

Managua



Flying into the capital for the first time, looking out the plane window, many visitors have the same thought: *this is big, bad Managua?* The city's low-rise development and gently rolling hills, punctuated by blue lagoons and carpeted by an almost improbable amount of trees, make it look more like a town tucked away in a forest than the war zone they've been warned about.

These first impressions are only slightly misguided – yes, you have to watch your back here, but this can also be an extremely rewarding city, populated by (mostly) friendly folks who will be surprised and pleased to see you here and even more surprised and pleased if you actually decide to hang around awhile.

It's also home to by far the best collection of cultural venues, restaurants and nightlife options in the country. Many people skip the capital altogether – or get out as soon as possible – lured by the colonial charms of nearby Granada, but if you're looking for pace and vibrancy Nicaraguan style, there's no place like Managua.

If it all *does* get a little too much, there's a range of attractions just a short bus ride away that pack out on weekends, but midweek you may have them all to yourself. The hot springs of El Trapiche and the white, sandy beaches of Pochomil are excellent, low-key options, while the nature reserves at Montebelli and Chocoyero-El Brujo provide refuge for a host of wildlife you wouldn't expect this close to the city. The lagoons that surround Managua make for another enjoyable day trip, where you can swim and (if you brought your gear) windsurf or scuba dive.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Taking in the city while standing in Sandino's shadow on a volcano's rim at **Loma de Tiscapa** (p76)
- Partying hard with Managua's jet set in the clubs along the **Carretera a Masaya** (p86)
- Checking out the crumbling colonial grandeur around the **Plaza de la Revolución** (p77)
- Following in the footsteps of Managua's early inhabitants at the **Huellas de Acahualinca** (p79)
- Gallery hopping around the city's cutting-edge **galleries** (p75)
- Getting some down time at one of the lovely beaches at nearby **Pochomil** (p92)



■ POPULATION: 908,000

■ ELEVATION: 90M

NAVIGATING MANAGUA

As in other Nicaraguan cities and towns, only Managua's major roads are named. Large buildings, *rotondas* (traffic circles) and traffic lights serve as de facto points of reference, and locations are described in terms of their direction and distance, usually in *cuadras* (blocks) from these points. Many of these reference points no longer exist, and thus addresses may begin with something like *'de donde fue Sandy's'* (from where Sandy's used to be...).

In Managua, a special system is used for the cardinal points, whereby *al lago* (to the lake) means 'north' while *a la montaña* (to the mountains) means 'south.' *Arriba* (up) is 'east' toward the sunrise, while *abajo* (down) is 'west' and toward the sunset. If you're having trouble remembering, just think of your days as a student protester, chanting 'down with the West.' Thus one might hear: *'del antiguo Cine Dorado, una cuadra al lago y dos cuadras arriba'* ('from the old Cine Dorado, one block toward the lake and two blocks up'), meaning one block north and two blocks east.

Confused? You get used to it (and you may be consoled to know that the rest of the country uses the same system, except with the cardinal points named). Listings in this chapter give the 'address' in Spanish – but we use the cardinal points, N (*norte*), S (*sur*), E (*este*) and O (*oeste*) – so you can ask locals for help or just let the cab driver figure it out.

HISTORY

A fishing encampment as early as 6000 years ago (see p79), Managua has been an important trading center and regional capital for at least two millennia. When Spanish chronicler Fernández de Oviedo arrived in 1528, he estimated Managua's population at around 40,000; most of these original inhabitants fled to the Sierritas, the small mountains just south, shortly after the Spanish arrived. The small town, without even a hospital or school until the 1750s, didn't really achieve any prominence until 1852, when the seemingly endless civil war between Granada and León was resolved by placing the capital here.

The clever compromise might have worked out better had a geologist been at hand: Managua sits atop a network of fault lines that have shaped its history ever since. The late 1800s were rocked by quakes that destroyed the new capital's infrastructure, with churches and banks crumbling as the ground flowed beneath their feet. In 1931 the epicenter was the stadium – dozens were killed during a big game. In 1968 a single powerful jolt right beneath what's now Metrocentro mall destroyed an entire neighborhood.

And on the evening of December 23, 1972, a series of powerful tremors rocked the city, culminating in a 6.2 quake that killed 11,000 people and destroyed 53,000 homes. The blatant siphoning of international relief funds by President Somoza touched off the Sandinista-led revolution, which was followed by the Contra War, and the city center, including the beautiful old cathedral, was never rebuilt.

ORIENTATION

The Interamericana (Pan-American Hwy) enters Managua from the southwest, via Jinotepe, as Carr Sur, and exits to the northeast, past the airport toward Matagalpa and El Rama, as Carr Norte. Running southeast from Metrocentro and Rotonda Rubén Darío is Carr Masaya, along which Managua's swankiest discos, restaurants and malls can be found. Heading west are Carr Nueva and Carr Vieja (New and Old Hwys) to León. Managua has hundreds of neighborhoods stretched between these highways, and not even the kamikaze *taxistas* (taxi drivers) know them all.

Área Monumental, on the lakefront site of Managua's pre-1972 downtown, is home to the Museo Nacional, Casa Presidencial (Presidential Palace) and Teatro Rubén Darío. It's connected by Av Bolívar, a major thoroughfare, to the Plaza Inter shopping mall, Loma de Tiscapa and Barrio Martha Quezada, with most services for budget travelers. To the southwest are Barrio Bolonia, with midrange accommodations, and Plaza España, next to Rotonda El Güegüense, with banks, travel agencies and airline offices.

To the southeast is Managua's modern commercial center, a 2km strip of Carretera a Masaya extending southeast from Metrocentro mall and Rotonda Rubén Darío through the cluster of glittering restaurants and bars known as Zona Rosa, as well as swish Los Robles and Altamira, two of Managua's most exclusive neighborhoods. West of Rotonda Rubén Darío is Universidad Centro America (UCA), with left-wing bookstores and micro-