

## Geography 489 (4 units)

### Special Topics in The Geography of Central America

<b>Dr. Robert Dull</b> (robdull@geog.tamu.edu)	<b>Summer Session 2004 – first term</b>
<b>Department of Geography,</b>	<b>June 7th – June 28<sup>th</sup> 2004</b>
<b>Texas A&amp;M University</b>	<b>Location: Nicaragua</b>

**Geography 489:** This course will provide the students with a broad background in the cultural and physical geography of Central America, using Nicaragua as a point of reference. Students will learn about: the basic geology of the isthmus; the geologic hazards that continue to plague the inhabitants of Central America (volcanic eruptions & earthquakes), the broad biogeographic realms of the Neotropics; the history of Pre-Columbian occupation in Central America; the colonial period; the modern era; the challenges of global development, environmental conservation, and sustainability. The course will include a mix of lectures at the San Juan del Sur classroom facility and field trips to illustrate material from the books and the lecture. Students will keep journal notes for each trip to be turned in at the end of class. Each student will also choose a paper topic during the semester prior to departure, and they will prepare a presentation to be given to the class in Nicaragua.

This course will include a major field study components that could not be offered on the College Station campus. We will visit Pre-Columbian archaeological sites, a 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish colonial town (UNESCO World Heritage Site), agricultural plots, tropical deciduous forests, cloud forests, mangroves, volcanoes, beaches, and the second largest lake in Latin America (Lake Nicaragua). All of these sites can be reached within a two-hour drive from our home base and classroom facility in San Juan del Sur, Rivas, Nicaragua. Also a site of historical importance, San Juan del Sur is a port town developed by American entrepreneur Cornelius Vanderbilt in the 1850s to take advantage of the Gold Rush migration to California.

**Some facts about Nicaragua:** 1) it is the largest country in Central America with a diversity of landscapes and a rich human history; 2) it has the lowest crime rate in Central America (U.S. World and News Report, 1998); 3) it boasts the fastest growing economy in Central America; 4) it also has the fastest growing tourism sector in Central America, which is currently second in size only to Costa Rica (and scheduled to pass C.R. within the next decade).

#### **Course Structure**

The course will begin with five 3-hour evening pre-departure meetings in College Station in April-May, 2004. Once in Nicaragua, the course will consist of Monday-Friday lectures, assigned readings, and several field trips throughout western Nicaragua.

**Pre-departure classes:** five 3-hour pre-departure meetings will be scheduled. These will be in lecture and discussion format, and are designed to give students an introduction to Central America and Nicaragua. These sessions will set the stage for the three-week field component by introducing broad themes to be covered in Nicaragua: Physical geography, cultural history, natural hazards, and Nicaragua today.

<b>Nicaragua:</b>	<b>Classroom Location</b> Casa de Cultura San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua
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*Week One:*

Geology, Biogeography, and natural history of the isthmus. Field trips to: La Flor Wildlife Reserve (tropical dry forest ecosystem, sea turtle nesting grounds), Mombacho Volcano Reserve (composite cone volcano, cloud forest ecosystem),

*Week Two:*

Cultural history, natural hazards (earthquakes, volcanoes, tropical cyclones). Field trips to San Ramon (coffee cultivation) Leon Viejo (16<sup>th</sup> century colonial town, natural hazards – earthquake, volcanism), Las Casitas Volcano (Hurricane Mitch lahar, hazards).

*Week Three:*

Modern economy, farming, economic development, conservation. Pie de Gigante (mangrove ecosystem, artisanal fishing, farming cooperative, site for proposed Nicaragua inter-oceanic “Dry Canal”), Masaya (traditional marketplace), San Juan del Sur fiestas patronales – June 24 (a local San Juan del Sur community celebration held annually).