

## **Long-Term Volunteer Supplement** *For International Volunteers*

Coming to Nicaragua as a long-term volunteer (someone who will spend 10+ weeks) can require slightly different preparations than just coming for a course. This short handbook is intended as a supplement to the “Handbook for Grupo Fenix”, which you should read first.

### **If You Will Be Staying With A Family in Managua, READ THIS . . .**

Managua was once a compact, somewhat attractive city; however, it never really recovered from the 1972 earthquake—the city center has never been revitalized and instead has shifted more toward “Caraterra Masaya” where modern hotels, malls, dance clubs, supermarkets, and office buildings have sprung up. The city has grown in a sprawled out manner with few buildings over one story. It’s unplanned growth and absorption of masses of people from other parts of the country has unfortunately turned it into a moderately polluted, slightly chaotic, and occasionally dangerous city.

Many volunteers often wonder how safe Managua is. In general, many people believe that Nicaragua is currently the safest or close to being the safest country in Central America. That said, Managua is the most likely place where one might have problems with crime. Indeed, while Managua does have gangs, it generally doesn’t suffer from the violent gang problems more common to Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Very few of the hundreds of people that have come to visit with or work with Grupo Fenix have had any problems whatsoever. In general, as long as you stay aware of your surroundings; carry little money; avoid flaunting jewelry, watches, or digital cameras; and try to travel in groups at night, you should have a safe, enjoyable experience while in Managua. Keep in mind that if you’re from a cold climate, temperatures in Managua are sometimes scorching.

Many families in Managua tend to be overly concerned about crime and keep their houses securely locked at night (and, in some cases, during the day). They also tend to worry about their newly-arrived guests staying out late. That said, *Barrio Edgar Munguia*, the neighborhood where Grupo Fenix volunteers stay, is quite safe throughout the day & into the early evening. At night there are usually watchman that parole the streets, sounding off their whistles from time to time to make their presence known; but it’s still best to be extra cautious when arriving late at night in the *barrio*. It’s not recommended that you leave the *barrio* late at night as few people will be out and it’s much more difficult to find taxis.

While we try to find families that will respect the independence many foreigners typically have, we suggest you take it slow at first. That is, try not to stay out too late your first week and, generally speaking, whether or not you have a key, always let your family know if you’ll be going out late or staying elsewhere. You shouldn’t have to feel trapped in your family’s home, but it’s important that you respect your family and grow in your relationship with them.

Living in *Barrio Edgar Munguia* is often a treat for foreigners not used to living in such a social environment. People are always around the neighborhood and love to chat with foreigners. Evenings are a great time to sit around and watch *telenovelas* (soap operas) with the family or hang out in the street chatting with neighbors or playing games with local kids.

Keep in mind that in the early morning hours, sounds of buses, dogs, and roosters abound in the *barrio*.

**If You Will Be Staying With A Family in Sabana Grande in the North, READ THIS . . .**

Sabana Grande is a close-knit community, though the houses are relatively far apart. The center of the community is a large tree, called “La Ceiba,” which everyone is very fond of. Most of the people in the community are at least distantly related. There aren’t outside visitors very often, so crime is not really a problem. You will often find pickup games of baseball or soccer, into which you will gladly be welcomed. None of the homes have running water, and a few do not have electricity.

Temperatures are cooler in the mountains of Sabana Grande than in Managua, particularly at night. However, the air does get very hot during the day. You will need nicer clothes if you plan on going to church but other than that, t-shirts are fine. Don’t forget hiking shoes for the mountains.

Sabana Grande is very rural, so there are few places to go. There are a few small food vendors within walking distance, but anything else that is needed must be found in the nearby city of Ocotal, about a 20 minute bus ride away. Evenings are usually spent talking with your host family, or watching television if the family has one. Some volunteers have greatly enjoyed reading or journaling, as well. If you would like to go out, you would have to find transportation to one of the neighboring cities. Please check with your family—they will know if the plans sound safe. In addition, due to the mere size of the community, your family will likely know where you are most of the time. Keep in mind though that that they would worry, if they did not know your plans.

**All Volunteers, Please READ THIS . . .**

Please be conscientious of the way you talk about and spend money around your host family. Nicaraguans are very conscious of the wealth differences between cultures but many individuals also have certain misconceptions. If you spend your money freely on the family believing that you’re giving them opportunities they don’t have, you may actually be subtly reinforcing stereotypes and encouraging undesirable behaviors that future foreign guests will have to confront. Thus, we suggest you exercise caution in treating your family to gifts. Don’t feel that you can’t, just think small on the gifts and, if you decide to take your family out, do so seldom or plan an event close to your departure. As we say in the general Handbook: your behaviors will impact those foreigners who come in the future.

Please read the lists below. They include additional suggestions for preparing for your trip:

**Things To Bring**

- **Clothes**
  - If you are looking to try to fit in with the locals, there are a few things that you should know. First, while clothing styles and standards continually change, many urban Nicaraguans don’t dress as informally as do some foreigners. Most males wear button up shirts or polos and pants. Many women wear pants or skirts with nice shirts. When going out to a restaurant, club, or fancy party, some locals may even take it a step up from that. Of course, because of the heat, you may find this

dress style a little uncomfortable. Dress may be more relaxed in the countryside where many people have less resources or work in agriculture.

- Bring an appropriate amount of clothing for your stay, but don't overload yourself—a week's worth of shirts will probably suit you fine. Having a sensible number of changes of clothes though is important as depending on your activities, clothes may get dirty pretty quickly (e.g., from dust, sweat, etc.) Also, wearing the same dirty clothes over and over may begin to offend smell-conscious Managuans.
- Light colored clothing will keep you cool but will quickly get dirty, particularly during the dusty, dry season. Darker clothing, especially pants, may last a couple days without being washed but will be much warmer.
- Note that your choice of clothing will depend a lot on your volunteer assignment and lifestyle. If you'll be spending a bit of time in the campo (countryside), you'll want sturdier shoes and durable clothing (though preferably not frayed and full of holes). If you'll be working primarily in the office and may meet with various officials, bringing some nicer clothes is appropriate. If you plan to go out "on the town", consider clothing for that purpose as well. One volunteer added that Nicaraguans tend to wear clothing less frayed or "antiqued" than Americans.
- Clothing ages faster when washed on the "pila" (the Nicaraguan "washboard" used for washing clothes) than in electric washing machines.
- **Shoes:** For a longer stay it is recommended that you bring at least 3 pairs of footwear:
  - Sandals/flip-flops – Note that inexpensive, smaller-sized flip flops up to about size 10 ½ (for men) are easy to purchase in Nicaragua because they're so commonly used; sandal styles are much more limited.
  - Sturdy shoes – This might be a pair you can use for hiking volcanoes or playing soccer as well.
  - Dress shoes or a pair of sneakers/shoes that looks somewhat dressy – Either for going out, attending more formal meetings, or for work attire in Managua.
- **Toiletries:** While you may find inexpensive brands of toiletries in Nicaragua, you may not find your favorite brands or you may discover they are much more expensive. Thus, depending on your flexibility, you may want to plan ahead and bring what you need for the length of your stay.
  - *Shaving:* If you're male and you want to "fit in" in Nicaragua, you will want to shave daily. Quality razor brands are available here at higher prices than you probably would pay back home. Thus, you might want to either bring a good shaver & blades or an electric shaver. Generally speaking, women in Nicaragua are not as concerned with body hair and shaving as, for example, many women from the United States are.
  - *Toilet Paper:* While toilet paper is easy to buy here, you will find that it is important to have a roll handy, particularly when traveling as most bathrooms or outhouses will not have toilet paper.
  - *Medications:* Many—but not all—medications that you might need a prescription for in the U.S. are available here with out prescription at a significantly lower cost, though some people have concerns about the sources or quality of these products. Chloroquine is available in limited pharmacies and antibiotics are easy to find.
  - *Tampons:* Tampons are not as readily available, particularly the kind without an applicator.

- **Entertainment:** You may want to bring things to help fill your spare time or give you a chance to engage more with the locals:
  - *Books:* In particular, unless your Spanish is perfect you will probably want to bring along a Spanish dictionary, textbook or handheld translator. You may find that you have adequate time for pleasure reading as sometimes the pace of life can be pretty slow in Nicaragua . . . but don't think you'll have time to read a whole library! You may become surprised at how busy you become after being here a while. Also, you may want to consider bringing books that relate to renewable energy or development work to complement your experience with Grupo Fenix and perhaps to leave as a gift in the office library. Literature in English is hard to find here and future volunteers as well as Nicaraguans trying to learn Spanish will no doubt be grateful for your gift.
  - *Games:* Games can be a great way to interact with the local population. Some things to bring might include sports equipment (including Frisbees) or board, dice, or card games. Many such games are not available in Nicaragua, so they are often an entertaining novelty for many families. (Note: Inflatable balls often pop or deflate, so bring a small pump and do not be disappointed if they pop.)
  - *Pictures of Home:* You may find Nicaraguans asking to see pictures of your family or the place where you live back home. A map of your country (or of the world) can also be a handy reference to show people where you live.

### Miscellaneous

- **Taxes:** Just as a reminder, if your government will require that you file taxes while you are in Nicaragua, be sure to make the proper arrangements before coming to Nicaragua.
- **Visas:** Upon entering the country you will receive a tourist visa. If you are from the U.S. or Great Britain, it will be good for 90 days. Canadians and Australians only have 30 days. If you are from another country, please check with the Nicaraguan Embassy in your country. Be aware that if you stay longer than that period of time, you will have to renew your visa. There are two ways to do this. The first way is to go to the Migration office in Managua. Take your passport and the little paper that they gave you when you entered the country. You will have to stand in a line and talk to someone behind a window for a little while. It may cost you about C\$200 for every month that you want to extend your visa. If you are volunteering with Grupo Fenix's university program (PFAE), the university may be able to help you with this. The other way to renew is to leave the country and reenter. This might cost a little more since you have to leave the country for at least 72 hours. However, Honduras and Costa Rica are both only about four hours away and it might be a good chance to take a break and experience another country. It may cost you between \$2 and \$10 both to leave and to re-enter (prices vary by country and change often) but you will reset the clock, so to speak, receiving a normal tourist visa upon your return.
- **Hours per Week:** Grupo Fenix asks volunteers to contribute a minimum of 30 or more hours per week. The work is often pretty flexible though and if you need to take an afternoon or a few days off, that's fine. Please just let us know ahead of time.
- **Lighting:** Since the lighting in some houses is inadequate for reading or studying, you might consider bringing or buying a small lamp. A flashlight is very useful as well, particularly if you plan to spend any time in the countryside.

- **Casa Ben Linder:** Those staying in (or visiting) Managua may want to visit Casa Ben Linder on Thursday mornings at 8:30 am. Benjamin Linder was a young American engineer who lived in Nicaragua during the Sandanista era. He worked on small hydroelectric projects in the north of the country and was killed by Contras during the war. This center was later set up in his honor and offers an opportunity for English-speaking individuals to come to know each other and to hear speakers talk about relevant economic & social issues within Nicaragua. Most attendees are Americans, though often some Canadians, Europeans, and Nicaraguans attend as well. Some individuals have been in Nicaragua for two or more decades and have a wealth of experiences to share. A taxi driver can drop you at the center or there is a bus that passes close by. The directions are “de donde fue el Banco Popular, 2 al lago, 2 arriba” It’s easy to find as there are murals painted on the outside. More information is available about Benjamin Linder and the center on their web site: <http://www.casabenlinder.org/>.

### Expenses

- **Additional Expenses:**
  - If you are staying with a family in Managua, your lunches (and possibly your breakfasts depending on your arrangement with Grupo Fenix) will not be covered. We recommend that you budget at least \$100/month for lunches and other personal expenses. If you plan on traveling a lot during weekends and enjoying the Managua nightlife, you’ll want to budget more.
- **Sample Price List** (*prices as of June 2006 & are subject to change*)
  - **Taxis:** \$1 - \$2.50 per person (less outside Managua)
  - **Buses (local):** 20 cents (may be different outside of Managua)
  - **Buses (long distance):** most are \$2 - \$5+ (varies by distance)
  - **Food**
    - Street/Kiosk: \$1 - \$3
    - Moderate: \$3 - \$5
    - Upscale: \$5 - \$10+
  - **Beer:** <\$1 at the store, about \$1 at a bar/club
  - **Movies:** about \$3
  - **Clothing (used):** In some markets (such as Mercado Oriental in Managua), it’s possible to buy decent condition used shirts, pants, & t-shirts for about \$1 each.
  - **Clothing (new):** New, brand-labeled clothing purchased at a mall may be the more expensive than the same clothing in your country (at least compared to U.S. prices).
  - **Electronics:** As virtually any electronic device you purchase will be imported, in most (but not all) cases you will pay notably more in Nicaragua.

### Gifts

- **Giving Gifts:** As a final note, we just want to make sure you’ve read the section in the Handbook about giving gifts, entitled “*Gifts to host families, new friends*”

*(IMPORTANT!)*”. We think it’s important to reflect on the economic differences between your country and Nicaragua. It’s important to understand as well that you’re about to embark on a wonderful learning opportunity—that is an opportunity for both you, as well those Nicaraguans you come to know, to learn more about each others cultures and to overcome cultural misconceptions. Do keep in mind, as we say in the Handbook, your behaviors will impact those foreigners who come in the future.

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