



## Nicaragua 2014 Crime and Safety Report

Anti-American sentiment; Travel Health and Safety; Political Violence; Natural Disasters; Cyber; Disease Outbreak; Information Security; Transportation Security

Western Hemisphere > Nicaragua > Managua

5/12/2014

### Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Nicaragua is a developing country with one of the poorest economies in the hemisphere. While crime rates are lower in Nicaragua in comparison to neighboring countries like Honduras, general crime is a persistent risk for residents and visitors alike. Crimes against U.S. citizens in the past year have ranged from petty theft to violent offenses. Criminal activity occurs throughout the country, but higher rates of crime reporting against U.S. citizens occur in Managua, Granada, Leon, San Juan del Sur, and the Northern and Southern Atlantic Autonomous Regions. Travelers should maximize caution while traveling by road. Political demonstrations and strikes occur sporadically and have occasionally become violent. According to official 2012 statistics, the overall homicide rate in Nicaragua is 11 per 100,000 inhabitants. However, homicide rates in specific population areas in the Northern and Southern Atlantic Autonomous Regions are as high as 39 per 100,000 inhabitants. Criminals will often steal backpacks, purses, and other personal items from overhead and below seat storage on buses as well break into vehicles parked outside restaurants, convenience stores, gas stations, and churches. During home invasions or hotel break-ins victims are often subject to violence. Perpetrators in unlicensed taxis have robbed and sexually assaulted victims in transit. Criminals will often burglarize secured and unsecured valuables and personal items in hotel rooms, hostels, and private residences. Criminals often rob victims walking on the street and on public beaches as well as target victims in vehicles stopped at traffic lights after dark. Pick-pocketing and purse snatching are common while in public places, on buses, and while eating at restaurants. Credit and debit card fraud are not frequent, but do occur. Criminals may follow victims from airports or other public places to hotels or tourist locations.

Most "express" kidnappings occur when a single person or couple enters a taxi cab. This has been most common when hailing a cab off the street. Typically, the vehicle stops shortly after

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picking up passengers and conspirators jump into the vehicle. The victims are then robbed of their valuables at gun or knifepoint and forced to provide PIN numbers for their credit and debit cards. The duration of these kidnappings usually varies between one to four hours, until the perpetrators have withdrawn all available money from the victim's accounts. The victims are generally left abandoned at empty lots or in isolated areas on the fringes of Managua, but these incidents have escalated to rapes and assaults. The perpetrators frequently use the threat of rape against female victims to force compliance.

International drug trafficking groups are primarily located on the east coast, and Nicaragua is used as a transit point. There has been no evidence that U.S. citizens are targeted for violence by these organizations. While drug-related crime is a concern, the Southern Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS) in the south and the Northern Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN) in the north are areas of particular concern. These regions are geographically isolated and are home to the poorest people in the Western Hemisphere outside of Haiti. The most recent statistics show that the population in RAAN is approximately 346,458 in a territory of 32,159 square kilometers. There are less than 500 Nicaraguan National Police (NNP) officers assigned to that area, averaging only one officer per 100 square kilometers. In 2012, various independent research groups reported homicide rates in these regions between 40 and 44 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants.

### **Road Safety**

Driving is on the right side of the road. 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 are commonly potholed, poorly lit, narrow, shoulderless, and often missing manhole covers. Speed limits vary depending on the type of road, and traffic rules are rarely enforced. Be on the lookout for detours and slow traffic. In general, road signs are poor or non-existent. Drivers will frequently encounter bicycles, oxcarts, dogs, horses, and vehicles without lights even on main thoroughfares in Managua. Motorcycles dart in and out of traffic with little or no warning. Sidewalks are not common, so drivers must be aware that 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, travel very slowly, and break down without warning. Drivers should be especially careful on curves and hills, as many drivers will pass on blind spots, and vehicles stop without warning. Road travel after dark is especially hazardous. Motorists should prepare accordingly and should carry a cellular phone and first aid kit in case of an emergency.

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Nicaraguan law requires drivers to be taken into custody for driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Police will also usually take into custody a driver involved in an accident resulting in serious injury or 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 is reached (often weeks or months) or until a waiver is signed by the injured party (usually the result of a cash settlement). Local rental car agencies offer licensed drivers familiar with local roads. In case of an accident, the police only take the driver into custody.

Transit Police conduct most traffic-related enforcement stops on foot at static locations marked by traffic cones in which one or more transit police officers will signal to a driver to pull over (police vehicle enforcement stops are less common). After being given a traffic violation, the normal process is supposed to be for the police to take the driver's license until the fine is paid. After paying the associated fee at a bank, the driver is supposed to go with proof of payment to Transito Nacional or a police station if it occurs outside of Managua to recover their 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. Further, the embassy has received multiple reports of police officers at these traffic stops soliciting bribes to "take care" of the violation on the spot in lieu of proceeding with the formal, complex process of paying a ticket and recovering the confiscated license.

Criminals posing as traffic police occasionally target vehicles. Imposters conduct traffic stops and rob vehicle occupants at gunpoint. Victims include occupants of both privately owned vehicles and those owned by local hotels. In most cases, the incidents happen after dark. While most of the reports of this activity received by the embassy occurred in or around Managua, there are occasional reports from other major roadways throughout the country. Buses and other transportation often lack proper safety equipment such as lights, seatbelts, seats, and handholds. Thieves often target travelers for pick-pocketing, purse snatching, other types of theft, and robbery.

### **Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence**

Nicaragua is a developing country with one of the poorest economies in the hemisphere. The government has often demonstrated antagonism to U.S. interests. There have been widespread irregularities in recent elections, and many state institutions have been politicized in favor of the ruling party. Nicaragua's judicial system is frequently characterized by

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corruption and bias. Violent confrontations between government security elements, their supporters and opposition and civil society elements, while infrequent, do occur. Due to the growing concerns over governance and human rights issues, several countries have reduced or eliminated aid programs, limiting much needed aid.

There are little or no local, regional, or international terrorism concerns.

#### Civil Unrest

Political demonstrations and strikes occur sporadically, have occurred in both urban areas and smaller remote communities. They have occasionally become violent. Typically, protests in Managua take place at major intersections or rotundas. Outside of the capital, they often take place in the form of road and highway blockages. Activities observed during past protests include, but are not limited to, the use of tear gas, rubber bullets, fireworks, rock-throwing, tire burning, road blocks, bus/vehicle burning, and physical violence between members of rival political parties. Police have often been slow to respond, and reluctant to interfere in violent confrontations between rival political factions. Many different segments of the population organize demonstrations including: political parties, university students, public transportation owner/operators, labor unions, and civil society groups. It is very common for groups to use university grounds and the most heavily traveled rotundas/streets in Managua to stage demonstrations. The following areas commonly host large demonstrations: City Hall; National Assembly; Central American University (UCA); Rotunda Metrocentro; Rotunda Universitaria; Rotunda Hugo Chavez; and Rotunda Centro-America. Protesters are also known to vandalize private property during demonstrations.

On several occasions in 2013, citizen demonstrations on behalf of a variety of causes were violently disrupted by security forces and government supporters.

In 2011, national elections led to widespread demonstrations and political rallies all over Managua. Violence also escalated in rural communities. Confrontations between the largest political parties erupted along main thoroughfares and locked down Managua for brief periods. The use of riot control, mortars, and rocks as well as sheer numbers of people led to some precarious situations.

In 2009, a violent demonstration took place in front of the U.S. Embassy, forcing closure of the building, causing physical damage to the facility, and resulting in clashes between the National Police and protestors.

In 2008, national municipal elections gave rise to a number of political demonstrations that erupted into violence. Activities observed during these protests included the use of tear gas and rubber bullets, setting off fireworks, rock-throwing, tire and vehicle burning, road blocks,

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and other types of physical violence. Violence between law enforcement, protestors, rival political parties, and individuals was documented.

### **Post-specific Concerns**

#### **Environmental Hazards**

Nicaragua, including around Managua and other popular tourist destinations, has many active and potentially active volcanoes. The San Cristobal Volcano near Chinandega has experienced two brief periods of minor eruptions beginning in September 2012, resulting in evacuations of residents living near its flanks. In addition, the Central America region has been seismically active in the same period, with major earthquakes in nearby Costa Rica and Guatemala.

Other potential environmental threats include earthquakes, flooding, fires, hurricanes, and tsunamis. In the event of a natural disaster, transportation, water, communications, and power systems may fail due to damaged infrastructure or heavy ash fall. Roads may close, and flights in or out of Nicaraguan airports might be cancelled due to adverse conditions. Earthquakes sometimes trigger deadly tsunamis, which could strike coastal areas of Nicaragua. National authorities put out warnings of potential tsunamis, but the response on the local level is minimal.

In light of these environmental conditions, it is important that travelers and residents maintain an emergency supply of food and water and establish an emergency plan with their family members or fellow travelers.

#### **Economic Espionage/Intellectual Property Theft**

Do not buy counterfeit and pirated goods, even if they are widely available. Not only are the bootlegs illegal in the United States, if you purchase them you may also be breaking local law. Be wary when making purchases from street vendors or in markets. Buying pirated goods undermines legitimate businesses.

#### **Regional Travel Concerns and Restricted Travel Areas/Zones**

Emergency services decrease significantly away from Managua and other urban areas. Street crime and petty theft are a common problem in Puerto Cabezas, Bluefields, and the Corn Islands along the Atlantic coast. Police presence is minimal on both Big Corn Island and Little Corn Island. U.S. citizens have been the victims of assault and sexual assault on these islands and other beaches in the country.

### **Police Response**

Police coverage is extremely sparse outside major urban areas, particularly in Nicaragua's Atlantic coast and autonomous regions. Given the areas' geographic isolation, the embassy's

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ability to provide emergency services to U.S. citizens who choose to travel in the Caribbean coastal area is severely limited.

Travelers may find the police, including the Nicaraguan National Police, to be unable to provide assistance in emergency situations, due to lack of resources, vehicles, and personnel to respond effectively. While there are countrywide emergency telephone numbers, it is extremely unlikely that an English speaking official will answer. The situation is the same when encountering police, fire, and emergency medical personnel on the street. The Tourism Police maintain a 24 hour per day emergency hotline for tourists needing support with police officers that speak English and Spanish.

**How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment**

If police detain you, under Nicaraguan law you are considered innocent until proven guilty. 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 he or she 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 Nicaraguan Constitution does not condone physical violence against prisoners (except in cases of self-defense). Should your rights be violated by Nicaraguan authorities, you should immediately inform the consular officer or representative, who will then bring your case to the attention of the government if you so desire.

**Where to Turn to For Assistance If You Become a Victim of Crime**

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

Tourist Emergency Hotline: 101

Fire: 115 or \*115 (cellular phones)

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

The Nicaraguan National Police is the sole law enforcement agency and is responsible for public safety and security, all types of criminal investigations, and traffic control. The Nicaraguan National Police has created a tourism police unit that is deployed to areas frequented by tourists and maintains a 24 hour hotline for emergencies. Police often lack sufficient resources to respond to crimes in progress effectively.

## **Medical Emergencies**

Emergency phone numbers vary by department. In Managua, dial 101 for Emergency Line for International Tourists (English and Spanish spoken). Dispatchers will coordinate needed

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emergency response. Dial 128 for Cruz Roja (Red Cross) ambulance service (Spanish only). Dial \*911 for fire department for fire or ambulance (Spanish only).

Medical care is very limited, particularly outside Managua. Basic medical services are available in Managua and many small towns and villages. However, treatment for serious medical issues is often unavailable or available only in Managua. Emergency ambulance services, as well as certain types of medical equipment, medications and treatments, are not widely available. Ambulance services are poor and do not meet U.S. standards. Travelers taking prescription medications should bring an adequate supply with them. Physicians and hospital personnel frequently do not speak English, and medical reports are written in Spanish. Patients must have good Spanish language skills to utilize local medical resources. In an emergency, individuals are taken to the nearest hospital that will accept a patient. This is usually a public hospital unless the patient or someone acting on their behalf indicates that they can pay for a private hospital. 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 accepted. Travelers should prepare to pay medical practitioners and hospitals at the time of service or even before treatment is given. The Department of State strongly urges U.S. citizens to consult with their medical insurance company prior to traveling abroad to confirm whether their policy applies overseas and whether it will cover emergency expenses such as a medical evacuation.

Embassy staff most often seek emergency medical treatment at Hospital Metropolitano Vivian Pellas in Managua (Telephone 505-2255-6900, ext. 85152 for the Emergency Room).

Travelers are reminded that the facilities at this hospital are modern and often technologically advanced but may not meet all U.S. standards:

Metropolitano Hospital: +505-2255-6900

Hospital Bautista: +505-2264-9020

Hospital Militar: +505-2222-2175

Hospital Central Managua: +505-2278-1566

Hospital Salud Integral: +505-2266-1707

#### Air Ambulance Services

The following air ambulance services have been known to operate in Nicaragua. There may be additional services that also operate in Nicaragua that can be found at the following link:

<http://www.travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/go/health/evacuation.html>

#### AeroCare

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U.S.A.: (800) 823-1911  
[www.aerocare.com/](http://www.aerocare.com/)

AirCare1 International  
U.S.A.: (877) 840-3041  
[www.airambulanceone.com/](http://www.airambulanceone.com/)

Global Rescue  
U.S.A.: (800) 381-9754  
[www.globalrescue.com](http://www.globalrescue.com)

Dengue fever is endemic. No vaccine or specific medication is available to prevent or treat dengue fever. Malaria is endemic in the Atlantic coast region and makes occasional appearances in Managua. Anti-malarial medication should be taken before and after travel to the Atlantic coast. Travelers are advised to take a prophylactic regimen best suited to their health profile. No prophylaxis anti-malarial medication is required for Managua or the western half of the country. For dengue fever and malaria, the best prevention is the use of insect repellent containing DEET, as well as protective clothing and bed nets to prevent mosquito bites.

Tap water is generally not considered safe; bottled water is recommended.

Individuals traveling to Nicaragua should ensure that all their routine vaccinations are up to date. Vaccinations against hepatitis A, hepatitis B, rabies, and typhoid are strongly recommended. Yellow fever vaccination is not required unless the traveler recently has visited a country where yellow fever is endemic.

Information on vaccinations and other health precautions, such as safe food and water precautions and insect bite protection, may be obtained from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's hotline for international travelers at 1-877-FYI-TRIP (1-877-394-8747) or via the CDC's web site: <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/nicaragua>.

#### **Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim**

The embassy does not permit U.S. citizen employees to enter the Mercado Oriental in Managua. Extreme caution should be employed by private citizens in public markets, transportation terminals, beaches, bars, nightclubs, deserted locations, and most areas after dark.

In the event of a robbery, the embassy urges all travelers to comply with the demands of the aggressors while attempting to observe identifying characteristics of the perpetrators. Once

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the suspect(s) has fled, contact the police and the U.S. Embassy. No item is worth risking serious injury or death.

The level of security at lodging varies greatly from property to property. Many of the international hotels in Managua maintain adequate security. Travelers should ask about security elements in place at a property prior to making reservations. Be wary of hotels lacking access control procedures, 24-hour front desk staff, or well-lit parking lots. Secure items left behind in lodging rooms as best as possible. Do not leave valuables in plain sight. Vary your routine. Be unpredictable in your movements so that you will not be an easy target. Never carry more than you are willing to lose and never carry anything you consider priceless or irreplaceable.

Increase your awareness of your belongings when in congested areas such as airports or bus stations. Teams of criminals frequent these areas, and one will attempt to distract a victim while an accomplice commits the theft.

While in public places such as restaurants, markets, or tourist locations keep purses, bags, cameras, phones, and other valuables out of sight. Do not draw attention to yourself with your actions. Maintain a separate copy of passport and credit card information and the telephone numbers to report a lost or stolen card.

Do not leave food or drinks unattended in public places, and never allow a stranger to give you a drink.

Avoid walking or cycling in deserted areas or after dark. The embassy recommends traveling in groups at all times.

Avoid buses as criminals will often steal backpacks, purses, and other personal items from overhead and below seat storage.

If travelers must use taxis, only use radio-dispatched taxis at Managua's international airport and most major hotels and restaurants. The use of other public transportation, to include unlicensed taxis and buses, is not recommended. Before taking a taxi, make sure that it has a red stripe across top and the 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.

If a rental car is used, with or without a hired driver, an adequate level of local car insurance should be purchased. Do not leave valuables in the vehicle or if no other option exists, secure

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valuables out of sight in the trunk or other areas of the vehicle. Park in well-lit areas near other vehicles.

To minimize risk of carjacking or theft from your vehicle while you are stopped at intersections, drive with your doors locked and windows rolled up. Do not leave anything of value in plain view in a car, including sunglasses, passports, sports equipment, purses, briefcases, or valuables.

### **U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information**

The U.S. Embassy is located at Kilometer 5 1/2 (5.5) Carretera Sur, Managua, Nicaragua. Normal hours of operation are 07:30am – 4:15pm, Monday through Friday except U.S. and Nicaraguan holidays.

American Citizen Services: +505-2252-7161 ACS.Managua@state.gov

Main Switchboard: +505-2252-7100

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

Regional Security Office: +505-2252-7136

Embassy Duty Officer: +505-2252-7100 or +505-8886-1495

### **OSAC Country Council**

The U.S. Embassy in Managua has an active OSAC Country Council that meets on a regular basis. All U.S. private sector organizations operating in the area are welcome to attend. Parties interested in joining the Country Council should contact the Regional Security Office at +505-2252-7136 and send general inquiries to RSO\_Managua@state.gov

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