VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK 2017

Compiled by: Lyndsey Chapman and Meg Slattery
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1 What is Grupo Fenix?

1.1 Our Model
First and foremost, Grupo Fenix is a community organisation, run by the community, for the benefit of the community. Grupo Fenix is a not for profit organisation, but does not follow a traditional NGO model—we like to consider ourselves a social enterprise. What does this mean? Well, whereas a traditional NGO relies solely on donations and grants we are almost completely financially sustainable, generating most income from courses and exchanges that we offer. We do receive grants and donations occasionally, especially for large projects such as new buildings. Community empowerment is central to the way we operate, leading to a number of our members forming their own groups, which reflects the diversification of activities as we have grown. Today, Grupo Fenix acts as an umbrella organisation for its four group members, while still carrying out programs of its own. For more information on the history of Grupo Fenix and our group members, please visit our website.

1.2 Our Vision
We are a sustainable organisation working with appropriate and innovative technologies to improve the quality of life of Nicaraguan families and rural communities in the areas of health, education, employment, environment and gender equity.

1.3 Our Mission
Grupo Fenix’s mission is to enable community development and empowerment by facilitating technological and cultural exchanges. We also offer continuing education courses for Nicaraguan and international audiences thus generating employment and growth opportunities for the local community.

2 Life in Sabana Grande
Sabana Grande is a small agricultural based community. The vast majority of the men work in agriculture and many though not all women are “amas de casa,” taking care of the house and family. People are usually up at 4 or 5 am to take the corn to the mill so that they can make the tortillas for the day. Evenings are usually spent with the family sitting around chatting or watching the latest telenovela if the family happens to have a TV, and people typically go to bed around 9pm. You might want to consider bringing cards or travel games to play with your family. On Sundays, most people go to church and your family will be more than happy to take you if you would like to go.

Like many rural Latin American communities, Sabana Grande is tied together by strong family values and celebrations such as birthdays, the community’s patron saint’s day, Semana Santa (Holy Week) celebrations and other church holidays. By modern standards, life in Sabana Grande would be considered simple and lacking in amenities, yet it is clearly a place where hard work is valued as highly as is time with friends and family.

A typical weekday in Sabana Grande will likely consist of waking up between 6:00 and 7:30, depending on your work schedule, drinking a cup of Nicaraguan coffee and eating breakfast prepared by your homestay, and taking a bucket shower (although the water is typically warmer in the evenings). You will work for the morning (7-11 at the Solar Mountain, 8:30-12 at the Solar Center), then eat lunch at the Solar Restaurant and resume work at 1:30 until 4 or 5. The rest of your day is then up to you; perhaps you’ll play soccer with the local team, hang out by La Ceiba, a massive Kapok tree in the center of Sabana Grande, or simply go home and read or spend time with your homestay family. Dinner is
between 6 and 7, and then you have the rest of the night to ponder your own thoughts and slowly descend into a deep existential abyss.

2.1 Homestay Experience

The families who host international volunteers and visitors in Sabana Grande are the twenty members of the Cooperative “Mujeres Solares de Totagalpa”. You will live with one of the cooperative’s members and their family. These families are well used to hosting international visitors and will do their utmost to make you feel at home. Each homestay has their own personality—some families are larger and you may find yourself surrounded by small playmates and card games, while others are smaller and a bit calmer, and you may spend more time chatting or watching a telenovela. If you are interested, ask your homestay mother to teach you how to prepare Nicaraguan food; it’s a great way to bond with your host family; nothing brings people together like laughing at your failed attempts to make tortillas. You can get to know a bit more about your future family and living situation by reading the homestay family profiles.

Housing in Sabana Grande is simple with most houses being made out of adobe or concrete, and roofs of tin or clay tile. Many, but not all, of the houses are connected to the conventional energy network, although blackouts can be common, especially in the rainy season and may last for days while problems are being repaired.

In most houses, water for washing and bathing is fetched from a nearby community well, although some houses have running water. You will be using a latrine to go to the bathroom, and for bathing purposes
you will most likely be taking bucket showers in an enclosed area outside the house (for more information on how to take a bucket shower click [here](#)). Please bring your own towels, shampoo and soap for bathing. Laundry service is not included in the monthly volunteer fee, so you will be responsible for washing your own clothes and providing your own washing powder. Clothes are washed by hand and your host family will be more than happy to show you how to do this. If you do not want to wash your clothes people wash 1 piece for approximately C$3 (you have to provide soap), just ask what type of soap is appropriate and how much is necessary.

You will have your own bedroom which will be basically furnished with a bed, bed sheets and a mosquito net (see the [homestay profiles](#) if you’re curious about the exact furnishing of your homestay room). You will also be provided with a lock for your room and a key for the front door. If you lose the key to your room, you are responsible for replacing the key and in the case that there is not a copy of the key buying a new padlock.

If for any reason you feel unhappy with your host family or experience any problems please inform the International Relations Coordinator who will help you to resolve the situation, either by talking to your family or moving you to another family.

### 2.1.2 How your host family will be selected

Your host family will be selected based on the information you provide in the housing form and based on Grupo Fenix’s housing policy. Grupo Fenix offers nano-loans for home improvements to the women who host international volunteers, and up to six women can take out a loan of US$200 at any one time from this revolving fund. The women pay back these loans from the modest sum they are paid for housing international volunteers. When placing volunteers with families priority is given to the women who have taken out loans. The International Relations Coordinator also keeps tally of how many nights each woman has hosted international visitors, and priority is then given to the women who have hosted international visitors for the least number of nights.

### 2.1.3 Homestay Rules

- Breakfast is between 7:00 to 7:30 am. Please let your host family know if you are going to leave earlier so that they can prepare a packed breakfast for you.
- Dinner is between 6.30 to 7:00pm. If you are not going to be home for dinner please give your host family sufficient notice.
- Please let your host family know in advance if you will not be there for a meal, will be away for the weekend or will be returning late at night. It is also courteous to let your host family know where you are going (for example to visit another family or volunteer for the evening) as otherwise they are likely to worry about you.
- Please keep your bedroom door closed and locked at all times. We can vouch for your host families but not all visitors that come by the house.
- Please respect the fact that most of the families in the community go to bed early. On a weekday it is recommended that you are home by 10pm.
- When coming home please make sure that you are quiet so as not to wake up other members of the household (they will have to get up very early in the morning). Please take extra care not to disturb the house’s or neighbours’ dogs.
• If you are going to go out of Sabana Grande in the evening you are required to return in a taxi or a private vehicle of someone who is trustworthy
• Do not allow animals in your room.
• Please ask permission if you would like someone to visit you at your house.
• Please don’t touch the animals.
• Your host family will give you clean bed sheets every two weeks. You must change the sheets and give them the dirty ones.
• It is your responsibility to clean your room. You are expected to clean your room at least once a week.

2.2 Social Life
As stated previously, there are undeniably fewer modern amenities, and the pace of life is slower in Sabana Grande. Nonetheless, you can certainly find ways to entertain yourself. The section below contains information about various activities you can engage in within the community. There is very little in the way of restaurants or other social gathering spaces in the community, but you can easily take a bus to Ocotal, Totagalpa, or Somoto if you’re in search of a bit more stimulation; additionally, many volunteers like to take advantage of being in Nicaragua to travel on the weekends.

2.2.1 Activities
There are several activities you can participate in if you want become more involved in the community. Baseball and soccer are both very popular in Nicaragua, and playing with the local teams is a great way to meet new people, get some exercise, and have fun. The young people in the community sometimes organize dance classes, which may include typical Nicaraguan folklore, salsa, cumbia, or dances to modern music that they choreograph themselves with some help from YouTube. If you are interested in participating, especially if you know any dance moves that you’d like to contribute, talk to a member of JPHF.

There are also several cool hikes in the community where you can see the entire valley as you watch the sunset and stargaze, or swim in “La Muta,” a swimming hole that is referred to locally as the Mini Somoto Canyon.

Finally, several extra-curricular activities take place at the Solar Mountain for the children of the community. You are more than welcome to go along and help out:

- English Classes 4pm – 5pm: Monday, Tuesday and Thursday
- Library 5pm – 6pm: Monday, Tuesday and Thursday

2.2.2 Alcohol
Many of the families in Sabana Grande do not drink due to religious beliefs (people are either catholic or evangelical), economic reasons or problems of alcoholism in the family. While Grupo Félix does not prohibit volunteers from consuming alcohol we ask you to use moderation, discretion and cultural sensitivity if you are to consume alcohol. Consumption of alcohol on Grupo Fenix property is prohibited at all times. If you choose to go out to a bar or discoteca in Ocotal, make sure you have a safe transportation option to come home, and be very quiet when you arrive at your homestay so that you do not wake your family up. You may want to consider staying the night in a hostel or hotel to avoid any complications. Keep in mind that being foreign, your actions are highly visible, and if you drink
irresponsibly it may affect not only your ability to effectively work in the community but also the community’s perception of foreigners in general.

2.3 Food & Diet
The staples of the Nicaraguan diet are beans, rice, eggs, dairy products, meats, and foods made with corn (e.g., tortillas, nacatamales, and pinolillo). A wide variety of fruits and vegetables are grown locally, from cabbages and carrots to pineapples and papayas. Their availability varies by the season and access to markets. Most Nicaraguans’ daily diet consists of gallo pinto, a mixture of red beans and rice fried in vegetable oil, which might be accompanied by corn tortillas, plantains, cabbage salad, a small amount of meat or chicken, or locally made salty cheese. Most dairy products are made in a traditional fashion in rural settings and, thus, are salted instead of pasteurized.

Many Volunteers enjoy frescos—a concoction of freshly-squeezed fruit and vegetable juices mixed with water and sugar that comes in many distinct flavors. Please do be careful to check that the frescos are made with purified water, the likelihood is that if they are being sold on the street or the bus it is not advisable for you to drink. Frescos made by your host family and at La Casita Solar are all made with purified water.

It is possible to maintain a vegetarian diet in Nicaragua. While the homestay families are well used to hosting vegetarians, it is important to note that Nicaragua is a beef-producing country, and some Nicaraguans who you might meet while travelling, particularly in rural areas, will not understand vegetarianism. As a vegetarian, you will need to develop a culturally-sensitive approach to declining meat products.

You will eat breakfast and dinner with your host family and also lunch on a Sunday. Meals will be typical Nicaraguan food. Please let your family know if there are certain foods that you do not like or are allergic too. Meat is most commonly eaten at lunchtime (as this is the main meal of the day) and is rarely eaten at dinner time, which is typically a much lighter affair. Fruits when not in season can be very highly priced and hard to store given the living conditions in Sabana Grande. It is best to consider it a luxury rather than a staple.

Monday to Saturday you will be able purchase lunch at the clean energy restaurant La Casita Solar, which is run by the Mujeres Solares de Totogalpa. The average cost of lunch is US$3.50, which includes a drink La Casita Solar is more than happy to run a weekly tab for you but ask that you pay this every Friday. If you are vegetarian, let the restaurant know and they will be happy to prepare vegetarian food. On Sundays you will eat lunch with your host family.

2.4 Health
We strongly recommend that you take out comprehensive travel insurance that will cover any overseas medical costs, including medical evacuation, before you depart. Confirm that your insurance covers you for the whole time you’ll be away and check what circumstances and activities are not included in your policy. Additionally, if you take any prescription medications, be sure to bring enough to last during your stay.
The most common health problems among Volunteers and the Nicaraguan population in general are upper respiratory infections and diarrhea. Both Dengue and Chikankunya are present in Nicaragua and there have been cases in Sabana Grande, but you can reduce your risk by minimizing your vulnerability to mosquitoes; make sure you bring insect repellent, and it is advisable to wear long pants. Please make sure that you have read the links to find out more about both illnesses.

Proper precautions will significantly reduce your risk of serious illness or injury; some gastrointestinal problems can be avoided by boiling drinking water and thoroughly washing fruits and vegetables before eating them. Parasitic infections come from eating contaminated food or drinking contaminated water. Hence avoid eating food and drink that has been prepared in questionable sanitary conditions (e.g. food or drink sold on the street or on buses). Avoid drinks and ice where you are cannot be 100% sure the water is purified.

2.4.1 What to do if you get sick
The nearest public health centers are in Totogalpa (5 minute bus ride), Ocotal (20 minutes), and Somoto (30 minutes), which offer free medical consultations, blood and stool tests, and medication. However, we recommend that you visit a private clinic, because the service at public clinics is slower and of lower quality than the private clinics, and because you are putting a strain on a public health system that barely has the resources to take care of its own citizens. There is a private clinic, ProFamilia, in Ocotal, and SERMESA in Somoto. At SERMESA, a visit that requires a consultation and tests will cost roughly $14. Pharmacies are abundant and easy to find in Ocotal and Somoto.

Most volunteers usually get sick at some point during their stay (with most common problems being stomach related). If you do get sick please let your host family know—they will likely offer to bring you to one of the health clinics, and accommodate your dietary needs accordingly if you are suffering from stomach problems. If you are sick for more than two days please let the International Relations Coordinator know so that they can orient you as to what you should do next. If you have recurring stomach problems it is advisable that you are tested for parasites. This can be done by taking a stool sample to a PROFAMILIA Clinic (there is one located near the post office in Ocotal), the test will cost C$50 and the results will usually be ready within 2 hours.

2.5 Safety
Sabana Grande is a relatively safe community and Nicaragua is considered one of the safest countries in Latin America. For more information please look at the United States Peace Index and read this article from The Economist.

There are several factors that can heighten a Volunteer’s risk, many of which are within the Volunteer’s control. By far the most common crime that Volunteers experience is theft. Volunteers have reported being robbed of their purse, watch, wallet, cell phone, or other personal possessions while riding on a crowded bus or walking in an urban area at night or early morning. Most petty thieves want only your belongings, and Volunteers are always encouraged to give up personal items should they encounter a thief. Do not bring to Nicaragua any item that you are not willing to lose or carry items you would not be willing to give up. Thefts often occur when Volunteers are away from Sabana Grande, in crowded locations (such as markets or on public transportation), and when leaving items unattended.

Before you depart for Nicaragua there are several measures you can take to reduce risks:
• Leave valuable objects in your home country.
• Leave copies of important documents and account numbers with someone in your home country.
• Purchase a hidden money pouch or "dummy" wallet as a decoy
• Purchase personal articles insurance

As with anywhere in the world, crime does exist in Nicaragua. You can reduce your risk by avoiding situations that place you at risk and by taking precautions. Crime at the village or town level is less frequent than in the large cities, especially Managua; people know each other and generally are less likely to steal from their neighbours. Tourist attractions in large towns are favorite worksites for pickpockets. Alcohol abuse occurs at a higher rate in Nicaragua than in other countries, so you should avoid areas where there is heavy drinking, especially at night. If you choose to drink, you should drink responsibly.

Statistically speaking, the risk of sexual assault in Nicaragua isn’t substantially higher than in the U.S. Most sexual assaults in Nicaragua occur as a result of domestic violence. Nonetheless, women volunteering in Nicaragua should know that some men may see them as sexual objects, and that friendships with men are not culturally the norm, so you will likely need to monitor your behavior since what may be intended as simple friendliness may be interpreted as something else. “Come-ons” made by men to women as they walk by are common and while essentially harmless can be especially offensive to foreign women. This behaviour can be reduced if you dress more conservatively.

2.5.1 Emergency Contact
The International Relations Coordinator will give you the cell phone number for your host family (if they have a cell phone) prior to departure. In case of emergency your friends and family can also call:

Lyndsey Chapman, International Relations Coordinator: +505 8935 3143
Susan Kinne, Founder and President: +505 8624 9350

In your volunteer application form you will be asked for contact information for two people in case of emergency.

2.6 Travel & Transportation
2.6.1 Getting around
Most travel in Nicaragua is done using public transport. There are two types of bus in Nicaragua: the ruteado and the expreso.

A ruteado is generally an old school bus which makes frequent stops to pick up passengers. These buses are often overcrowded and slow but run to set schedules, which are generally reliable. There are designated bus stops but if you happen to find yourself not to be at one when the bus passes, flagging it down will usually work. In Sabana Grande there are two official stops: Santo Domingo and La Tabla, and the Centro Solar now serves as an unofficial stop as well.

Expresos travel between major cities and towns, making very few stops. Luckily, expresos from Managua heading to Ocotal will stop at La Tabla, Centro Solar and Santo Domingo. It is advised to call ahead, reserve a ticket and ask it to stop if you are leaving from Sabana Grande when travelling by expreso, or
you can buy a ticket from the departing bus station before getting on board. *Expresos* leaving Managua heading north towards Ocotal leave from El Mayoreo Bus Terminal.

A bus ride to from Sabana Grande to Ocotal, the closest city, costs C$11 (less than $0.50). It is about a 20 minute bus journey from Sabana Grande and then a 15 minute walk into the center of town. Somoto, another nearby city, is a 30 minute bus ride, which costs C$12. The last bus to Sabana Grande from Ocotal leaves at 6:30, and the last bus from Somoto leaves at 4:30, so if you are planning on staying later you should be aware that you will likely need to take a taxi back (C$150-C$200) or stay in a hotel or hostel for the night.

For more information on bus times, please see the [bus schedule](#).

### 2.6.2 Traveling in Nicaragua

Many volunteers like to take advantage of being in Nicaragua to travel and explore on the weekends. In order to travel to touristic destinations near and south of Managua, you will need to take an *expreso* to Managua, take a taxi to a different bus station, and locate the bus or shuttle headed for your destination. This journey may take anywhere from 5-8 hours, depending on your final destination. Two other popular destinations are Leon and Matagalpa, both of which are reachable from Esteli, a larger city located 1.5 hours from Sabana Grande on the *Expreso*.

It is a good idea to check the bus schedules before you go anywhere, and avoid arriving after dark so as to give yourself plenty of time to find accommodations if you haven’t booked them already. Hostels and hotels require your passport information, so make sure you have your passport or a copy with you. You should keep important objects (e.g. passport, money, cell phone) on your person when traveling, and be sure to be aware of your surroundings. Bear in mind that Grupo Fenix is not liable for any mishaps that may befall you during your travels; so again, we stress the importance of travel insurance.

If you are planning on taking any days off to travel, please check in with your local counterpart and anyone else you may be working with at least a week in advance. Whenever you travel, it’s important that you write your destination on the whiteboard before you leave so we know where you are, and ensure that you have the contact information of Grupo Fenix staff members and vice versa in case of emergency. Additionally, please let your homestay family know where you are going and when they can expect you to be back so they don’t worry.

### 2.7 Communication

#### 2.7.1 Mail

If you want to receive mail whilst volunteering with Grupo Fénix you can use our post office box in Ocotal. The service is pretty reliable with letters taking about 2 weeks to arrive. If someone sends you a package you will be charged C$10 (less than U$ 0.50) by the post office for it. The address is:

Apartado 30  
Correo de Nicaragua  
Ocotal  
Nueva Segovia  
Nicaragua
2.7.2 Telephone

There are two cell phone providers in Nicaragua, Movistar and Claro. In the area of Sabana Grande both cell phone providers work though reception is often unreliable (Claro has better coverage than Movistar), especially during the rainy season. In the Solar Center there is an antenna which strengthens Claro’s signal and there is generally cell phone reception in the main room. You can pick up a cheap cell phone with a sim card for around US$20. If your phone is not tied to a network back home you can easily buy a sim card for around C$30 and use this in your existing phone. You can also consider unlocking your phone if it is tied to a network so that you can use it with other providers. It is important to check the band coverage of your phone if you are considering doing this. In Nicaragua the GSM frequency usage is GSM 1900 so you need to make sure that your phone has the band coverage to connect to this frequency.

The majority of people here have prepaid/pay-as-you-go cell phones. To put credit (saldo) on your phone you will need to go to a shop (or home) where you see the Claro sign and ask for a “recarga”. The person will then ask you for your number and the amount you want to charge to your phone. In some places (generally smaller stores) they will charge C$1 for every C$10 charged. For example if you want to charge C$50 to your phone they will charge you C$55. Claro has various different promotions where they double, triple, quadruple and even quintuple your credit. To find out about current promotions call *121 and to check your balance *55. Remember that you can only send text messages with your “saldo principal” unless you buy a message packet. For more details about offers, promotions and credit duration please check out their website. The cost of calling the states is relatively cheap compared to the cost of a local call but it is still much cheaper to call from an Internet Café where calls costs between C$0.50 to C$1 per minute. You are not charged to receive calls.

2.7.3 Internet Access

The easiest way to access the internet in Sabana Grande is via data packages on your Smart Phone. For this you will need an unlocked Smart phone and a local simcard. Please note that coverage is intermittent in Sabana Grande (as mentioned above) and slow (edge connection).

For a quicker and more reliable connection many volunteers go to Totogalpa, Ocotal or Somoto to check their email, communicate with friends and family and do any research necessary. All public parks have free wifi, and there are cyber cafes in Ocotal and Somoto.

3 Working as a Grupo Fenix Volunteer

3.1 Introduction

The goal of the Professional Exchange volunteer program is that by working together with a local counterpart, the volunteer contributes their unique skills and experience in a way that strengthens the abilities of the local members of Grupo Fenix, while also being prepared to learn from their vast practical knowledge. Depending on your skill set, you may be working on a specific project or technology and providing technical expertise, or working with the group members or staff more generally to strengthen organizational capacity. Whatever your specific project, it is critical that you maintain communication with your local counterpart(s), ensuring that whatever progress you have contributed to will not be lost when you leave.
3.2 Working Conditions
When you become a Grupo Fénix volunteer you become part of the Grupo Fenix team. We ask you to integrate into the team as much as possible while you are volunteering with us. Some of the ways you can do this are by speaking as little English as possible. On the whole staff and Grupo Members do not speak English and it can be very excluding for them if you carry on conversations in English with other volunteers or those members of staff who do speak English.

While you are volunteering with Grupo Fénix, you will likely be working either at the Solar Center, or the Solar Mountain if you are working with PSAE. The Solar Center is where we realize most administrative activities and hold meetings, and is also the location of the ACESol photovoltaic workshop and the Solar Restaurant. Most of the technological research and construction takes place here, including the elaboration of solar cookers, solar panels, and our solar water distillers. The Solar Mountain, a 20 minute walk from the Solar Center, is where PSAE realize their various activities, including reforestation, natural construction, and eco-agriculture. Be sure to take care of your personal items such as computers, cell phones, phones, and tools; do not leave them lying around, as we cannot be held responsible if they go missing. If you damage a tool or piece of equipment due to misuse you will be expected to pay for it.

It is important to keep in mind that this is Nicaragua—there is a different pace of life here, and while it is not expected that volunteers adjust immediately, it is expected that they do so eventually and without prejudice. Being an under resourced nation, parts critical to a project may be scarce. This could mean that a project is delayed because it requires a part that can only be purchased in Managua, or shipped internationally. These sorts of impediments happen here, so we stress that interns possess the fortitude and desire to keep working with enthusiasm through these sorts of impediments.

3.3 Volunteer Responsibilities
As a Grupo Fénix volunteer you will be expected to:

- Be respectful of the culture and traditions of the community.
- Integrate into the community.
- Speak Spanish as much as possible so as not to exclude others.
- Document your work (in Spanish) of any projects you work on. This should include a detailed description of the steps taken and why, budget for any materials used and photos documenting the work done.
- Fill out the evaluation form before departure.

On the last Thursday of the month volunteers will eat dinner together in La Casita Solar. In the past groups of volunteers have decided to use the funds for this meal to buy ingredients and prepare dinner for themselves and their families.

3.4 Hours & Vacation
The Solar Centre is open Monday to Friday from 8 am to 12 pm and 1:30pm to 5 pm. Please respect this schedule, unless you have arranged a different work schedule with your local counterpart, in which case please respect that schedule. Unfortunately you will not be allowed access to the Solar Centre outside of these hours.
The Grupo Fenix volunteer programme officially closes for vacation from the Monday before Easter till Easter Sunday and from the Friday before Christmas Eve for two weeks. During these times volunteers will be unable to stay in Sabana Grande.

3.5  Volunteer Fee
Grupo Fénix is a self-sustainable NGO through the courses we offer, small donations and grants we receive, and to a minor extent the fee we charge to volunteers. We find it necessary to charge fees in order to maintain our volunteer programme. Being a volunteer is a valuable learning experience and forms part of the knowledge cycle that Grupo Fenix promotes. Should a volunteer stay more than 3 months, we can reduce the fee in recognition of the volunteer’s experience and knowledge within the organization.

We strongly encourage you to involve your personal circle in your experience by raising funds from family, friends, and co-workers. Several past volunteers have done so and it has been a great way for them to share their experiences with members in their own communities.

3.5.1  Cost of Volunteering
All volunteers are required to pay a onetime Registration and Orientation fee of US$150. This fee covers the application process, pre-departure planning and in-country orientation. For further information about orientation please see the section entitled Volunteer Orientation.

The volunteer fee for the first 3 months is US$450 per month. This includes breakfast, dinner, accommodation and Sunday lunch with your host family. After 3 months we can reduce the volunteer fee to US$350. If you are a parent wanting to volunteer with your child (12 years and under) the cost for them will be US$225 (based on them sharing a room with a parent) and US$275 if they want their own room. Payment of the registration and orientation fee is required for children as there is generally a lot of work involved getting them set-up and integrated into the community.

3.5.2  Terms of Payment
We only require payment of one month at a time, though you are welcome to pay for your whole stay in advance.

Currently we are only able to accept payment in cash.

Cash
We accept cash payments in US Dollars. If you plan to use ATMs as a source of cash, they are relatively easy to find in Ocotal. Visa is more accepted than MasterCard and make sure that you have checked with your bank that your card is set up for international transactions. You may want to make sure you have a backup method of obtaining money as ATM cards sometimes fail or are eaten by the bank machines.

Reimbursement Policy
If you have to cancel your trip pre-departure and have already paid your volunteer fee and orientation and registration fee, we will reimburse you in full the volunteer fee and retain the orientation and registration fee.

Once in Country, if you should have to stop your volunteer work for any reason we will not be able to refund any payments for the current month. Families are paid on the start date of the volunteer for hosting them (and then on this date every month). It is against our policy to ask families to refund this money.

If you have paid any future months in advance, we will be happy to refund you 75% (US$340) of the volunteer fee. You must give us five days’ notice before the beginning of a new month. The new month starts on the same date that you began to volunteer with Grupo Fenix.

4  Arrival and Orientation

4.1  Start Dates

The start dates for volunteers in 2016 are as follows:

- 4th October
- 8th November

The start dates for volunteers in 2016 are as follows:

- 10th January
- 7th February
- 7th March
- 18th April
- 2nd May
- 6th June
- 4th July
- 1st August
- 19th September
- 3rd October
- 7th November

You must be at Managua Backpackers Hostel or Colibrí Hotel by 7.30 am on your start date to transfer to Grupo Fenix – Sabana Grande. Typically you will be met there and taken to the bus station and put on the bus to Sabana Grande (typically 4 hours) where a member of Grupo Fenix will meet you off the bus. You will be provided with the exact information before your start date.
### 4.2 Orientation Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DAY</th>
<th>TIME</th>
<th>ACTIVITY</th>
<th>PLACE</th>
<th>LEADER</th>
<th>LANGUAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TUESDAY</td>
<td>7:30am</td>
<td>Met by a member of Grupo Fenix in Managua Backpackers</td>
<td>Managua Backpackers</td>
<td>Grupo Fenix Member</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7:45 - 8:15am</td>
<td>Taxi to Managua Bus Station (El Mayoreo) accompanied by member of Grupo Fenix</td>
<td></td>
<td>Grupo Fenix Member</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8:45 - 12:30pm</td>
<td>Bus from Managua to Sabana Grande</td>
<td></td>
<td>Grupo Fenix Member</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12:30pm</td>
<td>Met by a member of Grupo Fenix in Sabana Grande</td>
<td></td>
<td>Grupo Fenix Member</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12:30 - 1:30pm</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>La Casita Solar</td>
<td>COOMUSOT</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1:30 - 2:00pm</td>
<td>Presentation: Homestays</td>
<td>Solar Centre</td>
<td>Central Administration</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2:00pm</td>
<td>Meet Host Families</td>
<td>Solar Centre</td>
<td>Central Administration</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6:30 - 7:00pm</td>
<td>Dinner</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td></td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEDNESDAY</td>
<td>7:00 - 7:30am</td>
<td>Breakfast</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8:45 - 10:30am</td>
<td>Tour of Sabana Grande</td>
<td>La Ceiba</td>
<td>JPHF</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10:30 - 12:00pm</td>
<td>Tour of Solar Centre</td>
<td>Solar Centre</td>
<td>Central Administration</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12:00 - 1:30pm</td>
<td>Lunch hour</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1:30- 3:00pm</td>
<td>Presentation: Grupo Fenix and Professional Exchanges</td>
<td>Solar Centre</td>
<td>Central Administration</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3:00 – 4:00pm</td>
<td>Grupo Fenix Documentaries</td>
<td>Solar Centre</td>
<td>Central Administration</td>
<td>English/Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6:30 - 7:00pm</td>
<td>Dinner</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THURSDAY</td>
<td>7:00 - 7:30am</td>
<td>Breakfast</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Group</td>
<td>Language</td>
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<tr>
<td>8:00 - 12:00pm</td>
<td>Tour and explication of Solar Mountain</td>
<td>Solar Mountain</td>
<td>Solar Mountain Staff</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00 - 1:30pm</td>
<td>Lunch hour</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:30 - 5:00pm</td>
<td>Visit Ocotal - internet cafes, banks, post</td>
<td>Ocotal</td>
<td>JPHF</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>office etc.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:30 - 7:00pm</td>
<td>Dinner</td>
<td></td>
<td>Family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:00 - 7:30am</td>
<td>Breakfast</td>
<td></td>
<td>Family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00 - 11:00am</td>
<td>Meet your counterparts</td>
<td></td>
<td>Group Members</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00 - 1:30pm</td>
<td>Lunch hour</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5 Preparing for your trip
5.1 Packing Guide

In general, pack no more than you can carry and use soft-sided duffel bags or backpacks rather than hard luggage. You will be travelling from Managua to Sabana Grande by public transport and once at the Solar Center you will have to walk up to 30 minutes on dirt paths to your host family’s house.

Since occasionally checked luggage is delayed, lost or stolen, it’s a good idea to pack your “essentials” in your carry-on bags (i.e. change of clothes & documents). Check with the individual airline regarding current regulations for checked and carry-on luggage.

When packing please consider what the climate will be like when you are in Nicaragua. The rainy season is from mid-May through to mid-November. It is advisable to bring quick drying clothes and raingear during this time. Temperatures can vary but it will generally be hot and humid during this time with temperatures cooling as the year progresses. Mid-November through to mid-May is considered the dry season though there still may be some showers in November and December. November till January is the coolest part of the year in Nicaragua and at night you will most likely feel the cold as houses are not built to keep warmth in. March till May is the hottest and driest part of the year.

✓ Necessary & important papers, licenses, cards: Passport (valid for 6 months after departure), credit or debit card (optional), health insurance card, health information card, home contact info, address book, etc. It is a good idea to make two copies of all of these things: one to leave at home with your contact person and one to take with you. Make sure to look at the backsides of the cards when copying information as important numbers are often listed there as well. The copies you bring to Nicaragua should be kept in a safe place.

✓ English-Spanish Dictionary

✓ Security Belt, Pouch, or Money Belt: Bring a security belt or pouch to safely guard your passport, valuable cards or papers, and larger amounts of cash when you need to have these with you.

✓ Towels: Bring at least one bath towel.

✓ Clothes: Expect very hot conditions all year round and often-high humidity during the rainy season (late May to November). Light, breathable clothes are most comfortable. Nicaraguans in urban areas tend to dress well for work but dress relaxed at home, with women sometimes wearing shorts and men often going shirtless. Despite the heat, jeans are commonly worn by both men and women. Consider bringing at least one set of semi-formal clothes for going out to a nice restaurant/discoteca or evening event. Bring a swimsuit for the beach or one of the nice lagoons you might visit. One or two pairs of long pants are a must and a long-sleeved shirt if you’re worried about sun exposure or for the occasional cool evening. A sweater or sweatshirt is a good idea as evenings can get cool.

✓ Rain jacket or poncho with hood or hat: If you’re coming during the rainy season be prepared to be caught in a deluge. You might want better quality, breathable raingear that’s comfortable to wear in a warm climate. Otherwise, bring a small umbrella or join the Nicaraguans in either getting wet while going about your business or just waiting out the rains.

✓ Sturdy walking shoes: Be prepared to walk a lot in Nicaragua. Much of the terrain, including some city streets, is rough. There can be stones, broken glass, holes, strands of barbed wire,
curbs, and cobbled streets that are waiting to twist ankles, stub toes, or send one flying. With
the heat, sandals are great as long as one really pays attention to one’s walking path. Sturdy
shoes are safer, and are definitely preferred if you’re going to spend any time hiking in the
“campo” (countryside).
✓ **Sandals and/or flip-flops:** Most of the houses in Sabana Grande will have either a concrete, tile
or dirt floor. While you may see some Nicaraguans going barefoot, this is not recommended.
People at all income levels take a lot of pride and sweep their floors often, but running around
the house in sandals or flip-flops will keep your feet cleaner and reduce chances of injury or
disease. Flip Flops are quite common in Nicaragua in and around home.
✓ **Hat, sunglasses & sunscreen:** Nicaragua is close to the equator and, as a result, it is often very
hot and very bright. For personal protection, it’s recommended that you bring all three with
you. It is much easier to burn in the Nicaragua sun than in northern climates.
✓ **Water Bottle or Canteen:** Plan to carry a water bottle with you at all times, so that you can
keep yourself properly hydrated. Bring a good, non-breakable water bottle with you that you
can refill with purified water
✓ **Small or medium-sized backpack:** Bring a backpack that has good zippers and can hold a bit of
stuff, including a water bottle, a camera, and anything else you may want with you during the
day. In Nicaragua backpacks are affordable and used by people of all ages and means. You will
not stick out as a foreigner because you’re hauling around a backpack (unless it’s large). Pick a
good one to bring with you, as many Nicaraguan-made backpacks tend not to last long.
✓ **Medical Kit:** Bring your own medical kit, containing: 1) any medications and/or supplements
that you take; 2) anti-bacterial wash; 3) anti-itch gel for insect bites (important in the
countryside); 4) antibiotic ointment; 5) rehydration salts (suer oral, readily available in
Nicaragua) and 6) Band-Aids. Some volunteers unaccustomed to Nicaragua, may at some point
have diarrhoea as their bodies adjust to the local germs. Consider bringing Pepto-Bismol and
perhaps Imodium. In the U.S. travel clinics often prescribe an antibiotic such as Cipro for
prolonged bouts of diarrhoea. Some volunteers also bring Acidophilus to help keep a balance of
intestinal flora. Remember that keeping your hands clean, drinking potable water, and eating
only well-cooked food will help keep you healthy.
✓ **Toilet Kit:** Bring all the items you know you’ll need or want. Most items you will want are
available, but shopping will be easier and faster for you at home. Tampons are not readily
available. Bring a couple pairs of earplugs if you’re at all troubled by noise while sleeping.
Expect noise from roosters, dogs, donkeys, people chatting and radios.
✓ **Flashlights:** Please bring a small flashlight; you will need it for going to the latrine at night and
walking home at night.
✓ **Camera & Film:** If using a film camera, you will save time and hassle by bringing extra film with
you. Prices are higher than in the US and special types of film are difficult to find. If you plan on
giving public presentations or sharing photos via the Internet, consider bringing a digital camera.
Volunteers are invited to contribute any excellent photos they have taken to the Grupo Fénix
archives.
✓ **Special Foods, Vitamins or Supplements:** If you need any particular foods, supplements,
vitamins or “comfort items” like herbal teas to facilitate your wellbeing while in Nicaragua, be
sure to bring them with you rather than trying to find them here.
✓ **Computer:** Most volunteer projects will need you to use a computer at some point. While there are computers available for use at the Solar Center these are generally intended for use by staff and members of community and are often in use.

5.2 **Gifts**
Unfortunately giving is not often as simple as it may seem. For many North Americans and Europeans, it may feel rewarding and easy to shell out a little money to buy a gift with the best of intentions. However, often times giving can have unanticipated side effects. Most people in Nicaragua are living in a context with significantly less financial resources and with preconceptions about the wealth of foreigners learned through television, movies, or past interactions with foreigners. Pulling out fifty dollar American bills or leaving a plethora of gifts cannot only set foreigners apart by reaffirming stereotypes about the wealth of foreigners, but it can encourage the kind of behaviours that make foreigners feel uncomfortable such as begging or pleading for objects or loans. Furthermore, it could contribute to what some call the “NGO phenomena” where Nicaraguans come to rely on foreigners as a source of funds and action to bail them out of their circumstances. This thinking also applies to the level of individuals. If you give or lend people money, they may come to see you (and other foreigners) as a source of money. Even, for example, if you frequently treat people to dinner and dancing, you may reinforce the same thinking. We don’t recommend that you lend money and we suggest you act very carefully when people ask you for money. Some people really are in dire circumstances, but in any situation, ask yourself if giving money would really make a sustained difference in the lives of the individuals. Try to assess whether they really need the money and whether or not there is anything else you could offer them instead. Visitors staying longer-term shouldn’t feel like they can’t treat their host family, but should consider doing so seldom. Keep in mind that your behaviours will impact those foreigners who come in the future and yours and your family’s dignity.

If you really want to give, don’t feel discouraged! You are giving with your own time and efforts and Grupo Fénix always welcomes further support in its work. Please ask the International Relations Coordinator or Founder for ways you could help.

Also, keep in mind that you give by sharing your life and culture with the people. In general we recommend that you think simple and sustainable. A cheap plastic toy will eventually end up broken and sitting in the soil with a growing amount of plastic garbage in the countryside. A Mag flashlight, once the bulb has blown, again becomes another piece of garbage, as the replacement lights are difficult to find in Nicaragua. If you want to bring a small gift for your host family consider bringing something that will be useful around the house such as bed sheets, solar chargeable flashlights etc. At the Solar Center we are trying to start a Spanish library as books are often hard to come by and economically inaccessible for members of the community. Consider donating a book in Spanish to the library that can be enjoyed by various members of the community. If you would like to donate funds or equipment (tools, computers etc) please talk to either the International Relations Coordinator or President.

5.3 **Passport & Visa**
Visitors from most countries can enter Nicaragua for up to 90 days without applying for a visa before arrival. Upon entry to Nicaragua you are given a tourist visa for 90 days, this costs US$10 and must be paid in cash. Once you have been in Nicaragua for 90 days you can either renew your visa for up to 90 days or leave the country. Visas can be renewed by going to Ocotal with a copy of your passport and entry stamp, filling out a form and paying the necessary fee (C$500 per month). They will send your
passport to Managua and it will be returned in about a week. You can only renew your passport once and then you will have to leave the country. As Nicaragua is part of the CA4 countries to renew your visa by leaving the country you will either have to travel to Costa Rica, Belize, Mexico or fly to a different country.

In Nicaragua it is required that all foreigners carry their passport or a copy of their passport with a copy of their entry stamp at all times. If immigration stops you and you do not have these documents they could detain you. As El Centro Solar is close to two border crossing points with Honduras, immigration will sometimes visit the center to check documentation.

For more information about which nationalities need visas, please see:

http://www.lonelyplanet.com/nicaragua/practical-information/visas#ixzz20SJKvyO6

5.4 Money
The official currency of Nicaragua is the Cordoba. For current exchange rates please see here. Most major towns and cities (e.g. Ocotal a 20 minutes bus ride away) have ATM machines where you can withdraw money. Visa is the most widely acceptable; volunteers have experienced problems getting money out using MasterCard. Please make sure you contact your bank before leaving for Nicaragua to check that your card is set up for international use. Dollars can be easily exchanged at banks, supermarkets, pharmacies and stores. Remember that torn, marked or taped notes will not be accepted. It is advised that when you arrive at Managua airport to not change your money at the money exchange counters in baggage claim as they give unfavourable rates. Please wait till you have gone through customs where there are ATM machines available. It is recommended that when you arrive in country you bring with you some small denomination bills (US$1, US$5, US$10) as these can be easily exchanged for local currency.

5.5 Spanish classes
The ability to communicate effectively in Spanish is essential to a successful and fulfilling volunteer experience. If you want to brush up on your Spanish skills before arriving at Grupo Fénix, we recommend the following Spanish schools:

Mariposa Spanish School
Dariana Spanish School
6 General Information
6.1 Overview: Sabana Grande, Totogalpa, Madriz

Sabana Grade is located in the municipality of Totogalpa, department of Madriz. At the national level, the municipality of Totogalpa is the second poorest in the country. 80% of the population obtain their only source of income from agricultural activities, primarily from the planting of basic grains. Work in the fields varies in nature according to the season and weather conditions resulting in high unemployment rates in the community, especially in the dry season.

The municipality of Totogalpa is located in the northwest of the Republic of Nicaragua. The climate is of a Tropical Savannah with a high vulnerability to dry spells. Totogalpa has some of the lowest precipitation in the country, with rainfall between 800 and 1,000 mm per year. At the same time the area enjoys solar radiation of an average of 5KWh/m2/day. The temperature varies between 20 and 30 degrees Celsius.

One of the greatest problems in the area is deforestation. It causes scarcity of water sources, especially for rural areas where people have to walk long distances in search for water during dry season. Due to mismanagement and indiscriminate cutting, 80% of trees native to the area have been lost provoking the appearance of plants that are typical to desert regions. The problem of deforestation has been extending throughout the country. Between 1990 and 2005 Nicaragua lost 21% of its forests with 97% of national consumption going towards cooking.

Even with the appearance of the detrimental effects of deforestation, 93.1% of the inhabitants of the area use wood-burning stoves to cook. The majority of the stoves are located inside the homes where they negatively affect the health of the family. The effects of cooking in this manner are the same as smoking two packs of cigarettes a day, making respiratory infections the main cause of morbidity in the
municipality. Moreover, because women and children are primarily responsible for cooking, they are disproportionately affected by health problems caused by the use of wood-burning stoves.

For more information about Sabana Grande and Totogalpa, please check out these websites:
http://www.totogalpa.gob.ni/index.php
http://www.manfut.org/madriz/totogalpa.html

6.2 Country Overview: Nicaragua at a Glance

6.2.1 History
Nicaragua probably derives its name from an Indian chief, Nicarao, who ruled part of the area at the time of the Spanish Conquest. Christopher Columbus, in 1492, was the first European to touch Nicaraguan soil. Francisco Hernandez de Córdoba followed in 1524 and founded the principal colonial cities of Granada and León. Granada evolved into a stronghold of the aristocracy, and León became the political and intellectual capital. The rivalry between these cities persists to this day. For three centuries, Nicaragua was a province of the Captaincy General of Guatemala, as the Spanish called their territories south of Mexico. Independence from Spanish rule came in 1821, and, for a short period of time,
Nicaragua was a member of the Central American Federation, which included Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Costa Rica. In 1838, Nicaragua became an independent republic.

For the next 100 years, Nicaragua experienced periods of war and peace, including an attempted takeover by American William Walker in 1855. Walker was defeated and killed by an alliance of Central American nations. After another period of unrest in the early 1900s, Nicaragua’s president invited U.S. Marines to restore and maintain order in the country. In 1934, the government was taken over by General Anastasio Somoza García, initiating more than 40 years of family rule under a military dictatorship. In 1972, downtown Managua was destroyed by an earthquake that killed tens of thousands. Managua was never completely rebuilt and has become a sprawling city without a center. In 1979, the Somoza regime was overthrown by a populist revolution, and was replaced by the Marxist Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), which ruled until 1990. This period included a U.S. government-supported civil war against the Sandinista government. A 1989 accord permitted free elections in 1990, in which Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, known for her conciliatory nature, became president. Nicaragua has experienced relative peace since 1990, and the country has celebrated four successive free elections to date.

6.2.2 Government
Nicaragua is an independent republic with a democratically elected president and a unicameral National Assembly with 93 seats. The assembly's members are elected by proportional representation and serve five-year terms. Presidential elections are conducted every five years. The current president, Daniel Ortega, leader of the leftist revolution that helped to overthrow the Somoza regime in 1979, was elected in democratically-held elections in 2006 and then again in 2011. Nicaragua’s five significant political parties are: Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), Partido Liberal Independiente (PLI), Alianza Liberal Nicaragüense (ALN), and Movimiento de Renovación Sandinista (MRS).

6.2.3 Economy
Agriculture is the cornerstone of the Nicaraguan economy. The principal crops are corn, beans, sorghum, and rice. Cotton, coffee, sugar, bananas, and tobacco are the principal export crops. Additional export products are beef and shrimp. In the early 1990s, Nicaragua experienced a very unstable economic situation, with hyperinflation, a large external debt, and high unemployment. During the past 15 years, the country has privatized many public institutions, but internal and external debt rates remain dangerously high. While Managua has grown and modernized, the poor rural and marginalized urban populations have experienced few economic gains. Droughts in 1996 and 1997, followed by Hurricane Mitch in 1998, caused tremendous economic hardship. The combination of unemployment and underemployment exceeds 50 per cent. Nicaragua’s annual per capita gross national product is currently less than $500, making it one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere. During the 2009-2010 harvest, Nicaragua registered a 32.2 per cent increase in its coffee export value in relation to the previous season, improving living conditions in rural areas.

The Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) is an agreement among the United States, five Central American countries (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua) and the Dominican Republic. Its terms were negotiated and signed by Central American representatives in 2004. The U.S. Congress ratified CAFTA in July 2005 and in August 2005 President George W. Bush signed the bill into law. Although there are differing perspectives on its purpose and outcomes, its aim is to
promote economic growth in the region and alleviate poverty by opening up trade and investment (and thus creating jobs).

6.2.4 People and Culture
The majority of Nicaraguans can best be classified as *mestizo*, a mix in which neither the European nor the Indian cultures predominate. On the geographically and politically isolated Caribbean coast there are six different ethnic cultures, including the *mestizo* population. The others are Creole, Miskito, Garífuna, Rama, and Mayagna. The Caribbean region is multi-ethnic, multilingual, and culturally diverse, but its residents only represent about 10 per cent of the total population.

The official and predominant language in Nicaragua is Spanish. Along the Caribbean coast some Miskito, Mayagna, and Rama cultures have maintained their indigenous languages; Afro-Caribbeans speak English and Creole.

More than 90 per cent of the population belongs to Christian denominations (approximately 73 per cent of which identify themselves as Roman Catholics; 15 per cent as belonging to various evangelical churches; and the remainder to other Christian-based faiths, such as Moravians, Mormons, etc.); 8.5 per cent declare no religious affiliation or claim to be atheists. The traditional social structure of Nicaragua has been essentially colonial, with a small number of wealthy landowning families at the top and a broad peasant class at the bottom. Despite the country’s economic growth in the 1970s, the emergence of a middle class, and the decade of socialist rule, there are still stark inequalities in the distribution of wealth. The country’s educational system, a major avenue for economic and social mobility, recently replaced the traditions of classicism and intellectualism with vocational training. Thus, the lower class now has a somewhat better chance for economic advancement. Due to a literacy campaign between May 2007 and June 2009, the illiteracy rate has been reduced to 3.56 per cent, according to government statistics in August 2009.

Nicaraguans are warm, generous, and friendly. Their hospitality is humbling. Nicaraguans are proud of their cultural heritage, as seen in typical dances, such as the Güegüense, and in the continued importance of poet Rubén Darío. Nicaraguans are also passionate about politics and are quick to share their thoughts on past or current events.

6.2.5 Environment
Nicaragua is the largest of the five Central American republics, with a land area of almost 50,000 square miles (slightly smaller than New York). It is the least densely populated of the Central American nations, with a population of 5,727,707 (July 2012 estimate) and an average annual growth rate of 1.067 per cent (2012 estimate). Known as the land of lakes and volcanoes, Nicaragua has a diverse environment, including highlands, lowlands, tropical forests, lakes, and two oceans. Lake Nicaragua is one of the largest freshwater lakes in the world and contains such aquatic oddities as freshwater sharks. Nicaragua’s location and diverse geography make it a beautiful and resource-rich country, yet it is also vulnerable to many natural disasters, including earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, droughts, and hurricanes. This vulnerability has increased as a result of deforestation and construction in unsafe areas.
6.2.6 Geography and Climate
Nicaragua can be divided into four geographic areas: the coastal area between the lakes and the Pacific Ocean; the Great Rift, a low depression in which Lake Managua and Lake Nicaragua lie; the central highlands to the north and east of the rift; and the Caribbean coast lowlands, which account for more than 40 per cent of the land area but only 10 per cent of the population. The climate varies with the region, but Nicaragua generally is hot and tropical, with cool, comfortable nights and a very short cool season. The Northern region, including Esteli, Jinotega, Matagalpa, and Nueva Segovia, is mountainous with a noticeably cooler climate than the rest of Nicaragua. The eastern third of the country, composed of the eastern slopes of the central highlands and the Caribbean lowlands, has a wet, tropical climate, with little or no dry or cool season. The climate of the central highlands is variable because of its ridge and valley topography, but generally it is an area of moderate temperatures and year-round rainfall. The hottest regions of Nicaragua include Leon, Chinandega, and Managua. These Pacific regions experience a distinct tropical wet season (May through November) and tropical dry season (December through April).

7 Resources for Further Information
7.1 General information about Nicaragua

http://www.countrywatch.com
On this site, you can learn anything from what time it is in the capital of Nicaragua to how to convert from the dollar to the Nicaragua Cordoba Oro (NOI). Just click on Nicaragua and go from there.

http://www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations
Visit this site for general travel advice about almost any country in the world.

http://www.state.gov
The State Department’s website issues background notes periodically about countries around the world. Find Nicaragua and learn more about its social and political history. You can also go to the site’s international travel section to check on conditions that may affect your safety.

http://www.psr.keele.ac.uk/official.htm
This includes links to all the official sites for governments worldwide.

http://www.geography.about.com/library/maps/blindex.htm
This online world atlas includes maps and geographical information, and each country page contains links to other sites, such as the Library of Congress, that contain comprehensive historical, social, and political background.

This United Nations site allows you to search for statistical information for member states of the U.N.

http://www.worldinformation.com
This site provides an additional source of current and historical information about countries around the world.

Online articles / Current News sites about Nicaragua
This is a comprehensive list of links to local and international sites about Nicaragua (in Spanish).

This offers links to English language news stories about Nicaragua and more.

This is the Ministry of Tourism webpage where one can learn more about Nicaragua.

This is Nicaragua's largest daily newspaper (in Spanish).

This provides links to English language news stories about Nicaragua.

This is another large Nicaraguan daily newspaper (in Spanish).

7.2 Recommended books about Nicaragua


