



Some things that you should know
before visiting somoto.

SOMOTO

FOR

DUMMIES

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A reference for the CWY Volunteers.

Somoto for Dummies

Wow, Somoto, Nicaragua. That sounds small. And for three months? What is there to do there? And I have to live with someone who doesn't speak any English? What if they don't like me? Where even is Somoto? What if I get lost? OMG what if I get sick, or don't like the food, or get stolen from?! AAhhhhhh!

Well lucky for you, we are here to help! 'We' are Alex Johansen and Véronique Dulude, two former CWY volunteers who have returned to Nicaragua for another go-round in Somoto. We participated in the first CWY exchange between Somoto, Nicaragua and Prince Albert, Saskatchewan 2009/10. As we were the 'guinea pig' year we experienced our fair share of challenges, disappointments, and fears. From these incidences we learned to work as a group and individuals, laugh at ourselves, and that you should NOT bake cookies without measuring cups. Learning about another culture is not an easy task, especially if you don't speak the language, but it can also be a rewarding opportunity to learn about yourself and the world in general. We present you with this guide in order to make your learning process slightly smoother than our own; however it also comes with a disclaimer: your experience will be as unique and challenging as our own. Your group will have its own dynamic and you will learn a variety of different things but the topics contained in *Somoto for Dummies* are some of the first differences that presented themselves when we came to Somoto. These are the fun things to discover about the Somoteño culture and so we encourage you to take *Somoto for Dummies* as an outline, not a rulebook for what you will learn.

We will start by answering some of the first questions you may have had when you found out where you were going. Somoto is a mountainous town 23km off the Honduran border; its population is about 20000 with an additional 15000 in the surrounding rural area. Yes, yes it's small. You will be living in the second poorest nation (behind Haiti) in the Americas, and the region of Totogalpa, where you may be working, is the poorest in Nicaragua. Nicaragua is divided into regions similar to our provinces, and Somoto itself is divided into sectors (but don't ask us where they are, we just know we live in Sector 4!). Fun factoid: 'Somoto' means valley of geese, but it's actually the donkey capital of Nicaragua.

Somoto is a town filled with small pleasures that you will discover on your own (and possibly name too, we have "the *raspados* place", "the *repocheta* place", and "the *pithaya* juice place". Really creative, we know), but it takes some getting used to before you venture out on your own. We hope that you can use this guide to speed the process, discover things we never got around to, and improve *Somoto for Dummies* for the years to come.

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1. Notion del Tiempo

The notion of time- we might get to it by tomorrow...

As I finish brushing my teeth I check the time, just to make sure I'm not late. I've already eaten and gotten all my stuff together for the meeting we have at 9:00am. It takes about 25 minutes to walk to INPRHU arriba from my house, so I've given myself half an hour to get there. As I come out of my room I look for my counterpart so that we can get going. She's eating breakfast. As the clock ticks towards nine (figuratively of course, most houses here don't have clocks) I begin to panic, "We're gonna be sssoooo late. What if I get in trouble? I'm totally going to miss the whole meeting. Do I leave my counterpart here? Or do I wait so we arrive together?" Finally at 9:35 when we leave the house I've adjusted to the idea of us walking in on the meeting in progress, and all the embarrassing explanations that accompany it. But wait, here we are at INPRHU and there's only two other people here. Did we miss it completely? Alas, no we are the first ones here.

True story. Although not a very exciting one, because it happens almost every day. The Nicaraguan sense of time is a *tad* different from the ideas we have in Canada about punctuality and schedules. If we say that we are meeting at 4:00pm, you'll get there at 4:00 right? Or if it's important, even earlier. Well 'Nica time' runs on a different clock. They aren't late, they just have a very relaxed concept of time. If something happens before you get there, you have to deal with it and there is always time to chat with *primos o amigos* (cousins or friends- which EVERYONE is by the way) along the way. If it's raining, we can almost guarantee you no one will show up. If your 4:00pm meeting starts at 4:45, it's all good, really what else were you going to do?

Another aspect of time which differs from the accepted norms in Canada is lunchtime. Normally 30 minutes for lunch is acceptable; an hour and you're a lucky duck. Here, everything shuts down from noon until about 2:00pm because everyone has to walk home for lunch. It's also the hottest time of day, so it becomes a rest period while you are eating and spending time with your family. We really think they got it right with this one, who wants to be working when it's 35°C out?! And how will you get to and from your house at lunchtime? Walking, of course. S-l-o-w-l-y. 'Nica pace' is also a very interesting concept. It stems from the simple and rational idea that when it is extremely hot out you want to conserve energy. But at 8:00am it's not that hot out! Some people take 'Nica pace' to a whole new level, to the point where within 5 minutes of walking the Canadian half of your group will be four blocks ahead of a majority of the Nicaraguans. And this is not only due to the leisurely rate of the Nicaraguans. Canadians walk *fast!* This is also the result of the simple and rational idea that when it is extremely cold out in

wintertime you want to get there quicker. As an individual you need to learn to relax (you'll get there eventually) and as a group you need to come to some sort of compromise when it comes to walking the streets of Somoto. The conclusion some of our counterpart pairs came to was that when you practice English, you walk 'Nica pace'; but if you practice Spanish you walk 'Canadian pace'. It worked rather well unless your counterpart happened to prefer taking cabs...

Finally, what to remember from this chapter is that, at first sight, for us Canadians, the Nicas are late and unpunctual people, but what is different is the notion of time. Ours and theirs. As North Americans, time is money and every second counts to do something. For the Nicas, every second counts to discuss with a cousin on the street or to truly enjoy your cup of coffee. You will live some frustrating moments, but please just take a minute to *breathe*...

2. ¿Dónde puedo encontrar...?

Where can I find...?

The basics of this question in Spanish are very simple. You can translate it almost exactly from English to ask where to find something. The response might be slightly more difficult. Although you will learn to understand what people are describing to you, chances are you will still not understand what they are really saying. If someone says to you “*dos cuadras al sur del Mercado y 1 ½ al oeste. Está en frente de la casa de Doña María. ¿La conoces? La prima de Pedro.*” It literally translates to “two blocks to the south of the market and 1 ½ west. It is in front of Doña María’s house. Do you know her? Pedro’s cousin.” Simple right? But which direction is south? And where is the market? And who on Earth is Doña María? Or Pedro for that matter? What?! And don’t even think about asking where the market is. That’s one of your major landmarks to know! And as such works the directional system in Somoto. There are no street signs. There are no house numbers. There is no easy way to help you learn to navigate Somoto other than telling you which landmarks are useful to know. Those would be: *la policía* (police station), *el Mercado* (market), *la carretera* (the highway), *Palí/el supermercado* (supermarket), *parque central* (central park), and *INPRHU (arriba y abajo)*, *la Iglesia* (Catholic Church), *el estadio* (stadium), *la cancha* (basketball court). Once you get to know these locations you will have a basic outline of Somoto. Another useful tidbit of information is that the big mountain (it has a name, we just don’t know it) is always to the south of Somoto.

Somoto runs on a basic grid system, there are no crazy traffic circles, or lanes; it’s just a bunch of rectangles stacked together. This should be a simple concept, except that they stuck sectors in certain areas. A sector is an area of Somoto associated with a number (and a gang, but that’s for a different chapter!). The problem is that they don’t go in order and their boundaries are very random. So unless you go about memorizing where each sector begins and ends, just learn the one you live in and you should be okay. We’re pretty sure some of the Nicas don’t even know all the sectors...

Now if you are an energetic young thing (that’s you CWYer’s!) then you may want to do some baking or cooking for your Nicaraguan family. After all, they cook for you every day, right? Let’s pretend that you want to bake cookies or a cake. What are you going to need? Flour-check, sugar-check, baking powder-check, maybe chocolate-check (expensive though...). One trip to Palí and you have almost everything you need. But what about baking soda? Or icing sugar? If you ask around I’m sure you can find everything you need, but it may surprise you where you have to look. Baking soda can be found in the pharmacies, icing sugar in the back room of the bakery beside the pizza place (how’s that for an address...), ground cinnamon and vanilla are

most common in the *pulperías* (little corner stores), and baking powder is sometimes known as *Royal*, sold in *Palí*. For some ingredients you may still have to venture outside of Somoto. For example brown sugar and molasses (however honey makes an alright alternative if you just need the consistency) are more frequently found in Estelí or Ocotal. And please inform Véro and Alex if you find chocolate chips or real vanilla extract! If you are craving ice cream, don't cry because although you can't find Ben and Jerry's, they have *Eskimo*! It is a block north of the Catholic Church and their ice cream is decent, but there are only ever three flavours at a time. It's also sold in *Palí* and from the little carts that walk around Somoto. "Are they selling food from that house?" you may ask when you see the sign citing '*se vende: cuajada, queso, y hielo.*' Yes. And from the second hand clothes store, pharmacies, and in the streets. Don't worry your pretty little head about the quality; you probably eat the same food in your house here anyways. I'm fairly certain I've even bought burritos from a house that was *not* selling them.

If you need some medicine such as acetaminophen or Imodium, you can find most of it in the pharmacies. It may look like whoever wants to can open a pharmacy, because there are so many of them, but the pharmacists are generally competent and helpful. For your personal hygiene products (let's face it, you'll run out of deodorant and it's kind of necessary here), you can find almost everything in the pharmacies. In *Palí* too, cheaper, but just know that *Palí* is a Wal-Mart affiliate...

Girls and guys, even though this is a volunteer program, you will at some point desire to look pretty. The second hand stores are everywhere and offer pretty nice stuff if you peek in. If you are not ready dig in the pile of clothes, there is also *El Húrcan*, a block south from the Catholic Church, and they sell clothes, shoes, girly and hygiene products (but they're basically all the same).

If you want to have a movie night, you have two options: rent or buy. To rent movies, there's a few places including one 3 ½ blocks east of the Catholic Church. It's in a pharmacy, surprise! You can also buy movies for 20 córdobas in the market or from the stalls in the streets. These are copies, so don't be too picky with the quality.

At some point, you will want to call home and give a sign of life to your parents, friends or significant other. You'll be happy; calling to Canada is really cheap (for 20 Córdobas –so a buck- you can talk for about 30 minutes). There are a few places where you can call from but we suggest you to go to *Llamadas Heladas*, on main street, because it's the cheapest. *Fono Center*, also on Main, is a good alternative. Three months without *Facebook* could be hard for some, so when you want to reconnect with the virtual world there are lots of places you can go to. The

two previous call centers have computers or the little *Cybers* are everywhere in town. It's cheap too, but don't spend all your free days on the computer...

If you're looking for something to bring home to Mommy and Daddy, then the main touristy stuff Somoto is known for is their ceramics. Unfortunate because they don't travel well, but pretty. Nicaragua is also known for their leather goods, so you can find some bracelets and change purses too. These items can be found in most of the clothing stores on a side street from the *calle principal*, the one with the vegetable stand at the end. You may also want to look in the *rosquillería Vélchez*, *El portal del Angel* (yellow hotel), Ideas (run by a cool German lady), and the *Mercado*.

Money! It's pretty simple: \$1 is *más o menos* 20 córdobas. That's why, for us, everything seems cheap. Don't get caught in this game, you could regret it at the end of your 3 months! At some point, you may need to change money. We suggest you to go to the bank (BDF) in front of the Mayor's office. Don't forget your passport and address here in Somoto if you are changing American money. If you want to get out money from your credit card, there's an ATM machine next to this bank. Happy shopping!

3. “ALTO” no siempre significa “Detenerse”

“STOP” doesn’t always mean “to stop” and other general rules of travelling in Nicaragua

Do you remember when you were little and your mother used to tell you to always look both ways to cross the street? She is an intelligent woman; you should listen to her more often. This rule holds true in the streets of Somoto as well, even if it is a one-way street. A ‘one-way’ street in Somoto means cars and motorcycles, not bikes. And really, you never know. During your time in Somoto you will probably walk or take a cab everywhere, depending on the weather and the distance of your destination. There are a variety of challenges that both of these options present you with. Although stop signs are rare in Somoto, the odd one will pop up. While walking, you can basically pretend they aren’t there, everyone else does. So whether or not there is a stop sign, *always* let the cars pass first. Pedestrians do *not* have the right of way; they are more like pests to drivers. The faster you are out of the way the better. The first test you will face if you take a cab is finding one. Even though you are in a foreign country, Murphy’s Law holds true. You will not find a cab when you need one. However your best bets are on the main streets or the highway. If you wave your hand at a cab on the highway, don’t be shocked when it comes to a screeching halt in front of you just in time. You may have to squish in with other people and the occasional chicken should not come as a surprise. Trust your driver. If it seems like you are going to hit the car in front of you, just close your eyes and try not to look to *gringo/a*.

When you do leave the municipality of Somoto as a group, your mode of transportation will be slightly different: truck. Depending on the type of truck you are riding in we can give you different advice to ensure the most comfortable and safest ride possible. When we say ‘truck ride’ we don’t mean your average ‘hop in the cab’ type ride. The majority of your travelling will be done in the back of a truck. Probably with all 20 of you at the same time. Don’t think it’s possible? You’ll learn fast. If the truck you are riding in happens to have bars attached to the back of it (lucky) then you better stand up along the side. You’re going to want to *ride* out the bumps (think the next hit Wii game), but don’t press your body against the bars or you will end up with some nasty bruises tomorrow. A special note to the *mujeres*: if you don’t want to lose your ‘lady lumps’ don’t lean against the bars either. It seems convenient until you hit a large bump, then you will understand. And if all of you are in the truck, then some people will have to go in the middle. Please, for their sake, scooch over just a little so they are holding on with at least one hand.

However if your truck does *not* have this particular modification then you will require somewhat different instructions. You can only sit in your run-of-the-mill truck, and it’s best in the corners.

The next best seating is on the wheel wells followed by a close runner-up: leaning against the cab. The equivalent of 'nose-bleed' seats is if you don't have anything to lean against and this can get slightly painful if you aren't on smooth roads (which is most of the time if you work anywhere other than Somoto). Once again trust your driver. People have a tendency to pass other vehicles whenever possible. If it's on a hill, around a curve, or if you can see the oncoming traffic; if they think they have time, they will pass. But don't be scared: they are not stupid; if it isn't safe they will wait for the next opportunity. The best advice we can give you in general about truck rides is the following: look up. This does not depend on how whether you are seated or standing, but if you are in the countryside LOOK UP. Otherwise you run the risk of being smacked in the face by a stray branch (or bug). If it happens don't worry, you aren't the first with those embarrassing scratches; but yes, everyone will laugh.

Another common method of transportation is on *moto* or motorcycle. You don't really have to worry about this section because it is *so* against program rules to ride a *moto*, but we will tell you a little of what you are missing. First of all, they are almost as common as vehicles here. On the highway they zip past just about everyone and in Somoto they can be seen parked on every corner. If you could ride one, as the passenger it is best to wear pants and put the visor down if you are on the highway (seriously, those bugs *hurt* when they hit you). And if it's rainy season, bring a jacket. And as with any *moto* it is best to ride as close to the driver as possible, nonetheless if two Nica males are on the same *moto* they will lean as far from each other as possible in order to avoid touching (eeewwww). You will also see a variety of curious objects being transported on *motos*. Other bikes for example. Or chickens. Children. Pipes. Boxes. Entire families. You name it, and they've probably done it. Although I'm sure it's disappointing, the wonderful program you are now participating in does not allow you to experience this particular facet of Nicaraguan culture. So if your counterpart or their family takes you outside of the city (with the permission of your supervisors of course) the finest way to travel is via bus. The bus system in Nicaragua, once you figure it out, is pretty simple. You go to the bus station beforehand and buy a ticket to the place you want. If you forget, then you buy one from the bus attendant as you get on, or if you know-someone-who-knows-someone (a lot of things in Nicaragua work this way) you can get on beforehand and choose your own seating. Get a seat early though. The buses stop all along the highway and pick up more people than you thought could possibly fit on a bus.

Although you can't ride a *motorcycle*, you can ride a *bicycle*. Not quite as exciting, we know, but much more accessible. Sometimes we think we've got things all figured out up there in Canada, but they have us beat for bike riding. Why no one does this yet in Canada we're not sure, but when they ride with two people (or more) on a bike the person in front steers while the person at the back pedals. None of this 'sitting on the handle bars' business and no extra pegs on your

back wheels. It's brilliant, simple and much more stable. The only time that the same person pedals and steers is when the girl is sitting in front in a skirt and the guy is being a gentleman. So take a lesson boys!

Drivers in Somoto use their horns as they are meant to be used: to warn you that they are coming. This could be to tell a biker on the highway you are about to pass or let a pedestrian know they didn't move quite fast enough. Honks in Somoto are as varied as objects that are transported on *motos*. They can range from the average *honk* to an incessant *beepbeep!* and even the occasional whistling sound (points for creativity though). The most interesting 'honk' you will hear is the braying of a donkey. This is not coming from a car or truck though. It is literally coming from a donkey. They are used as pack animals, to pull carts, and yes; even ridden. Some are surprisingly friendly, but please don't try to pet the neighbourhood donkey; it's not a household pet!

4. El español que no encontrarás en tu diccionario

The Spanish that you won't find in your Larousse

For neither of us (Alex and her Albertan English or Véro and her Québec frenchiness) is Spanish our maternal language. One of us learned it from the beginning and the other improved on the base she had. However, it didn't happen overnight. Long evenings with our best friend the dictionary... No matter what your Spanish level is, the communication barrier will be one of the first things (if not the first) you'll be dealing with in your cultural shock. Don't panic if you don't get anything anyone is saying to you; your counterpart, family, work, etc. will be part of your learning. You, though, are the only one responsible for whether or not you learn. If you're starting from the "HOLA" level, be patient, indulgent and curious; a language is a life lesson. If you're already speaking Spanish; don't sit on your butt and never stop trying. Curiosity is the key. You will feel even more part of the community if you're able to have conversations with the locals, ask questions and be part of the *vida Somoteña*. The goal of this chapter is not to teach you what books and classes could tell you. It's more to help you with some Nicaraguan slang and local expressions that you couldn't learn in your dictionary. Let's start with the greetings; when you enter in a house or in any public places (restaurants, stores, grocery store) you say "Buenas" as *Hi*. Not "HOLA". If you meet someone in the street and both of you continue walking in separate directions, you say "Adios" as *Hi* again. It could be confusing at first, but you'll get used to it. In Spanish, there are two ways of addressing someone; you could use the pronoun *Tú* (which is informal) or the *Usted* (which is formal). *Usted* is a sign of respect and we suggest you to always talk in the *Usted* form when you're speaking with someone for the first time. Of course, as long as you're comfortable with the different conjugation forms! Lots of intimate hours with your grammar book, we promise! If you've learned Spanish thinking it's absolutely necessary to say the pronouns when you speak; you're not totally right and you could have a hard time understanding others. Because every pronoun has a different conjugation, they don't see the point of saying them. Instead of saying *Yo estoy* (I am), they simply say *Estoy*. They also have the tendency to add "ito" or "ita" at the end of the nouns when they want those to be cute or describe something little. For example, coffee is *café*, but they could say: *¿Quiere un cafécito?* (Would you like a coffee?). Glass is *vaso*, but they could say: *Dame un vasito* (Give me a glass).

If you are learning Spanish for the first time, yes it will be difficult at times! But don't worry, most people assume you don't really speak Spanish anyways. Although you will need to do a little studying (you can't just learn it via osmosis) your best resources are your counterpart, family and the rest of your group. The ONLY way you are going to learn to speak and understand is by communicating with the people around you. While this may be very limited at

the beginning, it can also be a fun way to get to know your family. Communicating may include using the 20 words that you know in Spanish, drawing, dictionary searching, and even hand gestures are often involved. At first you may be stuck translating every word in your head, but as time goes on you will begin to associate the word with the idea, not the translation. Then you will start to understand without the pesky English middleman! The best advice is to be curious, always carry a pen and paper, and never forget to ask if you don't understand. Heck, Alex still sleeps with a dictionary in case she remembers a word she didn't understand during the day!

We have here a list of terms that will help you to follow a conversation. The more you get comfortable in Spanish, we encourage you to use these... but be careful to use them appropriately! It could generate funny and awkward situations!

- *¿Qué onda?* or *¿Qué tal?* = How's it going?
- *Nos vemos* = See you later
- *Mucho gusto* = Nice to meet you
- *Tuani* = cool
- *Permiso* = It means "Excuse me", but they say it when you're leaving the table, when you walk between two people talking or when you're interrupting a conversation.
- *Vamonos* = Let's go
- *¿Como amaneciste?* = This question is used as a greeting in the morning to ask how you are doing; the appropriate responses include *bien* and *mal* just like *¿Qué onda?* or *¿Qué tal?*
- *Gringo* = You could be called this in the streets. It used to be pejorative, now not so much. It was initially referring to the Americans during their occupation here. Now, it just means "outsiders".
- *Chele, Chela* = White people. It's not pejorative.
- *Chavala, chavalito* = Girl, guy
- *Chigüines* = A cute way to say "kids"
- *Muchachos* = Guys
- *Buena onda* = To say someone's cool/chill to be with.
- *Nicas* = They call themselves Nicas, instead of Nicaraguans
- *Grosero* = Gross
- *Guaro* = Liquor
- *Hombre* = Literally, it means "man", and they use it the same way we do.
- *Dale pues* = There's no literal translation, but it can mean "It's a deal" and is used as a departing salutation.
- *La sangre de Cristo* = For God's sake

- *Un montón* = A ton
- *Por fa* = Please is *Por favor*, but think along the lines of “thanks” instead of “thank you”
- *Peso* = It’s the same thing as Córdoba
- *Ponerse las pilas* = To hurry up
- *Me da pena* = Something makes you shameful, literally translated
- *Sin verguenza* = “Without shame” or “Help yourself”
- *Pues* = then/as (kind of).
- *Ese no es tu pedo* = It’s none of your business
- *Maje* = Guy
- *Hacele el animo* = You can do it
- *¡Mire ve!* = Look!
- *Enseñar* = It doesn’t only mean to teach, but to show too.
- *Te tengo un chisme* = I have news for you
- *Andas chiniado* = You have a lot of money
- *Nada que ver* = “It’s not what you say” or “It has nothing to do”
- *Ahi viene Elver* = Here comes the rain
- *Me estan son ando las tripas* = I’m getting hungry
- *¿Para dónde se las lleva?* = Where are you going?
- *¿De dónde se las trae?* = Where are you coming from?
- *Caliente* = Your dictionary will tell you it means “hot”, but only use it with things. If you’re hot, say “*Tengo calor*”, not “*Soy caliente*”... because used with people, it means “horny”.
- *Huevos* = Literally, it means “eggs”... but it could also be someone’s balls.
- *Embarazada* = It doesn’t mean “embarrassed”, but “pregnant”... be careful!
- *¡Qué barbaridad!* = “How barbaric” but it’s not quite that harsh. It’s more similar to “craziness”.
- *Que le vaya bien*= “Hope that it goes well”

This list is a small inventory of the slang and sayings that you may pick up during your time in Nicaragua. Although we have presented it in the “easy-to-read” format, the best way to learn them is by asking and listening to those around you. They are your best guide. If you don’t understand a word, try asking your counterpart instead of someone who can just translate it. You will probably get a better understanding of the idea if it isn’t a direct translation. The sayings in this list are our best equivalent, however they always sound better in Spanish!

5. Comida Nica... ¡no morirás de hambre!

Nica food... you won't die of hunger!

A huge aspect of the Nica's culture is their food. For them, food is a pretext to meet with friends and family and spend time with them for hours and hours. Mostly, it is a way to show respect and solidarity with *extranjeros*, so you, dear Canadians. The Nicas are really proud of their culinary practices and it's rude not to accept the bread and coffee they give you. Even if you just ate before visiting a friend and they serve you a plate of food, accept it with a smile, a well faked one, because you could insult your host. Especially if you visit someone in the countryside, because like we said: food is a sign of friendship and generosity. So even if some families barely eat 3 times a day, they will give you a full plate. Don't spit on it. Now I can hear you thinking out loud: "But what will I eat during my time here"? It would be simple and pejorative to say "rice and beans", but it's not totally false. Mainly, their meals are rice and beans, but they have different ways of cooking them. For example, the beans can be eaten in a "juice", fried or smooshed. The national meal of Nicaragua is *Gallo Pinto*; rice and beans, fried together. It is usually eaten at breakfast and supper. Believe me; even though you eat it every day, you will miss it once back home. But good thing: you don't have to be a three-star-chef to make it in Canada, it's pretty easy to make. Every meal, whatever you eat, is served with *tortillas* (made of corn flour, delicious hot). Also, their non-expensive cheese is *cuajada*, similar to our feta cheese, but lighter. The other cheese, literally named *queso* is thicker and saltier. The plantains, *plátanos*, are eaten pretty regularly, fried (really fried, if you know what I mean), boiled or cooked in the oven (rare). They often serve them with sour cream, *crema*. When the plantain isn't mature, they slice it thinner and fry it. They call it *tajadas* and they taste like chips. They eat all the elements above together, mixed, and the tortillas are used like a plate. Of course, you have a normal plate and utensils, but then, they put the *Gallo Pinto*, the *plátanos* and the *cuajada* together in the tortillas. You're not forced to eat like that, it's just a piece of advice so you won't be surprised. It depends on the family, but you will have a few meals a week of meat or chicken for lunch. They never eat meat at night, don't ask us why. There's a meal called "*Nacatamal*", an orange paste filled with meat, vegetables, raisins and fat, wrapped in banana leaves and boiled for hours. It's something you have to try at least once. Sometimes, the meat/chicken is boiled in an oily "soup" with vegetables (onions, carrots, peppers, potatoes, *yuca*, *malanga*, etc). The fruits cultivated in the country (so cheaper) are pineapples, papayas, bananas, oranges, mangoes, watermelon, *jocótes*, *mamónes*, *guyaba*, and *pithaya*. They import grapes and apples, but it's a bit more expensive. Fruits here have nothing to do with the GMO's we know in Canada. Their fruits are kind of a drug, be prepared to be fresh fruit deprived when you return to Canada. You can find "frescos" everywhere, fruit juices, really sugary but good. They make them with seasonal fruits and it's a good alternative to the traditional pops. By the way, *Rojita* is a national pop, like red Fanta... but not. The aftertaste is a

bit different. Whatever, just try it! And all drinks are sold in bags so that they can keep the bottle for the deposit. Don't you dare try opening that bag to drink it, you just have to rip off a corner and suck. A typical food called "*Carne Asada*" is beef really cooked over a BBQ, with a ton of spices. Really rubbery, but it's worth a try and not too dangerous for your Canadian stomach. You can find it in the little food stands in the street. Talking about those stands: they are everywhere at night. Basically anyone can set up a tent in the street and sell whatever they want, there're no sanitation laws or controls. We feel pretty comfortable to tell you to try some things they sell there because it's good, but if your stomach is sensitive or if you're finicky, just wait to get accustomed to the food here. The stands can offer *Tacos* (tortillas filled with meat and fried), *Repochetas* (tortilla stuffed with *cuajada*, folded and fried), *Burritos* (Like taco, but non-fried), *Empañadas* (looks like a taco), *Enchiladas* (fried tortilla, smooched beans on top and *cuajada*), *Gürillas* ("tortilla" made with another corn flour, served with *cuajada* and *crema*, sweet and delicious). There's more but it's up to you to discover and test your stomach abilities! Everything made in those stands are served with a ketchup-cream-coleslaw mixture and sold in a bag. If you don't like ketchup or cream, just ask without it. It's pretty cheap too: you can have a taco for 10 Córdoba, so \$0.50. For a dollar or two, you're full and good to go! If you're a "coffee-to-go" person, you might be disappointed because Tim Horton's hasn't made its way here yet. You can have coffee in the little "*Cafetines*"... You will rapidly discover that, here, they like their coffee sweet. Really sweet. They don't drink it with milk either. Get used to it; it's our only advice concerning coffee. In those *Cafetines*, you must try the *Raspados*. It's an icy beverage made with ice, ground cake bits and a sort of caramel mixture. It's their national "Iced Cap". You can have them in different flavors; milk, chocolate milk, peanuts and strawberry. Of course, their availability depends on the moment's resources. Another part of their national gastronomy is their *Rosquillas*. Made of corn, butter and cheese, they are little cookies that they usually eat with coffee. Actually, they drown them in it. The Somoto *Rosquillas* are the best in the country and they even export them to the US. Here again, you'll be addicted to those little pieces of joy and... calories! This was just a brief summary of what you will be eating in Somoto, but of course, there's *mucho* more. Some outsiders will say: "Everything here is fried, sweet and fatty". True we admit, but remember that almost everything you'll eat is produced here, from their agricultural lands. Can we, Canadians, say the same thing about what we eat? Yes, you'll eat tortillas every day, but at least, they're not filled with GMOs. Try to talk food with your family and you'll see how proud they are to show you how to make this or that. You will, for sure, have memorable moments in that kitchen... ¡*Vamos a comer!*

6. El hombre Nica... y su amor unidireccional

The Nica male... and his unidirectional love

Girls, this chapter is for you. You are in your first week in Nicaragua, walking alone in the streets of Somoto and at a corner, a male's harem is chilling in the shade. It's light out, the street is crowded so you feel perfectly safe to walk by these manly men. Just as you walk by them, you of course look at them because some Latinos are really attractive (!), but ... Woah! "What did they just tell me? They called me *mi amor* and some even barked at me! Are they drunk?" Well, we couldn't tell you there's no chance you'll find someone drunk at 8 am, but yes, yes you heard right. We don't really know how to put it, but let's just say it like this: The Nica males fall in love more easily and rapidly than what we are used to in Canada but the most distinct thing is that they say it to you, without any shyness. You probably don't know these men, but girl, you just stole their hearts! No, seriously, you will have to get used to it. They find young white girls really attractive (they also act like this with female Nicas) and they will let you know it in different ways. Alex and I have a collection of favorites including donkey sounds, marriage proposals, men running out of their house just to whistle at us and, of course, lots of cute names like *mi amor*, *muñequita* (doll), *chelita* (white girl), *bomba* (bomb), *princesa* (princess), *caliente* (horny), *guapa* (beautiful) and we're sure you'll hear the rest of the list. They will also try their -basic- English on you, they're making an effort there, come on! The "why" of writing this chapter is because it's so unusual for us to experience it, that we don't know how to react. "Should I turn? Spit on him? Smack him in the face and give him a lesson on how to treat a woman? Run away?" None of those reactions will be successful and you could be physically injured after your response. Our advice will be: just ignore them. Continue walking, don't turn your head and pretend to be daft. May be they'll be insulted that you are ignoring their proposal, but by ignoring them, you won't be giving him/them the attention he/they wanted. Generally, they will not follow you or touch you, but some could be more... insistent. Just change side of the street and continue walking. Please, don't assume that a-l-l the boys you will meet here are like that. Generally, the ones that you will meet for real (not the random ones in the street) like your counterpart's friends, family, and your work colleagues will be respectful. We can't promise they won't fall in love with you, but I'm pretty sure they won't bark at you. If you are going out to dance with some friends, you will for sure be asked to dance by a ton of guys. Because it is part of their culture; everyone dances with everyone and they know how to dance, trust us! If you feel uncomfortable, just gently say no and he will go away. This chapter is a bit "touchy" because we don't want you to be scared or to offend anyone, but it's advice we wish we would have had before. Those situations have to be taken with a grain of salt too. You'll see, those whistling moments are some of the funniest we've had in Nicaragua... just because of their awkwardness!

7. Algunas precauciones de seguridad personal y de salud

Am I going to wear the bullet proof vest or just my helmet today?

New country. New friends. New family. New language. New everything. So how do I know what from this “new life” could be dangerous for me? First of all, for those who can be really insecure, know that Nicaragua is one of the safest countries in Central America. If not the safest. Although we would prefer to give you some tips to avoid sketchy places and disagreements. First of all, almost every sector has its gang (*pandilla*) and its gang members (*pandilleros*) operate at night time. Depending on the sector (because some are more hardcore than others) they deal drugs, steal, intimidate or sometimes kill. Don’t worry, it’s within the gangs. They usually sit and occupy a street corner. Oh, no, sorry; *their* street corner. They kind of mark their territory, not peeing like dogs, but by sitting there and doing their ‘manly man’ things. We’re not quite sure what. The worst gangs are the ones from the sectors 13, 14, 18, 3. Anyways, your counterpart will tell you which sectors to avoid (by the stadium, the highway by the tall *Mirador* and behind the library areas, especially) at night or even during the day. If, for some reason, you happen to have some female chromosomes and you’re stuck walking at night, it’s preferable to be with a friend or two. Even more if you’re a young white lady. Whether you’re boy or girl, don’t walk in the street showing valuable things such as Ipods, cameras, wallets or credit cards. Walk as light as possible. And, anyway, at 40°C, you only want to carry the necessary. We’ve never been stolen from and don’t know anyone who has (actually we’ve had money *returned* that we dropped), but you don’t want to give some people ideas.

Something really unique that you’ll see (and hear, believe us) is their *bombas*. For a *fería*, any kind of inauguration, holiday, religious day, they fire bombs all over town... sometimes starting at 5am. So, don’t worry or panic; if you hear those loud explosions, it’s not the beginning of a civil war or any massacre going on. It’s a... *fiesta!* We agree, it’s unsettling at 5am, but you’ll get used to it.

If you’re leaving Somoto for any reason, it’s preferable to bring a copy of your passport with you, because the police stops cars on the highway and it could be really complicated if you didn’t have any identification papers. We suggest that you leave your passport in your room because if you lose it there’s no Canadian embassy in Nicaragua.

You’ll realize that there’s no SPCA in Nicaragua and dogs are everywhere. Canine life in the streets is huge (and they *do* pee to mark their territory!) Generally, those dogs are homeless and we suggest not petting them. You’d know why. If the animal defender in you is troubled at the sight of the bad treatment of some animals here, take a step back: not all the dogs are

homeless, starving or maltreated. If your home stay family has animals, ask if you can pet them. If yes, go for it. If not, here again, take a step back. Literally this time.

We know that in your preparation camp before the program, you had a big speech on the health precautions you should and must follow. We won't go all over it again, but just a few to refresh your brain. First, water. Somoto has a decent water chlorination system and the locals drink water from the tap. For your little *gringo* intestines, we'd say buy water or purify it with Pristine or similar products. You won't die if you drink the daily juices made with tap water or the occasional ice cube, but from personal experiences, have a parasite test before leaving Somoto. We now hear you asking "... Parasites?" Yes, dear friends, whether you want it or not, you will catch some of these freeloaders either from the water, pets, food, etc. In most of the cases it's nothing serious and you won't even know that you have something. To get this test, it's pretty simple and cheap (about 40 Córdoba): Go to a pharmacy, buy a plastic cup, fill it with your morning fertilizer (!) and go to the Lab next to the Mayor's office. Just ask the smiley lady for a parasite test, hand her your lovely cup and a few hours later, you come back for your results. They will tell you what kind of friends you caught and which pills to buy. Depending on the amount and the kind of parasites, you'll have about a week of medication. Fast. Easy.

It's normal at the beginning of your adventure if you're not hungry. It's a huge challenge for some intestines. Take it easy but eat a bit, at least just to please your family. For sure, they will give you the best food they have, but if you eat something on the street, you don't really have to worry about the meat. It's more than cooked. Although, the salad served with everything is washed in their water, so if you're worried, just order your food without *ensalada*. You may be shock to see that they don't necessarily refrigerate their milk or eggs. The eggs we can't really explain, but the milk is unpasteurized so they always boil it before they drink it. So it's really up to you if you want their warm milk/cornflake mush in the morning. We'll pass.

8. La religión... y el fútbol

Religion... and soccer

Metaphorically speaking, both concepts are related in Nicaragua. They are part of the culture; part of every single Nica. They both nourish excitement, passion and faith. Let's start with the religion. The main religion in Nicaragua is Catholicism, with all their branches (Lutheran, Batista, etc). In Canada, because there are so many religions co-existing next to each other, we don't really see religion as one single and unique entity. Here, it's a bit different. God is everywhere, literally talking here. On the buses and the taxis, you always see sayings like "*Dios es mi guía*" (God is my guide) or "*Jesus Cristo vive*" (Jesus Christ lives) written in bright letters. You can't miss it. Those vehicles are actually really cute and attractive. They give life to the streets and the highway. Don't worry, you can get in even if you're not catholic; they don't ask any proof of your religious background! Somoto has one big Catholic Church, in front of the park but there's easily one church or chapel within each block in the whole city. If you are bored on a Sunday (you will be, because on Sundays nothing's opened and the city's dead), have a walk in the streets and count them. Big challenge, because there are so many! Something you will always remember from your staying in Somoto is the sound of every single "church" singing and literally screaming their love to God, at nighttime. The masses are generally after 6 pm, so if you wander around, you will hear them melodically praying and singing. We are not religious but it's really particular and appealing to hear this. We also suggest you that, if your counterpart's family goes to church, go with them! We went a few times and it's pretty different and interesting. If you're not religious like us, just gently clap your hands like the others and remember to smile! Some week-end days you may also encounter a priest on one of the main streets, with a microphone and speakers, claiming his love for God and trying to recruit believers. In their daily expressions, they often refer to the Catholicism too; *Madre mio, La sangre de Cristo, Santo Cielo*, etc. If you are not catholic or if you're atheist, we suggest you to stay neutral on this subject and have a huge respect for those beliefs, because they are deeply engraved in their culture.

So is *fútbol* or soccer. Officially, baseball is their national sport (brought by the *Yankees*, the Americans, during their empiricism in the past centuries). Although in Somoto and northern cities in Nicaragua, soccer is stronger than baseball... and its passion too. Almost every kid, before walking properly, knows how to dribble the ball. You will see kids playing in the streets, in the stadium (yes, they have one) and in the fields. They are everywhere. If you're a good player yourself, don't hesitate to play with them. Otherwise, observe and learn. Nicaragua was a Spanish colony and they still remain "attached" to it, emotionally at least; If you're a *Somoteño*, you're either Barcelona or Madrid, the two Spanish national teams. Their games are shown on television and, from the street, you can hear the enthusiasm in the houses on game's days. So, better pick one of them right away, because you'll be asked who you are cheering for... and you better have arguments, because if you meet someone cheering for the other team, you'll have to explain yourself! Like we said, religion and soccer can provoke sparks.

9. Que hacer en Somoto para disfrutar un montón de tu estadía

What to do in Somoto to enjoy your stay

So you've arrived in Somoto. Which happens to be in Latin America. PARTY right?! Well although normally they are a hard-working, practical people; yes they know how to throw a party. The biggest *fiestas* happen in the streets. They cordon off a couple of blocks and set up drink stalls and a huge stage for the band or DJ's. You can usually buy tickets beforehand or at the door. And once the party gets rolling (usually at around 10:00pm), it *keeps* rolling until late the next morning. Ladies: don't worry *too* much about doing your hair. If you like to dance, it will be disgustingly sweaty in about 10 minutes. If you don't like to dance, you have a good half hour until it reaches the ponytail stage. You're in Nicaragua remember.

Speaking of street parties; *Carnaval* is a HUGE party that happens every year in November. It is known throughout Nicaragua and as far away as Guatemala. The main street is closed off for about 5 blocks and the party starts at 6:00pm until 6:00am the next day, although things start to get a little *too* drunk at around 3:00am. GOOD TIMES. There are six stages with rotating acts and lots of dancing, food and alcohol stands. It's kind of *gringo-ville* for a night though (we're not fans of this) with people from Germany, Spain, the States and more; just warning you.

Other than these, your options are slightly limited in Somoto if you want to go out. Occasionally *El Exclusivo* will have a party on a special occasion. If they do, you should go. It's usually full, there's lots of dancing and they sometimes even decorate the place (stolen table decorations make memorable souvenirs- not like we would know...). *El Colonial* also hosts concerts every once and a while. Decent music and atmosphere, but not so much dancing. Unless you start a little Canadian dance party, then the Nicas will follow (and out dance you). Looking for 'good' karaoke? (if there is such a thing). Then you want to go to *El Somoteño* on the highway. The highway is also home to *El Buen Gusto*, which has your choice of grilled/deep fried goodies; it's a good place to grab something if you are coming home late and live near the highway. And if you just want a 'dude' place (or dudette) to hang out then we recommend the restaurant Don Chu's, awesome fries and soup. Oh right, and beer. On the topic of beer, we know that it is not encouraged to drink in the program, and we in NO way support your misbehaviour. If it is not prohibited, you may intermittently want a drink. To go the cheap beer route you have three options. Literally. Toña, Victoria, and Victoria Frost. Can't lie, the beer isn't that good, the rum is though. Flor de Caña is the national rum and makes a rather good *Nica Libre* (rum and coke). If you look a little harder you can find wine, Smirnoff Ice, and imported beers. And as much as your counterparts tell you Cañita is a good drink and that you should try it, don't. Please. For the sake of your group the next day, do *not* try possibly the world's cheapest drink. It's like

liquid death. And we don't speak from personal experience but the memory of *Carnaval*, a bottle of Cañita, and a very unfortunate bus ride the next day.

Occasionally you will see a collection of stalls selling random trinkets in front of the *parque central*. They are travelling *ferías* that sell souvenir-type goodies such as shirts, music (you can always get that in front of the Enitel-Claro building though), jewellery etc. You WILL receive gringo prices though, so unless you are very sure of your bargaining abilities ask your counterparts for help. They can tell you if a product is good or bad too (especially if you want to buy a hammock). Please try not to get *too* ripped off, it makes all of us *cheles* look bad!

You will rapidly observe that Somoto is surrounded by mountains and the sunsets are *maravillosa* –gorgeous. It could be a nice group activity to go to the *Mirador* (view point) to see the sun go down. Actually, there are two; one is free and the other is 10 Córdoba to get in. From both of them you have a good view of Somoto and the mountains. Personally, we prefer the second one, because it's taller and the view is stunning. There are even some hammocks and a little restaurant. You know it's good because it's a popular lover's hangout. Lovely.

If someone in your group happens to have a birthday while you are here (probable- you're here for a *rato*; a bit) then you should be forewarned about a certain tradition that they have here. They throw eggs at the lucky individual who happened to be born on this day. An easy way to avoid this tradition is to make sure that you steer clear of your friends that might *actually* buy eggs, don't shower and make sure there is no water that day so that your family doesn't do it, and don't be born during a *campamento* (camp- too much scheming time). Simple right?

Finally if (when) you are having a particularly Canadian day and just want a piece of home, then *Pizza Italia* is a good fallback. Your Nicas will probably enjoy it too, so it can make a good group place. And if you get to know the owner a little (his name is Mario by the way) he puts more toppings on your pizza!

10. Conclusión

Conclusion

A culture is not something that can be explained on paper. It is a feeling, a way of life, a series of *creencias*(beliefs). The humorous treatment of the most visible facets of Nicaraguan culture contained in *Somoto for Dummies* is just a taste of the differences that you will experience over the next three months. The elements explained are the ones that at first sight, for us Canadians, may seem strange and sometimes silly. We cannot judge a culture and its practices. We must, at least, understand and respect them. We hope that we whet your appetite to discover the deeper aspects of this beautiful society and appreciate the differences that you will encounter here. Of course we cannot explain away all of the variations (and we haven't even touched most of them!), but we challenge you to look for similarities as well; because there are a lot, even more than the differences. In the process you may gain a new perspective on your own life in Canada, a new family here in Nicaragua, and the inspiration to continue learning about yourself and the world around you. As you continue your journey in the Canadian phase, please do not stop being curious; the abundance of cultures contained in your own backyard may surprise you. You owe it to your group, counterpart, community and yourself to discover the diversity of your own country. Our final pieces of advice have nothing to do with Somoto or Canada. The first is to never stop learning. It is going to be complicated at times and you may want to quit. But you learn the most when it's the hardest so take those moments as an opportunity to truly experience life and grow from it. The second is a single word which makes a world of a difference. Chill. Seriously, just chill. The majority of problems are caused when someone overreacts to a situation. And most of them are only worsened if you stress over them. The program you're beginning is a unique lifetime opportunity; embrace every second and in six months, you'll be a different person. So just remember that there is always time to enjoy a hot coffee on a hot day with good friends... Even if you are late for meeting.

¡Nos Vemos!

Alex Johansen and Véronique Dulude