



Nicaragua 2019 Crime & Safety Report



This is an annual report produced in conjunction with the Regional Security Office at the U.S. Embassy in Managua, Nicaragua.

The current U.S. Department of State [Travel Advisory](#) at the date of this report's publication assesses Nicaragua at Level 3, indicating travelers should reconsider travel to the country due to crime, civil unrest, limited healthcare availability, and arbitrary enforcement of laws.

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

The U.S. Embassy in Managua does not assume responsibility for the professional ability or integrity of the persons or firms appearing in this report. The American Citizens' Services unit (ACS) cannot recommend a particular individual or location, and assumes no responsibility for the quality of service provided.

Please review OSAC's [Nicaragua-specific page](#) for original OSAC reporting, consular messages, and contact information, some of which may be available only to private-sector representatives with an OSAC password.

Crime Threats

There is serious risk from crime in Managua. Nicaragua has low overall reported crime rates, however; many crimes go unreported, and anecdotal information suggests that crime is increasing. Theft from vehicles, pick-pocketing, and occasional armed robbery occurs in store parking lots, on public transportation, and in open-air markets. In Managua, street crime is more prevalent during hours of darkness, late at night or early in the morning. Street crime is also common in Puerto Cabezas, Bluefields, San Juan del Sur, Popoyo, El Transito, and the Corn Islands. The trend of criminals armed with weapons and violence continues, including with knives and guns.

While U.S. citizens have been victims of murder in Nicaragua, the most frequently reported crime was theft. U.S. citizens have also reported sexual assaults and other violent crimes while in Nicaragua. Several U.S. citizens have been the victims of sexual assault in beach locations and at hotels; violence against women in general continues to be a concern.

Drug trafficking and the criminal components associated with it appeared to increase as Nicaraguan security forces seized multiple large drug and bulk cash shipments and made multiple arrests.

According to the Government of Nicaragua's most recent official crime statistics, the overall homicide rate was 7:100,000 inhabitants. The homicide rate in the Southern Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region was 29, more than four times the national average. Other areas with homicide rates significantly above the national average were the "Mining Triangle," composed of the three Northern Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region municipalities of Siuna, Rosita, and Bonanza (19); Jinotega (13); and the Northern Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region as a whole (18).

The reported overall rate of robbery was 148:100,000 inhabitants, a decrease of approximately 17% from 2017.

The reported overall rate of theft was 54:100,000 inhabitants, a decrease of approximately 14% from 2017.

The reported overall rate of sexual assaults was 35:100,000 inhabitants, a decrease of approximately 14% from 2017.

The municipalities with the highest rates of criminal complaints were Managua, Matagalpa, Masaya, Estelí, Granada, Carazo, Chinandega, León, and the Northern Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region.

Other Areas of Concern

Exercise caution in municipalities with high volumes of crime, such as Managua, Granada, Rivas, León, Ciudad Sandino, and Bluefields; as well as other areas based on various crime factors, such as the Southern Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region due to its high homicide rate.

The U.S. Embassy prohibits off-duty U.S. government personnel from entering the Oriental Market due to high levels of crime and illicit activities. The U.S. Embassy must pre-approve all travel by U.S. government personnel to the Northern and Southern Caribbean Coast Autonomous Regions due to crime, transportation safety, and Embassy response concerns. Given the geographic isolation of the Caribbean coast and autonomous regions, the Embassy's ability to provide emergency services to U.S. citizens who choose to travel there is severely limited. The U.S. Embassy also strongly recommends that U.S. government personnel do not drive outside of urban areas after dark due to transportation safety concerns.

Armed individuals in civilian clothes or "para-police" have been perpetrating violence throughout the country since April 2018. Reports suggest that both "voluntary" and official police have taken part in this violence. Additional reports indicate that police have arbitrarily detained and searched people in an effort to identify and arrest those who have participated in protests or who oppose the government.

Transportation-Safety Situation

For more information, review OSAC's Report, [Security in Transit: Airplanes, Public Transport, and Overnights](#).

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Road quality in Nicaragua is better than in other Central American countries, particularly between the urban areas of the Pacific Coast. However, poor city planning has created multiple choke points and poor traffic circulation in Managua, and the high influx of vehicles over the past five years has led to an increase in vehicular fatalities. Road connectivity between the remote and underdeveloped Atlantic Coast and the western part of the country remains very limited.

The roadways of Nicaragua continue to present a threat to Nicaraguans and visitors alike. According to authorities 782 people died in traffic accidents in Nicaragua in 2017. Official data for 2018 is not yet available. There are approximately 122 accidents daily in Nicaragua.

Road conditions vary; frequent road hazards such as pedestrians, livestock, and other drivers enhance the risk of traffic accidents. Although some of the principal highways connecting the major cities are in good condition, drivers should be aware that torrential seasonal rains take a heavy toll on all roads. Roads commonly have potholes and unpainted speed bumps, and are poorly illuminated, narrow, without shoulders, and often missing manhole covers. Speed limits vary depending on the type of road, and police enforce traffic rules are inconsistently. Look out for detours and slow traffic. In general, road signs are poor or non-existent. Drivers will frequently encounter vehicles without lights, animals, bicycles, and pedestrians, all of which are difficult to see at night, even on main thoroughfares in Managua. Motorcycles dart in and out of traffic with little or no warning, taxis stop in the middle of the road to negotiate with potential passengers, and buses often travel in the oncoming lane to avoid traffic jams. Sidewalks are not common; pedestrians often walk on main roads, including on busy thoroughfares, and often do not look both ways before crossing the street. Many vehicles are in poor condition, have non-functional brake lights and turn signals, travel very slowly, and break down without warning. Be especially careful on curves and hills, as many drivers will pass on blind spots, and vehicles stop without warning and pass in "no passing" zones. Road travel after dark and in dark areas is especially hazardous. Many drivers will run red lights, especially at night. For more information on self-driving, review OSAC's Report [Driving Overseas: Best Practices](#).

Motorists should carry a cellular phone and first aid kit in case of an emergency. Nicaraguan law requires vehicles to be equipped with a stopped/disabled vehicle indicator (a reflective triangle or cone) and a fire extinguisher.

Police will take drivers into custody for driving under the influence of alcohol/drugs. Police will also usually take into custody the driver involved in any accident resulting in serious injury/death, even if the driver has insurance and appears not to have been at fault. The minimum detention period is 48 hours. However, detentions frequently last until a judicial decision (often weeks or months) or until the injured party signs a waiver (usually the result of a cash settlement). To avoid liability, consider hiring a professional driver through a reputable hotel.

Transit police conduct most enforcement stops on foot at static locations sometimes marked by traffic cones in which officer(s) will signal to a driver to pull over. Police vehicle enforcement stops are less common. After a traffic violation, the normal process involves police confiscating the driver's license until they pay a fine. After paying the associated fee at a bank, the driver must go with proof of payment to Transit Police Headquarters (or a police station if it occurs outside of Managua) to recover the license and show proof of payment. In practice, however, foreigners are rarely able to recover their licenses, even after paying their fees, due to delays in transferring the license from the place of detention to the Transit Police office. Most foreigners leave the country before the transfer takes place. Transit police have been known to demand on-the-spot bribes in lieu of fines. If this happens, request a receipt and the officer's name and badge number. To report mistreatment by police, file a complaint with Nicaragua's National Police and forward your complaint to the U.S. Consular Section in Managua. Also, advise your rental car agency if police say their vehicles do not meet transit regulations. The Nicaraguan National Police give information ([in Spanish](#)) about the process to pay or appeal tickets and recover confiscated licenses.

Public Transportation Conditions

Public transportation often lacks proper safety equipment (e.g. lights, seatbelts, seats, handholds). Bus accidents on roadways in Nicaragua often result in injury and death. Avoid buses, as criminals will also steal backpacks, purses, and other personal items from overhead and below seat storage. There have been reports of taxi driver complicity in the commissioning of robberies and assaults.

Only use licensed taxis endorsed or recommended by airport authorities, major hotels, restaurants, or other trusted sources. Before taking a taxi, make sure that it has a red stripe across the top and bottom of the license plate and that the number is legible. Choose taxis carefully and note the driver's name and license number. Check that the taxi is properly labeled with the company name and logo. Instruct the driver not to pick up other passengers, agree on the fare before departing, and have small bills available for payment, as taxi drivers often do not make change.

Aviation/Airport Conditions

Managua is in a seismically active zone, and is the location of the country's only international airport (MGA). Two other airports located on the Caribbean coast – Bluefields (BEF) and Bilwi / Puerto Cabezas (PUZ) – are often subject to demonstrations and closure during civil unrest. There are also small airports in Tola (ECI), Rivas, Big Corn Island (RNI), and Ometepe Island (OMT) that handle mostly private charter flights.

There have been reports of pickpocketing and other simple theft while in airport waiting areas. U.S. citizens have reported several instances where thieves appear to have targeted them for robbery and theft while transiting the Managua airport.

Airports in remote locales often have short airstrips, minimal safety equipment, and little boarding security.

Other Travel Conditions

Those traveling in the region by *panga* and other types of boat or ferry should consult with local naval or police authorities about the safety of setting out in current local weather conditions, and exercise a reasonable amount of caution in the face of possibly overloaded or otherwise unsafe vessels.

The government of Nicaragua has denied entry to travelers who use a passport of a different nationality than they did on prior trips to Nicaragua.

Several U.S. citizens have reported that authorities did not allow them to enter Nicaragua with camera drones and other electronic equipment, and/or that the equipment was subject to inspection and held until the citizen departed the country. Several U.S. citizens have reported electronic equipment confiscated upon entry and never returned. To confirm whether you may enter Nicaragua with specific items, check with the airline, the Nicaraguan Embassy in Washington, D.C., or Nicaraguan Immigration authorities before travel.

Terrorism Threat

There is minimal risk from terrorism in Managua.

Anti-U.S./Anti-Western Sentiment

The government has often expressed antagonism to U.S. interests and uses anti-U.S. rhetoric in domestic and international fora and events. This rhetoric increased after April 2018, when widespread civil unrest focused on political, economic, and social issues came to a head.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

Civil Unrest

There is serious risk from civil unrest in Managua. A large number of demonstrations involve demands for early or transparent elections, opposition to the proposed building of an inter-oceanic canal, women's rights, and excessive force by security forces. Most demonstrations begin peacefully, but the presence of counter-demonstrators and/or riot-police can lead to an escalation in tension and violence. Typically, protests in Managua take place at major intersections or traffic circles (rotundas). Outside of the capital, they often take the form of road/highway blockages.

In April 2018, demonstrations began over proposed changes in the social security system regarding benefits and other requirements. Based on the Nicaraguan government heavy-handed response, anti-government protests grew dramatically and lasted for months. Student groups, anti-canal groups, and a large cross-section of the Nicaraguan people participated. Protests in the form of marches, demonstrations in main intersections, strikes, road barricades, looting, and social media campaigns erupted. Government aligned para-police, and pro-Ortega groups countered protests, often with violence and intimidation. Reports of deaths directly related to the violence surrounding these protests, and extra-judicial deaths and disappearances occurred; Human Rights Organizations put these numbers between 300-500+ persons. Between April and August 2018, there were daily to weekly static protests and marches throughout the country. Protest groups sizes ranged from a handful to hundreds of thousands on the streets. Universities were particular locations of protests due to widespread student support. The police reportedly used live ammunition against peaceful protesters and demonstrators. While there have been no significant street protests or demonstrations since September 2018, the government has continued to round up and arrest those who supported the earlier protests. Heavy police presence continues, especially in major traffic circles in Managua and near universities. The President of Nicaragua said in a speech that the country would deal with protestors and anti-government participants with exile, jail, or death. Open-source reporting continues to highlight the government response.

Many groups continue to call for early elections and dialog. While it appears that the government has gained the upper hand in preventing new demonstrations/protests, it is likely that 2019 will see continued unpredictable political unrest.

Post-Specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

In 2017, according to U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) there were three earthquakes of 5.0-magnitude or above in Nicaragua that resulted in minimal to no damage. In 2018, USGS data showed four earthquakes above 5.0 that resulted in minimal to no damage. Shallow earthquakes with epicenters in Nicaragua that have been greater than magnitude 5.5 have caused structural damage or complete collapse to older buildings and poorly constructed homes.

Earthquakes sometimes trigger tsunamis; authorities have the capability to issue warnings of potential threats to coastal communities. In January 2018, a 7.6-magnitude earthquake struck in the Caribbean Sea 202 kilometers north of Barra Patuca, Honduras, triggering a tsunami warning throughout the Caribbean, including the coast of Nicaragua.

Nicaragua has many active and inactive volcanoes. Many are situated on the Pacific side of the country near Managua and other popular tourist destinations. Volcano boarding has become a popular activity, but adventure seekers should be aware that tour operators are not regulated and may not have robust emergency plans in place. The San Cristobal, Momotombo, Masaya, Telica, Cerro Negro, and Concepción volcanos are the most active in the country; authorities monitor each of them.

There have been fatalities from scuba diving off the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. Diving accidents stem from a number of factors, to include diver error. Travelers looking to dive should consult with a reputable diving establishment to familiarize themselves with Nicaraguan waters. Strong Pacific currents have caused a number of drownings. Powerful waves have also caused broken bones. Stingray injuries are not uncommon. Visitors to Nicaragua's beaches, lakes, and Lagunas should exercise appropriate caution; there are no warning signs, and lifeguards and rescue equipment are not readily available. Nicaragua's only hyperbaric chamber is in Puerto Cabezas, a five-hour speedboat ride from Corn Island.

Other potential environmental threats include flooding, storm surge, fires, hurricanes, and landslides.

Critical Infrastructure

Nicaragua is the largest country in Central America, yet remains one of the least developed. Infrastructure has strengthened in recent years, but weaknesses persist. Nicaragua ranked 92 out of 137 countries in terms of infrastructure in the World Economic Forum Global Competitiveness Report (2017-2018), scoring poorly in port and airport infrastructure, moderately in electricity supply, and above average in road quality and mobile telecommunications.

In the event of a natural disaster, transportation, water, communications, and power systems may fail due to damaged infrastructure or heavy ash fall. Road closures and flight cancellations may occur. Maintain an emergency supply of food and water to last at least 72 hours, and establish an emergency plan.

Over the past decade, the Nicaraguan government has made significant progress in the energy sector, increasing electricity coverage from 54% to 94% of the country, increasing power generation from renewable technologies from 25% to 54%, and doubling investment in power transmission. Despite these gains, electricity prices are comparatively high for Central America, and the country experiences approximately 20% power distribution loss. Crippling weaknesses in the electrical grid remain, as evidenced by nationwide power outages in 2017, when limitations in Nicaragua's transmission capacity revealed the lack of redundancy or back-up power for key infrastructure such as traffic lighting and public utilities. Power outages are a common occurrence and often take longer to resolve in rural parts of the country.

Internet access is widely available due to the \$1.5 billion of foreign direct investment injected into the telecommunications sector over the past 12 years, fueling the expansion of 3G mobile coverage and broadband networks. Subscription costs are relatively high when compared to other Central American countries, limiting internet penetration to roughly 20% of the population. Telecommunication providers have very limited back-up power capacity. The country's topography limits signal transmission, particularly in rural areas and the Caribbean Coast. Satellite phones are illegal and may be confiscated. In order to ensure reliability of cellular communications on the Caribbean coast, it may be necessary to have telephones or SIM cards for multiple cellular carriers.

Water shortages are a common occurrence during the November to April dry season, while flooding becomes problematic when heavy rains occur during the May to October wet season, partly due to poor sewage infrastructure.

Personal Identity Concerns

Same-sex sexual activity is legal in Nicaragua. The law provides protection for discrimination in employment and healthcare based on sexual orientation.

Economic Concerns

Do not buy counterfeit and pirated goods, even if they are widely available. Not only are bootlegs potentially dangerous and illegal in the U.S., you may also be breaking local law. Be wary when making purchases from street vendors or in markets.

Police Response

Police often lack resources to respond effectively to crimes in progress. Victims often must go to a police station to file a report, as police will often not come to the scene of a crime. The Embassy has received reports of police refusing to file reports. Copies of receipts or other proof of ownership of high-value items often assist in completion of police reports.

Police coverage is extremely sparse outside major urban areas, particularly in the Caribbean coast and autonomous regions.

During periods of political unrest, police forces focus attention on protests and demonstrations. Response actions to counter street crime can suffer.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

During questioning by the authorities, a defendant who does not understand Spanish is entitled to assistance from an official government interpreter. The defendant is entitled to an oral translation of any statement s/he is required to sign. A defendant is not required to incriminate him/herself. A defendant should answer questions pertaining to identity, age, address, occupation, citizenship, and other non-incriminating personal data. The Constitution does not condone physical violence against prisoners (except in cases of self-defense). Despite the rights granted under the law, in practice, the legal, judicial, immigration, and penal systems often operate in an arbitrary manner, subject to corruption and political influence. It is difficult to predict how the local legal system will work in any particular case, which can result in prolonged detentions without charges or due process.

Should authorities violate your rights, immediately inform the consular officer or representative, who will bring your case to the attention of the government if you so desire.

Crime Victim Assistance

Police: 118 or *118 (cellular phones) or 505-2249-1925

Tourist Emergency Hotline: 101 (only available to cell phones on the Claro system)

Fire: 115 or *115 (cellular phones)

Medical: 2255-6900, (ext. 85152 for emergencies) or 505-2265-2081

Police/Security Agencies

The Nicaraguan National Police (NNP) is the sole law enforcement agency and is responsible for public safety and security, all types of criminal investigations, and traffic control. The NNP tourism police unit deploys to tourist areas and maintains a 24-hour hotline for emergencies.

Medical Emergencies

Emergency phone numbers vary by department. Dispatchers will coordinate an emergency response. Dial 128 for Cruz Roja (Red Cross) ambulance service (Spanish only). Dial *115/118 for fire department for fire or ambulance (Spanish only).

Medical care is very limited outside Managua. Basic medical services are available in many small towns/villages. However, treatment for serious medical issues is often unavailable or available only in Managua. Emergency ambulance services (which are poor and do not meet U.S. standards) and certain types of medical equipment, medications, and treatments are not widely available. Physicians and hospital personnel frequently do not speak English, and medical reports are in Spanish. Patients must have good Spanish language skills to navigate local medical resources comfortably.

Nicaragua is home to many venomous snakes, among them the Fer de Lance, Coral Snake, and Barba Amarilla. Anti-venom is available only at the Ministry of Health. Snakebite victims should go to the nearest hospital and have them request the Anti-venom immediately. Black and Brown widow spiders, tarantulas, and scorpions are commonly seen. Bites from these can cause pain and illness however, are rarely fatal.

Contact Information for Available Medical Services

For medical assistance, refer to the Embassy's [Medical Assistance page](#).

Available Air Ambulance Services

For Air Ambulances, refer to the Embassy's [Insurance Providers page](#).

- [AeroCare](#): (800) 823-1911
- [AirCare1 International](#): (877) 760-7760
- [Global Rescue](#): (800) 381-9754

Insurance Guidance

Consult with your medical insurance company prior to travel to confirm the policy applies overseas. Consider the purchase of separate insurance for medical evacuation (medevac).

Payment for medical services is typically done on a cash basis, although the few private hospitals will accept major credit cards for payment. With rare exceptions, U.S. health insurance plans are not valid. Travelers should prepare to pay medical practitioners and hospitals at the time of service or even before admission. In most cases, private hospitals will require full payment or a significant deposit before giving any treatment, even in life or death cases.

Ambulances take individuals to the nearest hospital that will accept a patient. This is usually a public hospital unless the patient or someone acting on his/her behalf indicates they can pay for a private hospital.

Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

Travelers coming from countries designated by the World Health Organization (WHO) as places with the potential for active transmission of yellow fever must present an International Certificate of Vaccination for yellow fever, showing a vaccine given at least ten days prior to entry into the affected country, at the Nicaraguan port of entry. Table 3-22 on the [Center for Disease Control \(CDC\) page](#) shows the current list of countries. Symptoms of yellow fever include sudden onset of fever, chills, severe headache, back pain, general body aches, nausea and vomiting, fatigue, and weakness. For more information, visit the Embassy's [Yellow Fever page](#).

The CDC recommends visiting your doctor, ideally 4-6 weeks before your trip, to get vaccines or medicines you may need.

Travelers taking prescription medications should bring an adequate supply to cover the duration of their trip. The amount of medication should not exceed what would reasonably be considered for personal consumption. Carry medications in their original containers, pack them in carry-on bags, know generic or generic equivalent names in case they need replacement, and have a prescription or letter from a physician in case of questioning. For longer stays, your prescription should indicate specific amounts and duration of dosage. Many newer combination medications are not available in local pharmacies. There may be restrictions on bringing prescription or non-prescription medications without proper documentation. For questions about specific medications, contact the Nicaraguan Ministry of Health's [Pharmacy Department](#) before travel. For more information, refer to OSAC's Report, [Traveling with Medications](#).

Mosquitoes in Nicaragua may transmit Dengue fever, Chikungunya (Chik-V), Zika, and malaria. Leptospirosis, Leishmaniasis, typhoid fever, Chagas disease, Tuberculosis, and intestinal parasites (e.g. giardia, amoeba) are also risks. Malaria is present in large portions of the country; travelers should use prophylaxis. The CDC has issued a Zika virus travel alert for women who are pregnant or trying to become pregnant; see the [CDC website](#) for the most up to date recommendations. For mosquito-borne diseases, the best prevention is the use of insect repellent containing DEET, protective clothing, and bed nets to prevent mosquito bites. The International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers maintains good [information](#). For more information, refer to OSAC's Report, [What's Bugging Your Staff: Mosquito-borne Diseases - Mitigation Tactics](#).

Tap water is generally not safe to drink; use bottled water. For more information, refer to OSAC's Report, [I'm Drinking What in My Water?](#)

Ensure all routine vaccinations are up to date. Vaccinations against hepatitis A and B, rabies, and typhoid are strongly recommended. Many vaccinations are only available in public hospitals. The CDC offers additional information on vaccines and health guidance for [Nicaragua](#).

OSAC Country Council Information

The Country Council in Managua is active, meeting on a bi-annual basis. Interested private-sector security managers should contact OSAC's Western Hemisphere Team at OSACWHA@state.gov with any questions.

U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information

Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

The U.S. Embassy is located at Kilometer 5 1/2 (5.5) Carretera Sur, Frente al Parque Las Piedrecitas, Managua.

0715–1630 Monday through Thursday; 0715–1400 Friday, except U.S. and Nicaraguan holidays

Embassy Contact Numbers

Main Switchboard: +505-2252-7100 or 8768-7100

Marine Security Guard Post One: +505-2252-7171

Website: <https://ni.usembassy.gov/>

Embassy/Consulate Guidance

U.S. citizens traveling to Nicaragua should register with the [Smart Traveler Enrollment Program \(STEP\)](#) to ensure they receive pertinent security updates and notices.

Additional Resources

[Nicaragua](#) Country Information Sheet