



Nicaragua



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The Pacific coast of Nicaragua was settled as a Spanish colony from Panama in the early 16th century. Independence from Spain was declared in 1821 and the country became an independent republic in 1838. Britain occupied the Caribbean Coast in the first half of the 19th century, but gradually ceded control of the region in subsequent decades. Violent opposition to governmental manipulation and corruption spread to all classes by 1978 and resulted in a short-lived civil war that brought the Marxist Sandinista guerrillas to power in 1979.

Nicaraguan aid to leftist rebels in El Salvador caused the US to sponsor anti-Sandinista contra guerrillas through much of the 1980s. After losing free and fair elections in 1990, 1996, and 2001, former Sandinista President Daniel ORTEGA Saavedra was elected president in 2006 and reelected in 2011. The 2008 municipal elections, 2010 regional elections, 2011 presidential elections, 2012 municipal elections, and 2013 regional elections were marred by widespread irregularities. Nicaragua's infrastructure and economy – hard hit by the earlier civil war and by Hurricane Mitch in 1998 – are slowly being rebuilt, but democratic institutions have been weakened under the ORTEGA administration.

- **Ethnic Groups:** Mestizo (mixed Amerindian and white) 69%, white 17%, black 9%, Amerindian 5%
- **Languages:** Spanish (official) 95.3%, Miskito 2.2%, Mestizo of the Caribbean coast 2%, other 0.5% **note:** English and indigenous languages found on the Caribbean coast (2005 est.)
- **Religions:** Roman Catholic 58.5%, Protestant 23.2% (Evangelical 21.6%, Moravian 1.6%), Jehovah's Witnesses 0.9%, other 1.6%, none 15.7% (2005 est.)
- **Demographic Profile:** Despite being one of the poorest countries in Latin America, Nicaragua has improved its access to potable water and sanitation and has ameliorated its life expectancy, infant and child mortality, and immunization rates. However, income distribution is very uneven, and the poor, agriculturalists, and indigenous people continue to have less access to healthcare services. Nicaragua's total fertility rate has fallen from around 6 children per woman in 1980 to just above replacement level today, but the high birth rate among adolescents perpetuates a cycle of poverty and low educational attainment. Nicaraguans emigrate primarily to Costa Rica and to a lesser extent the United States. Nicaraguan men have been migrating seasonally to Costa Rica to harvest bananas and coffee since the early 20th century. Political turmoil, civil war, and natural disasters from the 1970s through the 1990s dramatically increased the flow of refugees and permanent migrants seeking jobs, higher wages, and better social and healthcare benefits. Since 2000, Nicaraguan emigration to Costa Rica has slowed and stabilized. Today roughly 300,000 Nicaraguans are permanent residents of Costa Rica - about 75% of the foreign population - and thousands more migrate seasonally for work, many illegally.
- **Population:** 5,848,641 (July 2014 est.)
- **Economy:** Nicaragua, the poorest country in Central America and the second poorest in the Western Hemisphere, has widespread under employment and poverty. The Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) has been in effect since April 2006 and has expanded export opportunities for many agricultural and manufactured goods. Textiles and agriculture combined account for nearly 50% of Nicaragua's exports. In 2013, the government granted a 100-year concession to a newly formed Chinese-run company to finance and build an inter-oceanic canal and related projects, at an estimated cost of \$40 billion. The economy grew 4.6% in 2013, despite a 33% decline in coffee export revenues due to a coffee rust fungus.

