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NICARAGUA - EVERYDAY LIFE G102



Nicaragua is the largest country in Central America, although it has a relatively low population - 5,600,000 in 2007.

There is a broad, hot, fertile plain along the Pacific coast. The western/central area is mountainous, with fertile valleys. Two big lakes, the Nicaragua and the Managua, are connected by the Tipitapa River. The swampy Caribbean coast is called the Mosquito Coast.



This western half of the country is a rainforest region, with several large rivers running through it. It is very sparsely populated. Nicaragua's Bosawas Biosphere Reserve (left) is located in the Caribbean lowlands. It protects 1.8 million acres (7,300 km^2) of Mosquitia forest - almost 7 % of the country's area - making it the largest rainforest north of the Amazon.



Before the arrival of Europeans the area that became Nicaragua was inhabited by various indigenous groups. A conquistador called Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba founded two of Nicaragua's oldest towns in 1524, Granada (right) and Leon. Most of the native people were enslaved. Today about 5% of Nicaragua's population is Amerindian, while another 9% are black, being descended from indentured labourers brought from the West Indies when eastern Nicaragua was a British protectorate (from 1655 to 1850). 69% of Nicaraguans are Mestizos (mixed Amerindian and White).

Nicaragua became an independent republic in its own right in 1838. During the twentieth century Nicaraguan politics have frequently been violent. American marines occupied the country between 1912 and 1933. Between 1936 and 1979 various members of the dictatorial Somoza family ran the country. The left-wing Sandinista movement took over the country in 1979. Their rule was opposed by the United States of America who financed guerilla groups in an attempt to drive them from power. In 1990 the Sandinistas lost the general election, although in 2006 their leader Daniel Ortega was re-elected as president.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century Nicaragua had achieved a degree of stability. However, the country is very poor, with about 50% of the people living below the poverty line.

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Reading and San Francisco Libre



In 1994 the town of Reading in the UK became officially twinned with the town of San Francisco Libre in Nicaragua.

San Francisco Libre is a small rural town, with a total population of about 10,500 people. It lies next to the huge Lake Managua, close to the magnificent Momotombo Volcano (below left). Although the town is only 50 miles from the capital of Nicaragua, Managua City, communications are poor and the road is often impassable in the rainy season.



The standard of living for most people in the town is poor. The houses have few comforts. In the drought of 1997 the maize harvest failed. Then, the following year, Hurricane Mitch caused incredible destruction, with four days of continuous rain. Hundreds of people became homeless and many lost everything they owned. Many of the objects in this box reflect the poverty of ordinary Nicaraguan towns such as San Francisco Libre.

The town was first settled in 1826. Originally it was known as San Francisco del Carnicero (San Francisco of the Butcher) as cattle were raised there and butchered to be sold in Managua. In the 1980s, the name was changed to San Francisco Libre by a priest, Father Chema Cabello, after it became the first town to be declared free from illiteracy through the work of the Sandinista government's national literacy campaign.





San Francisco Libre municipality occupies 756 square kilometres and is divided into four districts: San Roque, Telpochapa, Laurel Galán and San Francisco. Despite the destruction caused by the rain of Hurricane Mitch, the area has a dry tropical climate and outside the short rainy season the rainfall is so irregular that crops often fail.

Photographs - Top Right: A family from San Fancisco Libre. Bottom two photographs: Children going to school in San Fancisco Libre.

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Matches



This brand of matches is named after the Monotombo volcanoe mentioned on page 2. The mountain's distinctive shape is something of a symbol of Nicaragua, cropping up in locations from matchboxes to revolutionary murals. Five volcanoes feature in the Nicaraguan coat of arms (below), which can be seen in the centre of the Nicaraguan flag, each of which represents the five original states of the 1825 Central American Federation (Honduras, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua).





Most of Nicaragua's volcanoes are in the west of the country. In this region two major tectonic plates collide, causing earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Although periodic volcanic eruptions have caused agricultural damage from fumes and ash, earthquakes have been by far more destructive to life and property. Hundreds of shocks occur each year, some of which cause severe damage. The capital city of Managua was virtually destroyed in 1931 and again in 1972. The two huge lakes which are found in the west of the country - Lago de Managua (56 kilometres long and 24 kilometres wide) and Lago de Nicaragua (about 160 kilometres long and 75 kilometres wide) are located in a rift valley created by powerful earth movements.



Right: Concepción volcano on Ometepe Island in the Lago de Nicaragua.

Comb

A cheap green plastic comb which has been imported. These combs are much used by ladies to decorate their hair.



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Notes and Coins



The currency of Nicaragua is the córdoba. The first córdoba was introduced in 1912. It was named after the conquistador who established European control in Nicaragua, Francisco Hernández de Córdoba.

These notes and coins date from the Sandinista period (1979-1990). During this period the United States of America waged a secret war against the left-wing regime by supporting anti-government guerillas (the Contras, short for contrarevolucionarios).





The Contra movement contained several different groups opposed to the Sandinistas, including many indigenous peoples on the Mosquito coast, who resented centuries of mistreatment by the central government. Despite the American Congress prohibiting federal funding of the Contras in 1983, the Reagan administration continued to back them by secretly selling arms to Iran and channelling the proceeds to the Contras. They also allowed the Contras to trade in drugs to pay for weapons. The United States of America also imposed a trade embargo on Nicaragua in 1985.

The result of this violence and economic subversion was that much of the country's infrastructure was damaged or destroyed and the inflation rate rose dramatically. The 1985 annual rate of 220% tripled in 1986 and skyrocketed to more than 13,000% in 1988.

These events are reflected in these notes and coins. The 20,000 córdoba note dates from the late 1980s. The 25 centavos note is from 1991. The remaining five are from 1985. The notes show pictures which celebrate the Sandinista government. The 500 córdoba note, for example, shows a literacy class (Campańa Nacional de Alfabetizacion). On the blackboard slogans such as 'Sandino Vive' are written. It was this campaign which led to San Francisco del Carnicero being renamed San Francisco Libre.

Continued on next page.

Evidence of the darker side of the picture is also to be found in the notes. Two of them have been overprinted as a result of the rampant inflation that the country suffered from - a 10 córdoba note has been turned into one worth 10,000 and a 100 córdoba note into one worth 100,000.

All the coins date from 1987. In 1981 the Sandinistas issued coins featuring a portrait of Augusto César Sandino (right), the anti-American leader murdered in 1934 after whom their movement is named. From 1985 to 1987 coins like these were issued, which featured Sandino's characteristic hat. However, after this date the córdoba was replaced by a new currency (although still called the córdoba). This new currency did not use coins at all. The note valued at 25 centavos is from this second córdoba currency period. In 1994 a third córdoba currency was created and coins began to be issued once again.



Chewing Gum

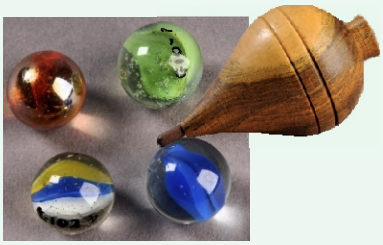


This is cardamom flavoured gum. The cardamom plant is indigenous to the Indian subcontinent, but it is also grown in southern Mexico and Guatemala. This chewing gum was made by the Peter Pan Company, founded in 1956, which is based in Guatemala City. The brand is exported to other countries in the region such as Nicaragua and, judging by the text on the back, to Arabian speaking countries as well.

Spinning Top and Marbles



Because of the poverty of many people, simple and traditional games are widespread in Nicaragua.



Lamp

This cheap lamp has been made from recycled tin. Although most homes now have electricity, power is expensive and power-cuts are common, so a lamp like this one can prove useful. The spout is removed to pour in the kerosene or paraffin and then a wick is added.



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White Soap

This block of soap is for washing clothes. Scented soaps are used to wash the body. Many people still wash clothes by hand, either in a river or at a concrete washing stand



Left: Maria Elena Alvarado, 22, and her nephew Andres Alvarado, 9 wash clothes in Lake Nicaragua on Ometepe Island.

Cup, Plate and Spoon

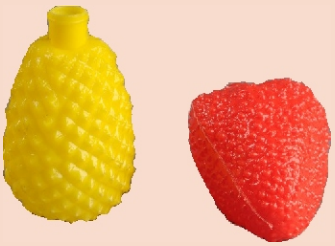
Made from cheap material, these items again reflect the poverty of many people in Nicaragua.





Gallopinto is said to be the national dish of both Nicaragua and Costa Rica. This dish is made of pre-cooked rice and beans fried together with onion and peppers. The photograph on the left shows gallopinto served with tajadas - fried plantain slices.

Lemonade Crystal Containers





Fresh fruit including jocote, mango, papaya, tamarindo, pipian, banana, avocado and yuca are widespread in Nicaragua. Drinks can be made by squeezing many of these fruits, but synthetic drinks are also popular, especially with children. These plastic containers held appropriately flavoured crystals which could be mixed with water to create a refreshing drink.

Above left: Coca Cola for sale in Granada.

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Wooden Bird



This balsa wood bird was made on the tropical Solentiname Islands at the southern end of the Lago de Nicaragua. They were made in an artistic community founded by the Roman Catholic priest Ernesto Cardenal.



Father Ernesto Cardenal (left, born 1925) lived on the islands between 1965 and 1977. The community he founded made pictures and crafts in a naïve, peasant style. Many of these items were sold to tourists.

Although from a rich family, Cardenal was a supporter of left-wing groups. In 1954 he supported the April Revolution against Anastasio Somoza García's regime. The coup d'état failed and ended with the deaths of many of his associates. He was ordained a Catholic priest in 1965.

In 1977, Cardenal's community was burned to the ground by government troops and he fled to Costa Rica. In 1979, he was named Minister of Culture by the new Sandinista regime. He occupied this office until 1987, when his ministry was closed owing to economic reasons. The photograph on the right shows him reading some of his poetry at a Sandinista meeting. The banner behind him reads 'The Triumph of the Revolution is the Triumph of Poetry'. In 1994, he broke with the Sandinistas although he still claims to be on the left.





The community he founded on the Solentiname Islands has survived the various troubles and still produces art and craft in a characteristic 'peasant' style.

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Gourd Güiro and Mask



A güiro is a hollow gourd with parallel notches cut in one side. It is played by rubbing a wooden stick along the notches to produce a ratchet-like sound. The scraper is often called a pua. The güiro is commonly used in Latin-American music. The güiro can make both long and short sounds by using different length strokes. Other names for güiro are calabazo, guayo, ralladera and rascador.

Both of these items were made to be sold to tourists. Until the late 1990s Nicaragua's instability made it unattractive to many tourists. However, in recent years things have changed. By 2007 tourism had become Nicaragua's largest industry earning the country a lot of foreign currency. Previously the biggest export item was coffee.



Many tourists come from the USA. 803,933 tourists visited Nicaragua in 2005 , earning the country $240 million. President Daniel Ortega says he plans to use tourism to combat poverty throughout the country. The photograph on the left shows a modern tourist complex at Montelimar on the Pacific coast. Other tourists prefer to visit some of the unspoilt wilderness areas in the east of the country.

Three Pottery Ornaments



A fruit, a bird and a tortoise. The tortoise is meant to be an ocarina - a baked-clay flute.Both the Mayans and Aztecs had produced versions of the ocarina. In this case, however, the instrument has been made more for show than to be used, as it doesn't produce musical notes! All of these items were probably made for the tourist trade.



Left: A potter's stall in the market at Masaya, Nicaragua.

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Wooden Jeep

Children in Nicaragua often have to make their own toys out of bits and pieces. This brightly coloured example may have been made for the tourist trade.



Painted Cross

This type of cross, with painted figures in the style of peasant art, has become very popular with tourists in recent years. Traditionally most people in Nicaragua belonged to the Roman Catholic church, however in recent years Protestant churches and non-Christian groups such as Mormons have been growing rapidly.





The high point of Nicaragua's religious calendar is neither Christmas nor Easter, but La Purísima, a week of festivities in early December dedicated to the Immaculate Conception (the Roman Catholic idea that the Virgin Mary was born unstained by sin), during which elaborate altars to the Virgin Mary are constructed in homes and workplaces. The photograph on the left shows the night-time procession of a statue of the Virgin Mary during La Purísima, Leon, Nicaragua.

Horse Head Band





Horses and donkeys are still widely used in Nicaragua, both in towns and the countryside. Those in towns are often used to draw tourist taxi carriages (left). In the country they are often used for cattle ranching or for more humdrum activities (below, left and right). The indulged horse of a proud owner might be given a head band like this one.





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Two Text Books

One of these is a reading book for young children containing stories from various south American countries. It was published in 1986 with the aid of UNESCO. The other is a maths text. It was printed in Russia and translated from the Russian language. These books were used in Nicaraguan schools during the Sandinista period.



Stamps

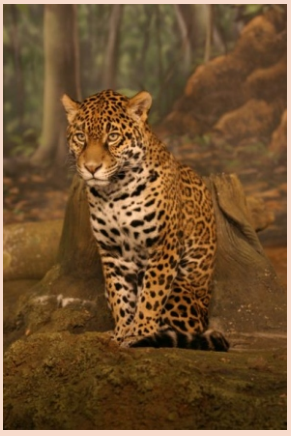
These stamps were also produced during the Sandinista period. The pictures on them show projects in which they took pride - health care and house building. They also bear witness to the inflation of the period, as their original value has been inked out and replaced by a new, increased one.



Tortoise Shell

The tortoise is an endangered species in Nicaragua. Conservation of animals and plants is difficult to implement in some places because of the poverty of the people. Trees are cut down for firewood, parakeets and other birds are captured and sold in cages, armadillos, iguanas and tortoises are sold for food.









Some animals of Nicaragua, from left: Jaguar, white-faced Capuchin monkey, the turquoise-browed motmot, or guardabarranco, which is the national bird of Nicaragua.