

**HANDBOOK
FOR
GRUPO FENIX**

COURSE PARTICIPANTS, VISITORS, & VOLUNTEERS

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INTRODUCTION

This handbook is for all Grupo Fenix course participants, visitors, and volunteers to help prepare them for their stay in Nicaragua. We ask that you read this handbook thoroughly and bring a copy with you. Some preparations for coming may take six weeks or more, so please begin early! There is a list of “Resources” at the end, which may help you prepare for your trip. Should any questions, concerns or suggestions come up for you when using this handbook, please communicate them to Grupo Fenix staff. Generally speaking, the more fully you prepare for your visit, the more enjoyable and enriching the experience is likely to be. Have fun getting ready to live and work with us! We look forward to your arrival!

PREPARATIONS BEFORE COMING

PASSPORT: You must arrive with a passport that expires at least 6 months after your planned departure from Nicaragua. Normally, obtaining a new or renewed passport requires at least six weeks, so as soon as you know you will be traveling to Nicaragua, apply for your passport, unless you already have one with sufficient time on it. Your local post office should be able to help you obtain a passport. While in Nicaragua, it is generally ok to travel with only a copy of your passport—though be sure to store your passport in a secure place!. If you choose to keep it with you every day, we suggest you use a security belt or pouch.

SHOTS & PREVENTIVE HEALTH MEASURES: Though not required by law, it is extremely important that you are current with vaccinations prior to coming to Nicaragua. There are a number of risks, as well as communicable diseases you may be exposed to while here, and we encourage you to consult a medical professional. Current information is best obtained from a “travel clinic” or from the recommendations on the Center for Disease Control’s web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/travel/index.htm>. It may be appropriate to get a prescription for anti-malaria medication (e.g. chloroquine), which is started a week before possible exposure. (This medication is available in Nicaragua without prescription, as are many other medications, usually at significantly lower costs than in the US.) Your decision about whether or not to do this depends on what part of the country you will be in, the time of year, and the weather conditions, as well as how safe you want to play it. Managua and many other inland parts of the country have fairly low risks of malaria, while the coastal areas are higher. Some anti-malarials cause side effects for some people. If you decide against taking it after reading some literature and visiting a travel clinic, consider the popular alternative preventive treatment, which is to take grapefruit seed extract daily, starting about a week before traveling to Nicaragua.

HEALTH & TRAVEL INSURANCE: If you carry health insurance, check with the company to make sure you will be covered while abroad, as many policies do not include such coverage. Numerous companies offer inexpensive temporary international health insurance plans. These can be found by searching on the Internet, contacting a health insurance agent, or reviewing the “Resources” section at the end of this handbook. You should carry a health information card with you, which includes blood type, known allergies, and the contact information for English-speaking doctors in Nicaragua. Remember that nearly all doctors and hospitals will expect direct payment for services, primarily in cash, and are not set up to bill your insurance carrier. Note that there are many types of “travel insurance” available and they may cover one or more of the following: general medical costs, emergency evacuation/repatriation costs, trip cancellation, lost baggage, theft, etc.

AIRLINE TICKET: Generally speaking, the earlier you begin shopping for an airline ticket, the lower the fare you're likely to find. Many course participants have had excellent service using Richard Komp's preferred travel agent, Earth Routes. If you prefer to search on your own, sites such as orbitz.com, travelocity.com, expedia.com, sidestep.com, and kayak.com have made comparing prices easy. "Consolidator tickets" are still available offline at low prices but may carry notable restrictions. In general, be sure to review refund, exchange, and date change policies before purchasing your ticket. If prices to Managua seem too high but you are travel savvy, consider flying into San Jose or Liberia, Costa Rica where tickets are at times substantially cheaper; and several quality buses cross the border daily.

IMPORTANT NOTE: As soon as you get your airline info, send it to Grupo Fenix. Include your arrival and departure airlines, flight numbers, arrival/departure times, and the city you will be arriving from (not the city of origination but the one that you are arriving from, usually either Houston or Miami from the US).

MONEY:

- **How Much?** The amount of money you bring depends on the length of your stay in Nicaragua, your living arrangements with Grupo Fenix, the activities you may participate in both with and outside the Grupo Fenix program, and your personal preferences for food, drink, and shopping purchases. As a general rule, try to figure out as best you can how much money you will need, and then add on at least 25% to cover the unexpected and emergencies. For course participants we recommend you bring at least \$5 per day for incidentals, such as snacks, water, and evening entertainment. Samples expenses as of June 2006:
 - Taxis: \$1 - \$2.50 per person (less outside Managua)
 - Local buses: 20 cents
 - Long distance buses: \$2 - \$5+ (varies depending on distance)
 - Food:
 - Street/Kiosk: \$1 - \$3
 - Moderate: \$3 - \$5
 - Upscale: \$5 - \$10+
- **Credit Cards and ATMs:** Credit cards are increasingly accepted in Nicaragua, especially in upscale stores such as in Managua's malls. Visa is more commonly accepted than MasterCard. ATMs are relatively accessible in Managua in the malls, banks, and modern gas stations but may not be prevalent in other parts of the country. ATM's may serve Visa, MasterCard, Cirrus, and Plus. As in other countries, use these machines with caution, paying attention to time of day and location vis-à-vis safety. Also, *do not* rely on ATM machines as your sole source of cash in case your card does not work with the systems here.
- **Traveler's Checks:** Traveler's Checks can be exchanged at some banks; however, they are not commonly accepted in Nicaragua and we do not recommend you use them as your primary source of money. The chain BDF charges a 3% fee, while Bancentro charges less than 1% but will only change to Cordobas. Assume these policies are subject to change. Also, not all banks accept all types of Traveler's Checks. We recommend you contact Bancentro (<http://www.bancentro.com.ni>) or BDF (<http://www.bdfnet.com>) before arriving.
- **Cash:** You can bring US dollars and change them into Cordobas (C\$) as you need them. As of March 2007 the exchange rate is about 18 Cordobas to one US dollar (but continually rises). U.S. dollars can be used for larger purchases. Changing money before you arrive is unnecessary as you will have opportunities to change money during your first days in Managua. Large amounts of cash can be kept in a guarded place where you are staying,

and/or in a money belt or security pouch on your person. Be sure to carry some small bills as 100 and 500 Cordoba notes are generally not accepted by smaller vendors.

- **Wire:** As a last resort wire transfer through Western Union is available in Managua.

LEARNING ABOUT NICARAGUA: Nicaragua is a beautiful and fascinating country, and is worth becoming acquainted with before you arrive. The Nicaraguan people are incredibly kind, generous, and forgiving. One can come here quite ignorant of the culture, socialize, ask lots of questions, and not necessarily offend. However, it's both polite and enriching to learn at least a little about the history, culture, environment, and current affairs so that you can more easily converse while here. It's unwise to assume people's politics or to assume that they hold grudges towards the US for its involvement here. In general the people are quite "amicable" and wish to move forward in peace and to tackle the many problems they are facing.

LEARNING SPANISH: The better you are able to communicate in Spanish from the time you arrive, the easier your time will be and the more you will learn. Unless otherwise noted, Grupo Fenix's courses are delivered in English. Some staff members are competent in English, and they enjoy the practice. However, you are likely to come into contact with many wonderful Nicaraguans who speak little or no English, and who have fascinating and entertaining things to share with you . . . in *Spanish*. If at all possible, make time to learn as much Spanish as you can. There are many great videos, audio tapes, computer programs, phrase books and dictionaries that can help you with this effort. Don't forget about your friends and neighbors as well—particularly if you live in the U.S. There are also inexpensive language schools in Nicaragua should you choose to arrive before the course begins.

CHOOSE A CONTACT PERSON AT HOME AND LEAVE CRITICAL INFORMATION WITH THEM: Grupo Fenix requires that you provide the name, address, telephone and e-mail (if available) of at least one person "back home" who is willing to handle any emergency or problem you might have. While not likely, there is always a chance at some time during your travels that you will lose money and/or critical papers while in Nicaragua. To protect yourself and make your life much easier, make copies of all-important papers that you're taking with you and leave them with your home contact person. These include: passport, airline ticket & schedule, license, credit cards, insurance cards, and contact information in Nicaragua, so that they can reach you quickly. As with any foreign travel, it is a good idea to be prepared just in case anything should happen.

THINGS TO BRING TO NICARAGUA

PACKING & LUGGAGE: Before assembling everything you wish to bring, ask your airline about baggage limits (e.g., weight, size, & number of bags). This is especially important with the new security measures that are being used at airports. Most airlines allow *only* 2 checked bags and 2 small carry-on items. Since occasionally checked luggage is delayed, lost or stolen, it's a good idea to pack your "essentials" in your carry-on bags (i.e. change of clothes & documents). Checked luggage should be durable and possibly lockable, in case you feel safer leaving it locked at your home-stays.

We ask that individuals coming from the U.S. check with Grupo Fenix to see if it has any supplies that need transportation into Nicaragua, since the shipping costs by mail are often prohibitive.

- **Necessary & important papers, licenses, cards:** Passport, one additional photo ID, credit card (optional), health insurance card, health information card, drivers license (only

if you might use it), home contact info, address book, etc. It is a good idea to make two copies of all of these things—one to leave at home with your contact person and one to take with you. Make sure to look at the backsides of the cards when copying information as important numbers are often listed there as well. The copies you bring to Nicaragua should be kept in a safe place—ask Grupo Fenix staff if you need help with this.

- **Handbook:** Bring a copy of this handbook with you, as well any other directions or contact information you might need.
- **English-Spanish Dictionary, Phrase Book, or Handheld Translator Device:** If your Spanish is limited, make sure to pick up at least one small book or device to carry in your pack.
- **Security Belt, Pouch, or Money Belt:** Bring a security belt or pouch to safely guard your passport, valuable cards or papers, and larger amounts of cash when you need to have these with you. Though quite infrequent for Grupo Fenix participants, purses, pouches and fanny packs can be stolen quickly, cut or undone by quick hands. Many of these types of things can be found at outdoor gear stores and some department stores.
- **Bedding:** Course participants should plan on bringing a pair of sheets for bedding. Additionally, if the family you stay with is in need of sheets, you might want to consider leaving the sheets with them as a gift.
- **Towels:** Bring at least one bath towel.
- **Clothes:** Expect very hot conditions all year round and often-high humidity during the rainy season (late May to November). Light, breathable clothes are most comfortable, and you can dress casually during all or most of your visit. Urban Nicaraguans tend to dress well for work but dress relaxed at home, with women sometimes wearing shorts and men often going shirtless. Outside of the home, however, shorts are not common in the city—particularly for women. Despite the heat, jeans are commonly worn by both men and women. Consider bringing at least one set of semi-formal clothes for going out to a nice restaurant/discoteque or evening event. Bring a swimsuit for the beach or one of the nice lagoons you might visit. One or two pairs of long pants are a must, and a long-sleeved shirt if you're worried about sun exposure or for the occasional cool evening. A sweater or sweatshirt is a good idea if you'll be spending time in the mountains. You don't have to pack a great deal of clothes for your stay. To do your laundry, you may either hire someone in the barrio ("neighborhood") or village, or you can do it by hand yourself at the place you are staying, using the family's "lavandero".
- **Rain jacket or poncho with hood or hat:** If you're coming during the rainy season be prepared to be caught in a deluge. You might want better quality, breathable raingear that's comfortable to wear in a warm climate. Otherwise, bring a small umbrella or join the Nicaraguans in either getting wet while going about your business or just waiting out the rains. December through mid-May is the dry season in Nicaragua.
- **Sturdy walking shoes:** Be prepared to walk a lot in Nicaragua. Much of the terrain, including the some city streets, is rough. There can be stones, broken glass, holes, strands of barbed wire, curbs, and cobbled streets that are waiting to twist ankles, stub toes, or send one flying. With the heat, sandals are great as long as one really pays attention to one's walking path. Sturdy shoes are safer, and are definitely preferred if you're going to spend any time hiking in the "campo" (countryside).
- **Sandals and/or flip-flops:** Most of the houses in the barrio and the campo will have either a concrete, tile or dirt floor. While you may see some Nicaraguans going barefoot, this is not recommended unless you happen to be in a home with a nice, clean floor. People at all income levels take a lot of pride and sweep their floors often, but running around the house

in sandals or flip-flops will keep your feet cleaner and reduce chances of injury or disease. Flip Flops are quite common in Nicaragua in and around home.

- **Hat, sunglasses & sunscreen:** Nicaragua is close to the equator and, as a result, it is often very hot and very bright. For personal protection, it's recommended that you bring all three with you. It is *much* easier to burn in the Nicaragua sun than in northern climates.
- **Water Bottle or Canteen:** Plan to carry a water bottle with you at all times, so that you can keep yourself properly hydrated. Either bring a good, non-breakable water bottle with you that you refill, or plan to buy purified water in plastic bottles. In Managua, the water is considered drinkable.
- **Water filters and/or purifying tablets:** While paying attention to the purity of the water while in Nicaragua is very important. We don't recommend you bring with you an expensive personal water filter or purifying tablets unless you plan on doing a lot of rough trekking on your own.
- **Small or medium-sized backpack:** Bring a backpack that has good zippers and can hold a bit of stuff, including a water bottle, course handouts, a camera, and anything else you may want with you during the day. In Nicaragua backpacks are affordable and used by people of all ages and means. You will not stick out as a foreigner because you're hauling around a backpack (unless its large). Pick a good one to bring with you, as many Nicaraguan-made backpacks tend not to last long.
- **Mosquito Net:** A mosquito net may or may not be useful to you, depending on the season and where you stay. Mosquitos tend not to be very prevalent in areas where our courses are held, though their prevalence varies and is much more likely during the rainy season. Mosquito nets can be purchased from army-navy & outdoor gear stores. Some families in Nicaragua do use them, particularly to protect young children at night. If you bring one along for "protection", there's a good chance you won't need it, but it's a light, small item.
- **Medical Kit:** Bring your own medical kit, containing: 1) any medications and/or supplements that you take; 2) anti-bacterial wash; 3) anti-itch gel for insect bites (important in the countryside); 4) antibiotic ointment and 5) Band-Aids. Some participants unaccustomed to Nicaragua, may at some point have diarrhea as their body's adjust to the local germs. Consider bringing Pepto-Bismol and perhaps Imodium. In the U.S. travel clinics often prescribe an antibiotic such as Cipro for prolonged bouts of diarrhea. Some participants also bring Acidophilus to help keep a balance of intestinal flora. Remember that keeping your hands clean, drinking potable water, and eating only well-cooked food will help keep you healthy.
- **Toilet Kit:** Bring all the items you know you'll need or want. Most items you will want are available in Managua, but shopping will be easier and faster for you at home. Tampons are not readily available. A flat rubber sink stopper is useful if you want to fill a basin with water. Bring a couple pairs of earplugs if you're at all troubled by noise while sleeping. Expect noise from roosters, dogs, people chatting, radios, and buses.
- **Flashlights:** Please bring a small flashlight, especially if you plan to be in the countryside. Some homes have limited electric lighting or none at all. In many homes the interior walls do not go up to the ceiling, and lights are often mounted at roof level serving several rooms at once.
- **Camera & Film:** If using a film camera, you will save time and hassle by bringing extra film with you. Prices are higher than in the US and special types of film are difficult to find. If you plan on giving public presentations or sharing photos via the Internet, consider bringing a digital camera. Course participants and visitors are invited to contribute any excellent photos they have taken to the Grupo Fenix archives.

- **Special Foods, Vitamins or Supplements:** If you need any particular foods, supplements, vitamins or “comfort items” like herbal teas to facilitate your well being while in Nicaragua, be sure to bring them with you rather than trying to find them here.

GIFTS TO HOST FAMILIES, NEW FRIENDS (IMPORTANT!): Unfortunately giving is not often as simple as it may seem. For many North Americans and Europeans, it may feel rewarding and easy to shell out a little money to buy a gift with the best of intentions. However, often times giving can have unanticipated side effects. Most people in Nicaragua are living in a context with less financial resources and significant preconceptions about foreigners learned through television, movies, or past interactions with foreigners. Pulling out fifty dollar American bills or leaving a plethora of gifts cannot only set foreigners apart by reaffirming stereotypes about the wealth of foreigners, but it can encourage the kind of behaviors that make foreigners feel uncomfortable such as begging or pleading for objects or loans. Furthermore, it could contribute to what some call the “NGO phenomena” where Nicaraguans come to rely on foreigners as a source of funds and action to bail them out of their circumstances. This thinking also applies to the level of individuals. If you give or lend people money, they may come to see you (and other foreigners) as a source of money. Even, for example, if you treat people to dinner and dancing frequently, you may reinforce the same thinking. We don’t recommend that you lend money and we suggest you act very carefully when people ask you for money. Some people really are in dire circumstances, but in any situation, ask yourself if giving money would really make a sustained difference in the lives of the individuals. Try to assess whether they really need the money and whether or not there is anything else you could offer them instead. Visitors staying longer-term shouldn’t feel like they can’t treat their host family, but should consider doing so seldom. Keep in mind that your behaviors will impact those foreigners who come in the future.

If you really want to give, don’t feel discouraged! You *are* giving with your own time and efforts and Grupo Fenix always welcomes further support in *its* work. Ask your course organizer if the community has a school or health center. You may be able to donate sports equipment, such as balls for group sports or Frisbees, academic and art supplies, or medicines that can benefit the community as a whole. And, of course, Grupo Fenix can *always* use tools and computer equipment.

Also, keep in mind that you give by sharing your life and culture with the people. Bring photos of your family or games to play with them. In general we recommend that you think simple and sustainable. A cheap plastic toy will eventually end up broken and sitting in the soil with a growing amount of plastic garbage in the countryside. A Mag flashlight, once the bulb has blown, again becomes another piece of garbage, as the replacement lights are difficult to find in Nicaragua.

YOUR ARRIVAL & DEPARTURE

Most participants arrive and depart by plane, using Nicaragua’s only international airport, located in Managua. Please carefully note the following regarding your arrival & departure:

Visitor’s Visa & Exit Tax: Non-citizens must pay a special fee both upon arrival and departure. You should have cash available in US Dollars, and whenever possible in the proper denominations to pay this fee. Upon entry you pay \$5 for the Visitor’s Visa (as of January 2007). These Visas are good for 90 days for U.S. and British citizens, 30 days for Canadians and Australians. Place the

small Visa form in your passport, as you will not need it again until you leave the country. When leaving via the airport, you may need to pay an “exit fee” of \$32 US in cash (as of June 2006). Ask your airline ahead of time if this fee is included in your ticket price.

Customs: Once you arrive, you will pass through Nicaraguan customs, and generally speaking this is quick and uneventful. You must present your passport and any documents the airline gave you to fill out. At this point you purchase the visitor’s visa. While highly unlikely, if the custom’s agent chooses to go through your luggage, it’s very important to be truthful and helpful. Use brief answers whenever possible, look the agent in the eye, and stay relaxed. Needless to say, you should not attempt to transport any items or substances that are illegal, as this could jeopardize your entry into the country and also your participation with Grupo Fenix.

Baggage Handling: Once you have passed through customs, proceed to the right to pick up your checked luggage. Before exiting you will come to a small stand with two lights on it. The attendant may flip a switch. If the switch is flipped and the green light turns on, you can pass through and exit the airport. If, however, the red light turns on, you must carry your bags off to the right to be scanned before exiting. A Grupo Fenix representative will await you outside. (Note that sometimes the agents do not use the lights and make the decision on their own.)

Arriving: Ground Transportation from Airport

By Grupo Fenix: If you arrive by plane, a Grupo Fenix representative will meet you at the airport in Managua (provided you have made prior arrangements with Grupo Fenix). So if you’re loaded down with luggage, once you exit the baggage area of the airport, someone will be there to give you a helping hand. Look for the “Grupo Fenix” logo sign. Just in case something should happen, make sure to have the barrio address on hand so that you can give it to a taxi driver. (See the SUNI Solar address below under the “Resources” section.)

On Your Own: If you haven’t made arrangement for Grupo Fenix staff to pick you up, the safest way to travel to the barrio is to take an airport taxi, which may cost as much as \$15 (US). If you walk across the street and take a taxi from the hotel opposite the airport, the fare maybe half or less than that of the airport taxis. Buses also stop at this location; however, only take a bus if you are traveling very light and have been in Nicaragua previously. **BE EXTREMELY CAREFUL** crossing all streets and avenues, and *view all moving vehicles in Nicaragua as “Planets in Orbit”*, which means that they are NOT going to stop for you, and they DO pack a deadly wallop!! Rich Komp gets credit for this crucial warning and mantra about moving vehicles.

Departing: Ground Transportation to Airport: Grupo Fenix staff will arrange a for a reliable taxi driver to take you to the airport when leaving Nicaragua. If you have an early morning flight, we will need to make arrangements the day before. *Allow plenty of time* to get to the airport and to get processed through the check-in with the airline. Flights out of Nicaragua are often full and processing can easily take an hour or more.

LIFE IN NICARAGUA, WORKING WITH GRUPO FENIX

HOMESTAYS

Grupo Fenix participants and visitors generally stay with families, both while in Managua and in other regions of Nicaragua. These “home-stays” are set up in advance with families interested in hosting one or two guests. As well as being a cultural exchange, it is also meant to be a modest income generating activity for the family. Grupo Fenix pays the family a modest sum for each guest-night and each guest-meal.

Visiting, Coming & Going: As a courtesy and to avoid any misunderstandings, please go over your schedule with your host family periodically, confirming which meals and nights you’ll be with them. This is particularly important when any changes are made, since host families frequently are very attentive to, as well as concerned about *you*, their guest. Plan to take time to socialize with your host family, even if your communication is limited and a bit awkward at first. In doing this, you will deepen your experience of Nicaragua and its people, and will expand your joy and delight. Nicaraguans have a great sense of humor and an easygoing manner, which is infectious. They live with a sense of family and community far stronger than what most people have grown up with in the “developed world”, and it is something worth embracing, and perhaps even trying to bring back home.

Bathing & Toiletry Concerns: Participants and visitors should expect to use facilities which are more basic, less private and at times less hygienic than what they are accustomed to. While most city homes have indoor bathrooms with modern flush toilets, nearly all country homes have outdoor “letrinas”. Regardless of the type of toilet you encounter, you should be careful about where you are putting your toilet paper. The septic systems are not designed to take toilet paper so most houses have a wastebasket next to the toilet. Many places have indoor showers—usually with just one “cold” faucet. Fortunately, in Managua the air temperature is warm, so the cold shower water is often refreshing. Like the bedrooms, the indoor bathrooms often have walls open at the top, resulting in less “noise privacy” than many foreigners are accustomed to. Homes without indoor showers, especially in the campo, often have a private washing area outside the house, which may be just a small stall made out of boards, brick or plastic sheeting. In the outdoor shower, there may be a large water bucket and a smaller cup to use for bathing. Not all homes will have lavatory sinks for teeth brushing, shaving and washing up. If hot water is desired, it may have to be heated on the kitchen stove. Virtually all homes will have a *lavandero* made out of smooth cast concrete. These are large one or two-basin sinks which include a “pila”, which is a trough for holding clean water. The “pila” is filled with a faucet or from buckets by hand, and it is *only a reservoir, not a wash-up sink*. Water is dipped out of the pila with a clean container and then used in the basin for scrubbing vegetables, washing dishes, clothes, etc. Some lavandero basins have a scrub board in one of the basins for doing laundry. If one is unsure about the appropriateness or the how-to of any details such as toiletry, doing ones laundry, etc., it’s good to check with ones host. The host family usually gets a kick out of showing guests how to do things. Visitors should know it is a part of the culture to laugh at awkwardness. Visitors have more fun if they put their pride aside and enjoy being shown how to do things.

Sleeping Concerns: Course participants are often set up in pairs with a host family, and virtually always are set up with a private sleeping area separate from the family members. Except for some home-stays in rural areas, the rooms will have tile or concrete floors, and there will probably be one or more windows for ventilation. In rural areas some homes have dirt-packed floors and no windows. Beds mattresses are often thin and may not offer the level of cushion or support many foreigners are accustomed to. Nights are often cool enough to sleep comfortably but lack of air movement can be an issue. In Managua fans may be available to guests. Should a visitor or participant have ongoing problems sleeping due to the heat or poor ventilation, speak with the host

family or Grupo Fenix staff. While the nights tend to be quiet after 10 pm, both in the barrio and the campo, one's sleep can be interrupted by the occasional rooster crowing, a donkey braying, early-morning traffic, a neighbor's radio blaring, or even the blowing of whistles by the all-night security patrol. The simple solution is to bring a few pairs of comfortable earplugs. Managua starts to come alive around 6 AM . . . so be prepared (though the roosters and dogs are awake much earlier!).

GETTING AROUND & PERSONAL SAFETY

Within Managua

Walking: Course participants often spend a bit of time walking in Nicaragua. During daylight hours, when people are out and the streets are busy, most places in Managua are quite safe. Traveling in pairs is, of course, safer, but during daylight hours it is not necessary. However, daytime robbing of wristwatches and handbags does occur; so it's important to be safety-conscious, particularly in bustling markets and while getting on and off buses. 'Machismo' is still apart of Nicaraguan culture, so women may expect a certain amount of attention—sometimes negative—from men while walking on the street. Night falls quickly due to Nicaragua's proximity to the equator, and it's generally dark by 6 or 7 PM (in 2006 Nicaragua enacted day light savings time). Walking on Managua's streets is less safe after dark, and after 8 PM visitors are encouraged to walk in groups or to take a taxi. As mentioned previously, *the greatest risk to your personal safety is moving vehicles, particularly during the day*, when traffic on many of the streets is very fast, noisy and congested. A very important part of your personal training is street-crossing: look in all directions, look at least twice, use stoplights whenever possible (but with care), and be especially careful when crossing near a traffic circle.

Taxis: In Managua taxis are quite abundant from roughly 7 am until 11 pm. The custom is to stand by the roadside to flag down a taxi, tell the driver your destination, and then agree upon a price before getting in. For one person, short 5 to 10 minute trips in central Managua should cost between 20 and 35 Cordobas. Trips to outlying sectors of Managua can run to 70 Cordobas. A second person will increase the fair but should not double it. Prices are higher at night and sometimes in the midst of downpours as well.

Buses: Managua has a very heavily used bus system, which runs from early morning until about 10 pm. Buses run on numbered routes, covering most of the city, and are the cheapest way to get around (C\$ 3 per trip as of June 2006). However, there are few signed bus stops, no bus route maps, and during commuting hours buses tend to be very crowded and are prime ground for pick pocketing and bag-snatching. Backpacks are best worn on the front while bus-riding. Boarding and exiting buses should be done quickly, since they barely stop for passengers—a fare-handler “scoops” passengers in and “shoos” them off. Riding the buses offers insight into how most Managuans and Nicaraguans get around, but it's advisable to take one's first trip with a local who can help you “learn the ropes.”

Driving: You will soon learn that driving in Managua and in most of Nicaragua is both a major challenge and somewhat of a “national sport”. Grupo Fenix participants and visitors are strongly discouraged from driving in Nicaragua unless they are: 1) comfortable driving in very fast, chaotic, rapid changing conditions, often on very rough road surfaces; and 2) fully prepared with a valid license and proper insurance coverage. Renting a car is easy in Managua and requires a valid

license, passport and credit card. As a foreigner, if you are stopped by the police, there may be a greater chance of encountering a corrupt officer who will seek to solicit a bribe from you.

Cities & Towns outside Managua

For larger course groups Grupo Fenix contracts micro-buses which offer safe, convenient, and reliable service. For smaller groups and for Grupo Fenix staff and volunteers, the primary option for travel between cities are the regular buses, usually older school buses from the US or Canada or the more modern minibuses. The big buses (sometimes heavily laden with goods and passengers in the campo) usually run according to a schedule, whereas the minibuses usually run on a demand basis, leaving as soon as they are full or when the driver decides it's time to depart. The fare by minibus is usually two to four times the fare of the regular bus for the same trip. One of Managua's minibus terminals, which serves Masaya and Granada, is located on the major street between Barrio Edgar Mungia and the UNI (National Engineering University). The main terminals for buses leaving Managua are located at the city markets. Transportation between cities and towns throughout most of Nicaragua by bus is dependable, affordable, but not necessarily rapid or comfortable. The driving habits of bus drivers can be challenging for the timid passenger.

Hitchhiking: Hitchhiking is somewhat common for Nicaraguans, but is not often done by foreigners. It is not recommended, and should it ever be found necessary, one should offer to pay for the ride.

DIET, HEALTH & MEDICAL SERVICES

Diet: Nicaraguan food tends to be simple, not spicy, carbohydrate-heavy, and nutritious, although frequently fried. "Gallo pinto" (a rice & beans dish pronounced 'guy-yo peen-toe'), plantains, a white salty cheese similar to feta, and corn tortillas are dietary staples. As well, you'll be served a wide variety of sugar-sweetened fresh fruit juices, eggs, chicken and beef. Seafood maybe served in coastal areas and some families occasionally eat pork, although pork should only be consumed in Central America if thoroughly cooked due to parasite concerns. Simple salads of tomatoes and lettuce or cabbage are occasionally served both in the home and at restaurants. Generally speaking, the food which Grupo Fenix participants and visitors will be served in their home-stays and at restaurants included in the program will be well-prepared and safe to eat. Unless a participant specifically requests vegetarian cuisine, he or she should expect some meat to be included in the host family meals. It's a good idea to clarify your dietary preferences with your host family; and if you want something outside the normal diet and budget of the family, you should purchase it yourself. Should you receive a meal that you don't feel comfortable in eating, you might politely say "No gracias. No se moleste." Or if there is too much food on your plate (as often in the case) and you just can't finish, try saying "Ya terminé. Muchas gracias." If you anticipate being served too much food, try "Por favor, no me sirve mucho".

As previously mentioned, city water in Managua is considered potable, coming from a modern water treatment plant. However, water from other parts of the country should be suspect, and we recommend purchasing bottled water unless you're certain the water is potable. Note that locals in some areas may comfortably drink the water and assure you that it is fine, but they may be accustomed to any microorganisms living in the water. If you will be in Nicaragua for a short period of time, it is advisable to err on the side of caution. We recommend reviewing some of medical travel literature, perhaps available through your travel clinic, before arriving in Nicaragua. Common

recommendations include viewing ice cubes as suspect, taking care when bathing, and only eating fruits and vegetables you know have been washed with uncontaminated water or that you have peeled yourself. Supplements, such as acidophilus, may help your intestines weather the new germs. Bottled water is available for volunteers and course participants living with the families in Totogalpa.

Health & Medical Services: According to one international health guide, if you travel to Latin America “for a one month period, there’s a 60% - 75% chance that you will have some type of illness or physical symptom. Your illness, however, will probably be minor, since there is only a 5% chance you will need to see a doctor for your symptoms. Your chance of being hospitalized will be less than 1%.” Travelers’ diarrhea is often transmitted by consumption of contaminated food or water. It is the most frequent ailment, about 80% of the time caused by bacteria, and often easily treated with standard medications you can bring with you or obtain from a pharmacy in Nicaragua. It can also be caused by certain parasites and viruses. Both giardiasis and amebiasis are fairly common parasitic diseases in Nicaragua, contracted via contaminated food or water (this includes accidentally swallowing water while swimming). Sometimes they manifest with lower-grade symptoms, such as fatigue, loss of weight, only very minor abdominal or physical discomfort. Please familiarize yourself with the symptoms of these common illnesses, as well as malaria and dengue fever, by reading one of the excellent international health guides. Sometimes symptoms or problems may not show up until after leaving the country.

Should you suffer any symptoms during your stay, Managua has some excellent services to turn to, both alternative and conventional. If you’re lodged in Barrio Edgard Mungia, there is a small alternative health practice run by a husband a wife that has provided excellent advice and treatments to participants with problems ranging from bone fractures to muscle aches, diarrhea, stomach pains, and energy loss. Just a few miles from that barrio is a private hospital that offers excellent modern medical services, as well as overnight care if needed. While Grupo Fenix staff has had very little need to call upon the services of allopathic doctors and modern medicine, they **are** readily available in Managua. Medical services outside of Managua are minimal, mostly consisting of local clinics and practitioners that can treat less severe illnesses and injuries.

Exercise Programs: Grupo Fenix participants and visitors usually do a great deal of walking while in Nicaragua. For those who wish additional exercise, there are a number of exercise and Aikido classes available in Managua. The Akido classes are fun, and Susan Kinne attends these classes on a regular basis. There is also a nice swimming pool at the UNI, which may be available for a small fee. Across the street from the UNI, “La Escuela de Danza” offers dance, aerobics, and weightlifting.

COMMUNICATIONS

Telephone: While telephone lines are still a “scarce resource” in Nicaragua, cell phones and cell-phone service have become common, even stretching out into parts of the countryside. Per minute costs within the country are high compared to what many foreigners are accustomed to, but international phone rates have dropped precipitously in recent years and calls, for instance, to the U.S. can be reportedly made as cheap as 12 cents per minute (June 2006). In cities there are public telephones, Internet cafes that offer phone service, and even some families rent their telephone on a per minute basis. If you are staying with a family that has a telephone, *please do not use* their phone without offering them compensation as all domestic calls are charged on a per-minute basis. Cell

phone rates a quite expensive, running around 30 cents per minute domestically. International Internet phone calling is available and inexpensive but not always reliable. **WARNING:** reportedly operator-assisted calls from Nicaragua to other countries are **INCREDIBLY EXPENSIVE**; avoid them if at all possible.

E-mail/World Wide Web: Increasingly used in Nicaragua, Web access is readily available at Internet cafes, particularly in Managua. There are several Internet cafes located near the UNI with prices around 10 Cordobas per hour (June 2006). The attendants tend to be quite helpful, although Internet speeds tend to be slower than most visitors may be accustomed to. .

Regular/Express Mail: Regular mail is used on a very limited basis in Nicaragua. Post offices and postal drop boxes are difficult to find. Since most barrios in Managua do not have named streets, postal addresses usually consist of directions on how to locate the house, using nearby streets and landmarks for reference. Amazingly, these addresses **DO WORK**, and barrio residents **DO** occasionally receive mail. For most residents, a letter from afar is itself a very nice “gift”. Participants are encouraged to collect addresses from people and to write to them. In Managua and some other cities, international express mail services such as DHL and Federal Express are available. To send mail while still in country, ask Grupo Fenix staff for advice. Grupo Fenix has post office boxes in Managua and Ocotal and staff are delighted to take letters to the families within the program.

GRUPO FENIX OFFICES & STAFF

PFAE (Programa de Fuentes Alternas de Energia), a university program, directs “Grupo Fenix”. Grupo Fenix is a renewable energy & sustainable development consortium, consisting of several small organizations and projects located in Managua and the rural north of the country. PFAE’s office is located at the Universidad Nacional de Ingenieria (the “UNI”). Located nearby in Barrio Edgard Mungia, is *SUNI SOLAR, S.A.*, a private company (established by PFAE), which produces, installs, and repairs solar energy systems. It is an easy 10 to 15 minute walk between PFAE and SUNI SOLAR.

THE BARRIO (The Neighborhood)

While in Managua Grupo Fenix participants usually stay with a host family in Barrio Edgar Mungia, an extraordinary little community. Located in the center of Managua, the barrio was founded in 1988, when a group of progressive citizens received permission from the government to build houses on a large vacant space nearby the Universidad Centro America (UCA). The south boundary of the barrio is less well defined; the housing extends many blocks, sloping gently toward the south, but the actual “barrio community” one feels a part of is closer to ¼ mile by ¼ mile in size. The barrio is easy to identify from a distance by the tall orange cellular phone tower it was “blessed with” in 1999, and is easy to give directions to since its northwest corner is a major intersection known as “los semáforos de ENEL”, or “the traffic light at ENEL”.

The barrio is almost completely “filled in” now with modest houses, tiny yards, and numerous home-based businesses. The houses range from minimal shelters made out of rough sawn boards and metal sheets to very solidly built modest “quintas” with concrete block walls and beautiful tile

floors. The barrio is constantly on the up and up and at anyone time there are likely several houses under renovation, often adding new rooms to rent to university students. The barrio has electricity, phone, cable, sewage, and water services. Not every house in the barrio, however, is connected to these as they incur monthly costs. Since the barrio was paved a few year ago, sometimes cars use the barrio as a shortcut and participants should be wary of the occasional vehicle rapidly zooming through the narrow streets.

According to residents of the barrio who have previously lived in different parts of Managua, Barrio Edgard Mungia is rather safe and one of the most community-minded barrios in the entire city. If you hear whistles after 10 pm, it's like from one of the individuals who stroll the barrio streets by night making sure thieves don't creep in from less safe neighborhoods.

RESOURCES

IMPORTANT CONTACT INFORMATION

Addresses for Grupo Fenix Consortium organizations:

PFAE (Proyecto de Fuentes Alternas de Energía), "Grupo Fenix" headquarters

UNI (Universidad Nacional de Ingeniería)

Managua, Nicaragua

Telephone/Fax: 505-278-3133

SUNI Solar S.A.

100 metros al Sur de los semáforos de ENEL

Barrio Edgard Mungia

Managua, Nicaragua

Telephone/Fax: 505-278-2630

Post office addresses for snail mail:

Grupo Fenix

Apartado Postal LM139

Managua, Nicaragua

Fenix Totogalpa

c/o Marco Antonio Perez

Apartado #30

Ocotal, Nueva Segovia, Nicaragua

Key Contacts:

Susan Kinne, Director of PFAE

Cell phone: (505) 624 9350

Email: skinnel@juno.com

Rich Komp, Solar/Technical Expert & Course Co-Director

SunWatt Corporation, Skyheat

17 Rockwell Rd SE, Jonesport, ME 04649

Telephone: 207-497-2204
E-mail: sunwatt@juno.com

Embassies In Managua:

Note: Please check with your government before leaving if your country is not listed below. If it is listed below, it's still a good idea to check to ensure this information is up-to-date.

United States Embassy — Located at Kilometer 4.5 Carretera Sur

- Telephone: 266-6010, 268-0123, after hours: 266-6038
- Web Site: <http://managua.usembassy.gov/wwwhembra.html>
- Email: EmbassyInfo@state.gov
- Hours: 7:30 – 4:15 M-F

Canadian Embassy — Located at Costado Oriental de la Casa Nasareth, Una cuadra arriba, Calle El Noval

- Telephone: 268-0433, 268-3323
- Web Site: <http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/sanjose/mngua-en.asp>
- Email: mngua@dfait-maeci.gc.ca
- Hours: 7:30 – 4:30 M-Th, 7:30 – 1:00 PM Fridays

British Embassy — Located at Plaza Churchill, Reparto los Robles

- Telephone: 278-0014
- E-mail: britemb@ibw.com.ni

HELPFUL PEOPLE IN THE BARRIO IN MANAGUA (Spanish only)

Maxima Medina — Coordinator for family stays and taxis

- Cell: 811 7169

Yadira Sanche — Laundry specialist.

Dr. Rubi Selva and Dr. Sergio Zamora — Natural medicine doctors in the Barrio

- Cell: 887 6861

TRAVEL AGENTS

Earth Routes, RFD1, Box 22-B, Penobscot, Maine 04476. Phone: 207.326.8635. E-mail: travel@earthroutes.net. Web: www.earthroutes.net. Jan Carpenter runs this small travel service out of her home in mid-coast Maine. She is extremely helpful, environmentally conscious, and makes a small donation to an environmental organization for each ticket sold.

TRAVEL GUIDES

- Nicaragua (Moon Handbooks), by Joshua Berman and Randy Wood, 2005. This guidebook comes highly recommended from many past volunteers.
- Nicaragua Handbook (Footprint Handbooks), by Richard Leonardi, 2005. This guidebook is smaller & cheaper than the Moon Handbook.
- Central America on a Shoestring (Lonely Planet), by Robert Reid, 2004. For those looking to travel outside Nicaragua.

- Web Site for Nicaragua:
<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/worldguide/destinations/central-america/nicaragua/>
- The Rough Guide to Central America 3 (Rough Guide), 2004. Another choice for those looking to travel outside Nicaragua.

WEBSITES WITH BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- Wikipedia.org: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicaragua>
- Wikitravel.org: <http://wikitravel.org/en/Nicaragua>
- The Lonely Planet: <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/worldguide/destinations/central-america/nicaragua/>
- CentralAmerica.com: <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/worldguide/destinations/central-america/nicaragua/>
- Nicaragua.com: <http://www.nicaragua.com/>
- U.S. Consulate Information: <http://travel.state.gov/travel/> (search on Nicaragua)

SPANISH LANGUAGE PROGRAMS & TUTORIALS

- Travel Alive – <http://www.travelalive.com>
 - Ocotal, Nueva Segovia, Nicaragua
- Hijos del Maiz - <http://www.hijosdelmaiz.net/>
 - A campesino Spanish language school that helps support the rural community of El Lagartillo, located in the countryside in between Esteli and Leon
- Nicaraguan Spanish Schools (NSS) - <http://pages.prodigy.net/nss-pmc/>
 - Granada and San Juan del Sur, Tutoring in Managua
- Latin American Spanish School - <http://www.latinamericanspanishschool.com/>
 - San Juan del Sur
- Casa Xalteva - <http://www.casaxalteva.com/>
 - Granada
- Ave Nicaraguita - <http://www.avenicaraguita.com/>
 - Granada
- Viva! Spanish School - <http://vivaspanishschool.com/>
 - Managua
- CENAC Spanish School - <http://www.ibw.com.ni/~cenac/>
 - Esteli
- Spanish Through Leadership's Nicaragua Summer Exchange - <http://www.nicaraguastudyabroad.org/>
 - High school summer immersion program
- “The Escuela Scoop: Spanish Language Schools in Nicaragua” – http://www.transitionsabroad.com/publications/magazine/0505/study_spanish_language_in_nicaragua.shtml
 - Article from Transitions Abroad about Spanish language schools
 - See Transitions Abroad's web site for more Spanish school listings

MEDICAL INFORMATION & INSURANCE

Information:

United States Center for Disease Control, Traveler's Health: 877-394-8747, <http://www.cdc.gov>

Insurance (Health):

International Student Insurance Service (ISIS), 800-777-0112, <http://www.sta-travel.com> (for young travelers)

Age Concern (UK), 0845 601 2234, <http://www.ageconcern.org.uk> (for older travelers)

Travel Guard, 800-826-1300, <http://www.noelgroup.com>

Access America, 800-284-8300

Travel Insurance Services, 800-937-1387

Travel Assistance International, 800-8212828

International Medical Group (IMG), 800-628-4664, <http://www.imglobal.com>

Insurance (Laptops):

Safeware: <http://www.safeware.com/>

CLOTHING & GEAR

- REI (Recreational Equipment Inc.), 800-426-4840, <http://www.rei.com>
- Eagle Creek Travel Gear, 800-874-9925, <http://www.eaglecreek.com>
- L.L.Bean, 800-259-2310, <http://www.llbean.com>
- Real Goods, 800-762-7325, <http://www.realgoods.com>
- Sierra Trading Post, 800-713-4534, <http://www.sierratradingpost.com>

RENEWABLE ENERGY INFORMATION: *The first two listed here are given to Solar/Cultural course participants and available in the PFAE office*

- Practical Photovoltaics, Richard J. Komp, PhD., 198 pg., 1995, aatec publications
- The Maine Solar Primer, 32pgs, Maine Solar Energy Association, \$6 (includes S&H), 17 Rockwell Rd SE, Jonesport, ME 04649
- Solar Energy Institute (SEI), <http://www.solarenergy.org>
- Rocky Mountain Institute (RMI), <http://www.rmi.org>
- Solstice, the Internet service of the Renewable Energy Policy Project and the Center for Renewable Energy and Sustainable Technology (REPP-CREST), <http://www.crest.org>

RECOMMENDED READING FOR VOLUNTEERS

- Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh (Sierra Club Books), by Helena Norberg-Hodge, 1991, 204pg.
- Gaviotas: A Village to Reinvent the World (Chelsea Green Publishing Company), by Alan Weisman, 1998, 227pg.
- How to Live Your Dream of Living Overseas (Penguin Group), by Joseph Collins et.al., December 2001, 468pg.