



International Boundary Study

No. 158 – August 16, 1976

Costa Rica – Nicaragua Boundary

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**The Geographer
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Bureau of Intelligence and Research**

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COSTA RICA – NICARAGUA BOUNDARY

I. BOUNDARY BRIEF

The Costa Rica–Nicaragua boundary is approximately 192 miles long. Inland from the Caribbean Sea, it crosses a sandbank and then continues in a clockwise direction along the shore of the Laguna de Harbor Head to the Rio San Juan. The line then follows the right bank of the Rio San Juan for about 80 miles to pillar No. 2. Between pillars No. 2 and No. 20, the boundary consists of straight-line segments for about 108 miles. The remainder of the boundary is a straight line to the center of Bahia de Salinas at 11°03'47"N. and 85°43'52"W.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Initially the Costa Rica–Nicaragua boundary was determined by the limits of Spanish administrative units. Both the province of Costa Rica and the province of Nicaragua became independent from Spain on September 15, 1821; and from 1824 to 1838, they were members of the Federation of Central America, which also included Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. To resolve a number of remaining territorial problems, the Canas–Jerez Treaty was signed by Costa Rica and Nicaragua on April 15, 1858. With subsequent modifications, this is the basic treaty determining the boundary between the two states.

The treaty of 1858 stated that:¹

Art. 2. The dividing line of the two Republics, starting from the North Sea, shall begin at the extremity of Castilla Point, at the mouth of the San Juan river, in Nicaragua, and shall continue along the right bank of said River to a point 3 English miles from El Castillo Viejo, measured from the exterior fortifications; thence in a curve, with center in the works of El Castillo and distant 3 English miles therefrom, to a point 2 miles from the river bank at the waters above El Castillo; thence towards the Sapoa river, which empties into Lake Nicaragua, in a course distant always 2 miles from the right bank of the San Juan river, with its turnings, to its origin in the Lake and along the right shore of said Lake to the aforesaid Sapoa river where this line parallel to the said banks terminates; from the point where it meets the Sapoa river, which as stated should be 2 miles from the Lake, in an astronomically straight line to the center point of Salinas Bay in the South Sea, where the demarcation of territory of the two Republics terminates;...

Between 1858 and 1888, several new treaties were proposed but none was ratified. Disagreements arose relative to the use of ports and waterways, and consideration was

¹ Gordon Ireland. *Boundaries, Possessions, and Conflicts in Central and North America and the Caribbean*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1941, pp. 13–14.

given to changing the Caribbean end of the boundary from the Rio San Juan to the Rio Colorado. An additional complication was introduced by the possible construction of an interoceanic canal utilizing the Rio San Juan and the Lago de Nicaragua. In March 1888, President Grover Cleveland of the United States handed down an arbitral award upholding the treaty of 1858.

A convention signed by Costa Rica and Nicaragua on March 27, 1896, provided for a mixed demarcation commission to trace and to monument the boundary according to the treaty of 1858 and the arbitral award of the President of the United States in 1888. The convention also provided for an engineer arbitrator to make decisions on disputes concerning the demarcation. Edward P. Alexander of the United States, who was appointed arbitrator, made a total of five awards.² Three of the awards clarified specific locational problems such as the specific alignment of the Caribbean end of the boundary, the shore of Lago de Nicaragua, and the coordinates for the center of Bahia de Salinas.

III. ALIGNMENT

A detailed alignment of the boundary sector between the Caribbean Sea and the Rio San Juan was contained in the first award of Arbitrator Alexander on September 30, 1897, as follows:

. . . the following initial line of the boundary: its direction shall be northeast and southeast . . . across the sandbank from the Caribbean Sea to the waters of Laguna Harbor Head. At its closest point, it shall pass 300 feet from the northwest side of a small cabin now existing in that neighborhood. On reaching the waters of Laguna Harbor Head, the line shall turn to the left, that is, toward the southeast and shall follow the shore around the harbor until it reaches the river properly so-called [Rio San Juan] by the first channel that it meets. The line shall continue as provided in the treaty, going up this channel [right bank] and up the river properly so called [right bank of Rio San Juan].

In accordance with the treaty of 1858, the boundary continued along the right bank of the Rio San Juan upstream to a point three miles below El Castillo Viejo.

Alexander's fourth award, on July 26, 1899, determined the shore of Lago de Nicaragua as follows:

. . . in the question of the height of water in Lake Nicaragua, that the boundary of the beach at the level of 106 feet, according to the markers fixed by the American Canal Commission, must be taken as the shore of the said Lake to which the treaty of 1858 refers.

² Alexander Marchant. *Boundaries of the Latin American Republics, an Annotated List of Documents*, 1493–1943, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1944, State Department Publication, InterAmerica Series 24, pp. 298–99.

His fifth award, on March 10, 1900, fixed the position of the center of the Bahia de Salinas at 11°03'47" North and 85°43'52" West.

From the right bank of the Rio San Juan to the shore of the Bahia de Salinas, pillars numbered 2 through 20 were erected to demarcate the boundary. The geographic coordinates of the boundary pillars were confirmed by an Inter American Geodetic Survey (IAGS) team in 1965 as follows:

<u>Pillar No.</u>	<u>Latitude North</u>	<u>Longitude West</u>
2	10°59'38.924"	84°21'33.634"
3	10°58'35.608"	84°22'35.566"
4	10°58'26.792"	84°23'59.596"
5	10°57'15.498"	84°25'13.336"
6*	10°57'35.511"	84°27'02.393"
7*	10°59'59.642"	84°29'10.258"
8	11°01'54.907"	84°33'52.596"
9	11°03'00.224"	84°34'29.168"
10	11°02'14.320"	84°36'21.987"
11	11°04'16.844"	84°39'59.272"
12	11°04'59.460"	84°40'49.886"
13	10°56'34.414"	84°54'38.654"
14	11°03'42.257"	85°13'41.750"
15	11°07'30.505"	85°21'27.262"
16	11°07'40.844"	85°25'26.823"
17	11°09'59.536"	85°31'20.463"
18	11°12'32.499"	85°33'37.616"
19	11°13'06.714"	85°36'35.874"
20	11°04'43.094"	85°41'33.544"

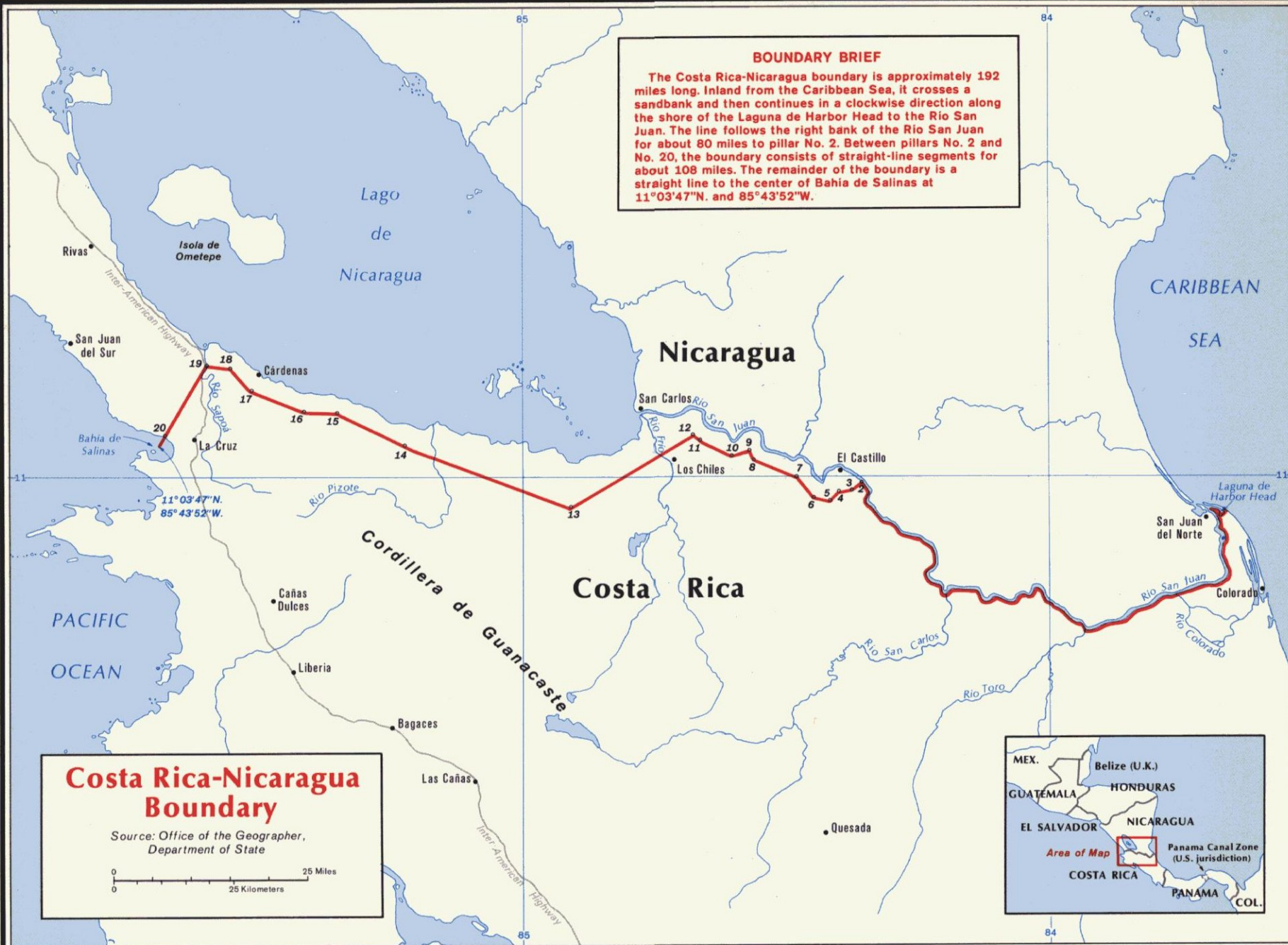
* Values were obtained from photogrammetric coordinates.

This International Boundary Study is one of a series of specific boundary papers prepared by the Office of the Geographer, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, in accordance with provisions of the Office of Management and Budget Circular No. A-16.

Government agencies may obtain additional information and copies of the study by calling the Office of the Geographer, Room 8742, Department of State, Washington, D.C. 20520 (Telephone: 632-2021 or 632-2022).

BOUNDARY BRIEF

The Costa Rica-Nicaragua boundary is approximately 192 miles long. Inland from the Caribbean Sea, it crosses a sandbank and then continues in a clockwise direction along the shore of the Laguna de Harbor Head to the Rio San Juan. The line follows the right bank of the Rio San Juan for about 80 miles to pillar No. 2. Between pillars No. 2 and No. 20, the boundary consists of straight-line segments for about 108 miles. The remainder of the boundary is a straight line to the center of Bahia de Salinas at 11°03'47"N. and 85°43'52"W.



Costa Rica-Nicaragua Boundary

Source: Office of the Geographer,
Department of State

0 25 Miles
0 25 Kilometers

