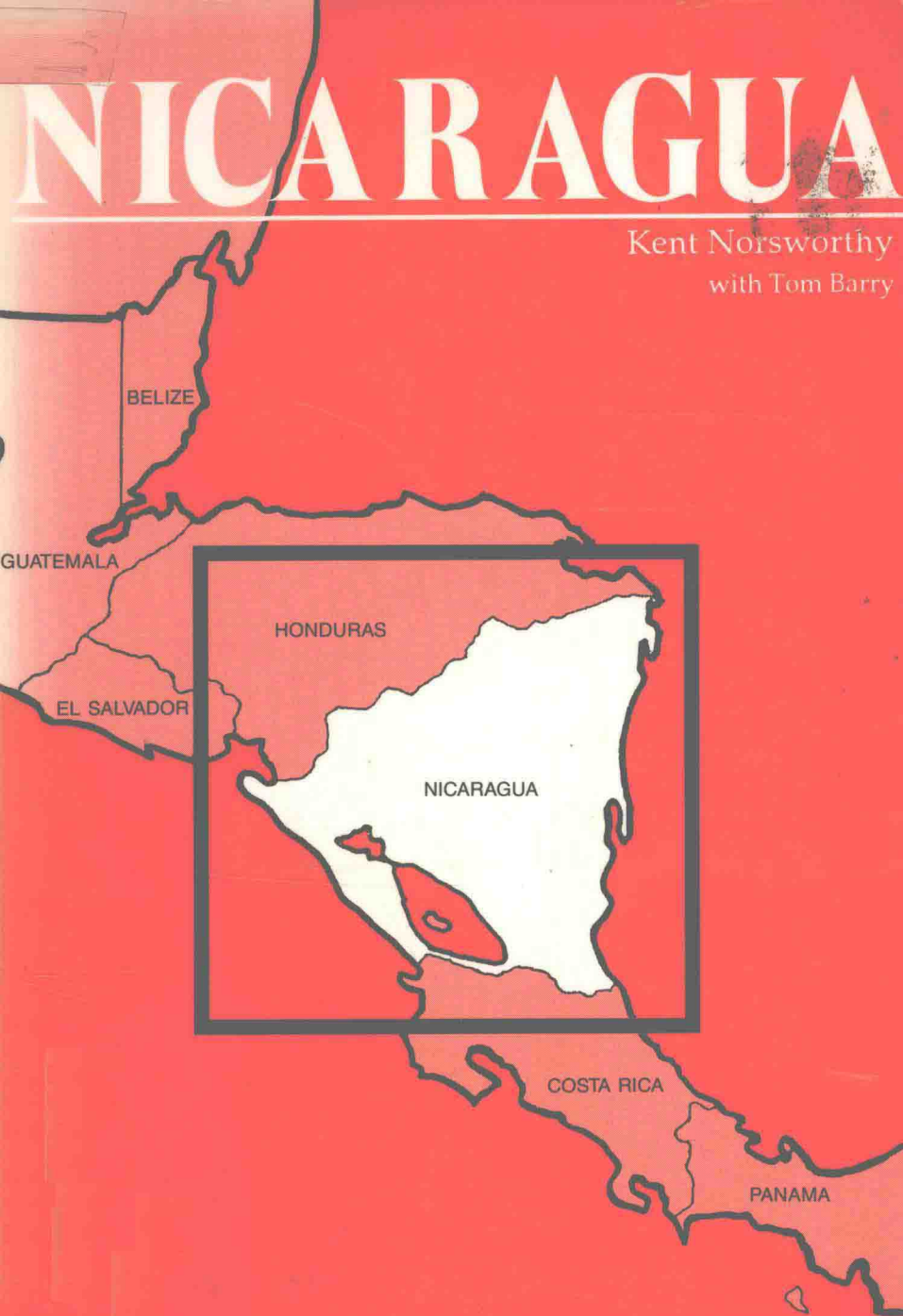


NICARAGUA

Kent Norsworthy
with Tom Barry



COUNTRY GUIDE

Nicaragua A Country Guide

Kent Norsworthy

with Tom Barry

**The Inter-Hemispheric Education Resource Center
Albuquerque, New Mexico**

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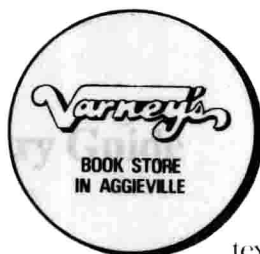
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The Resource Center

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Nicaragua



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Introduction

Ask Nicaraguans how they would compare themselves to their Central American neighbors and you are likely to be hit with a chorus of boasts and pejoratives. Not unlike their neighbors, Nicaraguans (known as *Nicas* or *Pinoleros*) consider themselves distinct.

The 3.5 million inhabitants of the largest country in Central America are proud of the attributes that set them apart, while often rejecting things foreign. Nicaraguans' sense of independence and nationalism rises from the country's long history of resistance to U.S. domination, dating back to the adventurism of U.S. filibuster William Walker in the 1850s and to the guerrilla war waged by Augusto César Sandino against the U.S. Marines in the 1920s and 1930s. Even President Violeta Chamorro, who hardly considers herself an anti-imperialist, brushed aside offers to send U.S. troops to restore order during a general strike in July 1990, asserting that Nicaraguans should be the ones to solve their own problems.

Nicaraguan nationalism also arises from a strong and self-confident popular culture. Cultural expressions from music to theater, dance, and painting are popular among all social sectors. Poetry and prose, however, reign supreme. Many Nicaraguans insist that their country has the highest per capita concentration of poets in the world! Indeed, in all corners of Nicaragua — from the remote mountain villages of Nueva Segovia to the halls of government in Managua — poets seem to be everywhere. In large part, the prominence of poetry can be traced back to Rubén Darío (1867-1916), the Nicaraguan who put his country on the map of international culture with his rich and intricate poems. Today museums, theaters, cultural events, and even the town where he was born are named after the hallowed Darío.

Baseball is the national pastime which comes closest to rivaling Nicaraguans' penchant for cultural production. On Sunday mornings virtually all open fields are occupied by baseball games — from the most impromptu and informal pickup contests where tightly wound rags and

socks serve as a ball and 2-by-4s as bats to dozens of organized leagues for players of all ages and both sexes. On the pages of all three daily papers, national sports commentators dissect the every move of the few Nicaraguan players who have made it to the U.S. major leagues.

Other, less grandiose characteristics also set Nicaraguans apart. Informality is one. Dress codes for men—the necktie, for instance, standard attire in business, government, and academic circles throughout the continent—are largely relegated to a tiny, foreign-educated elite, while Nicaraguan women have much less affinity for high heels and lipstick than their neighbors in the region. Language too is affected. Words and phrases deemed too profane or slang to be used in a typical Costa Rican conversation, for example, are everyday fare for Nicaraguans, often making their way onto the airwaves and into popular slogans, billboards, and graffiti. Native Spanish speakers from other countries often lament the absence of a dictionary of “Nicaraguanisms,” hundreds of words and phrases which have no meaning, or an entirely different one, outside the country’s borders.

Complementing Nicaraguan informality is a strong drive to disagree. Nicaraguans love to argue and complain over just about anything, a characteristic magnified by the deep-bred cynicism produced by nearly 50 years of Somoza dictatorship. In part, this has translated into a widespread penchant among the population to oppose the powers that be, irrespective of political sentiments, voting behavior, or superficial allegiances. A popular refrain heard on the streets in the days after the February 1990 elections was, “We threw out Somoza, and now we’ve thrown out the Sandinistas. If doña Violeta doesn’t deliver on her promises, we’ll soon throw her out too.” Indeed, if Chamorro’s first 100 days in office proved anything, it was that the Nicaraguan people remain as militant and unpredictable as ever.

* * *

When arriving in Nicaragua, first-time visitors as well as foreigners and even Nicaraguans who have been away from the country for a prolonged period are immediately struck by several features. With few exceptions, the first is temperature. Since much of the country, including Managua, is just above sea-level, the tropical heat is stifling day and night, all year round. A brief rainy season provides little relief. To alleviate the heat, Nicaraguans are avid drinkers. In any city or town, water, soft drinks, and fresh-squeezed fruit juices, dispensed in little plastic bags, are never more than a few blocks away.

Decades of dictatorship, followed by eight years of war and U.S. financial aggression have taken a heavy toll: underdevelopment and poverty pervade the physical landscape throughout Nicaragua. Although the Sandinistas attempted to reduce inequalities through the redistribution of national wealth and income, they eventually realized that a small pie can be cut only so many times. In stark contrast to neighboring Costa Rica, and to a lesser extent Guatemala and El Salvador, even the most basic infrastructure is conspicuously absent. Outside of the cities there are few paved roads, other than the deteriorated two-lane highways which link the capital with Pacific ports and border crossings. Access to safe water is still a luxury. In Managua, less than half the population enjoys running water in their homes, in the countryside less than one in ten.¹ Outside of urban offices and the wealthier *barrios*, telephone service is practically nonexistent.

The extreme level of underdevelopment in Nicaragua today is the heaviest part of the legacy left behind by the Somoza dictatorship. Part of the reason why the Somozas generated such intense and widespread opposition among Nicaraguans of all stripes is that they ran Nicaragua as their personal fiefdom, monopolizing just about everything in the country worth owning. Evaluating the decade of revolutionary changes left behind by the departing government, Sandinista leader and guerrilla heroine Dora María Téllez reflected: "I say that if all we did was to make Nicaragua into a nation, that was still the most extraordinary thing we could have achieved."² This sentiment was shared by Chamorro and her allies who, if they were willing to recognize anything positive done by the Sandinistas, conceded their having constructed a modern state and a national identity where before there had been neither.

* * *

Most of the above traits and characteristics can, to a greater or lesser degree, be found in all parts of the country. But Nicaragua, often characterized as three countries in one, is diverse and heterogeneous. The sparsely inhabited tropical lowlands of the Atlantic coast (divided into the North and South Autonomous Regions) cover more than half the national territory and are home to Nicaragua's five ethnic minorities (the indigenous Miskito, Sumu, and Rama, and the black Creoles and Garífuna). In the days of U.S. economic domination and the enclave economy, it was easier and quicker to travel from Nicaraguan Atlantic coast ports to New Orleans or Houston than inland to the national capital of Managua, a scant 250 miles away. Although a dirt road has been carved out of the dense jungles to connect the northern Atlantic coast with the rest of the country, the bulk of travel is still done by boat or plane. The Atlantic

coast's isolation from the rest of the country and historic mistrust of the "Spaniards" from the Pacific side continue to act as barriers.

To the west of the Autonomous Regions, stretching from the Honduran border to the Río San Juan (which separates Nicaragua from Costa Rica), lies the broad central part of the country. This central region passes through the rugged mountainous departments of Jinotega and Matagalpa in the north, then descends through the low-lying hills and plains of Boaco and Chontales in the south. Home to the majority of the Nicaraguan peasantry, in the mid-1980s this area was the primary target for contra recruitment, military destruction, and more subtle efforts to win over a social base.

The rest of the country, stretching from the central mountains and lakes in the south to the Pacific coast plains, hosts the major cities, ports, industries, and large agroexport farms, as well as isolated pockets of the peasantry. The country's two traditional political parties, Conservatives and Liberals, historically were based in this region's two major towns, Granada and León. In the 1850s Managua became the capital and since then it has remained the country's largest city (current population one million) and hub of national political activity.

The choice of Managua as the seat of government turned out to be an unfortunate one. Despite the fact that the city sits beside the shores of giant Lake Xolotlán, Managua suffers from a chronic shortage of drinking water. Lake Xolotlán, contaminated in the 1960s and 1970s by industrial waste, is awash in floods every rainy season as runoff pours into the streets from the surrounding hill country. Furthermore, the capital was built atop a series of major earthquake faults. In 1972 on Nicaragua's traditional Christmas eve, the city was leveled by a massive earthquake. The only major multi-story building left standing, the 21-story former Bank of America building, is today the lone skyline element in a downtown area which has never been rebuilt.

* * *

The political history of Nicaragua throughout most of this century has been dominated by two forces: *somocismo* and *sandinismo*. The guerrilla struggle of nationalist hero Augusto César Sandino in the 1920s and 1930s succeeded in forcing the United States to withdraw its contingent of occupying Marines. Sandino's subsequent murder at the hands of Anastasio Somoza García, who had been installed by the departing Marines at the head of the Nicaraguan National Guard, paved the way for more than 40 years of Somoza family rule over the country—the longest and most corrupt dictatorship in Latin American history.

The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) grounded its fight against the dictatorship in the thinking and actions of Sandino. The essential elements of Sandino's campaign, rescued 30 years after his death by the FSLN, included anti-imperialism, the quest for national dignity and sovereignty, and a commitment to the worker and peasant majority. On this basis, the Sandinista guerrilla struggle proposed to overthrow the dictatorship, dismantle the exploitative structures and institutions of *somocismo*, break the country's dependence on the United States, and move toward the construction of a more just social and economic order.

* * *

Like the initial period after the 1979 Sandinista victory, Nicaragua in 1990 was enveloped in powerful changes. The National Organized Union (UNO)³ government led by President Violeta Chamorro, in its drive to arrest the economic decline and reestablish agroexports and the private sector as the economy's motor force, has presided over a sometimes gradual, sometimes violent, process of rolling back the revolutionary transformations of the 1980s.

The process encountered resistance not only from the FSLN, which in the wake of its electoral defeat promised to "govern from below" and defend what it saw as the fundamental gains of the revolution, but also from tens of thousands of Nicaraguans who saw few signs of the peace, reconciliation, or economic prosperity which motivated them to vote for UNO.

But the frontlines of resistance were occupied by the country's labor unions and popular organizations. A major factor behind the failure of the Sandinistas' mixed-economy model was the refusal of the private sector to cooperate. In the 1990s, conversely, success of UNO's "social-market economy" appeared to hinge on the collaboration of the well-organized and highly class-conscious worker and peasant majority.

For the long haul, two key aspects of UNO's economic reforms, privatization and liberalization, appear likely to improve macro-economic performance and generate some economic growth. But to the extent that these same policies lead to a reconcentration of land and wealth in the hands of the elite, they threaten to aggravate the very roots of poverty and injustice which gave rise to revolution in the first place.

Another painful lesson which the transition period drove home for many Nicaraguans who had voted for UNO was that the United States' commitment to democracy and reconstruction was but a small fraction of its commitment to destabilize the Sandinistas. Washington's economic aid to the Chamorro government turned out to be less than anticipated, and

arrived much later than economic planners had hoped. Yet, at the political level, U.S. interference threatened to undermine the building of stable democratic institutions and the national consensus necessary to move the country forward.

* * *

The following pages attempt to explain the key actors, events, and dynamics from two distinct periods. One is the period of Sandinista rule, from July 1979 until April 1990. The other deals with UNO's program of government and its performance during Chamorro's first 100 days in office. By the end of those 100 days it was all too clear that Nicaragua was still in the grips of what promised to be a prolonged transition. That transition was characterized by a constant jockeying for position as the country's major constituencies and power blocs—moderate and right-wing blocs within the government, FSLN, unions and popular organizations, armed forces, ex-contras, capitalists—struggled to define their stance in relation to the critical issues of the day.