

# Road Safety Review: Nicaragua

## KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- ❑ Driving is on the right.
- ❑ Drivers are required to carry a valid driving license, vehicle registration and proof of insurance; insurance must be purchased within Nicaragua. A passport should be carried at all times. Vehicles should display inspection and registration decals.
- ❑ An International Driving Permit (IDP) is recommended for all drivers, and is required for drivers from outside of South American and Central American countries.
- ❑ The Córdoba (NIO) is the official currency. The United States Dollar is accepted in many areas.
- ❑ Hiring a professional driver through a reputable agency or hotel is recommended.
- ❑ Drive with windows up and doors locked.
- ❑ Pedestrians should avoid walking alone or after dark, even if accompanied by others.
- ❑ Women traveling alone and women drivers may be subject to harassment and verbal abuse.
- ❑ Women travelers should avoid riding in taxis alone.
- ❑ Authorities and armed civilians called “para police” may expel or detain visitors for perceived transgressions, including driving or walking in the vicinity of a protest or public demonstration.
- ❑ Legal blood alcohol limit is 0.05 g/dl. Despite legal limits, drink driving is common, and is a major contributor to crashes.
- ❑ There are 18.7 road deaths per 100,000 people in Nicaragua, compared to 2.2 in Sweden and 2.3 in the UK.



Source: CIA Factbook

## ROAD CULTURE

- **Many drivers** speed and behave aggressively.
- **Driving standards** are poor. Reckless road behavior is common, including dangerous overtaking, even on blind curves.
- **Motorists** often ignore traffic lights, stop signs and traffic laws.
- **Drivers are** undisciplined at traffic circles, and enter and exit without slowing or signaling, even in busy city centers. Some drivers may drive against traffic at smaller traffic circles.
- **Bicyclists** often ride with motorized traffic in roundabouts.
- **Many drivers** operate vehicles lacking standard safety features including seat belts, headlights, taillights, working brakes, good tires, windshield wipers and turn signals.
- **Pedestrians** often step into roads and cross in front of oncoming traffic, even on main roads in cities.
- **There are** many hitchhikers. Do not pick up unknown persons.
- **Drivers** of horse carts may behave recklessly, and drive into heavy traffic.

## ROAD CONDITIONS

- **Of the** 23,897 km (14,849 miles) of roads, 3,346 km (2,079 miles) are paved and 20,551 km (12,770 miles) are unpaved.
- **Road conditions** vary widely. Main roads connecting major cities, including the Pan-American Highway, are usually paved and in reasonable condition.
- **Beyond** major cities, road conditions and maintenance are generally poor.
- **Most roads** along the Caribbean Coast are unpaved.
- **Many** secondary and rural roads have large potholes.
- **Roads are** poorly lit or unlit, including main highways between large cities. Avoid travel after dark.
- **Few roads** have shoulders or guardrails.
- **Speed bumps** are inadequately marked.
- **Road and** traffic signs are limited or non-existent.
- **Streets** are often unnamed.
- **Traffic** circles are common.
- **There are** no toll roads.
- **Drivers should** use only secure parking areas, particularly if parking overnight.
- **Mobile phone** service is unreliable beyond major cities, and unavailable in remote and mountainous areas.



## Road Conditions, continued

- **Active** landmines remain in many rural areas of northern Nicaragua. Do not stray from main roads.
- **If traveling** to the remote North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN), a four-wheel drive vehicle is necessary. Drive in convoys of at least two vehicles, and bring extra water, fuel, food, clothing, a first aid kit, spare tires, extra phone batteries and tools. A satellite phone is recommended; many areas lack cell phone reception.
- **Do not** stop to change a flat tire in isolated areas. Be wary of strangers offering to help.
- **There are** many protests and public demonstrations; these should be strictly avoided. Such gatherings are violently suppressed by authorities, and result in road closures and disruptions to public transportation. Demonstrations take place regularly, including on multiple public holidays including:
  - » Semana Santa (the week before Easter).
  - » Repliegue Historico a Masaya (early July).
  - » July 19 celebration of the Sandinista Revolution.
  - » Celebration in Managua of Santo Domingo, the Patron Saint of the city (August 1st and August 10th).
  - » Day of the Nicaraguan Army (September 2).
  - » Nicaraguan Independence Day (September 14 and 15).
  - » Immaculate Conception (December 8).
- **During protests**, do not attempt to cross roadblocks on foot or by driving.
- **Use only** official border crossings. Criminal gangs are active in border areas with Costa Rica and Honduras and may impede road travel. Police in these areas are understaffed.
- **The town** of San Juan del Sur is a popular destination for clubs and bars. Many drivers and pedestrians may be under the influence of alcohol or drugs.
- **Scams** targeting rental cars are common, and include criminals pretending to be in distress or in need of aid on roadsides. When drivers pull over to offer assistance, they are robbed.
- **Pedestrian infrastructure** is underdeveloped in cities and undeveloped in most other areas.
- **Pedestrians** are at high risk from reckless and speeding drivers. Where crossings are provided, they are often ignored by motorists.
- **Bicycling** infrastructure is generally undeveloped. Cities lack cycling lanes.
- **Loose livestock** on roads is common.
- **Armed robberies** of motorists have occurred along the Tipitapa–Masaya and Managua–Leon highways. Motorists should avoid stopping at the Motombo Mirador lookout point along the New Leon Highway.
- **These roads** may present particular challenges to motorists:
  - » **Route 2** links San José with the southern part of the country and the border with Panama. A two-lane section of road called “El Cerro de la Muerte” (the Hill of Death) is particularly dangerous. This stretch of road is subject to heavy fog and landslides. Many sections of pavement have collapsed, creating hazardous driving conditions.

Maximum Speed Limits

Type of road	Maximum speed
Urban areas	45 kph (28 mph)
Rural roads	60 kph (37 mph)
Highways	100 kph (62 mph)

Always adjust speed according to signage, hazards and weather conditions.

Signs are generally pictorial and may not follow European Union conventions.

				
Example of route sign	Bus stop sign	Pan American Highway sign	Example of highway sign	Example of road sign



## Road Conditions, continued

- » **Route 32** connects San José and the Caribbean coast. A long stretch runs through a mountainous zone of rainforest. Heavy rains and thick fog occur regularly. During rain, water rushes down slopes onto road surfaces. Large transport trucks use this route. Drivers of cars and large trucks frequently overtake on blind curves and during rain.
- » **Highway 27** runs between San José and Caldera on the Pacific Coast. Reinforcements to rock walls along the highway often fail, resulting in rock falls and rock slides. Areas with loose walls may be unmarked. Frequent rains cause road surfaces to be slick and braking difficult; drivers may not be able to slow down with adequate time to avoid crashes. Lighting is lacking. Avoid this road at night.

## REGIONAL AND SEASONAL CONDITIONS

- **Nicaragua** is subject to torrential rains, severe storms, floods, hurricanes, brush fires, earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions.
- **Rainy season** is from May to November. The heaviest rains generally occur during October. Landslides, flooding and bridge collapses are common.
- **Roads** frequently flood during the rainy season. Dirt and gravel roads may be washed away, and major highways may become impassable.
- **Do not** drive into standing water, which may contain strong currents or obscure deep potholes or debris.
- **Hurricane season** is generally from June to November. Even small storms may develop quickly into major hurricanes. The direction and intensity of hurricanes may change suddenly and impact road travel and public transportation.
- **Brush** and forest fires occur often between December and April. Heavy smoke from fires may limit visibility.
- **The country** is located within a seismically active region. There are many volcanoes; eruptions may occur at any time. The Santiago, San Cristobal and Cerra Negro volcanoes are especially active.
- **Tsunamis** may follow volcanic activity. Risks may last for several hours following the onset of tremors.
- **Be familiar with emergency procedures.** The Red Cross provides a website and free, downloadable emergency app: <http://www.redcross.org/get-help/prepare-for-emergencies/types-of-emergencies>

## TRANSPORTATION

- **Transportation options** include cars, taxis, shared taxis (“colectivos”), moto-taxis (motorcycle taxis), buses (called “chicken buses”), modern coaches, “express”

vans, shuttle buses and ferries.

- **Public transportation** is generally regarded as unsafe. Many buses and taxis are poorly maintained and dangerously driven. There have been fatal crashes involving buses.
- **City buses** are generally older US school buses called “chicken buses.” These vehicles are often crowded, and may include a mix of people and livestock.
- **Bus stations** are chaotic and disorganized. Schedules, where available, are unreliable.
- **Avoid** bus travel after dark.
- **Some modern** coaches are operated by large tour companies, and offer transportation between main cities and major tourist sites.
- **Express vans** are available in some cities as an alternative to taxis and city buses. These vehicles are generally overcrowded.
- **Some larger** hotels provide shuttle bus service to and from airports.
- **Use only** licensed taxis that have been recommended by good quality hotels and restaurants, or by airport authorities. Do not accept a ride in a taxi hired for you by an unknown person.
- **Licensed taxis** have red plates (or red borders around plates); driver’s identification number, name and photo are visible on dashboard. Send driver’s name and plate number to a trusted person.
- **Most** licensed taxis have company names on vehicles that include the word “Cooperativa.”
- **Even licensed** taxis may lack seat belts. Verify presence of working seat belts before agreeing to service.
- **Do not** flag taxis on the street. Radio dispatched taxis are regarded as safer than taxis hired from public queues or parked along streets in tourist areas and shopping zones.
- **“Express kidnappings”** have occurred in unauthorized taxis. Passengers are taken to an ATM and released after turning over funds. Criminals are generally armed. Resistance may increase the chances of serious injury or death.
- **Do not** share taxis with strangers. Agree with driver on a fare for a private ride that does not involve picking up additional passengers.
- **Colectivo taxis** follow set routes. Drivers may not depart until all seats are filled.
- **Avoid moto-taxis**, which have a poor safety record. Many are driven by young or inexperienced drivers.
- **Ridesharing** is limited to a local service in the capital city. Use only services that have a dispatch app

## Transportation, continued

providing vehicle description, license plate number and driver's name. Verify all information before entering vehicle.

- **There is** no passenger rail service.
- **Boat travel** is risky. Ferries and boats are often overcrowded. Most passenger vessels have insufficient life-saving equipment, including life vests. Do not travel during inclement weather or rough seas, or board watercraft that shows signs of being poorly maintained. Bring your own life preserver.
- **Coastal disputes** are ongoing between Nicaragua and other countries including Colombia, Costa Rica, Honduras and El Salvador. Areas include waters surrounding the San Andres Islands, the Gulf of Fonseca and Isla Calero.

## TRAFFIC REGULATIONS

- **Drivers must** be a minimum of 18 years old, and at least 25 to rent a vehicle. Some rental agencies may have additional restrictions.
- **Seat belt use** is mandatory for driver and front seat passengers. For safety, all vehicle occupants should wear securely fastened seat belts.
- **Children** under the age of 12 are prohibited from

riding in the front seats of vehicles. Children under four years old must be seated in the rear in a child safety restraint. For safety, all children should travel in safety restraints appropriate to age and size.

- **Helmet use** is mandatory for motorcycle drivers. Both drivers and passengers should also wear securely fastened helmets.
- **Cars must** be equipped with an emergency triangle and fire extinguisher. These regulations apply to rental vehicles; items may not be included as part of rental.
- **Right-hand** drive vehicles are prohibited. This includes vehicles crossing borders into Nicaragua from neighboring countries.
- **Enforcement** of traffic regulations is inconsistent and arbitrary. Wrongful detentions are common.
- **Transit police** often stop drivers of rental cars, or vehicles with foreign license plates.
- **Cash bribes** may be demanded by transit police. The US State Department suggests that drivers request a receipt, officer's name and badge number.
- **If stopped** for a traffic violation, transit police will confiscate driver's licenses until fines are paid. Fines are generally paid at a local bank.

## Managua (Capital)

- » Largest city and main transportation hub in the country.
- » Transportation options include cars, taxis, shared taxis ("colectivos"), moto-taxis (motorcycle taxis), buses ("chicken buses"), modern coaches, "express" vans/commuter buses, shuttle buses and horse-drawn carts.
- » Driving is not recommended. Traffic congestion is heavy and increases during twice-daily rush hours.
- » Secondary roads and streets are often in poor condition. Drivers are undisciplined.
- » There are many motorcycles and moto-taxis. Drivers often ignore safety rules.
- » Do not rely on GPS systems for directions. Street addresses are inconsistent. Many areas which have sustained earthquake damage have no addresses; landmarks, including churches and public buildings, are used for navigation.
- » Public transportation is generally regarded as unsafe.
- » Buses and taxis are often poorly maintained and recklessly driven.
- » There is an extensive bus network, but route information and schedules are unreliable. Route numbers are displayed in the front windows of buses, but destination names are not included.
- » Bus routes begin around 5 am. Vehicles may already be crowded.
- » Most city buses are retired US school buses locally called "chicken buses." These vehicles often carry unsafe numbers of passengers.
- » City bus schedules are generally unreliable. Bus stations are chaotic and disorganized.
- » Do not take buses after dark.
- » The UCA Microbus Terminal is the hub for minibus routes to and from León, Masaya, Granada and Jinotepe.
- » Modern coach buses operated by large tour companies provide transportation between the city and other major urban areas; routes generally include popular tourist destinations.
- » There is no night bus service.



## Managua, continued

- » Express vans/commuter buses connect to nearby cities.
- » Long-distance, modern coach buses link to other capital cities throughout Central America and southern Mexico.
- » Use only licensed taxis. Order taxis through good quality hotels and restaurants.
- » Do not flag taxis. Radio taxis are regarded as safer than taxis hired from public queues or on streets in tourist areas and shopping zones.
- » Avoid taxis hired for you by an unknown person offering to be helpful.
- » Registered taxis have red license plates or plates with red borders. Driver's name, photo and identification number are displayed prominently on vehicle dashboard. Note driver's name and plate number and send this information to a trusted person.
- » Licensed taxis have company names on vehicles that include the word "Cooperativa."
- » Taxis may lack seat belts. Verify that vehicle has working seat belts before agreeing to service.
- » Never share a taxi with strangers. Negotiate fare for a private ride.
- » "Express kidnappings" have occurred in unauthorized taxis. Passengers are taken to an ATM and released after turning over cash. Criminals are generally armed. Resistance may increase the chances of serious injury or death.
- » Do not use moto-taxis. Safety records are poor. Many are driven by young or inexperienced drivers.
- » Colectivo taxis follow set routes. Drivers may not depart until all seats are filled.
- » The following neighborhoods have high levels of crime and assault, which may be directed toward pedestrians and drivers stopped at red lights: Mercado Oriental, Reparto Shick, Jorge Dimitrov, Ciudad Belén, Américas 1 y Américas 2 and Barrio Camilo Ortega.
- » A local ridesharing program is available. Safety records are unavailable. Use a dispatch app providing vehicle description, license plate number and driver's name. Verify information before entering vehicle.
- » Horse-drawn carts are common.
- » There are many street vendors, particularly during the day. Vendors may be aggressive and block intersections.
- » Street vendors may fill sidewalks, forcing pedestrians into roadways.
- » Augusto C. Sandino International Airport is 10.3 km (6.4 miles) from city center.
- » Public buses and taxis provide transport to and from the city.
- » Use only licensed airport taxis, and avoid unregistered taxis and drivers soliciting for fares in the arrivals area.
- » Some larger hotels provide shuttle buses to and from the airport.
- » Rental car agencies are represented at the airport. Some vehicles may be in poor condition.

## León (Santiago de los Caballeros de León)

- » Located two hours by road from Managua.
- » Leon Highway is a new route in and out of the city
- » Transportation options includes cars, shared taxis ("colectivos"), moto-taxis (motorcycle taxis), pedicab/tricycle taxis, "ruletos" (pick-up trucks), buses ("chicken buses"), modern coaches, "express" vans and horse-drawn carriages.
- » Driving is not recommended. Motorists are unruly. Traffic is chaotic, and roads are in poor condition.
- » All forms of public transportation are generally regarded as unsafe and unreliable. Bus travel is especially dangerous after dark.
- » There is one main bus station: the Northern Terminal.
- » There are no published schedules, but regular service via "chicken buses" and express vans is available to other cities, including Matagalpa, Estelí and Managua.
- » The Mercadito Sutiava Terminal, also called the Beach Terminal, offers bus routes to Las Peñitas and regular service to Managua.
- » Modern coach buses operated by large tour companies offer routes to other main cities and major tourist sites.
- » Minibuses and shared taxis are widely available. Destinations are written on cards displayed on vehicle windshields.



## León (Santiago de los Caballeros de León), continued

- » Pick-up trucks operate as local buses in most areas. Passengers ride on benches in truck beds without seat belts.
- » Licensed taxis can be identified by red plates or license plates with red borders. The driver's identification number, name and photo should be visible on vehicle dashboard. Note driver's name and plate number and send this information to a trusted person.
- » Many licensed taxis lack seat belts. Verify that vehicle has working seat belts before agreeing to service.
- » Order taxis through reputable hotels and restaurants, and do not flag vehicles on the street.
- » Radio dispatch taxis are generally regarded as safer than taxis hired from public queues or parked near tourist zones and shopping districts.
- » Do not use a taxi ordered for you by a stranger offering assistance.
- » Never enter a taxi occupied by other passengers. Agree with driver on a fare for a private ride that does not involve picking up additional passengers.
- » "Express kidnappings" have occurred in unauthorized taxis. Passengers are taken to an ATM and released after turning over their money. Criminals are generally armed. Resistance may increase the chances of serious injury or death.
- » Moto-taxis should be avoided. These vehicles have poor safety records, and are often driven by young or inexperienced drivers.
- » Pedicab/tricycle taxis are available in tourist areas and near beaches.
- » Horse-drawn carriages can be found in the historic area. In many parts of the city, residents use horse-drawn carts for work or transportation.
- » Pedestrians should exercise caution. Motorists generally disregard the safety of pedestrians.
- » Drivers often ignore traffic rules, stops signs and traffic lights, even where pedestrians are present.
- » Many people travel by bicycle. Rentals are available from larger hotels.
- » Bicycling infrastructure is undeveloped. Cyclists share narrow, busy roads with motorized and non-motorized traffic.
- » Drivers often disregard the safety of bicyclists.

## ACCOMMODATIONS AND INCLUSIONS FOR MOBILITY CHALLENGED

- **Though law** prohibits discrimination against persons with physical, sensory or other challenges, accessibility is limited or non-existent.
- **There are** few sidewalks or designated crossing areas on roads.
- **There is** limited or no accessibility on public transportation for persons with physical, sensory or other challenges.

## EMERGENCY INFORMATION

- **Pre-program** emergency numbers into your phone before departure.
- **Responders** to emergency numbers, doctors and hospital staffs generally do not speak English. Interpreters are not always available.
- **Emergency numbers:**
  - » Police: 118
  - » Ambulance: 128
  - » Fire: 115
  - » Emergency calls from a mobile phone: 911
  - » Tourist police: 101
- **Responses to** emergency situations are unreliable. Where available, emergency responders are able to provide only basic first aid.
- **There are no** ambulance services in most of the country. Injured or ill persons must take a taxi or private vehicle to the nearest hospital.
- **Medical services** are limited beyond Managua. Most public hospitals are poorly equipped.



### Emergency Information, continued

- **Each district** of the country has its own public hospital. In the event of an emergency, patients are usually taken to the nearest public facility unless the patient has guaranteed payment for a private hospital.
- **Private hospitals** are limited to Managua and are unavailable in rural locations and in Caribbean coastal areas. Some private hospitals may accept major credit cards, but this is not guaranteed.
- **Payment for** medical services is generally in cash and required in advance of care.
- **In the event** of serious illness or injury, evacuation to another country may be necessary.
- **Medicines** prescribed in other countries may be illegal in Nicaragua and carry severe penalties if brought into the country. Verify legal status of any medications prior to travel. Keep medicines in their original packaging, accompanied by a written prescription from your doctor.
- **Roadside** assistance is unavailable.
- **If involved in a crash:**
  - » Call 118 and request transit police; notify insurance company or rental agency.
  - » Contact emergency services if there are injuries.
  - » Keep windows up and doors locked. Transit police may fail to respond to calls; if there is no response, drive to the nearest police station or secure location.
  - » Contact your national embassy.
  - » Do not move vehicle until police and insurance representatives have indicated you may do so, or you will be held liable regardless of fault. In the event of serious injury or fatality, drivers will be arrested and detained until all settlement claims have been met.



#### ABOUT THE ASSOCIATION FOR SAFE INTERNATIONAL ROAD TRAVEL (ASIRT)

ASIRT is a non-profit humanitarian organization established in memory of Aron Sobel, age 25, who was killed along with 22 other passengers in a Pamukkale Bus Company crash on the roads of Turkey.

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