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Republic of Nicaragua Area: Managua pop , People: Spanish, English Creole, Miskito Religion: Republic Environment Nicaragua is the largest country in Central America. It is bordered in the north by Honduras, in the south by Costa Rica, in the east by the Caribbean Sea and in the west by the Pacific Ocean. The country has three distinct geographic regions: The fertile Pacific lowlands are interrupted by about 40 volcanoes, and dominated by Lago de Nicaragua, which is the largest lake in Central America. The Mosquito Coast is a sparsely populated rainforest area and the outlet for many of the large rivers originating in the central mountains. The cloud and rain forests in the north-west contain abundant wildlife including ocelots, wart hogs, pumas, jaguars, sloths and spider monkeys. Birdlife in the forests is particularly rich: The jungles on the Caribbean coast contain trees which grow up to 60m high and are home to boas, anacondas, jaguars, deer and howler monkeys. The Pacific lowlands are always extremely hot, but the air is fresh and the countryside green during the rainy season May to November ; the dry season December to April brings winds which send clouds of brown dust across the plains. The Caribbean coast is hot and wet; it can rain heavily even during the brief dry season March to May. The mountains of the north are much cooler than the lowlands. History The earliest traces of human habitation in Nicaragua are the 10,000-year-old Footprints of the Acahualinca - prints preserved under layers of volcanic ash of people and animals running towards Lago de Managua. The first contact with Europeans came in 1492, when Columbus sailed down the Caribbean coast. In 1522, a Spanish exploratory mission reached the southern shores of Lago de Nicaragua. The inhabitants of the heavily populated area around Managua put up a fierce resistance to the Spanish invaders and their city was destroyed. For the next three centuries Managua was but a village. Nicaragua gained independence from Spain in 1821, along with the rest of Central America. It was part of Mexico for a brief time, then part of the Central American Federation, and finally achieved complete independence in 1838. This became a major transit point for hordes of hopefuls looking for the quickest route to Californian gold. Walker and his band of mercenaries took Granada easily and he proclaimed himself president. In 1857, General Somoza, head of the US-trained National Guard, engineered the assassination of liberal opposition rebel Augusto C Sandino and, after fraudulent elections, became president in 1893. Somoza ruled Nicaragua as a dictator for the next 20 years, amassing huge personal wealth and landholdings the size of El Salvador. Although General Somoza was shot dead in 1933, his sons upheld the reign of the Somoza dynasty until 1979. Widespread opposition to the regime had been present for a long time but it was the devastating earthquake of 1972, and more specifically the way that international aid poured into the pockets of the Somozas while thousands of people suffered and died, that caused opposition to spread among all classes of Nicaraguans. Two groups were set up to counter the regime: When Chamorro was assassinated in 1978 the people erupted in violence and declared a general strike. The Sandinistas marched victoriously into Managua on 19 July 1979. They inherited a poverty-stricken country with high rates of homelessness and illiteracy, and insufficient health care. The new government nationalised the lands of the Somozas and established farming cooperatives. The US government, which had supported the Somozas until the end, were alarmed that the Nicaraguans were setting a dangerous example to the region. A successful popular revolution against a government supported by the USA was not what the US government wanted. By this time it was widely known that the USA was funding the Contras, often covertly through the CIA, and Congress passed a number of bills which called for an end to the funding. US support for the Contras continued secretly until the so-called Irangate scandal revealed that the CIA had illegally sold weapons to Iran at inflated prices, and used the profits to fund the Contras.

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