

# *Visit to Nicaragua*

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David Warner, MPP

This is one trip where a tiny nagging fear about my personal safety is lodged at the back of my mind. Rationally, I know that safety should not be a concern. I will not be in the war zone. Yet Nicaragua is a country currently enduring a war.

Travelling without pre-conceived notions reduces the risk of disappointment and increases the opportunity of objectivity. I have read many, but not all, of my briefing notes and have dutifully attended all the preparatory meetings with both Ontario and Nicaragua officials .... but now, the real thing!

People, places and politics in a different venue await and no doubt command a different understanding.

Up at 5 a.m. and 18 hours later I am in my room in Nicaragua. My room mate is Derek Nelson, a reporter from Southam News. The room is modest but adequate. There's an air conditioner and a shower. The weather is warm and a bit humid.

Our group, which is an interesting collection of six politicians, three reporters, one prison chaplain, one committee clerk and two interpreters, was warmly greeted at the airport by government officials and local news media. Like everyone else, I am eager to begin what promises to be an exhilarating experience.

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## **Saturday, March 14, 1987**

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The day was packed full of history, shopping and sightseeing. We visited places which commemorate early attempts by Nicaraguans to gain their independence.

Augusto Sandino was leader during the 1930s until being assassinated by a member of the Somoza family. Sandino's birthplace is well maintained and worth seeing.

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*David Warner represents Scarborough-Ellesmere in the Ontario Legislative Assembly. In March 1987 he and five other members of the Assembly undertook a six day visit to Nicaragua. Mr. Warner recorded some of his observations in diary form.*

Our personal attempt to improve the economy at the open market was gratefully received. Just about everything from fresh fruit to hammocks is for sale. Mechanical failure at the local brewery has caused what could best be described as a national disaster - no beer! Our guides took us on a delightful boat ride on Lake Nicaragua. During this peaceful ride, we stopped at a small island. The occupants of the island operate a modest food and beverage service and they had beer! Our guides are marvelous!

The countryside is a land of contrast - from lush tropical vegetation to dry, arid land. Poverty is evident everywhere. Most of the houses are small with the barest of necessities. The people we have met are kind, cheerful and very friendly.

Our group is getting to know each other better and everyone gets along quite well with one another. A pleasant dinner, complete with excellent food, cold beer and much laughter, brought our first day to an end.

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## **Sunday, March 15, 1987**

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Baseball is Nicaragua's national sport. We were treated to the second game of the country's championship series. The final score was 6-2 in a game which featured excellent fielding, good hitting and first rate pitching.

Lunch was enjoyed in an open air, thatched-roof restaurant situated on the side of a volcanic lagoon about 100 metres above the water.

We had time for a swim in the pool at our hotel before leaving for mass at a local Roman Catholic church. The service was quite interesting because of the accompaniment by a variety of instruments and pleas by the priest for North Americans in the audience to take home a message to the United States that Nicaraguans want peace. The paintings all around the church were dramatic, including a powerful painting of Archbishop Romero who was assassinated a few years ago, allegedly by the Central Intelligence Agency.

Dinner, late at night, was at a lovely restaurant on the side of a hill overlooking Managua. In this peaceful, tranquil setting, we were able to discuss politics, religion and the Revolution with our guide, Enrique.

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## Monday, March 16, 1987

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Our series of meetings with trade, tourist and parliamentary people was helpful. It is going to take a while longer to sort out precisely what Ontario can do to be of practical assistance.

We laid a wreath at the eternal flame, visited the Post Office, were treated to a delightful lunch and completed the day by being hosted to a superb dinner of shrimp and steak.

A few basic things are painfully evident. The war is putting a terrible strain on both the people and their economy. The United States embargo is hurting the economy quite badly. There is neither sufficient capital nor credit for the government to develop the kind of projects which would strengthen the economy.

It is difficult to appreciate the American opposition to the Nicaraguan government. The three basics established by the F.S.L.N. are a pluralistic political system which includes free elections, a mixed economy with both private and public investment and non-alignment internationally. There are seven political parties represented in the Assembly on a proportional basis.

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## Tuesday, March 17, 1987

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I know now what a geothermal project is. Canada is helping Nicaragua to drill down into a volcano to release extremely hot water. The steam is separated from the water then used to operate a turbine which in turn creates electrical power. The concept is simple and there is an abundance of volcanos. Our visit to the Momotombo project was enlightening.

Another superb lunch, this time shrimp and chicken.

Our late afternoon meeting was followed by a visit to a local popular cantina where we were treated to a traditional meal of turtle, fried beans, rice, barbecued pork and beef, pork rinds, tortillas and generous quantities of rum which is mixed with fresh lime and fruit juices. Two youngsters played their guitars for a while. The international recipe for a delightful evening was perfected - good food, good drink and excellent company!

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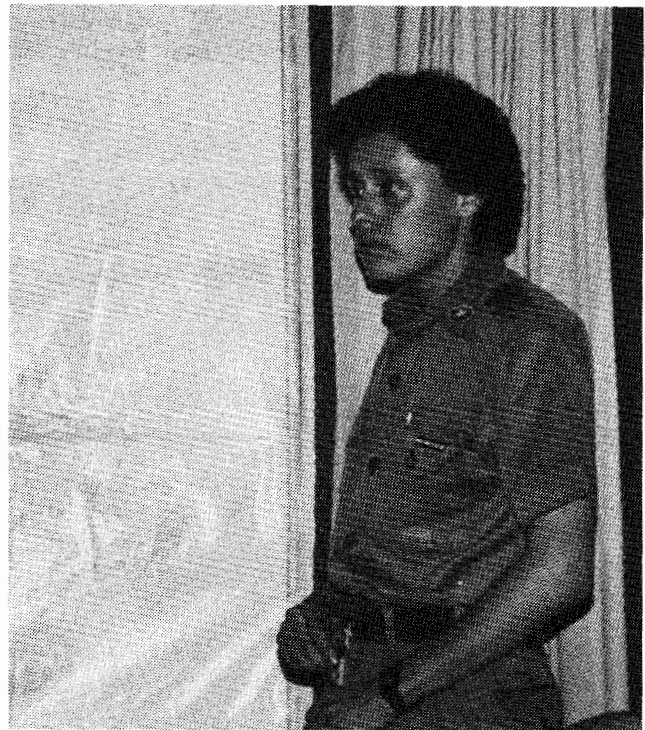
## Wednesday, March 18, 1987

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Today we met with two of the opposition parties - the Liberals and the Christian Socialists. Although both of them exhibited the usual opposition stance to a government, they also acknowledged that Nicaragua is developing a political pluralism. The meetings were quite helpful in developing a better understanding of how the country is functioning.



*Nicaraguan Minister of Tourism Hetty Lewites (third from right) greets Ontario parliamentarians, Joan Smith, Christine Hart, Richard Johnston, David Warner and Karl Morin-Strom.*



*Carlos Téllez (l) President of the National Assembly and Dora Maria Téllez, Minister of Health (r).*

The Conservatives failed to show up for our scheduled meeting. It is distinctly possible that the "no show" was deliberate. Nor could we locate the headquarters of the Communist party so that meeting was scrapped.

The highlight of the day was our meeting with the Minister of Health. Commendante Dora Maria Telléz, while in her early twenties, led one of the two major fronts against Somoza. She was responsible for several major victories which resulted in the eventual triumph in 1979.

I was impressed with her commitment to public health and how quickly she has accomplished a high level of community participation in health care. Like everyone else we met, she was candid and open, talking about successes and failures, the problems and the challenges.

The evening was delightful with a visit to two cantinas, the first for supper and the second for music. Sitting out under the stars drinking rum and lime and listening to guitars and singers, it is hard to imagine there is a war on.

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### **Thursday, March 19, 1987**

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Canadian cows are quite contented living in Nicaragua. Our government has provided about 3,000 dairy cattle. The government-run farm we visited is immense, well organized and very efficient. Not only does it supply a large quantity of milk for Managua but all the bulls who

are born are being given to independent farmers throughout the country. Our visit to the farm concluded with a delicious meal. Linen covered tables located under palm trees with a lake close by and volcano for a backdrop provided a picturesque setting for our meal.

We met with the Vice-President of Nicaragua, Sergio Ramirez Mercado in the late afternoon. He carefully explained the extent of the economic war which the United States is waging against Nicaragua. In addition to the blockade, and of a far more serious nature, is the total blockage of money from the International Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the International Americas Development Bank. They believe the United States has managed to pressure the directors to not approve any credit or loans to Nicaragua. The result is that the desperately needed schools and hospitals cannot be built and agricultural projects cannot be developed. Is the United States trying to starve Nicaragua?

In the evening we had dinner with the Minister of Education, Father Fernando Cardenal. This very experienced gentleman of the Catholic Church has a staunch commitment to both his religion and the revolution. He is a thoughtful, incisive man who has very definite ideas on how to bring education to the people. Already he has some impressive achievements. In a country of three million people, one million are attending university night classes. Illiteracy has been reduced from 56% to 12% in a very short time. I was deeply impressed with Father Cardenal.

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## Friday, March 20, 1987

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The morning was devoted to a tour of a maximum security prison. They have an interesting system which concentrates on each individual and attempts to teach practical skills, literacy or education to prepare the person to become a contributing member of society. So far the results are good with few "return visitors" to the prison. It is a reward system with time off the sentence based on the degree of co-operation and willingness to acquire skills.

The afternoon meeting was with the President of the National Assembly, Carlos Nunez Téllez. It was a useful discussion setting the groundwork for parliamentary exchanges which could involve both elected people and clerks.

A concluding reception featured numerous members of the Assembly, officials, spouses and others. It was a very pleasant occasion. Our signal to leave was when all the lights went out, not just the lights of the restaurant but the entire city of Managua! The power failure lasted about an hour.

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## Saturday, March 21, 1987

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The official meetings are over so now we have some time to see a couple of places outside of Managua.

We headed north to the City of Matagalpa, a city of 200,000 situated in the mountains. After a brief stop and some shopping, we headed higher into the mountains. Lunch was at a very attractive restaurant situated by a lake and in the midst of a coffee plantation.

The scenery all afternoon was breathtaking. The rugged mountain terrain was complemented with lush tropical growth.

Our only casualty of the trip occurred today. An isolated but picturesque spot in the mountains presented an unexpected opportunity to play baseball with three children who lived nearby. A sharply hit line drive struck our ace pitcher David Reville, (MPP, Riverdale), squarely in the eye. Fortunately, although, he required medical attention, David's eye was not damaged. Our final stop before returning to Managua was the small mountain town of Jinotega.

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## Sunday, March 22, 1987

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A trip to the beach was a wonderful way to end our stay. An hour's drive was necessary to take us from Managua

to the Pacific Ocean beach. Arrangements had been made for the use of a "beach cottage" which was located near the beach but up a hill, affording us an excellent view. We spent some time swimming, sitting on the beach and walking along the seashore.

Our final meal with our hosts, including their spouses and children, was in the "beach cottage". Lively music, good food and the exceptional Nicaraguan rum provided a great ending to our trip. This delightful day will ease the agony of a 4 a.m. start tomorrow for our return to Canada.

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## Observations

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Following our return, a number of points stand out in my mind. This is a deeply religious country which is essentially Roman Catholic but includes a range of Protestant faiths. Not only is freedom of religion guaranteed but the President of Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega, stated, while we were there, "We pray for peace so that we may pray for peace".

This is a peoples' revolution. Common, ordinary people rose up against a dictator. At the time when the vast majority of the population wanted to overthrow Somoza, fortunately the Sandinista groups who had been fighting isolated skirmishes with Somoza were able to mobilize a concerted effort with the people.

"Just about everyone in this country buys and sells" explained one of our guides. People sell oranges from their houses or cashews out on the streets. They have a very individual market system which totally defies the philosophy of communism.

The government is young and most of its elected members are inexperienced. The idealism, determination to succeed and commitment to involve the people in the building of a new society more than makes up for any lack of experience.

As the President of the National Assembly told us, this is not a poor country, this is an impoverished country. I agree. The sad part is that if the country was not at war it could solve many of its economic problems. Without the blockade by the international money markets, Nicaragua could develop its natural resources sufficiently to raise the country's standard of living substantially.

I found the people to be warm and friendly. They are reaching out for help! Only a very cruel person could deny the Nicaraguan people and their courageous government peace and the opportunity to live a decent life.