

Nicaragua: Land of Poets and Writers

Do you know the name of the largest country in Central America? If you did not answer Nicaragua, then chances are that there is very little you know about the country itself. Although a lot less popular than other Spanish-speaking countries like Argentina, Mexico and Venezuela, the Republic of Nicaragua is as interesting as it is beautiful.

The country is bordered to the north by Honduras, to the east by the Caribbean Sea, to the south by Costa Rica and to the west by the Pacific Ocean. It has a tropical climate, which means that it has a rainy season and a dry season, like Trinidad and Tobago, and the temperature only varies slightly. There are plains on the Caribbean and Pacific coasts, and rivers, lagoons, lakes, mountains and volcanoes in the interior. As a result, the country is prone to flooding and hurricanes.

Although originally inhabited by indigenous tribes like the *Nicarao* and *Niquirano*, in the 16th century the Pacific coast was settled by the Spanish and in the 19th century the Caribbean coast was settled by the British. As a British protectorate, indentured labourers were brought to the country from West Indian territories like Haiti and Jamaica. Therefore, the present-day Nicaraguan culture reflects the influences of all these peoples. For example, the British Maypole (or *Palo de Mayo*) is danced to African-infused rhythms in May along the Caribbean coast. The country gained its independence from Spain on September 15, 1821 and became a republic in 1838.

The name Nicaragua is a combination of the indigenous Nahuatl word 'Nicarao' and the Spanish word 'agua', which means 'water', due to the vast amount of water present in the country via Lakes Nicaragua and Managua, named after the country itself and the capital city respectively.

Perhaps, it is as a result of this abundant supply of water that the economy of the country is an agrarian one. Main export crops include bananas, coffee and sugar, and Nicaraguan rum and beef are held in high regard throughout Latin America. The tourism industry has been experiencing a boom over the last decade, with popular destinations being the colonial city of Granada, the Mombacho volcano and the Corn Islands. In spite of this, Nicaragua is still the least visited country in the region and one of the poorest, with high rates of inflation, poverty and underemployment. As a result, it depends greatly on monetary support from international organisations, like

the Inter-American Development Bank. Nevertheless the World Bank ranks Nicaragua as the second best economy in Central America in which to start a business. The unit of currency is the *Córdoba*.

Current president José Daniel Ortega Saavedra is a Sandinista, a member of the leftist political party which supported the anti-imperialist struggle of Augusto César Sandino during the 1930s and which led a Marxist revolution in 1979, overthrowing the Somoza political dynasty. President Ortega had previously ruled the country from 1985 to 1990. In 1990, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro replaced him and created history by becoming the first female president democratically elected in the Americas.

President Ortega is in charge of a population of just over 5.6 million, the majority of whom are *mestizo*, mixed with Amerindian and white (Spanish, German, Italian or French). Spanish is the official language but English and indigenous languages like *Miskito* and *Sumo* are spoken on the Caribbean coast. Most Nicaraguans are Christians, either Roman Catholic, Anglican or Protestant. However, the number of practising Catholics is on the decline while the popularity of Protestant groups like the Moravians continues to rise.

Nicaraguans have made important contributions to the development of Latin American literature and poetry. Famous Nicaraguans include the poets Rubén Darío and José Coronel Urtecho, and the writers Gioconda Belli, Ernesto Cardenal and Sergio Ramírez Mercado.

Unlike many other Latin American countries where “football is king”, baseball is the most popular sport practised in Nicaragua followed by boxing. In fact, the country has produced world boxing champions like Alexis Argüello and Ricardo Mayorga. Football is only now gaining popularity with the younger generation.

However, like many other Latin American countries, the main ingredient found in Nicaraguan gastronomy is corn. Corn is used in dishes, like *nacatamal*; sweets; desserts; and even drinks, like *pinolillo*. *Nacatamal* is like a tamale as it is a corn meal dough filled with meat and vegetables, wrapped in banana leaves and then steamed. *Pinolillo* is a traditional drink with a rough consistency, made from ground toasted corn and cocoa. It is normally served in a calabash gourd and can be sweetened or unsweetened, and mixed with milk or water.

Nevertheless, the national dish consists primarily of rice and beans and is called *gallo pinto* or *gallopinto*, which means ‘speckled rooster’ as when the two

ingredients are combined, the rice becomes coloured by the beans and the mixture appears speckled. This is not to be confused with the similarly popular dish in Costa Rica where black beans are used instead of the small red beans used in Nicaragua. Even in Nicaragua, there are variations to the dish as on the Caribbean coast, coconut is often added. This can be likened to the variations which exist when preparing our pelau, as some people prefer to use pigeon peas while others use black-eyed peas.

Although large in size, Nicaragua is often forgotten by the international community. It is our intention that this article has been able to give some insight into this beautiful Spanish-speaking country!

© The Secretariat for the Implementation of Spanish, 2008

The Secretariat is located at Level I2, Nicholas Tower, 63- 65 Independence Square, Port of Spain. We can be contacted at spanishsecretariat@gmail.com or 623-2931