, a variety of high-humidity plants that grow in the branches of other trees; houseplant aficionados will recognize lots of their favorites.

FOOD & DRINK

Neither El Salvador nor Nicaragua is known for its cuisine, with a few (mostly fried) exceptions. The standout is El Salvador's pupusa (see the boxed text, p38), which is also common throughout Nicaragua. For a breakdown of national dishes and local favorites, check out the Food & Drink sections for El Salvador (p310) and Nicaragua (p67).

Both Nicaraguans and Salvadorans usually eat three meals per day. *Desayuno* (breakfast) in both countries is usually eggs with rice and beans – refried in El Salvador, whole in Nicaragua. *Almuerzo*, or lunch, is the big meal of the day, and if you're on a shoestring budget it will be yours, too. Simple Nicaraguan restaurants offer *comida corriente*, a heaping set plate with a couple of choices of meat, while in El Salvador it's all served separately – soup, salad, meat and sides – and it's cheap. *Cena* (dinner) is more of an afterthought – in El Salvador a few pupusas, in Nicaragua a stop at the nearest *fritanga*, where cooks renowned throughout the neighborhood sell traditional favorites, including grilled meats and all things deep fried.

Where to Eat & Drink

Both El Salvador and Nicaragua have decent sanitation systems and drinking and washing water in some cities, but most of both countries require a bit of care. Remember that personal hygiene plays as important a role as watching what you eat – wash your hands before meals and after touching animals or anything else a bit sketchy.

Bottled water is cheap and available almost everywhere (discarded water bottles litter every beach and river), and many restaurants – even those not geared to tourists – use purified water (*agua purificada*) to make ice cubes and *frescos* (but ask). As you travel farther from major population centers and tourist havens, you should become pickier about your food – trust your gut, literally. If a town strikes you as unsanitary, or just has less infrastructure in general (and remember, the public water supply can be tainted by storms and flooding), skip the cheap *comedor* (basic eatery) at the market and pay for a real meal somewhere nice.

Groceries aren't always a great way to save money on meals (compared to cheap eateries), but they do provide some welcome variety. Be sure to skip the bland, sliced bread and stop by a *panadería* (bakery) for something more interesting. Many hotels and *hospedajes* (guesthouses) have kitchens you can use, perhaps for a small price.

Get far off the beaten track and small *pulperías*, or teeny tiny convenience stores, may or may not have something other than ramen noodles

and chicken bullion in stock. Plan ahead and pack a few power bars or tins of sardines for the road.

Vegetarians & Vegans

Tell the waiter '*soy vegetariano/a*' (I'm vegetarian), and you'll probably get what everyone else does (rice, beans, salad, plantains), without the meat. Steam-table buffets, or '*comida a la vista*' places usually have lots of vegetarian options that you can mix and match. *Gallo pinto* is light on beans, if that's your planned source of protein, so vegans in particular should stock up on healthy snacks in Managua, Granada, León or San Salvador before heading out.

Eating with Kids

Most travelers rate Latin America one of the best regions in the world to travel with children, and these countries are no exception. Food is already fairly bland, and sweetened exotic fruit juices (*refrescos*) go over well with the kid in everyone. Don't expect high chairs or kids menus, though.

Food Glossary

For staples and regional specialties, see p67 (Nicaragua) and p310 (El Salvador).

DISHES, FOODS & DRINKS

<i>agua purificada</i>	a-gwa pu-ree-fee-ka-da	purified water
<i>arroz chino/cantonés</i>	a-ros chee-no/kan-to-nos	fried rice
<i>arroz</i>	a-ros	rice
<i>café...</i>	ka-fe(a)	coffee
<i>con leche</i>	kon le-che	with milk (probably more than you're used to)
<i>de grano</i>	de gra-no	ground ('real') coffee
<i>instantáneo</i>	in-stan-ta-ne-o	instant coffee crystals (blech)
<i>sin azúcar</i>	seen a-soo-kar	without sugar (unless you like your coffee and fresco very sweet)
<i>camarones</i>	ka-ma-ro-nos	shrimp
<i>carne/pollo en salsa</i>	kar-ne/po-lyo en sal-sa	beef/chicken stewed in tomato sauce
<i>chayote</i>	cha-yo-te	green, pear-shaped squash used in soups
<i>chicharón</i>	chee-cha-ron	fried pig skins
<i>chilero</i>	chee-le-ro	jar of hot pickled chilies, carrots, onions and more (for your table)
<i>cuajada</i>	kwa-kha-da	fresh, salty, crumbly cheese served with tortillas
<i>ensalada</i>	en-sa-la-da	salad, usually made with cabbage, tomatoes and vinegar, but also with boiled veggies; potato salad could fall into this category
<i>frijoles</i>	free-kho-les	beans
<i>galla pinto</i>	ga-lyo peen-to	rice and beans, cooked separately and fried together, served at breakfast
<i>gaseosa</i>	ga-se-o-sa	soft drink
<i>huevos de paslama</i>	hwe-vos de pas-la-ma	turtle eggs
<i>huevos del toro</i>	hwe-vos del to-ro	bull testicles
<i>leche</i>	le-che	milk
<i>melón</i>	me-lon	cantaloupe
<i>pescado</i>	pes-ka-do	fish
<i>pithaya</i>	pee-tha-ya	a cactus fruit related to the prickly pear, made into drinks; also called dragon fruit
<i>plátanos</i>	pla-ta-nos	fried plantains, a starchy relative of the banana

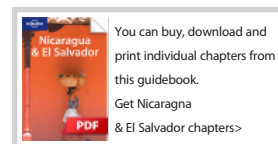
<i>plato surtido</i>	<i>pla-to sur-tee-do</i>	a mixed platter of fabulous food, usually for groups of four
<i>pollo</i>	<i>po-lyo</i>	chicken
<i>postre</i>	<i>pos-tre</i>	dessert
<i>queso</i>	<i>ke-so</i>	cheese
<i>refresco</i>	<i>re-fres-ko</i>	fruit juice beverage whipped with water or milk, plus lots of sugar
<i>sandía</i>	<i>san-dee-a</i>	watermelon
<i>yuca</i>	<i>yoo-ka</i>	cassava; manioc; a starchy root vegetable similar to potatoes, but stringier

COOKING METHODS & STYLES

<i>a la criolla</i>	<i>a la kree-o-lyo</i>	cooked with a tomato, sweet chili and sauce
onion		
<i>a la jalapeña</i>	<i>a la kha-la-pe-nya</i>	cooked in a spicy pepper sauce
<i>a la plancha</i>	<i>a la plan-cha</i>	broiled
<i>al lado</i>	<i>al la-do</i>	on the side
<i>al vapor</i>	<i>al va-por</i>	steamed
<i>empanizado/a</i>	<i>em-pa-nee-sa-do/a</i>	breaded and fried
<i>encebollado/a</i>	<i>en-se-bo-lyo-do/a</i>	grilled with onions
<i>gratinado</i>	<i>gra-tee-na-do/a</i>	baked with cheese (<i>au gratin</i>)
<i>frito/a</i>	<i>free-to/a</i>	fried
<i>picante</i>	<i>pee-kan-te</i>	spicy hot
<i>rostizado/a</i>	<i>ros-tee-sa-do/a</i>	roasted
<i>salsa agri dulce</i>	<i>sal-sa a-gree-dool-se</i>	sweet-and-sour sauce
<i>salsa de ajillo</i>	<i>sal-sa de a-khee-lyo</i>	garlic sauce

USEFUL WORDS & PHRASES

<i>algo sano</i>	<i>al-go sa-no</i>	something healthy
<i>algo dietético</i>	<i>al-go dye-te-tee-ko</i>	something low calorie
<i>comida a la vista</i>	<i>ko-mee-da a la vee-sta</i>	literally 'food that you can see'; a steam-buffet
table		
<i>comida casera</i>	<i>ko-mee-da ka-se-ra</i>	at very small restaurants, usually the one dish on offer
<i>comida corriente</i>	<i>ko-mee-da ko-ryen-te</i>	the day's set plate, usually rice, beans, meat, salad, plantains and a tortilla; usually better at lunch
<i>comida rápida</i>	<i>ko-mee-da ra-pee-da</i>	fast food
para llevar	<i>pa-ra lye-var</i>	to go; take-away
servicio al domicilio	<i>ser-vee-syo al do-mee-see-lyo</i>	delivery service
Tengo alergia a...	<i>ten-go a-ler-khee-ya a...</i>	I'm allergic to...
Soy vegetariano/a. (m/f)	<i>soy ve-khe-ta-rya-no/a</i>	I'm vegetarian.
¡Buen provecho!	<i>bwen pro-ve-cho</i>	<i>bon appetit</i> , said when you walk in on (or out on) someone eating.



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