

Regional Directory

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Although this little chapter is designed as your one-stop shop for information about your destinations, be sure to turn to the directories for Nicaragua (p282) and El Sal-

vador (p454) for more detailed, country-specific information.

Almost all prerecorded videos sold in the region (most of them bootlegs) use the NTSC image registration system, incompatible with the PAL and Secam systems.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Although there are excellent, modern hotels in Managua and San Salvador, as well as in upscale beach towns and colonial centers, in most major towns your choices will be between basic and midrange options. Hostels are relatively rare outside the main tourist magnets, but you can usually find basic rooms for US\$3 to US\$5 in Nicaragua, US\$6 to US\$8 in El Salvador. Midrange hotels can be expensive for what you get (particularly for solo travelers, who usually pay almost as much as a couple), but if you need the extra amenities (hot water, air-conditioning, 24-hour running water) there's usually one in every town. Official campsites are few and far between, but you're usually welcome to pitch your tent on private property, though you should always offer to pay. For country-specific information, check the directories

PRACTICALITIES

- Electrical current and plugs are the same as in the US and Canada: 110V AC, 60Hz in outlets accepting two flat-pronged plugs.
- Both Nicaragua and El Salvador officially use the metric system, but *libras* (pounds) may still be used in markets, and *galones* (US gallons) at gas stations – although here the equivalent in liters is also usually given. Also common are two colonial Spanish measurements, *manzanas* (0.70 hectares or 1.74 acres), useful if you're investing in land, and *varas* (0.70 meters or 33 inches), often used in lieu of meters for giving directions (100 *varas* to one block). For more conversion information, see the inside front cover.
- Bilingual tourist guides are available in hotels and tourist offices. In El Salvador, look for *Pashalua* (www.pashalua.com) and *El Salvador Turístico*, while Nicaragua's tourist board publishes small, bilingual destination-specific glossy booklets; also look for the English-language quarterly *Between the Waves*. El Salvador's major newspapers include the liberal *La Prensa Gráfica* (www.laprensa.com.sv) and the conservative *El Diario de Hoy* (www.elsalvador.com); in Nicaragua, there's the relatively right-wing *La Prensa* (www.laprensa.com.ni) and the more liberal *Nuevo Diario* (www.elnuevodiario.com.ni).
- Just because your hotel room has a cable TV doesn't mean you'll get to watch Simpsons reruns in English: there are several different cable packages, and the most common has primarily Spanish-language programming, including CNN, *en Español* only. In more expensive hotels, cable with English-language offerings include the BBC, DW Journal (also in German) and CNN in English.

BOOK ACCOMMODATION ONLINE

For more accommodation reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at www.lonelyplanet.com. You'll find the true, insider lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

for Nicaragua (p282) and El Salvador (p454).

ACTIVITIES

Although El Salvador has a stunning array of outdoor attractions, ranging from waterfall rappels (p363) to fuming Parque Nacional Los Volcanes (p353), much larger and less populated Nicaragua has the larger playground – its (officially) protected wilderness areas clocking in at almost the exact acreage of all of El Salvador.

See the Nicaragua & El Salvador Outdoors chapter (p43) for much more information about outdoor activities, from sea-turtle watching to the region's spectacular surfing, but also check the Environment sections, which have a rundown of parks and protected areas for both Nicaragua (p63) and El Salvador (p307).

Diving & Snorkeling

Diving is beginning to gain popularity in both countries, and Nicaragua's Corn Islands' site is world class. There are also interesting dives on the Pacific Coast (though visibility varies with the season and weather), as well as dives into crater lakes – the fish are less flashy, but the earth's open maw on one side and perhaps a few fumaroles on the other should make up for it.

Hiking & Trekking

Both countries have hikes that range from 1km interpretive trails for the whole family, to multiday treks into the mountains – not to mention plenty of volcano climbs. For most treks longer than a few hours, you'll probably be required (or strongly recommended) to hire a guide or, on some El Salvador hikes, request a free police escort. Guides, except at some private reserves, are

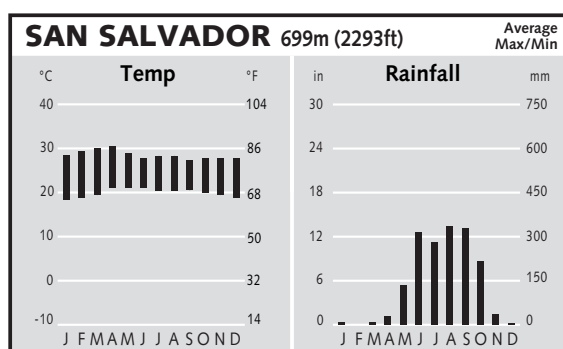
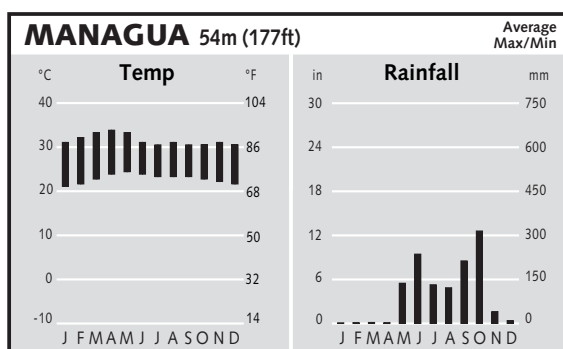
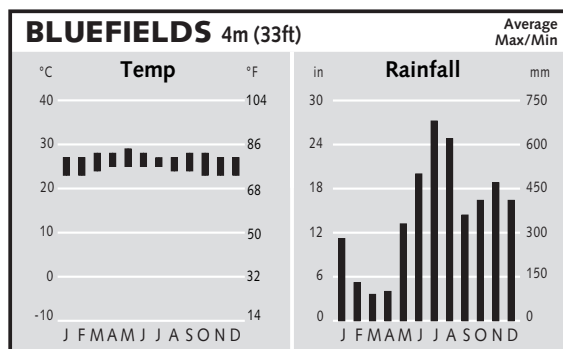
usually very inexpensive (US\$6 to US\$15 per day, per group) and generally well worth the cash because of safety issues. In less developed wilderness areas, at least let the ranger station or *alcaldía* (mayor's office) know where you'll be, and when you expect to return.

Surfing

See p45 for a special section on some of the best (and least crowded) surfing in the world – the region's best-developed adventure sport.

CLIMATE CHARTS

Thanks to altitude variations and microclimates, you can usually find agreeable weather somewhere no matter the time of year, but be mindful of hurricane season, which officially runs from June to November. The worst storms usually make landfall in October and November.



COURSES

Although neither country can quite match Guatemala for cheap Spanish classes, there are still plenty of fine spots to learn the subjunctive tense, including San Salvador and Santa Ana in El Salvador, and, in Nicaragua, León, Estelí, Granada, Laguna de Apoyo and San Juan del Sur; you could also take Miskito Waspám.

You can also try surfing lessons, which can be arranged as either pricey package deals, including three meals and airport pickup, or on the spot with a local guide, who may be able to throw in a day's surfboard rental with your lesson. In El Salvador, head to La Libertad and the beaches west of there (like Playa El Tunco, Playa El Zonte) for private instruction on some of Central America's best waves. Higher-end surf camps are popping up on El Salvador's east coast, near Playa El Cuco. The top spots to bust your chops in Nicaragua include San Juan del Sur – also with Spanish schools – Playa Pie de Gigante and Salinas.

CUSTOMS

Customs is a bit stricter in El Salvador than in Nicaragua, but wise travelers generally won't have to worry about anything other than lines at most borders. Drugs, drug paraphernalia, weapons, fruits, vegetables and any artifacts are forbidden. Large amounts of cash or expensive items like cameras, jewelry and laptop computers may raise eyebrows, but shouldn't break your stride as long as everything's been declared. Cleaning up, dressing conservatively and remaining formal and polite no matter what will expedite crossing any international border.

DISABLED TRAVELERS

Although neither El Salvador nor Nicaragua has much infrastructure for disabled travelers, both countries have a disproportionate number of people with mobility issues because of the wars and landmines, so people know how (and are eager) to be helpful. While experienced travelers may be able to get around on their own, it's still better to go with a tour; see the Disabled Travelers sections for both countries (p284 and p456) for more information, or try some of these sites.

Access-Able Travel Source (www.access-able.com)

Although their great searchable Central American database doesn't include specific El Salvador or Nicaragua listings, it does have links to several agencies that could arrange tours or at least point you in the right direction.

Mobility International USA (www.miusa.org) Works with Seeds of Change sending brigades to Nicaragua and El Salvador.

National Information Communication Awareness Network (www.nican.com.au) Offers advice to travelers from Australia and New Zealand.

For a list of services available to disabled travelers by airline, go to www.everybody.co.uk/airindex.htm.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

See the individual country directories for embassy and consulate lists for Nicaragua (p284) and El Salvador (p456). General embassy information can be found at www.embassyworld.com. Generally, your embassy won't be much help in emergencies where you're remotely at fault, and can't help you if you've committed a crime locally, even if such actions are legal in your own country. However, if your money and documents are stolen, it might assist with getting a new passport, but a loan for onward travel is probably out of the question. Most embassies and consulates can help you by contacting relatives or friends, or by suggesting reliable doctors, clinics and so on.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

Neither El Salvador nor Nicaragua is particularly open to the gay scene, though it does exist; check each country for a very short list of gay bars, predictably concentrated in San Salvador and Managua. Men in particular should err on the side of caution. There is a scene, however, and you will find it. The following are good places to begin:

International Gay & Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA; www.iglta.com) A general resource with the strength of 1200 travel-oriented companies.

Out & About (www.outandabout.com) Some Central America information.

The Gully (www.thegully.com) Politically charged gay zine in English and Spanish, with interesting Central America coverage.

Rainbow Network (www.rainbownetwork.com) The travel section has a gay guide and useful forum.

HOLIDAYS

Major holiday periods to consider when trip planning include Semana Santa (Easter Week; Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday in March or April), Christmas through New Year, and El Salvador's summer holiday (the first week in August). At these times, prices rise, hotels fill up and tourist density reaches a maximum. Consider making reservations ahead of time if you'll travel during these periods. For holiday hours and closures in each country, see the individual directories.

INSURANCE

A travel-insurance policy to cover theft, loss and medical problems is a good idea. Some policies specifically exclude dangerous activities, which can include scuba diving, motorcycling, even trekking.

You may prefer a policy that pays doctors or hospitals directly rather than you having to pay on the spot and claim later. If you have to claim later, ensure you keep all documentation. Check that the policy covers ambulances or an emergency flight home. See also the information on insurance on p286.

Worldwide cover to travelers from over 44 countries is available online at www.lonelyplanet.com/travel_services.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access is speedy and cheap (around US\$1 per hour) throughout El Salvador and the Pacific side of Nicaragua; on Nicaragua's Caribbean Coast, things get a bit spottier. For more information and country-specific websites, see p286 and p458.

MONEY

Nicaragua uses the córdoba, but US dollars are accepted almost everywhere. El Salvador has officially adopted the US dollar as its currency. All prices in this book are in US dollars. Other currencies, including the euro and British pound, are difficult to exchange in this part of the world, so bring dollars.

ATMs (*cajeros automaticos*) are widely available in El Salvador and the Pacific side of Nicaragua, but on the Caribbean Coast you'll need cash in many destinations. Most are on the Visa/Plus system, but Mastercard/Cirrus machines are becoming more popular. Try to bring two different cards,

and be sure to let your bank and credit-card companies know you'll be leaving the country, so they don't freeze your account after a US\$800 withdrawal. To check out worldwide MasterCard/Cirrus ATM locations, visit www.mastercard.com; for Visa/Plus ATM locations, see www.visa.com.

Credit cards are also widely accepted (except, once again, on Nicaragua's Caribbean Coast), with Visa the favorite. With the ascendancy of debit cards, travelers checks are becoming less useful and more difficult to exchange worldwide, and Central America is no exception; consider leaving them at home or just bring US\$100 or so for emergencies. **Western Union** (US ☎ +1-800-325-6000; www.westernunion.com) has offices all over both countries, and may be your best bet in case of emergencies.

Check the directories for Nicaragua (p287) and El Salvador (p459) for country-specific information.

PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

Film stores, groceries and pharmacies may sell regular color film (100 or 400), but anything special, including black-and-white and *diapositiva* (slide film), should be brought from home – although you should be able to find most items (albeit expensively) in Managua or San Salvador. Videos for sale in the region conform to the NTSC image registration system. VHS and mini DV tapes are sold in film and electronics stores in most major cities.

Etiquette & Restrictions

Most people won't mind having their picture taken if you ask first, and are perhaps able to pony up a dollar for the subject's trouble. In the indigenous communities of the Nicaraguan Caribbean, people may be less inclined to pose, so respect that.

TELEPHONE

Both countries have payphones, usually operated by telephone cards (available at small stores and specific outlets) rather than local currency. See the directories of each country for more details. In both cases, it's much more expensive to make international calls using landlines than heading to the nearest Internet café, where you can make the same calls (with those awful, echoing connections) for a fraction of the cost.

DOES ANYBODY REALLY KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS?

In 2005, ostensibly to save energy, Nicaragua enacted Daylight Savings Time (DST), springing forward (GMT-5) the second Sunday in April and falling back (GMT-6) the first Saturday in November – like the US Central Time Zone. DST, which makes sense at latitudes where day length varies by five or six hours over the year, has been met with bemusement and irritation in Nicaragua, where a 1½ hour variation doesn't seem to warrant anything as drastic as changing your clocks.

Thus, *la Hora Nueva* (the New Hour) is not universally observed. Although official business in Nicaragua proper observes DST, the RAAS and RAAN autonomous zones do not – except for the Managua-based airlines. Moreover, private businesses and homes all over the country also ignore DST, so if it's important, ask. In many countries, this sort of temporal anarchy would lead to missed meetings, lost hair and quite possibly the end of civilization. In Nicaragua, where (as in most of Latin America) there's an already hour leeway for any appointment or meeting, it's just a minor inconvenience. Well, unless you just missed your flight.

TIME

Both El Salvador and Nicaragua are on GMT-6, or six hours behind Greenwich Mean Time, equal to Central Standard Time in the USA – and Nicaragua has even been experimenting with daylight savings time (see the boxed text, above).

TOILETS & SHOWERS

While the major population centers often offer the same services you're used to at home (with the caveat that you should never, ever, flush your toilet paper; there's a wastebasket close by), take just a few steps off the beaten path and you could run into some surprises.

If the handle doesn't seem to work, this may be your introduction to bucket-flush toilets. Look around for a plastic bucket or large bowl, and some large, water-filled receptacle nearby. Fill the bucket with about a liter of water, lift the lid of the toilet (a splash-related courtesy) and pour the water into the bowl from around chest height. Repeat as necessary. In very basic hotels, you may also be using bucket showers, which should be self-explanatory, if inconvenient.

In all but the very nicest hotels, hot water comes from an electrical device attached to the shower, colloquially called a 'suicide machine.' While electrical shocks are very rare, avoid touching the machine when the water is running. For the hottest water (probably not very hot), set the heater to 'hot' and turn on the water, then wait a couple of minutes and slowly ratchet the flow down until the low humming noise stops. Then increase water pressure just

until the hum comes back on again. And that's as good as it gets.

VISAS

If you attend to one bureaucratic detail before you hit the road, it should be making sure your passport is not soon to expire (all travelers must have at least six months until their passport expires to enter either country) and verifying what visas, if any, you'll need. Visitors from Australia, Canada, the EU, New Zealand and the US do not need visas to enter Nicaragua or El Salvador. See the individual country directories (p288 and p461) for visa specifics, length-of-stay regulations and extension options.

WORK & VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Both El Salvador and Nicaragua have high unemployment and underemployment, and thus it's very difficult to get jobs without some sort of specialty and a sponsor company. There are, however, a wide variety of volunteer gigs waiting to be filled in both countries. Most, but by no means all, volunteer positions require a minimum time commitment. From one month to three is typical, though organizations realize that there are many altruistic travelers who only have two or three weeks to vacation and are looking to spend it doing good. Consequently, shorter-term opportunities are becoming more available; connecting through your Spanish school is another option. Do your research before committing, read the fine print associated with different positions and talk to past volunteers.

Australian Volunteers International (www.australianvolunteers.com) Places volunteers from Australia and New Zealand in Central America and around the world.

Earthwatch (www.earthwatch.org) Offers often pricey volunteer opportunities.

Habitat for Humanity (www.habitat.org) Talk to them before you come about several home-building projects, most concentrated in the Northern Highlands.

International Volunteer Programs Association (www.volunteerinternational.org) Collects many volunteer positions in Central America.

Peace Corps (www.peacecorps.gov) Places US citizens in both El Salvador and Nicaragua for a variety of humanitarian projects.

Seeds of Learning (☎ 707 939 0471; www.seedsoflearning.org; 13606 Arnold Drive, Ste 1, Glen Ellen, California, USA) A nonprofit organization that sends work brigades to El Salvador or Nicaragua to help build and equip schools.

Transitions Abroad (www.transitionsabroad.com) An excellent resource for finding paid work, contacts and volunteer positions, from planting mangroves on the Yucatán coast to educating sex workers in Guatemala.

Volunteer Abroad (www.volunteerabroad.com) Scores of volunteer, study abroad and internship opportunities listed by country, plus many useful resources. Paid teaching jobs and opportunities for high-school students also available.

Transportation

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Perhaps the most peculiar aspect of this book is that these two countries, while close as kin, don't actually share a border. There was once a ferry between La Unión, El Salvador, and Potosí, Nicaragua, but it's been out of service for years and rumors of its resurrection, at press time, seem exaggerated.

Regardless, it's easy to get between the two countries, via an inexpensive flight or even cheaper bus ride, with the option of a layover in the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa.

Flights, tours and rail tickets can be booked online at www.lonelyplanet.com/travel_services.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Central America can appear bigger on a map than it really is, and many travelers overestimate distances between cities and countries. The bus ride from Managua to San Salvador, which looks pretty epic from afar, is only 11 hours including breaks and border crossings.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

With your passport in hand, plus visa if necessary (see p461 and p288), entering Nicaragua and El Salvador should be a

THINGS CHANGE...

The information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change. Check directly with the airline or a travel agency to make sure you understand how a fare (and ticket you may buy) works and be aware of the security requirements for international travel. Shop carefully. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

breeze. You fill out the normal forms, immigration officials flick through your passport and stamp it, and you're on your way. Crossing a land border, it's US\$7 to enter Nicaragua and US\$2 to leave. Costa Rica is free coming and going, while Honduras charges US\$3 entry and you exit free. It is US\$1.50 to enter Guatemala and US\$1 to leave. El Salvador costs US\$10 to enter, and there's no fee for leaving. If you're Salvadoran or of Salvadoran descent, it's free both ways

If there are problems, however, stay patient and polite, even – or especially – if things are taking much longer than you'd like.

AIR

Certainly the most inspirational way to arrive to the lands of volcanoes – and lakes too, in the case of Nicaragua – is by plane, where on a clear day you'll be able to get the lay of the land while the butterflies in your stomach try to assist with the landing.

Airports & Airlines

Managua International Airport (MGA; ☎ 233 1624/28; www.eaai.com.ni), just east of the Nicaraguan capital, is a small, manageable but rapidly expanding airport. Look for tickets to get cheaper and lines to get longer as Nicaragua's popularity as a tourist destination increases. Tiny Granada International Airport (p126) has two flights daily between Granada and both San José and Liberia, Costa Rica. While the airport on Big Corn Island (p259) had recently been

DEPARTURE TAXES

Departure taxes of US\$27.14 in El Salvador and US\$32 in Nicaragua are levied on international outbound air passengers at airport check-in. You must pay it in cash – either local currency or US dollars. In Nicaragua, domestic flights carry a US\$2 surcharge that must also be paid in cash.

approved for international flights, at press time there was only domestic service; rumors about a direct flight from Miami were going around.

El Salvador's **Aeropuerto Internacional Comalapa** (SAL; ☎ 2339 8264), about 50km southeast of San Salvador, is a major Central and Latin American hub, and a gateway to and from North American cities like Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco; because it gets more flights, it may be less expensive than Managua.

El Salvador is a regional hub, and you may be able to find special deals on fares (check weekends, when business travel lulls) if you're diligent. Underused Managua International Airport gets less traffic, and fewer special offers.

If you're flexible, it may be less expensive to book a flight into Costa Rica, which has two international airports and a lot more travelers to drive down prices. San José is four to five hours from the Nicaragua border, while Liberia is just two hours from Peñas Blancas. Inexpensive Nature Air (see below) flights connect both with Granada twice daily. Very flexible travelers could also look into Cancún, with excellent deals on international flights but no cheap connections to San Salvador or Managua; instead schedule in an extra two weeks and pick up a copy of Lonely Planet's *Guatemala, Belize & the Yucatan*. If you'd rather just fly into Managua or San Salvador, these are your airlines:

Aerocaribe (QA; in Managua ☎ 800 502 20 00; www.aerocaribe.com, in Spanish; hub Cancún)

American Airlines (AA; in San Salvador ☎ 2298 0777, in Managua 233 1624/28; www.aa.com; hub Dallas)

Atlantic Airlines (in Managua ☎ 233 3103; www.atlanticairlines.com; hub Tegucigalpa)

Continental Airlines (CO; in San Salvador ☎ 2207 2040, in Managua 263 1030; www.continental.com; hub Houston)

Copa Airlines (CM; in San Salvador ☎ 2209 2672, in Managua 233 1404; www.copaair.com; hub Panama City)

Delta Airlines (DL; in San Salvador ☎ 2275 9292; www.delta.com; hub Atlanta)

Grupo TACA (TA; in San Salvador ☎ 2267 8222, in Managua 266 3136; www.taca.com; hub San Salvador)

Iberia (IB; in Managua 233 1624/28; www.iberia.com; hub Madrid)

Nature Air (in San José, Costa Rica ☎ 506 299 6000, in USA/Canada 800 235 9272; www.natureair.com; hub San José)

United Airlines (UA; in San Salvador ☎ 2279 3900, in Mexico 800-003-0777; www.united.com; hub Los Angeles)

Tickets

Unless you're arriving from Mexico or South America, most long-distance flights to and from El Salvador and Nicaragua pass through hubs in the United States, like Miami, Houston or Los Angeles. Some travelers arrange for a day or two layover for the fun of it, but airline surcharges and increasingly tedious US visa regulations can thwart such plans.

An open-jaw ticket (eg flying into San Salvador and out of Managua) can save you the time and effort of backtracking, but can be a problem at immigration if you're asked to prove you have an outbound ticket (not common, but possible). Ticket prices may rise during *Semana Santa*, the Christmas holidays and the December to April high season, although these seasonal changes are less pronounced in El Salvador and Nicaragua than in their more touristed neighbors.

From Australia, New Zealand & Japan

You've got to want to come: from Sydney, American Airlines connects through Los Angeles for San Salvador or Miami for Managua, clocking in at around US\$2200 round trip either way – which isn't much less than a round-the-world trip, if you were thinking of making an upgrade. **Qantas** (www.qantas.com.au) offers a flight connecting in Houston for about the same amount.

It's quite a bit cheaper to fly from Tokyo, where you stop in the USA before touching down in San Salvador for around US\$1500 round trip. Try www.travel.com.au and www.travel.co.nz for online fares.

Flight Centre Australia (☎ 1300 133 133; www.flightcentre.com.au); New Zealand (☎ 0800 243 544; www.flightcentre.co.nz)

STA Travel Australia (☎ 1300 733 035; www.statravel.com.au); New Zealand (☎ 0508 782 872; www.statravel.co.nz)

From Central America & the Caribbean

Grupo TACA, a consortium of regional airlines, is based at San Salvador's Comolapa International Airport, Central America's largest. TACA has connections with Belize City, Guatemala City, Guayaquil, Havana, Managua, Mexico City, San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa, among many others. Other airlines struggle to stay competitive, so look for good deals on Copa's Panama City flight.

From Managua, Copa offers service to Costa Rica, Guatemala and Panama; Atlantic Airlines has a flight to San Pedro Sula, and Aerocaribe offers one flight weekly from Havana; there are much better connections to Cuba from San José, Costa Rica. The tiny Granada airport offers flights twice daily to Liberia and San José, Costa Rica.

From Europe

The cheapest flights from Europe originate in Brussels and Madrid, connecting through various US cities on American, or Madrid on Iberia (nice if you want to avoid US visa requirements) for just under US\$1000 to either San Salvador or Managua. Amsterdam also has a good connection with KLM, stopping in Houston.

It pays to look into San José flights from Europe. From Rome, for example, if you fly to MGA on the AirFrance-TACA route through Paris and Miami, you'll pay US\$1500; if you fly into San José on Iberia, you can get tickets for around US\$1000. To search online for cheap flights, try www.dialaflight.com and www.lastminute.com. Recommended agencies in Europe include the following:

FRANCE

Nouvelles Frontières (☎ 0825 000 747; www.nouvelles-frontieres.fr)

OTU Voyages (☎ 0 820 817 817; www.otu.fr) Student and youth travel specialist.

Voyageurs du Monde (☎ 01 40 15 11 15; www.vdm.com)

GERMANY

Expedia (www.expedia.de)

Just Travel (☎ 089 747 3330; www.justtravel.de)

STA Travel (☎ 01805 456 422; www.statravel.de) For travelers aged under 26.

ITALY

CTS Viaggi (☎ 06-462 0431; www.cts.it) A specialist in student and youth travel.

NETHERLANDS

AirFair (☎ 020-620 5121; www.airfair.nl)

SCANDINAVIA

Kilroy Travels (www.kilroytravels.com)

SPAIN

Viajes Zeppelin (☎ 902 384 253; www.v-zeppelin.es)

UK

Flight Centre (☎ 0870 890 8099; www.flightcentre.co.uk)

Flightbookers (☎ 0870 010 7000; www.ebookers.com)

Journey Latin America (☎ 020-8747 3108; www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk)

STA Travel (☎ 0870 160 0599; www.statravel.co.uk) For travelers under the age of 26.

Trailfinders (☎ 020-7937 1234; www.trailfinders.co.uk)

From South America

Although TACA has direct flights to Lima and Quito, the most convenient flights to South America are through Laca in San José, Costa Rica, and Copa, with transfers in Panama City, which both fly to Bogotá, Caracas, Quito and Lima. Most other connections with South America run through Miami or Cancún.

Recommended travel agencies include the following:

ASATEJ (☎ 54-011 4114-7595; www.asatej.com) In Argentina.

IVI Tours (☎ 0212-993 6082; www.ividiomas.com) In Venezuela.

Student Travel Bureau (☎ 3038 1555; www.stb.com.br) In Brazil.

Viajo.com (www.viajo.com) Online and telephone bookings from several countries.

USA & Canada

Unsurprisingly, North Americans get the best deal, with round-trip flights to San Salvador running anywhere from US\$300 to US\$500 from Los Angeles, Miami or Houston, all served by a variety of carriers including American, Continental, Delta, TACA and United. TACA also offers direct flights to Chicago, Dallas/Fort Worth, JFK and Washington Dulles, but tack on another US\$100 for the convenience. TACA also offers a round trip from Toronto to

San Salvador (US\$500 to US\$700). Managua also has daily direct flights to Miami on American and TACA averaging US\$400 to US\$600, and to Houston on Continental for about US\$100 more.

Travel Cuts (☎ 800 667 2887; www.travelcuts.com) is Canada's national student travel agency. For online bookings try www.expedia.ca and www.travelocity.ca. The following agencies are recommended for online bookings from the USA:

Amex Travel (www.itn.net)

Cheap Tickets (www.cheaptickets.com)

Expedia (www.expedia.com)

Lowest Fare (www.lowestfare.com)

Orbitz (www.orbitz.com)

Smarter Living (www.smarterliving.com)

STA Travel (www.sta.com) For travelers under the age of 26.

Travelocity (www.travelocity.com)

LAND

Bus

With Managua and San Salvador just 11 hours away from each other on a smooth, safe and air-conditioned international bus (and León and San Miguel much closer) these clean, comfortable buses are an excellent option between the two countries and elsewhere in the region.

Managua is the major Nicaraguan hub, with at least five international bus companies represented, four of them convenient to the budget tourist quarter. But you can easily catch buses headed south to Costa Rica and Panama from Granada, Masaya and Rivas, while León has several buses running to San Miguel and San Salvador, the shortest trip between the two countries. Buses leaving from Estelí also connect to San Salvador, as well as points north and east.

San Salvador is El Salvador's major international hub, but you can also catch buses in Sonsonate, San Miguel and Santa Ana.

Border Crossings

Most people cross at the relatively hassle-free land borders. International buses do everything but hold your hand through the process, or you can take regular buses, walk a few hundred meters at most to immigration, attend to entry formalities and connect with ongoing bus service on the other side. If you arrive in a car or motorcycle, have your paperwork in order. To expedite any border crossing, dress your best and act respectfully and deferentially.

Below are the main land border crossings between the countries in the region; see below for river crossings. Onward bus connections are usually well coordinated.

Nicaragua–Costa Rica Sapoá/Peñas Blancas (p159).

Nicaragua–Honduras From west to east: Guasaule/Choluteca (p187); El Espino/San Marcos (p204); Las Manos/Danlí (p204).

El Salvador–Honduras From west to east: El Poy/Nueva Ocotopeque (p395); Perquín (p442); El Amatillo (p428).

El Salvador–Guatemala From south to north: Ciudad Pedro de Alvarado/La Hachadura (p362); Valle Nuevo/Las Chinamas (p372); San Cristóbal/San Cristóbal (p351); Anguiatú/Anguiatú (p359).

RIVER

Nicaragua has three river border crossings, all incredibly scenic.

San Carlos to Los Chiles, Costa Rica (p265) Easy, beautiful, recommended for the whole family.

Waspám to Puerto Lempira, Honduras (p237) Challenging but definitely do-able.

San Juan de Nicaragua to Barra, Costa Rica (p281) Expensive; you must arrange everything in advance.

INTERNATIONAL BUSES SERVING NICARAGUA & EL SALVADOR

Company	Local Telephone	Website	Areas Served
Pullmantur	El Salvador ☎ 2243 1300	www.pullmantur.com	San Salvador, Guatemala City, Tegucigalpa
Tica Bus	El Salvador ☎ 222 4808 Nicaragua ☎ 222 3031	www.ticabus	Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexican border
King Quality/Comfort Lines	El Salvador ☎ 2271 3330 Nicaragua ☎ 228 1454	no website	Costa Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala
Transnica	Nicaragua ☎ 270 3133	www.vianica.com/go/profile/1-Transnica.html	Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador
Del Sol Bus	Nicaragua ☎ 270 2547	no website	Nicaragua, El Salvador

TEGUCIGALPA, SAN MARCOS & CHOLUTECA, HONDURAS

Going overland between El Salvador and Nicaragua, you have to pass through Honduras (obviously) but rapid bus service to and from the borders means you can easily make the trip in a day, or even a couple of hours. Leaving El Salvador, cross at El Amatillo, where minibuses leave every 45 minutes for the Nicaraguan border at Guasaule (US\$4.75, 1¾ hours, last departure 10pm); there are no stops, making this the fastest route by far. To get to the border at El Espino, take an ordinary bus to Choluteca (US\$1.75, two hours, every 25 minutes, last at 4:30pm) and transfer to a San Marcos bus (US\$1, 1½ hours, every 60 to 90 minutes, last at 6:15pm). From there, it's another 10 minutes by taxi or bus to the border. Coming from Nicaragua, follow the same routes in reverse; the last minibus from Guasaule to El Amatillo leaves at 10pm, the last bus from Choluteca to El Amatillo is at 4:30pm.

If you need just to stay the night, the most logical stop is Choluteca. **Hotel Santa Rosa** (☎ 782 0355; Av La Rosa btwn Calles Paz Barahona & Williams; s/d US\$4.75/7.50, with air-con US\$11/14.50) is a clean reliable option opposite Mercado San Antonio. From Choluteca, frequent buses go to Tegucigalpa (*ordinario* US\$2.75, 3½ hours; direct US\$7, 2½ hours) and beyond.

If you actually want to stay a while, the most charming town in southern Honduras is San Marcos, near the Nicaraguan border at El Espino. There, stay at **Hotel Shalom** (☎ 788 3268; s/d US\$12/15), which has the highest perch in town and is impossible to miss. Ask at **Restaurante La Exquisita** (☎ 788 3505; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) about arranging an overnight at the owners' coffee farm in Duyusupo, with excellent hiking opportunities into the nearby Ojochal wildlife refuge.

SEA

The only potential (legal) sea crossings are at the Gulf of Fonseca. From La Unión, in El Salvador, there's a very infrequent ferry service that goes to Coyolitos, in Honduras, as well as the opportunity to rent a boat to Potosí, in Nicaragua, which according to rumors will offer an official international ferry between them in the future. If you decide to use this option, make sure that you arrange everything in advance at immigration in Managua and/or San Salvador.

GETTING AROUND

AIR

Only Nicaragua has domestic flights, most based out of Managua, plus one flight daily between Bilwi and Bluefields. For more info see p291.

BICYCLE

Both Nicaragua and El Salvador have considerable potential as road-biking destinations – they have beautiful paved roads with wide shoulders, plus populations who use, and are used to seeing, bicycles absolutely everywhere, most definitely including on the Interamericana/Carr Pan-americana.

BOAT

Boats are not an important part of the Salvadoran transportation system, although there is a scenic route from Suchitoto across the Cerrón Grande to San Francisco Lempa, and you'll need a boat from Puerto El Triúnfoto get to Corral de Mulas and around the Bahía de Jiquilisco. La Unión offers a variety of boat trips around area islands, and may provide service to Honduras.

Nicaragua, however, relies on boats for travel around Lake Nicaragua and throughout the humid Caribbean Coast. Major boat routes include El Rama to Bluefields, down the Río Escondido, the only way to the Corn Islands if you'd rather not fly. Isla Ometepe (and its 500 sister islands) can only be reached by boat, with almost hourly, one-hour ferries from San Jorge and twice-weekly, four-hour trips from Granada, which continue for nine hours across the lake to San Carlos and the Río San Juan, a region almost entirely (and only) navigable by boat. You'll also rely on boats for side trips from Bluefields, Bilwi and Waspám, while in San Juan del Sur, boat taxi is often the best way up and down the coast.

Public boats are affordable – the trip from Granada to San Carlos costs US\$6 for first class – but schedules can be erratic or inconvenient, and private *pangas* (light

boats) can easily cost more than US\$100 per day. When relying on boat transport, always get there early and see if you need to sign your name to a list; if you can buy tickets ahead of time, that may be a good idea. And please remember that these aren't Disney rides – the Ometepe Ferry sank just after this book was researched. Everyone was fine, but please wear your life preserver.

BUS

Buses in Nicaragua and El Salvador range from ultra-comfortable international cruisers – which you can take within either country if you don't mind paying premium prices for reclining seats, food service, air conditioning and bathrooms – to old Bluebird school buses, many modified to take on roads that would make a Sherman tank blanche. Bus transportation is one thing that's cheaper in El Salvador, but regular buses in both countries usually cost under US\$1 per hour, while speedy minibuses cost a bit more. While you should always try to purchase tickets for international buses in advance, most local buses don't even give you that option (but when they do, there's usually a good reason). Pay when you get on the bus, or after it starts moving.

Buses are generally safe in both countries, although the city buses in Managua are best avoided unless you're comfortable with a little urban mayhem. It's always safer to take a *directo* or *expreso* bus, which doesn't stop as often as an *ordinario* or *ruteado*, and international buses are the safest.

Classes

Both countries have a hierarchy of classes with different and potentially, misleading names. In El Salvador, regular service is usually called *ordinario*; first-class service is *especial* or *super*. The term *directo* is often used as a euphemism for ordinary service, though not always – double check depending on what service you want. First-class buses are modern air-conditioned coaches with a bathroom and usually a video.

Nicaraguan buses are rarely so plush, and the only difference between *ordinarios* or *ruteados*, the cheaper buses, and *expresos* or *directos*, is that the latter only stop in major destinations, which shaves a few minutes off your trip. More comfortable minibuses

cost about 25% more, and are available for most major routes, with vans leaving 'when full' (about 10 people).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Driving in Nicaragua and El Salvador allows you to go where you want to go, when you want to go. Whether you bring your own vehicle or hire one upon arrival, it's worth thinking carefully about whether driving here is for you (look at the boxed text, below; and remember, buses are generally safe, economical and efficient).

Driver's License

Foreign drivers should carry a valid drivers license from their country of residence at all times, which is (technically) only good for 30 days after entering the country. An international driver's license is required after that, and is recommended at all times.

SHOULD I BE DRIVING?

Are you traveling alone? Cost, liability issues and endurance limits tip the scales against driving for most solo travelers.

Do you have language or mechanical facility? Spanish-speaking drivers will be better able to resolve problems, while any off-the-beaten-track breakdown will likely require some repair work by you. Bikers, especially, should know how to fix their ride.

Are you traveling during the rainy season? Flooding and washouts are common in Nicaragua from May to November, and roads to more isolated spots are often in disrepair any time of year. Consider renting a 4WD.

Do you have gear? Anything unwieldy, like a kayak, photo equipment or surfboard may make driving a car the most convenient alternative. Get a car with a trunk - backpacks on the back seat invite break-ins

Are you at least 25 years old? In both countries, the person renting a vehicle usually has to be at least 25, or pay a much higher rate, often from a less reputable company.

Do you have a major credit card? Rental agencies usually require a credit card or large cash deposit. And some credit cards include rental car insurance, which can save you money. Folks driving their own vehicles will want one too, for that 'oh shit!' scenario.

Hire

Renting a car is almost twice as expensive in El Salvador (US\$40 to US\$60 per day for an ordinary car) than in Nicaragua (US\$25 to US\$40 per day) – you've got to love pro-tourism tax breaks. If you plan to use dirt roads, particularly in the rainy season, you're going to want a 4WD, which ups the final total even more. Both countries have gas prices more on par with Europe's than the United States' (US\$3 to US\$4 per gallon); keep this in mind while figuring your final bill. Always check several companies, and don't be afraid to quote your lowest offer; there's usually wiggle room. Avoid renting at either airport, where stiff surcharges can add 11% to 15% to your bill.

CHINANDEGA

Budget (☎ 341 1663)

Dollar (☎ 341 2303)

GRANADA

Hertz (☎ 552 8103; sergiouca@yahoo.com)

Alamo (☎ 552 2877; www.alamonicaragua.com)

Dollar (☎ 552 2947; www.dollar.com.ni)

Budget (☎ 552 2323; www.budget.com.ni)

MANAGUA

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

Avis (☎ 233 3011; avisnic@cablenet.com.ni)

Best (☎ 263 3242)

Budget (☎ 266 6226; www.budget.com.ni)

Dollar (☎ 266 3620; www.dollar.com.ni)

Exotic (☎ 233 4695; www.exoticrentacar.com.ni)

Hertz (☎ 233 1237; www.hertz.com.ni)

Lugo (☎ 263 2368; www.lugorentacar.com.ni)

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

Nicaragua (☎ 250 2114; www.nicarentacar.com)

Payless (☎ 233 1329; www.payless.com.ni)

Targa (☎ 222 4824; rentacar@ibw.com.ni)

World (☎ 263 1011; worldrentacar@cablenet.com.ni)

MATAGALPA

Budget Rent-A-Car (☎ 772 3041)

Dollar Rent-A-Car (☎ 772 4645)

SAN MIGUEL

Alamo/Uno Rent A Car (☎ 2679 0188)

Budget (☎ 2682 1062)

SAN SALVADOR

Budget (☎ 2260 4333; www.budget.com.sv)

Alamo/UNO (☎ 2211 2111)

Avis (☎ 2261 1212, 2339 9268; www.avis.com.sv)

Quick Rent a Car (☎ 2229 6959; www.quickrentacar.com.sv)

Insurance

You are required to get basic insurance and will be asked to consider supplemental insurance to cover the deductible. If you're paying with a credit card, your agreement probably includes free supplemental car insurance, so ask before paying another US\$10 to US\$15 per day.

Road Rules

Road rules in both countries are similar to the United States, in terms of driving on the right side of the street, obeying standard international signs and pulling over when a corrupt cop notices that you're in a rental and wants to accuse you of, say, 'poor driving.' There is no system of paying fines or tickets on the spot, and your rental company can help you pay them later. But if you'd rather pay the bribe, at least pretend you don't speak any Spanish – make 'em work for it.

Note that Salvadoran police are decidedly less corrupt than those in Nicaragua and other Central American countries. It is rare to be pulled over for no reason; the most common mistake foreign drivers make is going the wrong way on a one-way street. If it wasn't clearly marked (very possible) you can and should plead your case, always respectfully.

In cities, unsigned one-ways, overstuffed markets spilling out into the streets, and traffic circles, perhaps a new trick for some, make things challenging even in broad daylight. Avoid driving in cities at night, which can be dangerous; even if you have a rental car, consider taking a taxi after hours.

Road Hazards

While city driving can be sketchy – keep an eye out for those unsigned one-way roads and traffic circles – rural driving has hazards all its own.

Cattle Red flags mean cows ahead (unless its election time), so slow down. After making eye contact with the cowboy or cowgirl in charge, aim sloooowly for the side of the herd with the lowest cattle density; make your way through without honking, and keep an eye on younger, more impetuous cows and unruly individuals with Y-shaped yokes (that's their punishment) around their necks.

Checkpoints Police and/or military checkpoints are common, especially near borders. Officers are looking for drugs and illegal immigrants, and most tourist-looking people will be waved through. If stopped, you'll have to produce your passport, driver's license and vehicle registration; in rare instances, they'll search your car. Be patient and cooperative.

Potholes and Pothole Repair People Axle-snapping potholes are just part of the fun, so try to get behind someone who obviously knows the road, and follow their tracks.

In Nicaragua, you may see people pointing to a dirt-filled pothole and pointing into the air. That means, 'I just filled in this pothole, please give me a coin.' It's worth keeping small change in your ashtray.

Rivers Always ask locals first before crossing any rivers you can't see the bottom of. No locals? Get out and check. If you feel confident your car can pass, aim slightly upstream and punch it; don't stop for anything.

Hitchhiking

Hitchhiking is much more common in Nicaragua than in El Salvador, even by solo women. That said, hitching is always potentially dangerous, so you should use your best judgment and go in pairs whenever you can't avoid hitching completely.

LOCAL TRANSPORTATION

Local transport comes in a variety of shapes and sizes; ramble off the beaten track and you'll almost certainly need to rely on horses and/or motorized canoes, or else your own two feet. Horse carriages are common in Masaya and Southwest Nicaragua, while covered trucks take over on roads where even mighty Bluebirds can't go.

Bicycle

Bicycles are often the most common form of public transportation, dominating the thoroughfares alongside drivers used to catering for (not to mention seeing) two-wheelers. Maddeningly, it's difficult to find bicycle rental places outside the main tourist centers, and even then quality tends to be poor. So ask at your hotel or, in smaller towns, the *alcaldía* (mayor's office) to see if they can arrange a private rental. And off you go.

Boat

Boats are rarely used for transportation in El Salvador, which has only one major river system and is primarily a dry tropical forest ecosystem. Nicaragua's lakes and vast Atlantic lowlands, however, rely on boats as transport between cities and within regions.

This can get expensive. The Río San Juan region has cheap public boats; on some routes, only three times a week. If you don't have time, tack another US\$100 onto your bill for a private boat. The indigenous beach towns north of Bluefields are the same – day trips are out for Pearl Lagoon unless you spring for a private *panga*, and if anyone figures out a cheap way to Rama Key, please email us!

In towns, where you just need to use private canoes to cross smaller rivers, fees are typically less than US\$0.50 for the ride, and worth it just for the views.

Bus

Almost all population centers have some sort of public bus system. In major cities, crowded buses are a favorite haunt of pickpockets, so be aware (this goes triple in Managua) of your surroundings and belongings. In smaller cities and rural regions, public buses may be less formal, perhaps a local with a minivan who drives back and forth along one particular route, and who may not be feeling well that day. In general, where you need a bus you'll find one; ask locals about routes and destinations, and hold on as they pull you into whatever vehicle flies by.

Taxi

Taxis are found in cities and towns throughout both countries, and are almost never metered. In El Salvador, official taxis have a license plate that begins with 'A' and are usually painted yellow; in Nicaragua, taxis should have a red license plate. In many towns, especially in El Salvador, small three-wheeled 'mototaxis' or 'motos' are a new, and usually cheaper, option for short rides. All should have a photo ID posted, and you should check the photo against the actual driver's mug. Agree on a fare before getting into the taxi (ask locals what you should be paying; there's often a set fare, at least in daytime), particularly in Managua (see the boxed text, p74), San Salvador, or anywhere with a lot of tourist traffic.

Almost all taxis in Nicaragua are *colectivos*, which will offer to pick you up while already packed with people; this is why they usually cost around US\$0.70 to anywhere. Using taxis between cities is a comfortable and reasonable option for midrange travelers, in Nicaragua at least; prices double in El Salvador.

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