

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT TRAVEL TO NICARAGUA

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Summary:

The information you will read in these FAQs is not meant to worry you. It is meant to help you become a more informed and more experienced traveler. It is also to let you know what could happen in worst cases, and give you ideas about how to recover.

This set of Q & A should help in avoiding many embarrassing situations. It will also help you to more quickly move up the learning curve that often times leads people to think of Nicaragua negatively, without understanding the cultural differences.

I look forward to meeting you in Nicaragua and hope that this marvelous country fills your heart as much as it has mine.

Rodney McDonald

ERSLA Latin American Director

Is it safe?

Nicaragua is considered by many sources as the safest country in this hemisphere. Although the crime rate has risen over the past couple of years, it is still very safe overall. Very little violent crime occurs there and the police (although slightly corrupt) are very well trained and maintain order in the communities without violence.

There are, however, many more precautions that one must take. The culture does not seem to have the same point of view on certain details of law as we do in the United States and many gestures we use in everyday life that would be taken as kindness can be taken in a much different light in Nicaragua. This can create problems for an uninformed traveler.

- a. Nicaragua is a very conservative society although sometimes the dress of the younger generations may make it not seem so. Social interaction between men and women, if treated with respect to the culture, is usually conducted formally. What normally could be considered as “just hanging out” can be taken as a relationship or at least the possibility of a relationship. The best rule of thumb to avoid uncomfortable situations is to ALWAYS dress professionally and ALWAYS understand that any gesture can be magnified to a level not expected. This goes for men and women
- b. Women walking around alone will be heckled by men on the street. Although the comments may be extremely flirtatious, they are actually not meant to be offensive. In fact, many times, the local Nicaraguan women will be offended if the men don’t make comments as they pass. Women have returned to pass by the men a second time to find out if they weren’t attractive enough to justify a comment. For those from other cultures, it is difficult to pass and not acknowledge the comments, but more times than not a confrontation will only add fuel to the fire next time. This behavior is best just ignored.
- c. Social drinking is not customary in many parts of Nicaragua. To be seen in the bars, or openly with alcohol, although casual, can be perceived as a problem by some locals. Since alcoholism is prominent in many parts of Nicaragua, it is common to see very drunk men passed out or meandering down the road. These men oftentimes will be infatuated with foreigners and will be very forceful about talking to them. The best rule of thumb is to ignore their actions unless they are putting themselves or others in danger. Even in such a case, do not get involved, but look for others to help with the situation.
- d. Petty theft is common in many areas of Nicaragua. Some Nicaraguans consider “what is mine is yours”. Often times, if things are left out or set to the side, they will be viewed as discarded and may end up at someone else’s house. This can go for anything at anytime. Always guard all personal possessions carefully. The best rule of thumb is not to bring anything that you could not afford to lose. You may not have any problem, but it is best not to take chances.

What should I pack?

Most things can be found in Nicaragua that are essential to life. There are, however, a few things that you may want to bring to make travel a little easier.

- a. Bug repellent or (even better) fabric softener sheets like you would use in the dryer. Mosquitoes are not bad in parts of the country and are horrific in others. They also change in intensity depending on the time of year. Bug repellent, while great for protection, can be a pain to carry, and also can make you smell funny. A great solution is to use fabric softener sheets: rub your exposed skin with the sheets. The fragrance will hide you from the mosquitoes. They are also easier to pack and smell much better than any bug repellent.
- b. A good flashlight that is small enough to fit in a backpack and works off of AA batteries. Power outages are common and streets and houses are not always well lit. Bring a good

supply of extra batteries as well as good quality ones are expensive and not so easy to find outside of cities.

- c. Comfortable shoes are a must. The roads in all parts are categorized in three ways: Not so great, awful, or non-existent. It is common to walk much more in Nicaragua than visitors are generally accustomed.
- d. Prescription medication, if you require something specific. Although prescription medications are fairly available in Nicaragua without a prescription and many times much less expensive, if you need something specific, you should bring it with you. If you have a local contact, request them to check at pharmacies if needed before your trip.
- e. Basic travel size first aid and sewing kits are handy. It is fairly easy to find things, but sometimes the work schedule does not accommodate getting to a store.
- f. Electricity is the same as the US and most plugs are grounded. There is no need to bring adaptors.
- g. A long-sleeved shirt or a sweater. No matter what time of the year, or what part of the country, it is a good idea to pack at least a long sleeve shirt or sweater. Even in the hottest parts of the country, it can get chilly at night, especially if you get sunburned during the day. (A good cover is always a good idea. For some reason when air conditioning is available in public places it is always as cold as possible!)
- h. Umbrellas and/or raincoats are always a good idea. The umbrella will be used in the dry season for shade and in the rainy season it can rain extremely hard. If traveling in the rainy season, it is a great idea to bring an entire rain suit. The storms will come from nowhere, and can rain hard and fast. If there is a tropical storm it can rain hard and fast for all day (or days). Be prepared.
- i. Sunscreen. Although this is available in Nicaragua, it may be difficult to find outside the beach areas or larger cities. It is best to bring a good supply with you as the sun is extremely intense all year. It is a good habit to apply it regularly throughout the day.
- j. A water Bottle (Nalgene type) is always a good item to bring. Bottled water is readily available, but when in a group of people you will set your bottle down and it will look like everyone else's. If you have something to pour it in with a top that will close, you will waste less drinking water. It is a good idea to bring a bottle type that can attach with a Carabiner clip, so it can be attached to your side or bag.

What will I need at immigration?

As soon as you get off the plane, you will be guided directly to immigration, then through baggage claim, then customs. Immigration will check your passport and will ask for US \$5.00 and will stamp a small piece of paper and place it in your passport. This is your tourist visa and you should keep this with you throughout your trip. Generally this is given for 90 days, but be sure and check the details.

PLEASE CHECK ALL REQUIREMENTS IMMEDIATELY BEFORE TRAVELING. THERE IS TALK OF ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS BEING REQUESTED BY NICARAGUA.



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How is the weather?

In many cities such as Managua, Leon, San Juan del Sur, and Granada it is always hot-hot-hot. But in the mountains (Estelí, Jalapa, Jinotega, Matagalpa, etc.) it can be quite cool and sometimes even cold.

May through October is the rainy season. November through April is the dry season. April is the hottest month, December is the coldest.

Rainy season is divided into two specific categories “primera” and “postrera” The “primera” category occurs from May through August and means that generally hard rains occur once or twice a day and the storms move quickly and do not last long. The “postrera” type means that generally slower moving rains occur which sometimes last through the day and night.

How should I dress?

Generally speaking, dress conservatively but comfortably for hot weather. Cleanliness is very important in Nicaraguan culture and well maintained clothing is considered to be a sign of pride. Shoes well kept are a sign of care.

Do not wear flashy or expensive jewelry, especially around Managua. Most Nicaraguans wear cosmetic jewelry and people with money only bring out the good stuff for very, very special events. Leave anything in your home country that you can't part with. It just isn't worth the worry while you are here.

Shorts are generally only worn around the house or in beach communities except by teenagers and visiting “gringos”. Local men generally do not wear shorts unless they are playing a sport or in a beach community.

There is a double standard. Nicaraguan women will oftentimes dress very provocatively, especially in the younger generations. But, foreigners that do so will be inviting problems. It is very strongly suggested by experienced travelers no tank tops or strapless t-shirts, no short shorts, and resist the urge to show a lot of cleavage. It is best to wear cotton woven fabrics because they breathe better. Knit tops are very hot in this climate. Knee length loose fitting pants or skirts made of cotton or linen fabric are more comfortable.

Best rule of thumb is to always realize that you are being observed by the local community and that your outward image is their first impression. Dress professionally, but come prepared for the climate.

How do I get around?

Buses are available around the country; although sometimes old, they are very well maintained mechanically. They run like clockwork and are reliable. There are two types of buses to get around the country: Ruteadas, and Expresos. Both are reliable and safe. A Ruteada will pass through every small town and stop often; an Expreso will stop fewer times and usually arrive 50% faster. Both are economical and have set prices based on distance. There is no haggling.

DO NOT take a local bus in Managua unless you want to get pick-pocketed or harassed. In Managua and other cities, the taxis are the best option. BE CAREFUL with taxis. Make sure the taxi has the proper tag which should be either red and white or solid red. Make sure the number that is painted on the taxi's trunk and sides match the number of the tag and observe the taxi drivers interaction with other drivers in the area if possible. There should be a tag on the front and back with the same number. DO NOT use a taxi if it does not have a tag. Another general rule in Managua is that even numbered taxis are permitted to operate from 2:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m., then odd numbers run from 2:00 p.m. until 2:00 a.m.. This is just a general rule and not strongly enforced, but it still is best to make sure the one you are using is permitted for that time period.

Without speaking Spanish and being familiar with the neighborhoods, make sure you go with the hotel service taxis or other transportation professionals. The cost will be usually double, however, your safety will be guaranteed. If you use a hotel taxi or other professional, they will usually give you their personal phone number and you can call them for service when needed. If they are available, they will come (for a fee of course). The taxis allowed in the airport are always safe but are significantly more expensive than normal. It is best if you have the option to have a local person pick you up at the airport.

Local taxis in Managua have negotiated prices although the fares are usually not extremely negotiable. Prices will run slightly higher for visitors. Again, unless you are familiar with the area and the distances in the city, try to avoid this on your own.

Taxis in other smaller cities usually have set fees and the fares are even less likely to be negotiable. Try to avoid using taxis at night where exaggerated fees or unscrupulous drivers seem to be more plentiful. It is good to know locals and ask how much the taxi services are in the area you are traveling.

If you are going to be in Nicaragua a while, rental cars are comfortably priced and the rental car companies have chauffeurs for hire that are qualified and usually very affordable.

Can I drive a car?

Yes, but you will drive at your own risk, so please read this section carefully before you decide to drive. The laws are fairly straight-forward in Nicaragua but corruption among traffic police is high. They have very low salaries and are encouraged to ask for bribes to subsidize their low pay. They usually do not have vehicles and stand in confusing areas where traffic lanes may not be clearly marked, or traffic lights may not work perfectly. The more entrepreneurial ones will look specifically for foreigners or rental cars to find any small "infraction" they can think of on the spot. They will recite a law number to you that you have broken and then tell you they will have to take your license and it can be picked up later. You can usually tell they are the unscrupulous police at this point because they will begin to ask questions about how long you will be in the country, where are you from etc. They are fishing for how long they need to tell you it will be before you can retrieve your license. Paying these bribes is not considered bad if you so choose to pay. (I personally have never paid one).

If your Spanish is good enough and you feel you can logically and rationally talk your way out of an “infraction”, then go for it. It may or may not work. DO NOT get upset or show any anger. DO NOT threaten. Speak calmly and with logic. Look for things such as their badge number, make sure it is visible, write it down and ask for their name. It is not a bad idea to have a camera where they can see it. If they continue, ask them if you can get out of the car and is it possible to discuss exactly what the infraction was. This is generally when they will be expecting the bribe. Speak very smoothly to ask them if they mind if you take photos while they explain what the infraction was because you want to make sure that when we go to court, the story is the same. If the discussion continues, ask to take a photo of them to make sure they are who appears in court. (I have never taken a photo and I have never lost my license). The key is “Keep it cool”.

BUT IF YOU HAVE CREATED A TRAFFIC VIOLATION YOU WILL NOT HAVE A CHANCE. JUST PAY AND GO.

If you choose to let them keep your license, don’t worry. There is no connection to Nicaraguan police records and the US. An “infraction” in Nicaragua will not affect your record.

Another issue with driving personally that puts you at risk is the law in Nicaragua that states: “In case of an accident with an injury, ALL drivers of cars are likely to go to jail until the situation is sorted out.” If you are the one that looks like you have more money, you will be forced to get a lawyer and most likely will have to pay something to help the injured even if you are not at fault. This can cost days of time and the situation can become very difficult.

Streets are not well marked and outside of cities (and even sometimes inside) they are barely lit. People socialize beside the road. Particularly on weekends, there is a good chance that extremely intoxicated men may be wandering or even sleeping in the middle of the road. Sometimes they will be in places you would not expect to see anyone. Vehicular homicide, unfortunately, is common on weekend nights outside of the cities.

Hiring a driver at minimum cost per day insures that, #1, you will not be stopped as often, and #2, if there is an accident, he will be the one in the jail, not you if something goes wrong. If you are traveling for more than a day, it is common to bring the driver with you and pay for his meals and hotel.

Where will I stay?

Nicaragua has many variations on places to stay. There are 5 star hotels in Managua as well as very rough looking places.

You will not stay at what is called an “Auto Hotel”. These are by-the-hour places that are used to have some “quiet time” in a country that is accustomed to being surrounded by people all the time.

Places where there are no hotels usually have families that will put you up. Cleanliness is part of the culture in Nicaragua and many visitors are surprised at how clean many places are kept in an environment so full of dust and mud.

What about tipping?

Tipping for services such as bellhops, grocery bag carriers, security guards in parking lots, etc. is common, but is significantly less so than in the US. Generally one or two córdobas per bag vs. one or two dollars is usual. If you have a rental car and park on the street or in a parking lot, you may see a gentleman helping you back out and watching the parking lot. It is customary to offer a few córdobas to him when you leave if you wish, but not is required. Hotel staff is paid a salary so they do not rely on tips for a living.

Cabs are not tipped generally unless it was exceptional service.

Restaurants will include the tip in the bill at the bottom called “propina” which is usually 10 to 15 percent. Make sure to look and to ask if it is included before leaving a tip. If you choose to leave a little extra for excellent service it is generally only a few córdobas.

Will I get sick?

If you plan to be in Nicaragua for a long period of time, you most likely will experience illness because you do not have immunities to the local pathogens. This is true whenever you travel to another part of the World. The best thing to do is use common sense regarding cleanliness and food and drink. Most diseases that you may contract are well known to local doctors and can be treated easily.

What vaccines/ preventative medicines should I get?

There are no required vaccines to visit Nicaragua although it is a good idea to make sure your general shots are updated (tetanus, hepatitis, etc.) Please check with the [CDC](https://www.cdc.gov) for any of the latest possible needs.

Tropical diseases exist in the country.

Malaria. The types of malaria that exist are not deadly and are not resistant to the medication most commonly used to prevent and treat it called [Chloroquine](#). If you are planning on being in Nicaragua for a long period of time and are planning on being in wet areas or around smaller towns you can get a prescription for Chloroquine, which can be purchased in country.

Chloroquine phosphate prevents the development of [malaria](#) parasites in the blood. Doctors use it to both prevent and treat malaria.

To prevent some strains of malaria, you take Chloroquine phosphate once, 1 to 2 weeks prior to travel to an area where malaria is present, and then weekly while you are in the area, and weekly for 4 weeks after you depart from the area.

Medicines to prevent malaria destroy the malaria parasite once it enters the bloodstream. To completely rid yourself of the parasite, take the medicine for 4 weeks after you leave the area where malaria is present.

Dengue Fever. This is the counterpart to Malaria. The mosquito that carries Malaria is out at night and the one that carries Dengue Fever is out in the day. It is not common, but is more common than malaria. [Dengue fever](#) is the most common cause of fever in travelers returning from the Caribbean, Central America, and South Central Asia. This disease is caused by four similar viruses (DENV-1, -2, -3, and -4) spread through the bites of infected mosquitoes. Usually dengue fever causes a mild illness, but it can be severe and lead to dengue hemorrhagic fever (DHF), which can be fatal if not treated. People who have had dengue fever before are more at risk of getting DHF.

No vaccine is available to prevent dengue, and there is no specific medicine to cure illness caused by dengue. Those who become ill with dengue fever can be given medicine to reduce fever, such as acetaminophen, and may need oral rehydration or intravenous fluids and, in severe cases, treatment to support their blood pressure. Early recognition and treatment of severe dengue with impending blood pressure failure can reduce the risk of serious complications.

If you return from a trip abroad and get sick with a fever, you should seek medical care. Be sure to tell the doctor or other health care provider about your recent travel.

Mosquito Protection

Travelers can reduce their risk of getting dengue fever by protecting themselves from mosquito bites. The mosquitoes that spread dengue usually bite at dusk and dawn but may bite at any time during the day, especially indoors, in shady areas, or when the weather is cloudy.

To protect yourself from both Malaria and Dengue Fever, keep your skin covered, and sleep with a mosquito net when in areas where it is common. Most hotels and houses will have the mosquito nets if it is common in the area- bring your own only if it will make you feel more comfortable.

Use a repellent:

☒ Look for a repellent that contains one of the following active ingredients: DEET, picaridin (KBR 3023), Oil of Lemon Eucalyptus/PMD, or IR3535. Always follow the instructions on the label when you use the repellent.

☒ In general, repellents protect longer against mosquito bites when they have a higher concentration (percentage) of any of these active ingredients. However, concentrations above 50% do not offer a marked increase in protection time. Products with less than 10% of an active ingredient may offer only limited protection, often no longer than 1-2 hours, but they, and the fabric softener sheet trick mentioned earlier, will help. Don't worry if you do get bit by a mosquito. The odds of contracting either disease are very slim.

Do's and Don'ts of stomach infections.

Stomach problems such as diarrhea are common.

Travelers can minimize their risk for Travelers Diarrhea by practicing the following effective preventive measures:

- Avoid eating foods or drinking beverages purchased from street vendors or other establishments where unhygienic conditions are present.
- Avoid eating raw or undercooked meat and seafood.
- Avoid eating raw fruits (e.g., oranges, bananas, avocados) and vegetables unless the traveler peels them.

If handled properly well-cooked and packaged foods usually are safe. Tap water, ice, unpasteurized milk, and dairy products are associated with increased risk for TD. Safe beverages include bottled carbonated beverages, hot tea or coffee, beer, wine, and water boiled or appropriately treated with iodine or chlorine.

Is prophylaxis of travelers' diarrhea recommended?

CDC does not recommend antimicrobial drugs to prevent traveler's diarrhea (TD). However, studies show a decrease in the incidence of TD with use of bismuth subsalicylate (Pepto Bismol). Several studies show that bismuth subsalicylate taken as either 2 tablets 4 times daily or 2 fluid ounces 4 times daily reduces the incidence of travelers' diarrhea. The mechanism of action appears to be both antibacterial and antisecretory. Use of bismuth subsalicylate should be avoided by persons who are allergic to aspirin, during pregnancy, and by persons taking certain other medications (e.g., anticoagulants, probenecid, or methotrexate). In addition, persons

should be informed about potential side effects, in particular about temporary blackening of the tongue and stool, and, rarely, ringing in the ears. Because of potential adverse side effects, prophylactic bismuth subsalicylate should not be used for more than 3 weeks.

- Do - keep yourself hydrated if you should develop diarrhea. The problem that will cause death in diarrhea is dehydration. Drink water, or a diluted Gatorade (Gatorade is available in most of the country, but is too strong by itself for an upset stomach. Dilute three parts water to one part Gatorade at least if you choose this method). General rule of thumb - put in the amount that comes out.
- Do Not- assume that what caused your illness was the last thing you ate. Some ailments take a few days or sometimes weeks to gestate. If your diarrhea or stomach upset continues, there are medical labs in most small to mid-sized cities. You can have your blood and stools tested for parasites or bacterial infection and results can be obtained the same day. Consulting a local doctor as to what medications are best is inexpensive and fairly simple.
- Do Not - assume that because your stomach is upset that you have a serious ailment. As your body develops immunity to the local pathogens (bugs) your stomach problems will resolve, normally within a few days.

How does the money exchange work?

The local currency (córdoba) is pegged to the US dollar. This means that inflation is controlled and is elevated at a set monthly rate. These days dollars and córdobas are interchangeable in most instances. It is, however, important to have local currency or small US dollars, i.e. one and 5 dollar bills when in more rural areas. You may not be able to purchase something simply because the seller does not have change.

There are ATM's in the large and mid sized cities in the country and they often accept debit cards from the US. Check with your bank before coming to see if your card will work and what the fees will be. Be prepared. It may take some time to find a machine that is working or accepts your card. Don't get to the end of your cash supply before looking for a machine.

In the large and mid-sized cities there may also be people that will exchange money on the street. They are usually official, but always check to make sure their license is visible and they are the person in the photo. Normally their exchange is close to the current exchange (currently about 20 córdobas per dollar), but should not be used for large amounts. Use them only when money is needed for convenience. Again, remember, MOST places will accept dollars and córdobas interchangeably although almost always you will receive change in córdobas.

In mid and large sized cities, many businesses will accept credit cards but don't rely on them as your sole method of payment. There will be fees (sometimes steep) from your credit card company and the seller may also place an additional fee for the convenience. This is all very normal. MAKE SURE you speak to your credit card company BEFORE traveling to Nicaragua to advise them of your trip. Many times the card will be refused by the credit card company if not informed of your travel. The company will assume the card is stolen because Nicaragua isn't a common travel location. To contact the credit card company after arriving in Nicaragua is

sometimes difficult because of access to telephones, cost of phone calls, travel restraints etc. Pre-planning can save a lot of time and headache on this point.

What will I eat?

Most of the diet of Nicaragua consists of grilled or fried chicken, beef, or pork with rice, beans and boiled vegetables and/or some sort of plantain. Often times, meals include a small amount of cabbage salad and a corn tortilla.

The food is usually very well prepared and is much more natural than found in many other countries. Vegetarians are not common in the culture so outside the larger cities it may be challenging to get a true vegetarian meal.

Places that are accustomed to tourist or volunteer workers want repeat business, so they will go to great lengths to insure the food is prepared well. When traveling off the beaten path, follow common sense and make sure you can see where and how the food is prepared.

Can I drink the water?

For many of the municipalities, the water is safe to drink although some cities have problems caused by volcanic activity close by or other issues. It is always a good idea to check on the water source with the local population before drinking.

Ice will be safe in places accustomed to tourist or volunteers.

Filtered or bottled water can be purchased almost anywhere in the country and is very inexpensive.

How are the people?

Generally Nicaraguans are the most warm, friendly, grateful and generous people that can be found anywhere. It is customary for a Nicaraguan to give generously to anyone that is willing to be involved in their lives. Hard work is considered honorable.

It is considered rude in many places to disappoint foreigners. Often times locals, especially “campasinos” (people from the smaller towns), will give more than they have to insure you are comfortable; they also will commit to things they know they can’t deliver. This is not because they are telling you an untruth, but because it is considered rude to say no or even that they don’t know the answer to your question. It is therefore important to ask questions in a way that allows a truthful answer while still saving face if they do not know. Many times if the question is asked as a yes or no concerning a follow-up meeting, the campasino will say yes although they know they will not be there. The trick of asking questions in the right way to get a truthful answer is very difficult for most foreigners. The best solution is to ask a Nicaraguan to phrase the question or to interpret for you the answer.

A general example of how to ask a question: Let’s suppose you are driving through a town and you are trying to find the road to take you to the park. If you ask anyone “Is this the way to the park?” they are most likely going to say “Yes” even if you are going the wrong direction. But, if you ask “Which way is it to the park?” they will have the opportunity to correct your mistake if you are heading in the wrong direction in an acceptable manner. You are more likely to get a correct answer.

Also, when asking for directions, ALWAYS ask two or three opinions, then deduce the way from what you are told. As mentioned above, Nicaraguans always want to help and do not want to disappoint visitors. Therefore, it is common for someone to give convincing directions and not even be close to accurate. When looking for a new place, it is very important to go with the flow to avoid going crazy.

Most streets in the entire country are unnamed. Addresses are common which refer to landmarks; even official home addresses are given in the same manner. It is also common that the directions may include where things “used to be”. Enjoy the adventure!

There will be beggars everywhere. Some are desperate, and some are professionals. In Managua, people will wash car windows at traffic lights (sometimes forcefully) and try to sell anything they can find. Many times you will see children in the street asking for money, or selling something. Be careful not to fall for the tricks. These children are generally in the street working for their parents or someone else. Although the urge is to give money to help the situation, it will only perpetuate the problem. If the children get more money, the parents will have them in the street more.

Many times if someone is asking for money, the word “no” will not work. The secret code to tell them “no thank you” is to simply raise your index finger and wave it left and right “like we use to tell a child not to do something”. They will then get the idea.

Many people are professional beggars as well looking for foreign missionaries to collect medicine, receive handouts or for money. There are hundreds of missions in the country every month. There is a great need for medicine and medical help, but be aware as well that many have become experts at looking in need so as to get something for nothing. Make sure to be thorough in determining the need. It is best to have locals that you know and trust screen and select recipients of aid. When you hear that you are “the only people that have come to help”, be wary. There are many missions in Nicaragua and frequently people have gotten aid from several different groups. They will never admit that they have already received help elsewhere. Again, the help is needed, but remember that not all those who ask are really in need.

How do I handle political / religious conversations?

Politics in Nicaragua, both about Nicaragua and the U.S., is as popular as college football in the U.S. The only thing more popular will be baseball. The answers given will need to be spoken with extreme caution. If you suggest that you are a Democrat you will be labeled “Sandinistan” - If you suggest you are a Republican, you will be labeled a “Liberal”. These are opposite meanings from what is commonly understood within the U.S.

If the conversation is about Nicaraguan politics, the views expressed may be colorful and very opinionated from the Nicaraguan, but agreeing or disagreeing with the conversation can potentially label you as part of a particular political side.

The problems with the labels are that the conversations will circulate within the communities where you are working / visiting. Once you are labeled, 50% of the community will choose not to associate with you.

This can also be said for religious conversations. The two primary religious beliefs in Nicaragua are Catholicism and Evangelicalism. These beliefs are strongly rooted and many times are likely to alienate anyone who is outspoken one way or the other. It is very acceptable to practice your beliefs and visit services and churches. Religious services in Nicaragua and the churches are beautiful parts of the culture and a must-see. It is advisable to note that any conversation or action beyond normal considerations may make your future interactions difficult with some in the community.

In both political and religious conversations, maintaining a neutral view (as much as you are able) can go much further than you expect.

How do I stay in touch with family?

It is fairly easy to stay in touch with people at home. Pre-paid phones are inexpensive and easily re-chargeable. The fees to call the US are affordable. Also, people from the states can call for a relatively reasonable rate. Effective April 22, 2009, Nicaragua began a system that added a number to the previous 7 digit phone numbers. For conventional numbers, land lines, it is required to first use a 2 and for cell phones an 8. So phone calls from the United States would be as follows 011-505-8-123-4567. (011= international call, 505= country code, 8=cell phone, 123-4567= telephone number.)

If you choose not to have a cell phone, there are calling centers in mid and larger sized cities where you can go into a booth and pay by the minute for telephone usage.

If you have a local contact, they can usually purchase an inexpensive phone, and small amount of prepaid time for you, before you arrive. Usually they can set you up for less than \$40.00 (\$20.00 for the phone and \$20.00 for the time purchase). This can be handy so you can get the phone number to people in your home country before you travel.

Skype is a handy tool. Have family members sign up and they can call phones in Nicaragua for less than conventional charges using “Skype out”. If you will be in an area with a decent internet connection, Skype works well on both ends, or you can sign up for a “Skype in” service which will allow you to have a US based phone number that can call your account anywhere in the world. If you have a camera on your computer, it is great to use the video as well to share your experience.

Internet is available in most locations. There are many smaller towns that may not be connected, but in mid to large sized cities, there are internet cafes everywhere. Sometimes the services do not work or may be slow, but usually it is adequate. If the service is down, enjoy Nicaragua and plug in again later.

What if I get injured?

- It is a good idea to have some sort of travelers insurance or international insurance. MAKE SURE the insurance you purchase works with hospitals in Nicaragua. The best hospital in the country is called “[Hospital Metropolitano Vivian Pellas](#)”. It provides excellent service and many of the physicians that practice there were trained in the US; it is also very affordable. Check with your insurance and make sure they work with this specific hospital. The standard procedure for the hospital is to ask for a credit card deposit when they begin treatment and, as charges are accrued, they will be charged to the card. If your hospital visit requires a mid- or long-term stay, hospital staff will bring the bill to you every couple of days to make sure you understand the charges. There will always be a small amount of a deposit on your credit card to cover any incidentals when treatment is over, but the prices are drastically less expensive than prices in the US.
- Make sure you and/or your organization have some sort of evacuation plan in case of accident. The hospitals in the rural areas are very limited in their capabilities, but will

do the best they can with what they have. It could possibly take 24 hours to transport from a rural area to the Hospital Metropolitano due to road conditions and availability of ambulances. It is a good idea to work with someone that is in country to help insure a well thought out plan and possibly insure a relationship with the directors of the local hospitals where you may be working to secure prompt transport in case of emergency. It is strongly suggested to do this BEFORE it is needed.

- It is a good idea to have GPS coordinates of where you are staying and where you are working. Also, it's not a bad idea to site a helicopter landing area nearby in case of the need for a helicopter evacuation and mark it with a GPS coordinate as well. Nicaraguan Helicopters are not allowed to fly at night, so if an evacuation is needed, it will need to be decided quickly in the day.

How can the U.S. Embassy help me?

The U.S. Embassy has an effective system to assist in case of natural disasters as well as minor accidents. It is strongly suggested to register at the U.S. State Department [website](#).

The following is from the US Embassy and is a description of the importance of registration and the warden program:

The U.S. Embassy has set up a warden program to assist with U.S. Citizens in country. This system is a mechanism for the U.S. Embassy to make information available to U.S citizens in case of emergencies of various types. Wardens serve as points of contact between the embassy and the U.S. citizens. The citizen registration and the resulting warden system are the keys to getting news out to the U.S citizen public and, in a worst case scenario, effecting an evacuation. Moreover, the registry is critical in “personal” crises where individuals are needed to be contacted (e.g: a relative is in the hospital). Another key function of the registration process is that it allows the Embassy to keep a proof of citizenship in their records. In case of a lost passport, a registered citizen can obtain a new passport quickly and directly from the embassy whereas a non-registered citizen will have to wait until citizenship verification arrives from Washington D.C.

There are two types of wardens. One type is generally located geographically. If you will be in the area for a long period of time, it is a good idea to make contact. There are also specific wardens in some cases for groups such as NGOs. These wardens can be informed for movements of groups, or groups working in specific areas. Warden positions are volunteer positions. (I am the volunteer warden for NGOs in Nicaragua)

What if there is a natural disaster?

Nicaragua is called “The Land of Lakes and Volcanoes”. This is a beautiful name and very true. Lakes and volcanoes are a large part of what makes the country so amazing to visit. However, volcanoes also mean a constant threat of natural disasters with possible unpredictable eruptions and more commonly earthquakes. Combine this with the occasional tropical storm or hurricane and it is best to be prepared more than usual. Utilize the Embassy registration and the warden service mentioned above to maximize your safety.

Will I be a rock star?

YES!!!! You can even go on-line and find t-shirts to claim the fact. The truth is that you will be a rock star in the communities you visit and with the people you contact. This has both good and bad aspects. You may have had to endure dinner conversations in which someone recounts their 10-second encounter with a celebrity; well now, YOU are the celebrity! The significance of this is that if you are kind you will always be remembered as amazing; if you are in the slightest bit unfriendly, you may be remembered forever as horrible.

Your actions also will affect those that follow. If you come into town and give everything away without consideration for sustainability, those visitors who arrive after you may be viewed as “Santa Claus” and will have a difficult time achieving their work because of the assumption they also will give everything away. It is very important to always know that your interaction in a country is part of a larger picture and may have a lasting effect, both positive and negative.

A personal story to explain this point: When I was a Peace Corps volunteer, I was placed in a community where a volunteer had lived a few years before. There had not been a foreign presence in the community since. The volunteer that had lived there had a similar physical structure to mine. Immediately upon arrival, I was called “John” (the name of the previous volunteer). I was approached by people that would feel the fabric of my shirt to check the quality, then tell me their name and ask me to hold the shirt for them. They would tell me that John had given them some clothing when he left and they liked the clothes. They would tell me that they wanted to make sure no one else in the community had whatever garment they liked. They wanted me to promise to save it for them for two years until I would be leaving and then make sure they got it.

John had also built a community center which was not used for its original intent. The solar panel he had put for light had been removed and taken to someone’s house to run a television. The community was very excited to see me arrive, but when the realization came that I wasn’t going to “give” anything for free, but was going to “teach” sustainable techniques with what they already had, I was shunned for several months. I began my service with an uphill battle originated by someone who – I am sure – had had the best of intentions but that I never had the chance to know.

It is very common for someone to arrive in a community and be judged based on a previous visitor who appears similar and who may have created a negative experience several years earlier.

REPUTATION IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT!

With all this said, will I have fun?

YES! Understand that your adventure to Nicaragua will be a life-changing experience, and promises to be one of the most positive opportunities in a lifetime. It is a country that usually gets into peoples’ hearts and they find it hard to stay away. Almost everyone I know that has visited for even a short time has come back.