Overall Crime and Safety Situation

The second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, Nicaragua is a developing nation that faces many economic and political challenges. Crime, while less severe than neighboring countries to the north, continues to affect residents and visitors alike. Nicaragua is rated “Critical” for crime and for residential security by the State Department. Political demonstrations and strikes occur sporadically, are usually limited to urban areas, and occasionally become violent. Crimes against U.S. citizens in the past year have ranged from petty theft to violent offenses, including armed robbery, home invasion, sexual assault, and express kidnappings. Very low rates of apprehension and conviction of criminals – due to limited police and judicial resources – contribute to Nicaragua’s high crime rate. Police coverage is sparse, and they are often slow to respond.

Crime Threats

Pick-pocketing and armed robberies occur on crowded buses, at bus stops, at ATMs, and in open areas like Oriental and Huembes Markets. In the past year, these crimes have spread to more upscale neighborhoods and the areas near the major hotels on Masaya Highway. Backpackers are frequently targeted for robbery, as are travelers carrying laptop computer bags. Armed robbery attempts continue to be a concern in popular tourist destinations.

Violent criminal activities and petty crime are of concern in the areas surrounding San Juan del Sur. Reports of sexual assaults, home-invasions, theft, and robberies by assailants wielding machetes, knives, and/or guns have been reported along the beaches in and around San Juan del Sur. These beaches are especially dangerous after dark.

Reports of U.S. citizens falling victim to fraud related to their credit or debit cards are not extremely high, but they do occur. “Skimming,” the theft of credit card information during an
otherwise legitimate transaction, is more likely to occur in restaurants or bars, where the skimmer takes the victim’s card out of the owner’s view. To avoid skimming, take the credit/debit card to the register yourself and never let the card out of your sight. Also, be sure to monitor your bank account or credit card statement frequently.

Incidents of sexual assault continue to pose a threat. Criminals generally target women who are alone and use alcohol or incapacitating drugs on unsuspecting tourists to rob and/or sexually assault them. So-called date-rape drugs disorient the victim and can cause prolonged unconsciousness and serious medical problems.

While not common, murders against U.S. citizens have occurred. Investigation and prosecution of the perpetrators is the responsibility of the government and do not proceed with the speed and thoroughness witnessed in the United States. Although the U.S. Embassy monitors and encourages these investigations, the ability to intervene is extremely limited.

**Overall Road Safety Situation**

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 manholes. 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.

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. Bicycles, oxcarts, dogs, horses, and vehicles without lights are encountered even on main thoroughfares in Managua. Buses are overcrowded, unsafe, are often used by thieves. Motorcycles dart in and out of traffic with little or no warning. 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. Traffic accidents often result in serious injury or death.

Nicaraguan law requires drivers to be taken into custody for driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs. A driver involved in an accident resulting in serious injury or death, even if the driver is insured and appears not to have been at fault, is usually taken into custody. 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). Visitors should consider hiring a professional driver.
Licensed drivers who are familiar with local roads can be hired through local car rental agencies. In case of an accident, only the driver will be taken into custody.

Regulations governing transit are administered by the National Police. For information concerning driver’s permits, vehicle inspection, road tax, and mandatory insurance, refer to the National Police website: http://www.policia.gob.ni. You may also contact the Nicaraguan Embassy in Washington, D.C. for further information. Visit the website of Nicaragua’s national tourist office and national authority responsible for road safety at: http://www.mti.gob.ni/.

Visitors are occasionally targeted by criminals posing as traffic police. The imposters conduct traffic stops and rob vehicle occupants at gunpoint. Occupants of both privately owned vehicles and those owned by local hotels have been victimized by this type of crime. In most cases, the incidents happen after dark. While the traditional location of these incidents has been the Tipitapa-Masaya Highway, this activity has also been reported along the Managua-Leon Highway.

On buses, luggage stowed below the bus or at a traveler’s feet is sometimes stolen.

“Smash and grabs” occur when thieves break into parked vehicles but have also been known to occur in slow-moving or stopped traffic. U.S. citizens have reported several break-ins of vehicles while they were in convenience stores at gas stations.

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

Nicaragua is a developing country with one of the poorest economies in the hemisphere. The government has grown increasingly hostile toward the United States, and the country’s political stability is tense due to widespread irregularities in the November 2011 national elections and the November 2012 municipal elections, the politicization of many state institutions, and pervasive corruption in the judicial system. Conflicts and violent confrontations between the ruling and opposition political parties have cooled, but flare-ups do occur. Due to the deteriorating political situation, several countries have reduced or eliminated aid programs, limiting much needed aid. Nicaragua’s crime is increasing as a result of the harrowing poverty of both rural and urban communities.

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

There is little or no indigenous terrorism. Organized crime is not visible, and Nicaraguans are not faced with the endemic issues of gangs and other forms of organized crime as in other
Central American countries.

Civil Unrest

Nicaragua has frequent demonstrations in urban areas, most of which are located in Managua. Violent clashes between demonstrators and police are common, as are the use of improvised mortars that have injured a significant number of police officers and demonstrators. Many different segments of the population organize demonstrations including: political parties, university students, public transportation owner/operators, health sector employees (including doctors), 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; and Rotunda Centro-America. Protesters are also known to vandalize private property during demonstrations.

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

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.

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 flooding, fires, earthquakes, 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.

Regional Travel Concerns and Restricted Travel Areas/Zones

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 sexual assault on these islands and other beaches in the country. In 2007, a U.S. citizen was assaulted and raped while on vacation in Little Corn Island. There have been other, more recent assaults on non-U.S. travelers to the island. The Embassy recommends traveling in groups at all times.

Drug-related Crimes

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 narco-fueled 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 km². There are less than 500 Nicaraguan National Police (NNP) officers assigned to that area, averaging only one officer per 100 km². In 2012, various independent research groups reported homicide rates in these regions between 40 and 44 homicides per 100,000
inhabitants.

Kidnapping Threats

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 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 fringe 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.

Also, several U.S. citizens traveling by bus from the Penas Blancas border of Costa Rica and San Juan del Sur to Managua have reported being victimized by fellow travelers who offered to assist them in locating and/or sharing a taxi upon arrival in Managua. Often the accomplices appear to be young and friendly.

Police Response

Police coverage is extremely sparse outside major urban areas, particularly in Nicaragua’s Atlantic coast and autonomous regions. A lack of adequate police coverage has resulted in these areas being used by drug traffickers and other criminal elements. Given the areas’ geographic isolation, the Embassy’s ability to provide emergency services to U.S. citizens who choose to travel in the Caribbean coastal area is severely limited.

Travelers will often find Nicaraguan National Police (NNP) members to be receptive and eager to assist. 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.

There are some similarities and some differences between written Nicaraguan and U.S. legal procedures. Please note the following highlights. 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).

While in a foreign country, a U.S. citizen is subject to that country’s laws and regulations, which sometimes differ significantly from those in the United States and may not afford the protections available to the individual under U.S. law. Penalties for breaking the law can be more severe than in the United States for similar offenses. Persons violating Nicaraguan laws, even unknowingly, may be expelled, arrested, or imprisoned. Penalties for possession, use, or trafficking in illegal drugs are severe, and convicted offenders can expect long jail sentences and heavy fines. Engaging in sexual conduct with children or using or disseminating child pornography in a foreign country is a crime, prosecutable locally and in the United States.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

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
Fire: 115 or *115 (cellular phones)
Medical: 2255-6900, (ext. 85152 for emergencies) or 505-2265-2081

Various Police/Security Agencies

The NNP has created a tourism police unit that is deployed to areas frequented by tourists. However, the NNP lacks sufficient resources to respond to crimes in progress effectively. NNP is the sole law enforcement agency and is responsible for public safety and security, all types of criminal investigations, customs and immigration enforcement, and traffic control.

Medical Emergencies

Emergency phone numbers vary by department. In Managua, dial 128 or *911 for all emergencies. Operators typically speak only Spanish.

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. 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 Americans 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.

Contact Information for Recommended Local Hospitals and Clinics

The Embassy recommends that medical emergencies be treated 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

CDC Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

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 frequent appearances in Managua. Anti-Malarial medication should be taken before and after travel. 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 repellant
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**

Never carry more than you are willing to lose and never carry anything you consider priceless or irreplaceable.

Pay for items in cash whenever possible and use credit cards at larger establishments such as hotels. Take only the money you need with you and do not keep it all in one pocket. Only change money at banks or hotels, as street exchanges can lead to fraud or robbery.

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.

Maintain a low profile and do not advertise the fact that you are American. Dress casually, keep valuables out of sight, and do not draw attention to yourself with your actions. Maintain a copy of passport and credit card information and the telephone numbers to report a lost or stolen card. 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 the suspect(s) has fled, contact the police and the U.S. Embassy. No item is worth risking serious injury or death.

Walking or cycling after dark, or in deserted areas, is not recommended. The Embassy recommends traveling in groups at all times. Lastly, vary your routine. Be unpredictable in your movements so that you will not be an easy target.
The level of security at hotels and resorts 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.

Travelers should only use radio-dispatched taxis at established international hotels, as use of other public transportation, to include taxis and buses, is not recommended. Before taking a taxi, make sure that it has a red stripe across the license plate and that the number is legible. Choose taxis carefully and note the driver's name and license number. 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. Also, check that the taxi is properly labeled with the cooperativa (company) name and logo.

If a rental car is used, with or without a hired driver, an adequate level or local car insurance should be purchased. Do not leave valuables in the vehicle or if no other option exists, secure valuables out of sight in the trunk or other areas of the vehicle. Park in well-lit areas near other vehicles.

To avoid 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. Always be aware of your surroundings, and try to travel in groups.

Most of the street crime against foreigners in Managua occurs in the following areas:
Avenida Bolivar, from the Plaza Inter Rotunda to the Military Hospital
The TICABUS public transportation terminal in Barrio Martha Quezada
Altamira Neighborhood
Roberto Huembes market and surrounding neighborhoods
Mayoreo Market and surrounding neighborhoods
Mercado Oriental and surrounding neighborhoods

To lower your risk from incapacitating drugs and associated assaults, travel in groups, do not leave food or drinks unattended in public places, and never allow a stranger to give you a drink.

U.S. Embassy/Consulate Location and Contact Information

Embassy/Consulate Address and Hours of Operation
The U.S. Embassy is located at Kilometer 5 1/2 (5.5) Carretera Sur, Managua, Nicaragua.

Embassy/Consulate Contact Numbers

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: 505-2252-7628  
Embassy Duty Officer: (505) 2252-7634 or (505) 8886-1495

For the latest security and threat information, U.S. citizens traveling or living abroad should regularly monitor the Department of State's travel website (http://travel.state.gov) and U.S. Embassy Managua’s website (http://nicaragua.usembassy.gov). These sites contain country-specific consular information, current Travel Warnings and Travel Alerts, as well as the Department’s Worldwide Caution.

OSAC Country Council Information

OSAC Managua has an active Country Council. All U.S. private sector organizations operating in the area are welcome to attend. Parties interested in joining the Country Council in Managua should contact Heather Hix at 505-2252-7136. POC is RSO Patrick Leonard who can be reached at 011-505-2252-7628. General inquiries should be sent via e-mail at RSO_Managua@state.gov.