



SOL Work Group Volunteer Packet

For Groups Traveling to Nicaragua

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Welcome to Seeds of Learning (SOL)

Thank you for your interest in Seeds of Learning's Work Group Program. We hope that you will become a part of SOL's family of over 4,200 work group volunteers who have traveled to Central America with SOL.

Since SOL first began its work in Central America, 26 years ago, we have been very careful to approach our work with humility and respect. We do not approach our role working with communities in their development process as knowing what is best for them. Instead, we are invited by a community to work with them in a particular area. Then, as a way to further establish a relationship of trust and respect, we hold a series of community meetings during which we visit the community to explain who we are, what we do, and how we work.

During these community encounters we learn more about the community's needs and aspirations, and spend time with the teachers, students, parents, and all members who are interested in working towards commonly defined goals. We let the community know that if the proposed project is approved we are then able to work alongside of them to help procure the necessary resources to realize the project, but that their involvement, commitment and leadership in this process is what will guarantee its success.

In addition to the Work Group Program, SOL also offers a variety of educational programs to students, teachers, and communities in Central America. While in Nicaragua, you may have the chance to observe and/or participate in these programs.

SOL welcomes volunteers to join with us in this relationship-building and empowering process of working together for the common good. We invite you to join the SOL family which has carefully and respectfully shared, learned, and grown together by way of this intentional approach. As you enter into this relationship with SOL, please carefully read all of the information in this packet, and be sure to bring it with you to all pre-departure group meetings in order to prepare for your experience.

Volunteer Information and Application Process

Each SOL work group volunteer *must* complete and submit the *SOL Work Group Volunteer Application, Medical Waiver, and Liability Release* form. Please refer to the timeline below and *Work Group Pricing, Deposit, and Cancellation Policies* for important deadlines.

Each volunteer must have a current passport (that is valid for at least 6 months from the date of departure). For US and Canadian citizens tourist visas are required and are purchased upon arrival at the airport in Nicaragua for \$10. Participants who are not US/Canadian citizens are responsible for ensuring they meet all entry, exit, and visa requirements for Nicaragua and US/Canada. They are also responsible to make sure that their passport is valid for at least six months from the date of departure. This should be done well in advance of the travel date.

Due to SOL at least 90 days prior to group departure

- ❑ *SOL Work Group Volunteer Application, Medical Waiver, and Liability Release*
- ❑ \$500 Work Group fee (this amount may differ depending on group type and length)
- ❑ *If you don't already have a valid passport, start the process ASAP (before 90 days)!

Due to SOL at least 45 days before departure

- ❑ Total remaining work group fee (typically this is an additional \$1,050) PLUS airfare

Work Group Program and Travel Information

Purpose and Program Description: The SOL Work Group Program is designed to promote solidarity and cross-cultural understanding between people of the global north and global south through hands-on community based projects. Our hope is for participants to better understand and reduce poverty and inequality in the world.

The emphasis is on building bridges of friendship and cross-cultural understanding with Nicaraguans. International volunteers will work with Nicaragua staff and community volunteers to build or repair educational infrastructure and/or participate in other educational exchanges.

We encourage participants to bring skills, resources, encouragement, and, most importantly, an open mind, which can vastly improve their own experience and understanding as well as the educational opportunities available to Nicaraguan communities.

Volunteer Work: In Nicaragua volunteers of all skill levels can contribute to the work. Most volunteers will focus their work on improving an educational infrastructure. However, some groups focus primarily on educational exchanges only. You will know which type of group you are in from your group leader. Both types of groups will engage in cultural exchange activities with Nicaraguan volunteers.

Infrastructure/Construction Projects: Most volunteer groups spend time working on a learning resource center (LRC), a classroom, kitchen or storage facility area of a new or existing school. Usually it takes several groups over the course of a year to complete an infrastructure project. Reinforced brick or cinder-block buildings with metal roofs are the most common structures. Construction volunteers may move or pack dirt, sift sand, mix concrete, carry bricks, fill joints with mortar, bend rebar, help put on the roof, or perhaps paint. Alternative building supplies and materials are used when possible. This can be strenuous yet rewarding work. Volunteers work under the direction of SOL staff, including an experienced construction supervisor.

Educational Exchanges: Some groups will focus the majority of their time engaging in cultural and educational exchanges, which can include: informal or organized interactions/discussions with adults and youth from the community, playing games, reading books, teaching a lesson, practicing Spanish, or informally teaching computer skills, English, and other topics.

Educational Preparation: An integral part of the work group experience takes place during the four group meetings prior to leaving for Nicaragua. Volunteers will get to know the other group members, review the logistics, learn about Nicaragua, and plan for the trip together. *SOL requires that all work group volunteers attend at least three of the four pre-departure meetings, and strongly recommends volunteers attend all four.* We also encourage volunteers to educate themselves about the country as much as possible ahead of time in order to enrich the experience. Meetings will be led by volunteer group leaders who will travel with the group. Individuals who are unable to make any of the meetings (because of distance) should be in contact with the SOL office and the work group leader. Through group discussions, talks with locals, and excursions, volunteers will have the chance to revisit the themes they

discussed pre-departure while in Nicaragua. Please use the [Nicaragua Resource Guide](#) for valuable links, books and movies about Nicaragua.

Climate: In Nicaragua, the weather is roughly similar to that of California's central valley, with highs in the 90's and often muggy and very hot. Evenings may be warm or very cool depending on the altitude of the project location. March and April are very hot and dry. The rainy season runs May to September -- afternoon rains may bring a slight cooling. Be prepared to work in mud. Some regions can expect heavy rains while other areas are very hot and dry. Participants should be prepared for all weather conditions.

Accommodations and Work Conditions: Volunteers should expect to be exposed to rustic conditions not too unlike a camping trip. Volunteers stay in the hostel style rooms or a rustic retreat center or hotel, often with shared rooms and bunk beds for 2-8 people. Expect running water and electricity to go out at times. Do not expect hot showers. Expect to use a latrine at the work site, but flush toilets where you sleep at night. **Persons who have a low tolerance for dirt, roosters crowing at night, close-quarter living, serious medical concerns, or lack of privacy may not want to make this trip.** We encourage participants to personally reflect on how they will respond to the rustic conditions and close living quarters. If you have any hesitations about going due to your health, diet, or the conditions of the site please contact SOL to discuss if this is a good fit for you.

Group Life: The group cohesion and bonding both within the work group and with Nicaraguan friends and co-workers is one of the most unforgettable aspects of a work group experience. Time is set aside regularly for work group participant meetings during which volunteers can share about their experiences and reflect on social issues, the meaning of the work, reactions to what they experience, impressions, joys, concerns, conflicts, and more. The work group leader is responsible for facilitating these discussions, typically in the evenings.

Interaction with the Community: North American volunteers work alongside adults and children from the local Nicaraguan communities. Opportunities to play with and learn from local people are plentiful. In most cases, volunteers participate in both welcoming and departure festivities with the local community. There are often opportunities to visit local homes and prepare food together.

Language: Spanish is spoken throughout Nicaragua. Very few people you will encounter will speak English. Some familiarity with Spanish will enable you to exchange simple information and greetings. However, SOL does not require any prior knowledge of Spanish to participate in the work group program. All group activities and educational outings are translated for volunteers by bilingual SOL staff. Volunteers who speak Spanish often get the most out of the work group experience, but people with no Spanish also find it very rewarding.

Food: Meals are usually catered by or eaten at local restaurants. Vegetarians, vegans, and people with restricted diets should be aware that, although in-country staff does their best to accommodate special needs, there is not always a lot of variety in the food the group may eat. Meals often consist of rice, beans, corn tortillas, plantains, cheese, fruit, avocados, eggs and meat. If you have diet restrictions, please let SOL know well in advance. You should also identify yourself to the SOL Nicaragua staff upon arrival to review your restrictions. They will do their best to meet your needs, but cannot guarantee it will be sufficient, depending on your restrictions. You may consider bringing some food from home to

supplement the local diet. Volunteers should always check with SOL Nicaragua staff about where to shop and what is safe to eat.

Work Group Program Fee: The base work group program fee is \$1,550 plus international airfare. This donation covers food (three meals a day), lodging, in-country transportation, emergency traveler's insurance, staff support, and includes general support to Seeds of Learning's education programs in Nicaragua. Consult your group leader for specific group payment amounts and schedules. For more information about scholarship support and fundraising opportunities see: [SOL Financial Assistance](#).

Tax Deductible Service Program Fees: If you are a U.S. tax-payer, you are eligible for out-of-pocket savings for the volunteer service program. The service program fees, air fare, visa, and related travel expenses are tax deductible if the participant adheres to SOL's program itinerary, because they perform the work of Seeds of Learning, a 501c-3 tax-exempt organization. (See [IRS Form 526](#)). Our trips adhere to IRS requirements that students work, on average, eight hours per day, six days out of nine (or five out of seven) to ensure this tax benefit. We can provide a detailed itinerary, however, we also recommend you keep a personal journal detailing the hours you work for tax purposes. Those interested in claiming this benefit will need to consult a personal tax advisor for tax-deductibility advice. Please note: additional travel or vacation either before or after the service program may disqualify all or part of your service program fee, air fare, etc., from this tax deduction.

Nicaragua Host Staff: Volunteer groups will be picked up at the airport by SOL bilingual staff who will accompany the group at all times in Nicaragua, providing translation and facilitating the itinerary and interactions with the community.

Group Leadership: All SOL work groups are led by a North American based volunteer. This person is responsible for disseminating information to all group participants, facilitating group meetings and maintaining contact with the SOL office. While in Nicaragua, this person is also responsible for leading the group and serving as the group liaison to the SOL Nicaragua staff hosts.

Communication in Nicaragua: SOL provides emergency contact information for all participants prior to their departure and SOL staff has cell phones to receive emergency calls. While sometimes available, frequent calls and emails home are not encouraged.

Health Concerns and Limitations: Expect to experience hot, humid, rustic OR wet and cooler conditions. It is extremely important to monitor your health and keep your group leader and SOL staff informed regarding illnesses and other medical conditions. Whenever you feel tired, short of breath or faint, stop work immediately and don't push yourself. While SOL strives to welcome all participants regardless of age or physical capabilities to the program, there are some serious limitations of the roads and physical infrastructure in Nicaragua, which should be taken into account when deciding whether to participate in the work group program. If you have any doubts about your physical condition and/or have a chronic medical condition which requires specialized attention (machinery or otherwise), please contact the SOL US office well before the trip to learn more about the conditions in Nicaragua.

Health and Safety Guidelines

While SOL staff takes as many precautions as possible to ensure the health and safety of all work group volunteers, it is a reality that illness does occur for some. Intestinal discomfort and diarrhea are the most common ailments, followed by heat exhaustion and dehydration. In Nicaragua, food and water borne diseases are the number one cause of illness in travelers. In the event that someone does become sick while in Nicaragua, SOL staff maintains a list of professional health care providers and clinics to serve patients. Please note that all medical costs will need to be covered by the individual needing care (we recommend saving the receipts from costs incurred, to later submit to one's health insurance company).

SOL uses the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) www.cdc.gov/travel/camerica.htm recommendations as a guide for the following vaccines and/or preventative medications. For more information about health and safety concerns the US State Department Consular Information on Nicaragua is available at <http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/country/nicaragua.html>.

Please consult your doctor at least **4-6 weeks before your trip** for further information, discussion, and consideration regarding just some of the following optional immunizations and health risks. **There are no required immunizations and/or medications for travel to Nicaragua**

- Hepatitis A or immune globulin (IG)
- Hepatitis B
- Typhoid Fever
- Malaria- Be aware that some malaria prophylactics have potentially serious, debilitating side effects (e.g. Chloroquine). Therefore, it is strongly recommended that you consult your doctor regarding which, if any, of the malaria prophylactics might be best for you. Be sure to follow the instruction on any prescribed medications, as some require being taken both before and after travel.

Zika, Dengue and Chikungunya, are viral illnesses for which there is no immunization. The diseases is spread through mosquito bites. Familiarize yourself with prevention recommendations for Zika <https://www.cdc.gov/zika/prevention/index.html> and Chikungunya <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices/watch/chikungunya-central-america>.

- You should make special consideration if you have any sort of health condition which could be made worse by getting these viruses and be sure that you are comfortable with the risks and affects of these serious illnesses.

In order to stay healthy, take the following precautions:

- Keep hands clean by washing with soap and water, or using hand sanitizer or wipes before meals and after using restrooms.
- Drink only purified, bottled water or carbonated drinks. Avoid tap water and ice cubes. Make sure water bottles have caps that cover the spouts to avoid contamination. Don't share water bottles with others. Brush your teeth with purified water.
- Drink plenty of purified water to prevent dehydration – at least 2-4 quarts/day.

- Volunteers have found it helpful to bring Gatorade powder for staying hydrated. You may consider bringing an extra water bottle for this.
- Eat only thoroughly cooked food or fruits and vegetables that you have peeled yourself or that have been prepared by a SOL pre-selected eating establishments. Avoid eating food from street vendors.
- Protect yourself from insects by using appropriate repellents as recommended here <https://www.cdc.gov/zika/prevention/prevent-mosquito-bites.html> and wear long-sleeved shirts and pants from dusk to dawn.
- For protection against the sun, apply sun block regularly and wear a hat and sunglasses.
- To prevent fungal and parasitic infections, keep feet clean and dry, and do not go barefoot. Wear sandals in the shower.
- Some people have found it very useful to take **acidophilus** tablets either every morning or before every meal as a preventative measure.
- Ensure that you bring a supply of all necessary prescription medications with the pharmacy label on the prescription package. Do not plan on medicines being available for purchase.
- No one is permitted to go out alone at night. All who go out in the evening should notify the group leader before going and return by the local curfew set by SOL staff.
- Monitor your health. Keep your group leader and SOL staff informed of your status, including diarrhea and exhaustion, so that they are able to help monitor your health. When you feel tired, take it easy—don't push yourself to exhaustion that could make you susceptible to illness and/or accidents.

First Aid

- Each group will be provided a first aid kit in Nicaragua.
- SOL staff has developed emergency response plans and has directories for local medical professionals and pharmacies in case of medical emergencies.

Cultural Differences

There are a number of cultural differences between the United States and Nicaragua. Beyond the obvious differences in language and the people, there are slight idiosyncrasies that are often revealed in the culture. By better understanding some of the differences, such as the concept of time, dress and behavior, and manners and language, volunteers will have a more enriching experience while in country.

Time: The pace of life and the speed with which things happen in Nicaragua are generally slower than what many people are used to in the United States. People may show up late for appointments, or perhaps not at all. Most people you will meet do not expect expediency and efficiency in their lives on a daily basis. They are not accustomed to quick and easy Internet access, express gas stations with credit card machines at the pump, cell phones, answering machines, pagers and other gadgets. The country you are visiting is a less developed country, which has not had the opportunity to access much of the technology and resources of the so-called "developed countries." This translates into slower, bumpier roads (if any), unreliable telephones, power and water outages, crowded buses that may break down, and moments (even hours) when you may have to stand around waiting for people. SOL encourages volunteers to understand these differences and to be patient and sensitive to the delays and comparatively slower pace of life in Nicaragua. Many volunteers have found the pace actually quite refreshing during their work group experience.

Dress and Behavior: Although Nicaraguans may have patches on their well-worn clothing; you will notice that when they step out of their homes, they look presentable. Cut-off shorts, dirty t-shirts and baggy jeans are generally not a part of the Nicaraguan wardrobe. Most people's clothing is neat and pressed. It is important to respect this and err on the side of more conservative dress, rather than giving offense to locals. Foreign women in Nicaragua tend to draw a lot of attention from men. SOL encourages women to dress conservatively so as not to draw unwanted attention to themselves and the entire group. **Short skirts and shorts, low cut shirts, and shirts with spaghetti straps should not be worn.**

Manners and Language: One of the most difficult parts of being in another country is getting past the language barrier and being able to communicate with the people around you. Although you may feel that you do not know a single word of Spanish, it means a lot to local people if you at least try. Remember that just as you may not know Spanish, often they do not know English. Elevating your voice or speaking slower to someone in English will not necessarily make you better understood by a native Spanish speaker. It will likely just offend them. Motioning, signing, showing, or using the simple words "okay," "por favor" (please) and "gracias" (thank you) can make a world of difference, as your effort to communicate will not be lost on the other person. If you know a little Spanish, use it! You will make mistakes and may be laughed at, but in a very supportive way, and you will find yourself encouraged to try more.

Guidelines for Responsible Travel

When traveling in any foreign country, especially the countries that you will be visiting, it is very important to adhere to the following guidelines for responsible travel. Please contact our office should you have a concern or question about any of these.

- Travel in the spirit of humility and with a genuine desire to meet and talk with local people; travel to meet, not conquer.
- Reflect daily on your experiences; seek to deepen your understanding. “What enriches you may rob or violate others.”
- Be environmentally friendly; use energy, water and other resources efficiently and in keeping with local practices. Only bring necessary technological gadgetry. Participate in local recycling programs where available. Try not to bring into the country any containers that you don’t plan to take out.
- Don't create barriers
- Acquaint yourself with the local customs. Be culturally sensitive, especially with photography; people will be happy to help you.
- Realize that the people in the area you visit often have time concepts and thought patterns different from your own; not inferior, just different.
- Be economically beneficial. Spend money so that it stays in the community. When buying, remember that a bargain may be obtained because of low wages paid to the producer. Do not purchase products made from endangered species.
- If alternatives exist, try not to buy US products that are made by companies whose profits leave the communities (such as multinational companies) where they are sold
- Cultivate the habit of listening and observing, rather than merely hearing and looking. Discover the enrichment that comes from seeing another way of life.
- Listen and learn, please do not criticize cultural practices.
- Make an effort to learn the names of our in-country staff and the people with whom you work, even a few phrases in Spanish.
- Evaluate requests for gifts carefully, please do not give individual gifts, but communicate requests and desires to give to our in-country staff.

These guidelines were adapted from www.thetravelspecialists.biz

Packing List

Pack lightly. Most of the time, you will want to be in clothes that you can get dirty. There will be opportunities to do laundry by hand or pay someone to wash your clothes (approximately \$.25 per piece.) **Please check for last minute baggage information and TSA requirements at the airline website for baggage limits and size restrictions.** As much as you are able to carry donations for SOL (volunteer donated school supplies and/or donations in the SOL office) the better. We recommend not bringing jewelry, wedding rings, expensive watches, cell phones, tablets, video cameras, and other electronic devices.

Money: Each participant must take **\$10 cash for a tourist visas** to enter Nicaragua. Participants should also take along US cash, typically around \$50-150, for spending money to purchase souvenirs and personal incidentals. SOL staff can help you exchange money to Nicaraguan Cordobas after you arrive. Take US dollars (small bills of 20 or less) that are newer “clean bills” that have no rips or blemishes.

Documentation: Passport - *must be valid for at least six months after the date of departure.*

Clothing: (easy to rinse fabrics are recommended as they can be hand washed and dried easily. Bring enough clothing, as laundering may not be an option– so bring enough and/or plan on hand washing and air drying. The quantity of clothes below assume that you will be rewearing work clothes for multiple days between laundering.)

- 1 long sleeve cotton work shirt, mostly for sun and insect protection
- 2-3 pair jeans or work pants
- 2-3 pair shorts
- 4-5 T-shirts for working (no tank tops)
- Underwear, socks, night clothes
- 1 jacket, sweater, windbreaker or waterproof jacket or rain poncho for Matagalpa region
- 1 pair work or rubber boots(work sites can be very muddy, closed toe shoes are required on work site)
- 1 pair tennis or other comfortable shoes
- 1 pair sandals
- Hat with wide brim to protect from the sun is best or baseball cap, sunglasses
- 1 pair work gloves (leather or tighter fitting garden gloves)
- 1 set of nice, but casual comfortable clothes for plane travel and excursions to the city
- 2 sets of after-work comfortable clothes
- Swim suit

Accessories:

- Contact lens solution or an extra pair of glasses (neither are easily available locally)
- Bandana
- Flashlight
- Day pack
- Towel

Health: see *Health and Safety Guidelines*

- All other prescription medications you need – enough for the whole trip

- ❑ 1 - 2 water bottles (with a cap to protect the area you drink from)
- ❑ Mosquito repellent
- ❑ Sun screen (at least SPF 30)
- ❑ Treatments for insect bites, sunburn, diarrhea, headaches and general aches & pains (note that there will be a First Aid kit with the group at all times)
- ❑ Preventive medicine: acidophilus (we HIGHLY recommend you take this before, during and after the trip) or Pepto Bismol can be very helpful for upset stomach, lip balm, hand sanitizer and wipes, vitamins.
- ❑ Toiletries (remember all gels and liquids over 3.4 oz. must be in checked luggage)

Recommended:

- ❑ Pictures of your family and/or home community to share with locals you meet
- ❑ Notebook for journaling, book to read, inspirational book of readings/quotations to share with the group, playing cards
- ❑ Simple crafts and games (i.e. origami, jump ropes, soccer balls, Spanish story books, bracelet making supplies) to share with local communities
- ❑ Ear plugs for sleeping (especially if you are even slightly sensitive to noises at night)
- ❑ Ziploc bags
- ❑ Energy bars, granola bars, trail mix or snacks
- ❑ Gatorade powder
- ❑ Favorite foods, (though we encourage you to eat local foods, which will be provided during your stay)
- ❑ **School supplies for donation to SOL's programs and schools (see list below). As much as you can fit in your luggage the better!**

Nicaragua Educational Program Resources Needed

Please consider taking as many donated supplies to Nicaragua to help support our educational programs as you are able to. Upon your arrival, let the SOL In-country staff know that you have these materials and they will later distribute them to the appropriate SOL programs and communities. Please contact SOL if you have any questions about items you plan to take.

In order of priority:

1. Funds to purchase needed supplies, books, and technology equipment in Nicaragua. This is the preferred option, as we are able to procure the most relevant, up to date materials in Nicaragua. If you are interested in this option, please contact SOL's US office 707-939-0471.
2. Computers/Technology – *for one of 7 SOL Learning Resource Centers*
 - a. Laptop computers (new or very gently used, less than 2 years old)
 - b. Tablets (any kind, less than 2 years old)
 - c. Smart phones (any kind, less than 2 years old)
3. Books in Spanish – *available to children & adults in SOL's Learning Resource Centers or SOL built schools.*
 - a. Dictionaries- (Spanish only)
 - b. Reference books
 - c. Children's story books
 - d. Young adult books
 - e. How to books

For a complete list of titles click [here](#).

4. Materials for our education programs – (new or gently used)
 - 50 piece or less puzzles
 - Games such as: Connect Four, Sequence, Spot It, Chess, Checkers, Othello, Pick-up sticks, Monopoly, Loteria, Zingo, Macula, Jenga, Bingo, Candy Land, etc. We prefer that word-based games are in Spanish.
 - Construction sets such like Legos, Tinker toys, and Gears.
 - Toys: tea sets, dolls and clothes, toy cars, simple didactic games/ activities for young children
 - Craft materials: colored construction paper, scissors, pipe cleaners, colored felt, glitter, stickers, beading supplies, popsicle sticks, glitter glue, glue sticks, silicon glue, silicon glue sticks, silicone glue gun, crayons, colored pencils, markers, hole punchers, staplers, paper plates, paper bags, yarn, embroidery thread, etc.
 - School supplies: backpacks, pencils, pens, notebooks, markers, highlighters, colored pencils, crayons, scissors, erasers, pencil sharpeners, rulers, glue, USB memory sticks.
 - Supplies for classrooms: maps in Spanish, world globe, pencil sharpeners for the classroom (metal or electric), wall clocks (with extra batteries), whiteboard markers.
 - Professional quality musical instruments (contact SOL for more details)
 - High quality construction tools: sanders, angle grinders, portable HVLP Painting System, Stanley "Shark-tooth" hand saws, hammers, side-cutting pliers, mortar trowels, goggles, leather gloves, drill and screwdriver bits. (contact SOL ahead of time so we can confirm if the item is needed)
 - Sports and recreation items- soccer, baseball, frisbee, jump rope

If items are purchased on Amazon, please shop with [smile.amazon.com](https://www.smile.amazon.com) and select SOL to benefit from a additional donation from amazon for each purchase you make. Thank You!!