

# Postcard: Managua

By **Tim Rogers** Thursday, Jan. 17, 2008



In Managua, residents find their way without official street names *Maria Lopez / EFE for Time*

A year after Irish Rocker Bono visited Nicaragua in 1986 to raise awareness about Central American war refugees, U2 released its smash-hit album *The Joshua Tree*, and Nicaraguans immediately recognized that one of the songs seemed to be written about their country. It wasn't, but 20 years later, most people here still hold as fact that *Where the Streets Have No Name* was written about Managua, a squat and sprawling capital city where, well, the streets are unnamed.

The Managua of today still has the feeling of a rural backwater that hopes one day to grow up to be a capital city. No building is taller than 10 stories. There are still more trees than buildings, and going "downtown" means going to the Metrocentro shopping mall.

Finding one's way around Nicaragua means developing an intimate understanding of the spatial relations between current and past landmarks, some of which were destroyed more than 30 years ago, in the 1972 earthquake. The quake and the civil war between the *contras* and the *Sandinistas* disrupted, among other things, plans to number the streets. And so giving directions here is still, as former *New York Times* Managua bureau chief Stephen Kinzer described it, a "Socratic" technique, based on first determining what the direction asker knows, then working backward from there.

For example, if a foreigner asks, "How do you get to the Nicaraguan Tourism Institute?" the conversation might go like this:

"Well, do you know where Casa de Los Mejía Godoy is?"

"No."

"Do you know where the former Lips strip club was?"

"No."

"The Hotel Crowne Plaza, which used to be the Hotel Inter-Continental?"

"Bingo."

"From there, it's one block south, one block down."

One block "down," of course, is Managua code for "one block west." Sometimes going "down," then, actually means going uphill. To further confuse things, directions are given in a unit of measurement known as a *vara*, which is apparently based on the arm length of a former nobleman from some time and some place in the distant past.

Even on the Caribbean coast, which was settled by the British rather than the Spanish, addresses are just as relative. British expatriate Louise Calder lives in the Caribbean city of Bluefields, "in front of Francisco Herrera's house." Her neighbor Herrera in turn lists his address as "in front of Louise Calder's house."

The uncertainty isn't limited to Nicaragua. When I lived in Costa Rica, a friend in the U.S. asked for my mailing address. I jokingly gave the directions in Spanish as the locals would explain it: "From the Lourdes Church in Montes de Oca, two blocks west, past the Pali supermarket, take a right at the next corner where an old woman sells fruit, past the Bar Maguey to the end of the dead-end street, where the gringos live. Costa Rica, Central America." His letter actually arrived.

Even when streets do have names, few know what they are. My girlfriend recently saw an official map of her hometown—Masaya, Nicaragua—and discovered that the street where she had grown up in fact has a name: Calle Palo Blanco. But if you tell a taxi driver "Calle Palo Blanco," all you will get is a blank stare. So we still give the more common address ("From the San Jeronimo Shell Station, 2 1/2 blocks down"). And off we go without further question.

The lack of street names is a smaller crisis, though, than the lack of good roads. Potholes force cars and ox-drawn carts alike to ride on the shoulders of the country's highways and byways. President Daniel Ortega, eager to lift his country out of poverty by attracting foreign investment, recently pledged to "launch an offensive" on unpaved roads. Until that war is won, however, the Bono song that most comes to mind in Managua is *I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For*.

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