



Central America and the Caribbean Islands

GEOGRAPHY

The Land and People of Nicaragua

Many Americans know of Nicaragua because of the civil war that raged there from the 1960s into the early 1990s. When the communist Sandinistas rebels took over in 1979, the U.S. government backed anti-communist Nicaraguans, called “Contras.” The Contras forced the Sandinistas to hold elections in 1990. Nicaraguans then voted the Sandinistas out of power. This reading looks at the land and people on which Nicaragua hopes to build its future.

Picture an area about the size of the state of New York, covered with forests, lakes, and mountains. Imagine long western and eastern coasts looking out on the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. . . . In all, Nicaragua has about 560 miles of coastline. At 50,193 square miles, Nicaragua is a little bigger than Louisiana and a little smaller than North Carolina. Large areas of the country are uninhabited; most of its people are concentrated in the western region and in a few cities. The country’s population per square mile is relatively thin compared to other Central American countries.

Nicaragua is divided into three geographic regions: the western Pacific lowlands, the eastern Caribbean lowlands (also called the Mosquito Coast), and the central highlands. Each region has features and weather characteristics that differentiate it [make it different] from other parts of the country.

Three out of four Nicaraguans live in the western part of the country, between the Pacific coast and Lake Managua. Here the land is good . . . because it has been naturally fertilized over the years by ashes discharged from the area’s many volcanoes. Many of the people who live here work on farms, but Nicaragua’s three biggest cities are also in this region. The largest is Managua, the nation’s capital.

East of Managua lies the area known as the central highlands. This mountainous area is covered with dense rain forest and receives an annual rainfall of between 70 and 100 inches. The region is nearly uninhabitable, but in the mountains is a rich mining district called Nueva Segovia. For many decades, a few people have been willing to live in this humid place in order to mine the silver and gold found here.

Even wetter than the central highlands is the Mosquito Coast, which runs along the eastern third of the country. . . . This region is the wettest in Central America, with average rainfall ranging from 100 to 250 inches per year. Much of the area’s soil is gravel and sandy clay, with the only variation being a treeless, grassy plain called the savanna. Four main groups live here: the Miskito, Rama, and Sumo Indians are native to Nicaragua, and the Garífunas are blacks who originated [came from] from Africa. These groups have lived in this swamp-like region for many generations. . . .

Few Nicaraguans travel between the Pacific coast and the Mosquito Coast. Only a few roads link the two sides of the country. . . . The two coasts . . . are like two different countries. . . . The main natural resources of the two areas are quite different, and the lifestyles are different. Farmers in the western Pacific lowlands know a lot about corn, cotton, and coffee, while farmers in the east are used to growing coconuts and bananas. The main industries along the Atlantic coast are fishing and catching lobsters. On the Pacific coast there are many more schools, colleges, and businesses. In the east, many Indians follow the traditions and customs of their ancestors. On the whole, the people of western Nicaragua think the Atlantic coast people are rather backward. . . .

Ethnic identity became an important issue only recently. Past governments mostly ignored the Atlantic coast, but when the Sandinistas came to power, they guaranteed civil rights for blacks and Indians and made ethnic identity a political issue. They promoted respect for traditional Indian religions, languages, and celebrations, but sometimes offended the Indians by trying to integrate [mix] them with the rest of Nicaragua. What the Indians really wanted was independence and control of the abundant natural resources in the region. Peace between the government and the Indians came when the Sandinistas helped organize an autonomous [independent] local government on the Atlantic coast.

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Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. In what ways does the geography of Nicaragua’s coasts differ?

2. Why do you think the people of the Pacific coast have a low opinion of those on the Atlantic coast? How does Nicaragua’s geography contribute to this situation?

Activity

Create a poster for a campaign to promote national unity by improving western Nicaraguans’ opinion of the people who live on the Atlantic coast.