

Nicaragua Country Profile

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Country Overview

The Republic of Nicaragua is the largest country in Central America and is located in the equatorial tropics, with Atlantic and Pacific Ocean coasts. The name "Nicaragua" was coined by Spanish colonists based on the name *Nicarao*, chief of the most populous indigenous tribe.

The soil, enriched by volcanic ash, makes the country rich in biodiversity. The country's population is 6 million, with Managua being the third-largest city in Central America. The population is young, with a median age of 18-19 years old and 25% of the population under 10 years old. 69% are Mestizo (mixed native and European); 17% are Caucasian; 9% are Black and 5% are Native Indian. Spanish is the predominant language, though a number of indigenous groups on the eastern coastal region speak their native languages.

Nicaragua is about 50,000 square miles (the size of Iowa). The eastern part of the country is covered with tropical rain forest and swampland. Pine forests cover the low hill and mountains of the interior.

Never rich in the first place, Nicaragua is striving to overcome the after-effects of dictatorship, civil war and natural calamities, which have made it one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere. An earthquake in 1972 decimated 90% of the city of Managua, and the effects of that destruction are still visible in some ways today, including the old city center which has not been reconstructed (though the president recently announced plans to do so).

Nicaragua became a Spanish colony in the 16th century and gained independence from Spain in 1821. Nicaragua has traditionally relied on agricultural exports. But these benefited mainly a few elite families of Spanish descent, primarily the Somoza family, which ruled the country with U.S.-backing between 1937 and the Sandinista revolution in 1979.

The Somoza family ruled for 43 years – the longest of all military dictatorships in Nica – and their family wealth at the time of revolution was believed to be over \$1 billion USD. After relief funds flooded Nicaragua following the 1972 earthquake, which were pocketed by the Somoza family, many disaffected Nicaraguans joined the ranks of the Sandinistas.

Once in power, the Sandinistas began redistributing property and made huge progress in the spheres of health and education. They won a decisive victory in 1984 elections, but their leftist orientation also attracted U.S. hostility and drove them to turn to the USSR and Cuba.

This set the scene for a U.S.-sponsored counter-revolution, in which the U.S. armed and financed thousands of rebels, or Contras, in order to carry out attacks on Nicaragua from bases in Honduras. The U.S. also imposed trade sanctions and mined Nicaraguan harbors.

By 1990, when the Sandinistas were defeated in elections held as part of a peace agreement, Nicaragua's per capita income had plummeted and its infrastructure was in tatters. Peace brought some economic growth, lower inflation and lower unemployment. But this was more than counter-balanced by the devastations of Hurricane Mitch in 1998, which killed thousands, rendered 20% of the population homeless and caused billions of dollars of damage.

Nicaragua's modest tourist industry - which had all but collapsed by the early 1990s - has enjoyed a revival. The country's attractions include wildlife-rich rainforests, volcanoes, beaches and colonial-era architecture.

Religious freedom is promoted in Nicaraguan government and constitution. Catholicism is the largest religion, and Catholic bishops are often present at government functions or make pronouncements related to government policies. Catholicism has been on the decline over the past 30 years, with evangelical Christianity and Mormonism on the rise.

Since 2007, FSLN (Sandinista party) Daniel Ortega has been president. He was the first Sandinista member to regain control of the presidency since 1990, when anti-Sandinista Violeta Chamorro became the first democratically elected female president in the Americas. In 2014, the constitution was modified to allow him to run for a third successive term.

History in Country with JVC

The first Jesuits arrived to the region from Mexico in the early seventeenth century, but were banished several times. In 1914 Jesuits returned to Central America and in 1926 established the Central American Mission, part of the Province of Mexico. By 1976 the Province of Central America became official. By 1979 it joined the Mission Province of Honduras, and has sustained a relationship with the U.S. Province of Missouri. Learn more about the Central American Province at jesuitascam.org.

The late Fernando Cardenal is likely Nicaragua's most famous Jesuit priest, who was appointed Minister of Education from 1984-90 and led the highly successful Sandinista literacy campaign of 1980. Though he was forced to leave the Society while a government minister, after his term he was reinstated into the Society of Jesus. He founded the Fe y Alegría network of schools in Nicaragua and was a friend to many JVs. He passed away in early 2016.

Though lay volunteers from the U.S. had been working in Nicaragua with the Jesuits for over 10 years prior, JVC officially opened a JV community in Managua in 1998. JVC's primary partnership with the Society of Jesus in Nicaragua has historically been with the Missouri Province. Over the years, JVC has had JV communities in Managua, Cusmapa (until 2004), and in Ciudad Sandino (until 2016).

Joe Mulligan, SJ is a Jesuit from the Missouri Province who has lived in Nicaragua over 30 years. He has been JVC's primary in-country contact for the local implementation of JVC's program and is a tremendous support and resource for the JVs. With his connections to local ex-patriots in the Managua area, to faith and justice communities, and other religious orders, Fr. Joe has been a strong resource for the JVs.

In recent years, Fr. Joe and JVC staff have been working together to develop further the relationships with the Central American Province of the Society and the local Jesuit

communities in Managua.

Interest and enthusiasm for JVC is growing among the Nicaraguan Jesuits, as they learn more and more about the program and as they and the JVs make more intentional efforts to extend hospitality and get to know one another.

There are currently five JVs in Managua, at the following worksites:

- Cantera: Jorge Dimitrov
- Proyecto Generando Vida
- Pajarito Azul
- Proyecto Samaritanas
- Cantera: Ciudad Sandino (will cease to be a JV worksite after 2016)

Country Specific Resources

Websites

- Current events in Nicaragua: guardiannews.com/world/nicaragua
- Magazine published at the Jesuit university in Managua: Universidad Centroamericana – UCA/ online edition Spanish (English also available): envio.org.ni
- Washington Office on Latin America: wola.org
- **Article:** “Nicaragua the Remains of a Revolution”
motherjones.com/photoessays/2012/10/nicaragua-los-restos-de-la-revolution/fsln-rock

Books

Faith & Joy, (2015), Fernando Cardenal, SJ.

This is the memoir of Fernando Cardenal, SJ, a Nicaraguan Jesuit priest who oversaw a national literacy campaign and served as Minister of Education in the revolutionary Sandinista government in the 1980s. Underlying this dramatic story is the deep sense of vocation, which inspired Cardenal’s commitment to the poor, his decision to join the revolutionary struggle, and his work within the revolution to instill values of self-sacrifice, generosity, and love. He has known many generations of Jesuit Volunteers.

Open Veins of Latin America, (1997) Eduardo Galeano.

Eduardo Galeano has organized the various facets of Latin American history according to the patterns of five centuries of exploitation. He is concerned with gold and silver, cacao and cotton, rubber and coffee, fruit, hides and wool, petroleum, iron, nickel, manganese, copper, aluminum ore, nitrates, and tin. These are the veins which he traces through the body of the entire continent, up to the Rio Grande and throughout the Caribbean, and all the way to their open ends where they empty into the coffers of wealth in the United States and Europe.

Flights of Victory (1985), Ernesto Cardenal.

Book of Nicaraguan Poetry focusing on the struggles of the people written by the revolutionary brother of Fernando Cardenal, SJ.

Stories and Poems/Cuentos y Poesias: A Dual Language Book (2002), Rubén Darío.

One of the most important Latin-American writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Nicaraguan poet and essayist Rubén Darío (the pen name of Félix Rubén García Sarmiento) is considered the high priest of the modernismo school of literature, known for its dazzling verbal virtuosity and technical perfection. The present volume contains a rich selection of Darío's best poems and stories, carefully chosen from *Azul* (Blue), *Prosas profanas* (Worldly Hymns), *Cantos de vida y esperanza* (Songs of Life and Hope), *El canto*

errante (The Wandering Song), and *Poema del otoño* (Poem of autumn). Stanley Appelbaum has provided accurate English translations (line for line in the poetry section) on the pages facing the original Spanish, as well as an informative introduction to Darío's life and work, and annotations to the individual stories and poems. The result is a superb resource for any student of Spanish language and literature or anyone interested in one of the earliest and most influential literary movements of the twentieth century.

The Jaguar Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey (1987), Salmon Rushdie.
Rushdie's account of his experiences traveling in Nicaragua.

Now We Can Speak (1982) and *Nicaragua: What Difference Could a Revolution Make?* (1982), Joseph Collins.

The Country Under My Skin: A Memoir of Love and War, (2003) Gioconda Belli.
A tale of passion told through the guises of love, patriotism, motherhood, poetry and war

Blood of Brothers: Life and War in Nicaragua, (2007) Stephen Kinzer.
The former New York Times Managua bureau chief analyzes the roles of the Sandinistas, the Catholic Church and the Reagan administration in modern Nicaragua.

The Death of Ben Linder: The Story of a North American in Sandinista Nicaragua, (2003) Joan Kruckewit.
An account of Linder's life and murder and highlights the human cost of America's policies toward Nicaragua.