



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 4,500 volunteers who have traveled to Latin America with SOL.

Since SOL first began its work in Central America, 28 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 learn more about the community's needs and aspirations in working towards commonly defined goals. We share the understanding with the local community that their involvement, commitment, and leadership in this process is what will guarantee its success.

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 this packet.

A Note about Travel and Security in Nicaragua for Work Groups Traveling in 2019 and 2020

As stated in our Work Group Application, although the US State Department has a level 3 Travel Warning for Nicaragua (as of September 2019), per the assessment of the SOL Board and staff, we have determined that travel to, from, and on Corn Island and to Ciudad Dario and the department of Matagalpa is safe. However, if Seeds of Learning deems travel to Corn Island and/or Ciudad Dario/department of Matagalpa is unsafe and cancels the work group at any time prior to the trip and/or if a participant determines that it's unsafe at any time and wants to cancel his/her trip, he/she will be refunded the entire amount paid to Seeds of Learning minus a \$200 administrative fee and minus any amount already paid to an airline carrier that is not recoverable. Participants will only be refunded the amount paid to the air carrier that SOL is able to recover on their behalf. This may include and be up to losing the entire amount. Thank you for being willing to take that risk. If a participant decides to make a cancellation at any point for reasons other than safety, he/she will be subject to the regular SOL Work Group Cancellation Policies.

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.

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.*

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. 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 work group program fee (\$1,500) covers food (three meals a day), lodging, in-country transportation, emergency travelers 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. taxpayer, you are eligible for out-of-pocket savings for the volunteer service program. The service program fees, airfare, 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 501 c-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.

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. 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. 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 that requires specialized attention, please contact the SOL US office.

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 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 following the [CDC](#) & WHO guidelines for immunizations.

For more information about health and safety concerns the US State Department Consular Information on Nicaragua is available [here](#). Please consult your doctor at least **4-6 weeks before your trip** for further information, discussion, and consideration.

Zika, Dengue and Chikungunya, are viral illnesses for which there is no immunization. The disease 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 effects 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.
- 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.
- Eat only food that has been prepared by a SOL pre-selected eating establishments.
- 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.
- Some people have found it helpful 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.
- SOL staff will have a first aid kit and emergency response plans and directories of medical professionals and pharmacies in case of emergency.

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. 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 of school supplies the better. We recommend not bringing jewelry and other expensive 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.*** Verify this well in advance of the travel date. 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.

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 re-wearing work clothes for multiple days between laundering.)

- 1-2 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
- **1 pair work or rubber boots** (work sites can be very muddy)
- 1 pair tennis or other comfortable shoes
- 1 pair sandals
- Hat with a 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
- Swimsuit/swimming shorts
- Bandana (if you prefer)
- Flashlight
- Day pack
- Towel
- All other prescription medications you need – enough for the whole trip
- 2 liter size refillable water bottles (with a cap to protect the area you drink from)
- Mosquito repellent
- Sunscreen (at least SPF 30)
- Treatments for insect bites, sunburn, diarrhea, headaches and general aches & pains
- Preventive medicine: acidophilus (HIGHLY recommended to take before and during the trip), lip balm, hand sanitizer, and vitamins.
- Toiletries (remember all gels and liquids over 3.4 oz. must be in checked luggage)
- Notebook for journaling, book to read, inspirational book of readings/quotations to share with the group, playing cards
- Earplugs for sleeping
- Ziploc bags

- Energy bars, granola bars, trail mix or snacks (though we encourage you to eat local foods, which will be provided during your stay)
- Simple crafts and games (i.e. origami, jump ropes, soccer balls, Spanish story books, bracelet making supplies) to share with local communities
- **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 the 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 be 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), and whiteboard markers.
 - Professional quality musical instruments (contact SOL for more details)
 - High quality construction tools: (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 and select SOL to benefit from an additional donation from amazon for each purchase you make. Thank You!!

Nicaragua Resource Guide

Working in Central America can be an incredibly fulfilling and life changing experience, but it is one that requires preparation and reflection. The social and economic realities of Nicaragua will undoubtedly call forth questions, reactions, and confusion. You will be prompted to analyze some of the overall as well as everyday causes of the pervasive poverty that you will witness. These conditions are a product of a history that has been determined by geography, culture, politics, economics, and international relations, among other social forces.

Seeds of Learning staff have developed this list of resources to use as a tool to assist you in preparing for your SOL volunteer experience. We ask that you learn as much as you can about Nicaragua before you go which will help to contextualize your experience there. It has consistently been our experience that the more people educate themselves before they travel, the richer their experience will be.

We appreciate and welcome your feedback and suggestions to help us improve our reference list. Thank you for joining a SOL work group and helping SOL to fulfill its mission of increasing access to education and cross-cultural understanding.

Websites

- 1) **World Health Organization**- Basic national statistics www.who.int/countries/nic/en/
- 2) **Nicanet**- Current news briefs in English, (free email list serve) www.nicanet.org
- 3) **Tortillas con Sal**- News reporting and commentary, English and Spanish www.tortillaconsal.com
- 4) **Envio**- Nicaraguan magazine with political and economic analysis www.envio.org.ni/index.en
- 5) **Nicaragua Now- Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign**- Articles and interviews <http://nicaraguasc.org.uk/resources/>

Movies

1. Nicaragua: An Unfinished Revolution An excellent 4-part documentary done by Al Jazeera and broadcast on July 17, 2009. [Nicaragua: An Unfinished Revolution part 1](#) YouTube has parts 1-4, each about 10 minutes long. It's very well done and an extremely comprehensive political history that focuses on the revolution and where Nicaragua is today politically.
2. Deadly Embrace: World Bank and International Monetary Fund in Nicaragua After five years of IMF and World Bank assistance, Nicaragua experienced the worst economic collapse in its history. Deadly Embrace traces the history of U.S. involvement in Nicaragua, and its economic plight as influenced by the IMF, the World Bank and US agencies.
3. Hombres Armados (Men with Guns), (1997) John Sayles' social, religious, political, military realities in this movie, while being generic to the region, are very accurate to the general sentiment and complexity of the times. Set in an unnamed Central American country, it is the story of one man's discovery of what actually happened in the political history of his nation, and what happened to his students.
4. Dying to Live is a profound look at the human face of the immigrant. It explores who these people are, why they leave their homes and what they face in their journey. <http://www.nd.edu/~latino/dyingtolive/film.shtml>
5. The End of Poverty? A documentary discourse on why poverty exists when there is so much wealth in the world. Helps understand not only the US economic system, but also the foundations of today's global economy.
6. Dreaming Nicaragua A sensitive and lyrical portrayal of four children living in extreme poverty in Nicaragua.
7. Pictures from a Revolution In 1981, Susan Meiselas published her photographs documenting the Sandinista revolution. Ten years later, Meiselas returns looking for the people who appear in the photographs: where are they now, what do they remember, what do they think of their country and of the revolution?
8. Harvest of Empire, This is a movie and book about the roots of immigration stemming from US policy in Latin America

http://www.democracynow.org/blog/2013/4/30/see_democracy_now_s_juan_gonzalez_speak_at_upcoming_screenings_of_harvest_of_empire

Books

1. Nicaragua, Living in the Shadow of the Eagle by Thomas W. Walker and Christine J. Wade.
2. The Death of Ben Linder: The Story of a North American in Sandinista Nicaragua by Joan Kruckewitt
3. The Country under my Skin and A Memoir of Love and War by Gioconda Belli
4. Nicaragua: Surviving the legacy of US Policy, Photography by Paul Dix <http://nicaraguaphototestimony.org/>
5. Blood of Brothers : Life and War In Nicaragua by Kinzer, Stephen.
6. Life Is Hard : Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power In Nicaragua. By Lancaster, Roger N.
7. Nicaragua in Focus: A guide to people politics and culture by Hazel Plunkett

Articles

1. Mango, Mango. A family, a Fruit Stand, and Survival on \$4.50 a day, by Douglas Haynes. Great article that encapsulates many current realities and struggles of the working class and marginalized in Nicaragua today, <http://blog.longreads.com/2014/08/26/mango-mango-a-family-a-fruit-stand-and-survival-on-4-50-a-day/>
2. Poverty in Nicaragua drives children out of school and into work, by Nina Lakhani. Current educational reality and statistics about school retention, attendance and challenges. <http://gu.com/p/48akj/sbl>

Curriculum

1. Inside the Volcano: A Curriculum on Nicaragua. Multi lesson resource that is still relevant though it is dated. Great concepts to explore history and politics and balances of power. Warning this is a big PDF file and therefore slow to download. <http://www.teachingforchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Inside-the-Volcano.pdf>