City Life

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HABANA TODAY

With Fidel Castro edging ever closer to death, Habana and its controversial socio-political system has once again been thrown into the full glare of the international spotlight. But what direction the city will take if (or when) the much hated 46-year US trade embargo is finally lifted is still anyone's guess.

HAVANA V HABANA

Habana's official name is Villa de San Cristóbal de la Habana but, for simplicity's sake, most Cubans refer to it as La Habana or just plain Habana. Throughout this book we have chosen to use Habana, the Cuban spelling, rather than Havana, the long-standing anglicized version.

What few people realize is that Habana has been quietly dusting off its communist cobwebs for more than a decade. Aided by a growing medical and pharmaceutical sector and bolstered by closer political and economic ties with Venezuela and Bolivia, Cuba is no longer the economic basket case that it was in the early 1990s. Subtle signs of the new economic buoyancy are everywhere. Check out the greater choice of consumer goods in the city's shops, or the rapidly expanding waistlines of the better-off *habaneros* (inhabitants of Habana) or, most noticeably, the traffic – 10 years ago you could have quite conceivably sat down and had your lunch in the middle of the Malecón (Av de Maceo), Habana's scenic oceanside drive; these days it'll take you a good five minutes to even cross it.

While the huge growth of tourism has brought plenty of economic benefits to Habana's long-suffering and ever patient inhabitants, the presence of more foreigners on the streets of the capital has presented some prickly problems for the city's once unbreakable social fabric. Che Guevara's socialist 'new man' is looking decidedly old hat these days and, among the younger population, the cultural zeitgeist is gradually changing. Added to this is the emergence of an unofficial class system, a direct consequence of the widening income gap that has exploded between those who have access to tourist money and those who don't.

But despite all of these ticklish issues, Habana has lost none of its refreshing uniqueness and little of its exotic charm. The restoration of Unesco–listed Habana Vieja continues apace, Che Guevara still inspires the reverence of a Catholic saint, and commercialization, globalization and anything resembling a McDonald's restaurant is just a glint in the eye of some wheeling-and-dealing Miami-based marketing magnate. Visit while the legacy is still intact.

LOWDOWN

Population 2.3 million

Time zone Pacific Time (GMT minus eight hours)

Bus ticket CUC$0.25–CUC$0.50

Three-star hotel room CUC$60

Cup of coffee CUC$1

No-no Don't buy cigars off the street, they're nearly always substandard or fake

CITY CALENDAR

Like most Latinos, the inhabitants of Habana aren't shy of holding a fiesta, and through revolution and recession the city calendar has always included its fair share of social shindigs. But it's not all rum and rumba. Indeed, many of Habana's annual get-togethers are internationally renowned cultural extravaganzas that draw movers and shakers from around the globe.

JANUARY

LIBERATION DAY

As well as seeing in the New Year with roast pork and a bottle of rum, Cubans celebrate the *triunfo de la revolución* (triumph of the revolution) on January 1, the day in 1959 when Fidel Castro's rebel army finally dislodged the regime of Fulgencio Batista.

FEBRUARY

FERIA INTERNACIONAL DEL LIBRO DE LA HABANA

The International Book Fair was first held in Cuba in the 1930s and has been growing ever since. In Habana, the event is hosted at the Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña (p93), ExpoCuba (p96) and various bookstores around the capital. Highlights include book presentations, special readings and the prestigious Premio Casa de las Américas, an awards ceremony for outstanding writers of Latin American origin.

APRIL

FESTIVAL INTERNACIONAL DE COROS

Held in even numbered years, the International Choir Festival brings together different choirs from around the world in a series of workshops and performances. Venues include the Teatro Amadeo Roldán (p131) and the Basilica Menor de San Francisco de Asís (p131).

LA HUELLA DE ESPAÑA

An annual festival that showcases various vestiges of Spanish culture in Cuba, the Huella de España includes dance, music, visual arts, poetry and theater. It kicks off at the Gran Teatro de la Habana (p131) in the last week of April.

MAY

CUBADISCO

Far from being Cuba's interpretation of *Saturday Night Fever,* Cubadisco is an annual get-together for record producers and recording companies (both foreign and Cuban) with musical interests on the island. The itinerary includes a trade fair at the Pabexpo conference center, numerous performances and concerts, and a Grammy-style awards ceremony that encompasses every musical genre from chamber music to pop.

LABOR DAY

Hundreds of thousands of flag-waving Cubans converge on the Plaza de la Revolución every May 1 to witness military parades and listen to Fidel Castro make an impassioned speech. It's a fantastic spectacle, even if you're lukewarm about the political polemics.

FESTIVAL INTERNACIONAL DE POESÍA DE LA HABANA

An opportunity for poets from around the world to convene in Cuba as part of an international cultural exchange, this festival is organized by the Unión Nacional des Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (Uneac; National Union of Cuban Writers & Artists) and is held in the glorious Iglesia y Monasterio de San Francisco de Asís (p73) in Habana Vieja.

JUNE

FESTIVAL INTERNACIONAL BOLEROS DE ORO

Organized by Uneac and held in various Habana theaters, the Boleros de Oro was created by Cuban composer and musicologist José Loyola Fernández in 1986. Groups and individuals from as far away as Japan head to Habana to take part in the largest global celebration of the *bolero* (romantic love song).

JULY

COMMEMORATION OF THE ASSAULT OF THE MONCADA GARRISON

On July 26 every year, the Cubans 'celebrate' Fidel Castro's failed 1953 attack on the Moncada Garrison in Santiago de Cuba. The event is a national holiday and – in the days when Castro enjoyed better health – the loquacious leader was famous for making speeches that went for up to four or five hours. Aside from the political rhetoric, Cubans use the holiday as an excuse to eat, drink, dance and generally be merry.

AUGUST

HABANA CARNIVAL

Parades, dancing, music, colorful costumes and striking effigies – the Cubans certainly know how to throw a party. Habana's annual summer shindig might not be as famous as its more rootsy Santiago de Cuba counterpart, but the celebrations and the joyful processions along the Malecón leave plenty of other city carnivals in the shade.

FESTIVAL INTERNACIONAL HABANA HIP-HOP

Organized by the Hermanos Saíz Association, the youth arm of Uneac, the annual Habana Hip-Hop Festival is now well into its second decade. A chance for the island's young musical creators to improvize and swap ideas, the event has its headquarters in the rough Habana suburb of Alamar, where Cuba's nascent rap scene first emerged, and where it still maintains its spiritual home.

SEPTEMBER

FEAST DAY OF THE VIRGIN OF REGLA

Every September 7, religious devotees from around Habana take part in a pilgrimage to the church of Nuestra Señora de Regla on the eastern side of the harbor to honor the saintly Virgin of Regla, a black Madonna associated with the Santería deity of the ocean, and venerated by both Catholics and followers of Santería. An effigy of the saint is removed from its position on the church's main altar and paraded through the neighborhood.

OCTOBER

FESTIVAL INTERNACIONAL DE BALLET DE LA HABANA

Hosted by the Cuban National Ballet and presided over by dance diva Alicia Alonso (p28), the International Habana Ballet Festival brings together dance companies, ballet dancers, and a mixed audience of foreigners and Cubans for a week of expositions, galas, and classical and contemporary ballet. It has been held in even numbered years since its inception in 1960.

NOVEMBER

MARABANA HAVANA MARATHON

The popular Marabana Havana Marathon gets under starter's orders in late November, and draws between two and three thousand competitors from around the globe. The race begins outside the Capitolio Nacional and proceeds along the oceanside Malecón before switching back toward the airport. It is a two-lap course, though there are also races for 5km, 10km and half-marathon distances. The organization of the marathon is consistently excellent and the sense of camaraderie is second to none.

FESTIVAL INTERNACIONAL DE JAZZ

Intrinsically linked to Cuban jazz maestro Chucho Valdés, the International Jazz Festival has been around for nearly a quarter of a century. Staged in the Casa de las Américas (p84), along with the Teatro Karl Marx (p132), Teatro Mella (p132) and Teatro Amadeo Roldán (p131), the event draws top jazz musicians from around the world, resulting in some truly memorable concerts.

DECEMBER

FESTIVAL INTERNACIONAL DEL NUEVO CINE LATINOAMERICANO

www.habanafilmfestival.com

Cubans love the movies, and this internationally renowned film festival, held in cinemas across Habana, helps illustrate Cuba's growing influence in Latin American cinema. In recent years, the event has showcased such classics as *Viva Cuba*.

PROCESSION DE SAN LÁZARO

There can be few pilgrimages more powerful or disturbing than this devotional crawl to the Santuario de San Lázaro, located in Santiago de las Vegas (p97) on the outskirts of Habana. Every year on December 17, up to 50,000 Cubans descend en masse on the venerated shrine of Saint Lazarus to exorcise evil spirits and pay off debts for miracles granted; some devotees crawl on bloodied knees, others drag themselves prostrate across the asphalt, while still others walk barefoot for kilometers through the night.

HOT CONVERSATION TOPICS

Hit the withered streets of Habana on a sun-streaked Saturday evening and – even if you don't speak Spanish – it's easy enough to discern that the ebullient *habaneros* (inhabitants of Habana) are anything but tongue-tied. But aside from the haranguing hustlers who stalk unsuspecting tourists with offers of cheap taxis and knock-off cigars, what are the locals really talking about?

- Baseball – rarely a day goes by without hotly disputed talk of Habana's two baseball teams, Las Industriales and Los Metropolitanos, and their chances of trouncing each other (or the boys from Santiago) in the upcoming game and/or season.
- New appliances – *habaneros* are still busy comparing their new energy efficient electrical appliances (including refrigerators, light fittings and pressure cookers), which were doled out by the Cuban government in 2006 to usher in the Year of the Energy Revolution.
- Fidel's health – love him or hate him, Fidel is hot news in Habana, especially since a 2006 illness brought him a step closer to death.
- Tonight's party – hang around on the Malecón (Av de Maceo) on a Saturday night and the idle chatter will quickly gravitate to talk about what's happening later, how you're going to get there and who's providing the car.
- Luís Posada Carriles – Cuba's Osama bin Laden is still wanted on terrorist charges in Venezuela for blowing up a Cubana de Aviación passenger plane containing 73 people off Barbados in 1976. The story has dominated Cuban news stories since 2005, when Carriles turned up illegally in the US, and throughout 2006 the Cuban government organized a number of demonstrations in Habana demanding the Cuban-born fugitive be extradited (the US courts have yet to oblige).
- *La Cara Oculta de la Luna* – Cuba's popular government-sponsored soap opera *La Cara Oculta de la Luna* (The Dark Side of the Moon) features gay characters and has been riveting the nation with its controversial discussion of transvestism and AIDS.

CULTURE

Habana's culture is as dynamic as it is distinct, and its influences have spread far beyond the boundaries of the city – there are few people who haven't heard of Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, salsa music, Cohiba cigars, Havana Club rum or mojitos. Other equally unique aspects of Habana culture, such as Santería and the city's eclectic colonial architecture, are less famous internationally but are just as compelling.

IDENTITY

To the vast majority of its two million inhabitants, Habana *is* Cuba, a cosmopolitan and enormously energetic metropolis that makes the rest of this palm-fringed Caribbean archipelago look like a sleepy bucolic backwater. Renowned for their musicality, hospitality, joviality and glowing civic pride, the *habaneros* are survivors, and their gallant dignity and infectious joie de vivre has seen them battle resourcefully through hell, high water and innumerable economic crises.

Cocooned from the outside world by a 45-year trade embargo and spared much of the ugly urban blight that has engulfed many other 21st-century capitals, Habana remains a quirky and old-fashioned city where neighbor still helps neighbor, young kids play baseball in the street, and old men slap down dominos on potholed sidewalks.

Music is the city's lifeblood and it is rare that you'll come across a *habanero* who can't sing or dance. Rootsy rumba began life on the docks of Habana Vieja, the lilting *habanera* first fused smooth French melodies with raw African rhythms in the city's dusty dance halls, and salsa – perhaps Cuba's greatest cultural export – can trace at least a part of its musical metamorphosis to the colorful streets of Cuba's lively capital.

Descended from a colorful mixture of Spanish colonists, African slaves, French émigrés, Chinese immigrants and the odd surviving Taíno (a settled, Arawak-speaking tribe that inhabited much of Cuba prior to the Spanish conquest), the people of Habana are a vibrant and eclectic lot, and their unique blend of blood, brains and brawn has infused Cuban culture with an unusual degree of creativity and adaptability.

HEALTH WITHOUT WEALTH

In the late 1970s, Fidel Castro boldly declared that his fledgling Caribbean nation would become a pioneer in Third World medicine, rub shoulders with the world's economic giants and provide a realistic challenge to the medical power of the US. He was right on all three counts.

Subsequently, under the dark shadow of the US trade embargo, the Cubans – who languish at 156 on the CIA's list of the world's richest nations, in between St Vincent and Georgia – stuck the lion's share of their resources into health care in an attempt to match their northern neighbor on every health-related index from life expectancy to infant mortality rates. Quite remarkably, they succeeded.

With a doctor:patient ratio of 1:170 and a national pool of 30,000 general practitioners who, skillwise, could knock strips off many of their US counterparts, Fidel's health experts have developed a health-care system that is the envy of many of the world's cash-rich democracies.

Achievements are impressive and wide ranging: homegrown treatment for over 15,000 Chernobyl victims, the successful vaccination of 1.5 million Haitian children against measles, the production of the world's first meningitis B vaccine (subsequently licensed by drug multinational GlaxoSmithKline), heart transplants, cancer research and one of the world's lowest AIDS rates.

'Health care is better now because we can do more with less,' piped the understandably smug health minister, Leoncio Padrón, in 1998. It was a timely and pertinent comment. Thanks primarily to the ongoing US embargo (which since 1992 has included emergency food aid and medications), preventative medicine has become a way of life in Cuba. With 21 medical schools training doctors en masse and a family-doctor program placing thousands of qualified health professionals inside every single community in the country, the government has been able to create both legitimacy in the international arena and greater popularity at home.

Habaneros have long displayed an almost inexhaustible ability to bend the rules and 'work things out' when times get tough. In a country where everything is illegal, anything becomes possible. Two of the most popular verbs in the national phrasebook are *conseguir* (to get, to manage) and *resolver* (to resolve, to work out), and the *habaneros* are experts at doing both. In a small nation where monthly salaries top out at around US$20, survival can often mean getting innovative. Cruise the crumbling streets of Habana Centro during the daytime and you'll see people *conseguir*-ing and *resolver*-ing wherever you go. Here's the mechanic wiring a Lada engine underneath the hood of his 1951 Plymouth, and there's the cigar-factory worker selling cast-off Cohibas to foreigners on a side street. One of the most popular ways to make extra cash is to work with – or work over – the tourists.

But it's not all tribulation and trickery. In Habana, sharing is second nature, and helping out your *compañero* (companion) with a lift, a square meal or a few convertibles when they're in trouble is considered a national duty. Check out the way that strangers interact in queues or at transportation intersections and log how the owner of your casa particular (private houses that let out rooms to foreigners) always refers you onto someone else.

In such an egalitarian system, the notion of fairness is often sacred and the social cohesion that characterized the lean years of the *período especial* (special period; p23) still remains loosely intact. One of the most common arguments you'll see in a Cuban street is over queue jumping – a fracas that won't just involve one or two people, but half the neighborhood.

LIFESTYLE

Cuban socialism dances to its own drummer. While on the surface the citizens of Habana might appear open minded, gregarious and devil may care, dip your toe a little deeper and the reality is often a little more contradictory – and Kafka-esque.

Cuban women have been liberated in the sense that they have access to education and training of whatever sort they desire. In fact, women make up 66.4% of the professional and technical workforce, and specific governmental policies such as one year's guaranteed maternity leave and free day care mean it's easier being a mother *and* a career woman in Cuba. But, like everywhere, a glass ceiling still exists in some fields (eg politics), and home-based tasks, such as cooking, child minding and cleaning, are still largely the woman's responsibility. However, the ongoing economic difficulties have meant that Cuban couples since the early 1990s have only had one or – at most – two children, something that is unprecedented elsewhere in the developing world.

The rapid influx of tourists to the island has affected daily life for *habaneros;* with the lucrative carrot of capitalism being dangled in front of their noses, many people, including women, have turned to hustling to get by. While some *jineteras* (women who attach themselves to male foreigners for monetary or material gain) are straight-up prostitutes, others are just getting friendly with foreigners for the perks they provide: a ride in a car, a night out in a fancy disco or a new pair of jeans. Some are after more, others nothing at all. It's a complicated state of affairs and can be especially confusing for male travelers who get swept up in it. It's unusual – though not unheard of – for a Cuban-foreigner relationship not to have at least some kind of economic motivation.

While housing is free, shortages often mean three or even four generations live under the same roof, and with strict property laws there's little scope to move elsewhere. This domestic claustrophobia also cramps budding love lives, and Cubans will tell you that this is the reason the country has one of the world's highest divorce rates. On the flip side, a full house means there's almost always someone to baby-sit, take care of you when you're sick or do the shopping while you're at work. It also accounts for the unusually close-knit nature of Cuban family life, and partly explains why there are few visible signs in Habana of street gangs or teenage delinquency.

Thanks to the tropical climate, much of Cuban life is lived out in the open, and animated conversation and general good neighborliness are all part of the rhythm of the street. Most homes don't have a phone or computer, and internet access is effectively out of bounds to the general populace. Due to a lack of disposable income, keeping up with the Joneses (in Miami) is a pipe dream and most people must be content with filling their houses with furniture that looks as if it's been dragged kicking and screaming from a 1970s bargain basement.

What makes Cuba different from somewhere like Bolivia or Sweden, though, is that the government heavily subsidizes every facet of life, especially culture. Consider the fact that in Habana there are some 200 movie theaters and a ticket costs 2 Cuban pesos (US$0.08) – or that a front-row seat at the Gran Teatro de la Habana costs 10 pesos (US$0.40), rap concerts cost 2 pesos and a patch of cement bench at the ballpark is 1 peso (US$0.04). Now if only there was the transportation to get there. Still, with a set of dominoes or a guitar, a bottle of rum and a group of friends, who needs baseball or the ballet?

FOOD

Overcooked, frazzled and tasteless, Cuban food is invariably portrayed as the revolution's Achilles heel. There's a certain truth in the rumor that the local chicken are born fried and that salad is a euphemism for 'whatever raw thing is available,' but it's not all burnt-to-a-cinder pork chops and congealed microwave pizzas. Indeed, Habana's much maligned restaurants often get an unfairly bad rap. Look no further than Habana Vieja, where many of the city's eager-to-please chefs can be extraordinarily creative, or Vedado and Playa, where the old-fashioned home cooking in privately run paladares is both plentiful and delicious.

The key is to manage your expectations. Don't arrive in Habana assuming that you'll find New York–standard delis or Singapore-style variety. Food culture in Cuba – or the apparent lack of it – is a direct consequence of the country's *período especial* (p23), when meat was a rare luxury and an average Cuban breakfast consisted of sugar mixed with water. As a result, mealtimes in Habana aren't the drawn-out family occasions so common in France or Italy, and people rarely discuss recipes as they might do in Europe or North America. Eating rather is seen as a basic necessity – and a hastily undertaken one – that acts as a prelude to drinking, music, dancing or some other more exciting form of night-time entertainment.

Food in the classier hotels is a different story. If you're headed to the Hotel Nacional (p167) or the Meliá Habana (p170), there will be cranberry-filled crepes for breakfast and

at least a dozen types of exotic fruit for lunch. But eating options shrink astronomically as you scoot down the star ratings. Wake up in an old-town hotel and you can expect a standard 'Cuban' breakfast of eggs and fruit; crash at the two-star Hotel Lincoln and you'll be contemplating a bowl of rice pudding, a cup of lukewarm coffee and ham that looks mysteriously like tinned spam.

Popularly known as *comida criolla*, Cuban meals use a base of *congrí* (rice flecked with black beans, sometimes called *moros y cristianos*) and meat, and invariably come garnished with fried plantains and salad. 'Salad' is limited to seasonal ingredients (outside the posh hotels), and consists mostly of tinned green beans, cucumber slices and/or shredded cabbage.

Protein means pork, and you'll become well acquainted with *lomo ahumado* (aromatic smoked loin), *chuletas* (thin juicy fillets), and pork fricassee with peppers and onions. *Filete Uruguayo* is a deep-fried breaded pork cutlet stuffed with ham and cheese.

Chicken is readily available in Habana, though it's often fried to a crisp, while *pescado* (fish) is surprisingly limited for an island nation. Though you'll come across *pargo* (red snapper) and occasionally octopus and crab in some of the specialist seafood places in Playa, you're more likely to see lobster or shrimp *ajillo* (sautéed in oil and garlic) or *enchilado* (in tomato sauce). *Ostiones,* small oysters served with tomato sauce and lime juice, are also popular. The farming of cows is government controlled, so beef products such as steak are sold only in state-run restaurants. Cuban fast-food chains El Rápido and Pollo make McDonalds look like a health-food store and are best avoided.

Yuca (cassava) and *calabaza* (pumpkinlike squash) are served with an insanely addictive sauce called *mojo,* which is made from oil, garlic and bitter orange. Green beans, beets and avocados (June to August) are likely to cross your lips too.

NUEVA COCINA CUBANA

For legions of taste-deprived gastronomes, Cuban cuisine has always been something of an international joke. From the empty-shelf ration shops of Habana Vieja to the depressing ubiquity of soggy cheese-and-ham sandwiches that seem to serve as the country's only viable lunch option, it's a question of less feast, more famine. But while celebrity chefs might still be in short supply in many of Habana's uninspiring government-run restaurants, a whole new pot of tricks is brewing in the suburbs.

Nueva cocina cubana is a loose term used to describe a new awakening in Cuban cooking. Combining fresh, innovative ingredients and exciting new flavors with a traditional Caribbean base, the ideas have their roots in the US and owe a notable debt to celebrated Cuban-American chefs such as Douglas Rodríguez. But the real engine room of this gourmet-led food revolution lies not in the US, but in Habana's small clutch of congenial but vastly underrated paladares (privately run restaurants; p124).

Legalized in 1994, Habana's paladares faced tough times during the dark days of the *período especial* (special period). But by the late 1990s, as tourism increased and food shortages gradually began to ease, some of the restaurants started to use their new private status to experiment and expand. One such innovator was La Guarida (p118), a private paladar housed in a wonderfully eclectic mansion in Centro Habana. Fostering close ties with gastronomic gurus in France, Spain and the US, La Guarida's chefs keenly absorbed international influences and slowly began to fuse traditional Cuban food with more exotic European and North American flavors. The results were as tasty as they were unexpected: tuna infused with sugarcane, chicken in a lemon and honey sauce, and caimanera (a fish indigenous to the Guantánamo region) panfried in onions and white wine. Word of these delicacies spread rapidly and, before long, a roll call of big names was descending on La Guarida: Jack Nicholson, Uma Thurman, Matt Dillon, Queen Sofía of Spain, plus a plethora of US congressmen. Soon it wasn't a question of whether you had been to Habana, but whether you had been to Habana *and* eaten at La Guarida.

Not to be outdone, other paladares quickly starting jumping on the culinary bandwagon. Housed in old grandiose houses in the neighborhoods of Vedado and Playa, places like La Esperanza (p125) and La Cocina de Lilliam (p125) were soon churning out equally delectable dishes, and recipes were being developed and expanded.

Thanks largely to *nueva cocina cubana*, Cuban food has slowly edged itself back into international reckoning, and visitors to the island are increasingly surprised by the quality of the food on offer. Although Habana might still be a long way from becoming the gourmet capital of Latin America (let alone the Caribbean), by most measures that Cuban stereotype of cheap rum and iron rations could soon be confined to gastronomic history.

Few restaurants do breakfast (although pastries are sold at chains such as Pain de Paris, and the 24-hour Pan.com in Miramar does great eggs), so if this is an important meal for you, stock up at a hotel buffet or arrange for your casa particular to provide it. Most casas do huge, hearty breakfasts of eggs, toast, fresh juice, coffee and piles of fruit for CUC$2 to CUC$3.

Habana has some great coffee houses and more are being opened all the time. The Cubans prefer their coffee strong, black and sweet, but most touristy places will have an espresso machine and will be able to rustle you up a *café con leche* (coffee with milk), especially first thing in the morning. However, the Cubans haven't yet cottoned onto coffee 'to go.'

See p110 for restaurant reviews.

RELIGION

Religion in Cuba is a complex and highly misunderstood topic. Though the Cuban state is nominally secular, the people of Cuba are anything but, and while practicing Catholicism may have taken a nosedive since the 'triumph' of the revolution, spirituality is very much alive.

Before the revolution Cuba, like most other Latin American countries, was staunchly Catholic, with 85% of the population pledging allegiance to Rome, though only 10% attended church regularly. Protestants made up most of the rest of the church-going public though, up until 1959, Habana supported a significant Jewish population of over 12,000. Though never officially banned or persecuted under Castro, the Catholic Church came up against two problems once the new Socialist regime was firmly installed in Habana. Firstly many conservative priests, objecting to Fidel's dogmatic leadership style, quickly identified themselves with the counterrevolution and soon fell foul of the ambitious new leader and his supporters. In the early 1960s, 140 Catholic priests were expelled from the island for reactionary political activities and another 400 left voluntarily. Secondly, by proclaiming the revolution as Marxist-Leninist in 1961, Castro – who had himself been educated at a Jesuit school in his youth – embraced atheism, thus making life increasingly difficult for *creyentes* (believers).

Treated as ideological deviants during the hard-line Soviet days of the 1970s and '80s, practicing Catholics were prohibited from joining the Communist Party and unofficially prevented from holding key posts in national or local government. Certain university careers, notably in the humanities, were also off-limits. In short, while religion itself was never technically banned, admitting that you were a believer could seriously damage your career prospects.

Things took a turn for the better after 1992 when the constitution was revised, removing all references to the Cuban state as Marxist-Leninist. Another hatchet was buried in January 1998 when Pope John Paul II visited Cuba and over one million people turned out to see him say Mass in Habana's Plaza de la Revolución (suggesting that many Cubans had been a lot more religious than they'd let on during the '70s and '80s). Recent statistics suggest that there are currently 400,000 Catholics regularly attending mass in Cuba and 300,000 Protestants from 54 denominations. It's not quite on a par with the rest of Latin America, but it's a giant leap of faith since the 1960s.

The religious beliefs of Africans brought to Cuba as slaves in the colonial period have proved to be far more durable than traditional Catholicism. Santería – or Regla de Ocha as it's sometimes known – first took root on the island in the 17th and 18th centuries, when thousands of Yoruba slaves transported from West Africa brought with them a system of animistic beliefs that they hid beneath a Catholic veneer. Over time the slaves began to practice their own form of religious worship, replacing each Catholic saint with an equivalent Yoruba *orisha* (deity).

It's likely there are more followers of the Afro-Cuban religions than practicing Roman Catholics in contemporary Cuba and, although Regla de Ocha is by far the largest group, it is by no means the only strand. Some even contend that Fidel himself is a practicing *santero* (Santería high priest) and the son of the god of destiny, Elegguá, which might account for his ability to cheat death so often.

SPORTS

In Habana, *pelota* (baseball) is the unofficial religion and, with two rival city sides battling it out for honors in the 18-team national baseball league, there's plenty to get worked up about. Habana's most successful team is Las Industriales, closely followed by Los Metropolitanos, although the most intense rivalry is with the outsiders from Santiago de Cuba. An integral part of baseball folklore is the *esquina caliente* (hot corner), a shady spot in Parque Central (p82) where animated, finger-wagging baseball fanatics come to argue and joke with their rivals. The corner is especially entertaining in the postseason, when funereal wreaths and offerings to *orishas* appear for eliminated teams and those still contending.

Boxing is Cuba's second sport and Habana has produced its fair share of pugilistic greats in the past, including Eligio 'Kid Chocolate' Sardiñas and Florentino 'the Ox' Fernández. Ingrained in the national sporting curriculum, boxing is the primary reason why Cuba's Olympic medal haul has rocketed into the stratosphere since the early 1970s. The crowning moment came in 1992, when the Olympic team brought home 14 gold medals and finished fifth in the overall medals table. It's testament to Cuba's high sporting standards that their 11th-place finish in Athens in 2004 was considered something of a national failure.

Basketball, volleyball and soccer (football) are all popular in Cuba, but *dominó* (dominoes) and chess – which are both considered sports – are national passions. José Raúl Capablanca, touted as the greatest natural chess player that ever lived, became world chess champion in 1921, and you'll see chess matches on the street and read about the masters in the sports pages. *Dominó* is everywhere, and you'll see quartets of old men and young bucks slugging back shots of rum and slamming down their tiles in every Cuban neighborhood. In March 2003, Habana hosted the first annual Campeonato Mundial de Dominó (World Domino Championship), with 10 countries and thousands of players participating. The finals were held in Ciudad Deportiva, where Cuba won it all.

CUBA'S OLYMPIANS

Cuba's Olympians are living proof that success at sport is not just about sponsorship, equipment and million-dollar contracts – hunger, passion and a heartfelt desire to succeed are equally important factors when it comes bagging the top honors.

The country's awesome athletic accomplishments speak for themselves. Floundering as the world's 105th-largest nation and with a GDP on a par with the African state of Angola, Cuba has achieved a level of sporting prowess way out of proportion to its size. Between 1976 and 2000, the island never fell outside the top 10 in the final medals table at the summer Olympics, finishing in fourth position in 1980 with 20 medals, and turning in an even more impressive performance 12 years later in Barcelona when, in the depths of the *período especial* (special period), the Cubans grabbed 31 medals (including an unprecedented 14 golds) to finish fifth.

Here are some of the island's most celebrated Olympic heroes:

- Teófilo Stevenson – arguably Cuba's greatest Olympian, heavyweight boxer Stevenson won three successive gold medals in Munich (1972), Montreal (1976) and Moscow (1980). He could well have gone one further in 1984 if Cuba, following the lead of the USSR, hadn't boycotted the Los Angeles games.
- Félix Savón – another skillful heavyweight boxer, Savón equaled Stevenson's Olympic tally with three successive boxing golds in Barcelona (1992), Atlanta (1996) and Sydney (2000).
- Men's baseball team – with baseball introduced as an Olympic sport in 1992, the Cubans won the first two baseball tournaments (1992 and 1996) and remained unbeaten in the competition until suffering a narrow defeat against the USA in Sydney in 2000. Not to be outdone, they came back four years later to regain the Olympic gold in Athens.
- Women's volleyball team – as indomitable as the men's baseball team, Cuba's female volleyball players won a hat trick of Olympic golds in 1992, 1996 and 2000.
- Alberto Juantorena – at Montreal in 1976, Juantorena became the first athlete to win Olympic golds at both 400m and 800m track events, and he remains the only male runner to have achieved this feat. He set a new world record for the 800m in the process (1:43:50 minutes). In Cuba he is known affectionately as White Lightening or *El Caballo* (the Horse).
- Javier Sotomayor – the current holder of the world high-jump record (2.45m), Sotomayor brought home gold from Barcelona in 1992. He's dominated the sport ever since, recording 17 of the 24 highest jumps in history.

THE FOREIGN PRESS IN CUBA

There are 120 foreign correspondents in Cuba, although the number of regular working journalists is closer to 35. News agencies with offices in the capital include Reuters, Associated Press, CNN and the BBC; two US newspapers, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Miami Sun Sentinel*, also have offices. Despite rather restrictive working practices, only one agency is currently banned from the island: the German TV and radio network ARD.

Although there is no official censorship in Cuba, all work inside the country is monitored by the state-controlled Centro Prensa Internacional (who must OK all in-country interviews), and the visas and work permits of journalists who fall out of favor with the Cuban authorities are often not renewed. In February 2007, such a fate befell a writer from the *Chicago Tribune* for filing home news stories that were deemed too negative. The previous year a journalist from the *Financial Times* was similarly banished for writing an article that allegedly 'mocked' Fidel.

Cuba is one of the few countries in the world where it is almost impossible to pick up a copy of any Western newspaper or magazine. Even business hotels such as the NH Parque Central and the Meliá Cohiba don't stock copies of popular periodicals such as the *Economist* or *Newsweek*. Apart from the insipid *Granma* or *Juventud Rebelde*, your only real domestic news source is the internet, which is readily available to foreigners, and the TV, which broadcasts international news networks such as CNN, TV5 and TVE in tourist hotels (Cubans technically have access to neither of these sources).

MEDIA

In a country replete with talented writers and lyrical poets, Cuba's gagged media is something of an oxymoron. With only two wafer-thin national newspapers and a central press agency, which keep an asphyxiating hold on every word, thought and feature that is sent to print, Habana's heavily censored news reporters are little more than state-sponsored minions working for the all-pervading, all-encompassing propaganda ministries of the Cuban Communist Party.

The silencing of the press was one of Castro's first political acts on taking power in 1959. Challenged with the crime of speaking out against the revolution, nearly all of Cuba's – and Habana's – once independent newspapers were either closed down or taken over by the state by the summer of 1960. Many freelance operators faced a similar fate. In 1965 Guillermo Cabrera Infante, one of Cuba's most respected writers, left for an ignominious exile in London while, three years later, Castro's former journalistic guru Carlos Franqui – the man who had been responsible for the setting up of rebel newspaper *Revolución* in the Sierra Maestra – earned his own place on the blacklist for speaking out in opposition to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Though art, music and culture are actively encouraged in Cuban society, writers of all genres are set strict limits. Conformists such as national poet Nicolas Guillén enjoy prestige, patronage and a certain amount of artistic freedom, while dissidents – Franqui and Infante to name but two – face oppression, incarceration and the knowledge that their hard-won literary reputation will be quickly airbrushed out of Cuban history.

Although there has been some opening up of press restrictions since the heavy-handed days of the 1970s and '80s, Cuban journalists must still operate inside strict press laws that prohibit antigovernment propaganda, and ban the seemingly innocuous act of 'insulting officials in public' – a crime that carries a three-year jail term.

Habana's two main dailies are *Granma* and the slightly edgier *Juventud Rebelde*. For more information on these and other publications, see p194.

LANGUAGE

Spanish is the language spoken by most Cubans, and some knowledge of it will enhance your stay in Habana exponentially. Despite high levels of literacy and education, the people of Habana, rather like their counterparts in North America and Britain, are linguistically lazy. While you can expect employees in the tourist sector to understand basic English, it's unlikely that the average *habanero* will know his right from his 'write.' The Cubans will appreciate any attempts to converse with them in their own language, and learning some common Spanish words and phrases will definitely open a few doors; see p202.

¿QUE BOLÁ ASERE?

Informal, heavily accented and rich in slang, Cuban Spanish doesn't always match up to the Spanish in your phrase book. Here are a few useful words and phrases to help you get your tongue round the local lingo:

¡Déjame coño! – Get lost!

¿Dígame? – a more formal form of *Dime?*, normally used by someone answering the phone

¿Dime? – literally means 'Tell me,' but often used as a friendly form of greeting

guagua – bus

guajiro – country person; specifically someone from Pinar del Río province

jamaliche – literally 'food junkie;' someone who's always eating

mamay – literally a delicious, fleshy tropical fruit, but used as a superlative for anything good

mango – a pretty woman

melón – money

No es fácil – It ain't easy

palestino – someone from eastern Cuba

pepe – someone from Spain

por la izquierda – attained via the black market

¿Que bolá asere? – How's it going, man?

¿Qué es la mecánica? – What's the process here? (when buying a ticket, renting a car etc)

¿Quién es último? – Who's last? (used when joining a queue to ascertain who's in front of you)

Tranquilo, man – Cool down, man

yuma – someone from the US

Now for the hard part – Cuban Spanish is notoriously difficult to understand and is riddled with colorful slang. Furthermore, Cubans in general – and *habaneros* in particular – often talk incredibly quickly and are in the habit of dropping vital letters from the ends of their words (most commonly the letter 's,' which can be confusing when you're talking in plurals). A plea to *habla más despacio* (speak slower) usually puts them straight.

The Cubans have enriched their language with many of their own words and phrases. Some of these injections come from Afro-Cuban sources (*cabildo* for 'brotherhood' or *batá* for 'drum'), others are a legacy of the original Taíno natives (the word *cohiba* for 'cigar' and *guajiro* for 'country person').

Cuban Spanish is a lot more informal than the Spanish you will encounter in other Latin American countries. In Habana, for instance, it's not unusual for a female shop assistant to address a (younger) male customer as *mi amor* (literally 'my love') and male clients in restaurants to attract the attention of waitresses by calling them *niña* (girl) or *muñeca* (doll). In a similar fashion, the polite *usted* form of address is less widely used here than in, say, Colombia or Bolivia (Cubans generally favor the pronoun '*tu*').

In common with the rest of Latin America, the Cubans use the pronoun *ustedes* for the second-person plural (as opposed to *vosotros*).

ECONOMY & COSTS

Habana is the proverbial engine room of the Cuban economy, and is by far its richest province. As a result, Cubans from all over the island regularly pour into the city in search of work, security and better living conditions. But to assume that Habana's streets are paved with gold would be a gross miscalculation. On the contrary, the city's relative riches are woefully paltry by Western standards, and foreigners flying in from Europe and North America are often struck by Habana's cheap, scruffy houses and general air of decrepitude.

Nearly destroyed during the economic meltdown that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the Cuban economy has defied all logic by its continued survival. Coaxed out of its coma with a three-pronged recovery plan in 1993 that included the legalization of the US dollar (retracted in 2004), the limited opening up of the private sector and the frenzied promotion of the tourist industry, net advances have been slow but steady, with many of the benefits yet to filter down to the average man on the street.

Throwing off its heavy reliance on old staples such as sugar and tobacco, Cuba's economy has spun inexorably toward Latin America, with new trade agreements such as the 2004 Bolivian Alternative of the Americas (ALBA) accords exchanging Cuban medical know-how for Venezuelan oil. Other modern economic mainstays include nickel mining (Cuba is the world's third-largest producer) and pharmaceuticals.

To the surprise of many, Habana isn't a particularly cheap destination, especially since the US dollar was abolished in 2004 (meaning that all tourists must buy convertible pesos, for which they are charged a 10% commission). While there is nothing to stop you wandering off to anywhere you please, the tourist industry has been specifically designed to herd visitors into posh hotels, where they are encouraged to fork out for overpriced souvenirs and bland organized tours. To stay outside of this vacuum, try traveling on public buses, renting a room in a casa particular with kitchen privileges and changing a small amount of money into Cuban pesos *(moneda nacional)*.

If you stay in a casa, eat from street stalls and hang out with the locals, it is possible to get by in Habana on as little as CUC$40 to CUC$50 a day. Hobnob with the tourists in the Hotel Parque Central, however, and you won't see much change from CUC$250 daily.

Cuba has a sometimes confusing double economy where convertibles and Cuban pesos circulate simultaneously. In theory, tourists are only supposed to use convertibles but, in practice, there is nothing to stop you walking into a *cadeca* (change booth) and changing your convertibles into *moneda nacional*. With approximately 29 pesos per convertible, there are a lot of saving possibilities if you are prepared to sacrifice a little (or a lot!) of quality. Alternatively you can just put aside a small amount of Cuban pesos for small daily items such as ice cream, pizzas and bus fares.

HOW MUCH?

Liter of gas CUC$0.95

Liter of bottled water CUC$1

Bottle of Cristal beer CUC$1.50

Souvenir T-shirt CUC$8

Peso pizza CUC$0.25

Cinema ticket CUC$2

Night at the opera CUC$20

Mojito CUC$3

Tropicana cabaret show CUC$70

Music CD CUC$10

SURVIVING THE SPECIAL PERIOD

Following the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Cuban economy went into free fall. Almost overnight, half of the country's industrial factories closed, the transportation sector ground to a halt and the national economy shrunk by as much as 60%.

Determined to defend the revolution at all costs, Castro battened down the hatches and announced that Cuba was entering a 'special period in a time of peace,' creating a package of extreme austerity measures that reinforced widespread rationing and made acute shortages an integral part of everyday life.

It was a decision that quickly resonated throughout all levels of society. Suddenly Cubans, who had been relatively well-off a year or so earlier, faced a massive battle just to survive.

The stories of how ordinary Cubans got through the darkest days of the *período especial* (special period) are as remarkable as they are shocking. Ask any *habanero* (inhabitant of Habana) over the age of 25 about the years 1991 to 1994 and they will invariably furnish you with torrid tales of hunger, hardship and almost unimaginable personal sacrifice. The changes people made to their living conditions during this period were drastic and dramatic: pigs stored in bathrooms, soap made from cow fat, breakfasts consisting of sugar and water, and power outages that lasted for up to 18 hours a day. In three fearsome years, the average Cuban lost over a third of their body weight and saw meat pretty much eradicated from their diet. Insipid food substitutes included 'steaks' cut from grapefruit skins, beans made from royal palm fruit (normally used as animal feed), and tea concocted from various indigenous leaves and herbs.

It is testament to Cuban spirit and ingenuity that the country didn't just survive the *período especial* – it emerged from the crisis with its head held high and its national dignity still intact. Indeed in many respects Cuba's social cohesiveness was actually strengthened by the crisis, creating the kind of stoic wartime resolve that saw the Russians through the siege of Leningrad and the British through the Blitz.

Socially, the *período especial* saw the emergence of a whole new culture of conservation and innovation, and many elements of this communal belt-tightening still mark Habana today. Unique Cuban adaptations from the 1990s include *camellos* (metro buses), paladares (privately owned restaurants), casas particulares (private guesthouses that let out rooms to foreigners), organopónicos (urban vegetable gardens), agropecuarios (vegetable markets), peso pizzas, stretch Ladas and *amarillos* (roadside traffic organizers).

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

Independent Socialist republic or totalitarian one-man dictatorship? That is the question. The true nature of Cuba's unorthodox political system, with its contradictory list of hard-fought successes (health and education) and dismal failures (the media and elections), has long been a matter of some debate. According to the Cuban constitution, the country is 'a Socialist state of workers and peasants and all other manual and intellectual workers,' but in reality, not much happens on this idyllic Caribbean island that hasn't first been heavily scrutinized by the *Líder Máximo* (Maximum Leader) Fidel Castro and his assorted cronies.

Theoretically the Cuban system largely apes the ex–Soviet Union. The constitution of February 1976 provides for a 601-member Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular (National Assembly of People's Power) that is elected every five years. In 1992 the constitution was amended to allow direct elections by universal suffrage and secret ballot (previously, the National Assembly was elected indirectly by the municipalities). Half of the candidates are nominated by mass organizations, while the other half are chosen by elected municipal delegates from among their ranks.

TOP FIVE POLITICAL BOOKS

- *Fidel: a Portrait,* by Tad Szulc
- *Che Guevara: a Revolutionary Life,* by John Lee Anderson
- *After Fidel,* by Brian Latell
- *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom,* by Hugh Thomas
- *Pleasure Island: Tourism and Temptation in Cuba,* by Rosalie Schwartz

The National Assembly elects the 31-member Consejo de Estado (Council of State), which has a president (currently Ricardo Alarcón), a first vice president, five additional vice presidents and a secretary. This body represents the National Assembly between its twice annual meetings, and the Council's president is the head of government and state. The president, in turn, nominates a 44-member Consejo de Ministros (Council of Ministers), which must be confirmed by the National Assembly. The Council of Ministers is the highest-ranking executive body in the country and is headed by Fidel Castro.

Cuban elections have refined the overcomplicated democratic voting system down to a simple universal choice: Communist or Communist. Existing as Cuba's only political party, the Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC) was formed in October 1965 by merging cadres from the Partido Socialista Popular (the pre-1959 Communist Party founded by Julio Antonio Mella in 1925) and veterans of the guerrilla campaign, including members of M-26-7 (26th of July Movement; Fidel Castro's revolutionary organization) and the Directorio Revolucionario 13 de Marzo. The present party has close to one million members and is led – you've guessed it – by Fidel Castro.

At the local level, each of Cuba's 14 provinces – including Habana – is represented by a provincial assembly known as the Poder Popular (People's Power), an elected administrative body that deals with local issues such as garbage collection, housing and community services. Far more important at ground level are the Comités de Defensa de la Revolución (CDRs), Cuba's most integral mass organization. The CDRs are a type of neighborhood-watch scheme that mixes excellent community work with plenty of neighbor-on-neighbor snooping (to root out dissidents). They have more than seven million members islandwide and there are more than 15,000 committees in Habana alone. You'll see their graffiti plastered everywhere, usually highlighted with the slogan *En Cada Barrio, Revolución* (Revolution in Every Neighborhood).

Fidel Castro's recent illness has once again served to reignite Cuba's succession debate and to fuel further speculation as to whether Cuba's political system can outlive the man who created it. First in line for the country's top job is Fidel's younger brother Raúl (opposite) but, devoid of any personal charisma and lacking his older sibling's extraordinary popularity, it is unlikely that the younger Castro could rule alone. What is more likely is some form of collective government will emerge, propped up by other key figures such as National Assembly president Ricardo Alarcón, economic guru Carlos Lage, and Fidel's ex–personal secretary and current foreign minister Felipe Pérez Roque. Only time will tell.

WHO IS RAÚL CASTRO?

Small, impish and outwardly unassuming, Raúl Castro has always been the living antithesis of the self-confident and more combative Fidel. Biographer Tad Szulc once described him as resembling a 'self-satisfied Spanish grocer,' while other equally critical observers have dismissed him as Fidel's obsequious minion.

But hiding beneath the neatly trimmed moustache and khaki military fatigues of Cuba's little-known leader-in-waiting, the picture is a bit more complex.

Born in Birán, Holguín province, in June 1931, Raúl was a quiet and unremarkable youth who exhibited few academic leanings and even fewer political ambitions. A good head shorter than his robust and ruggedly athletic older brother, the impassive younger Castro instead nurtured a childhood penchant for cockfighting and a lifelong love of Cuban rum (political opponents claim he's a closet alcoholic).

Yielding to Fidel's domineering influence, in his early 20s Raúl attended the 1953 International Youth Conference in Vienna, where he received his first political awakening under the auspices of KGB spy Nikolai Leonov.

It was an important and retrospectively timely conversion. A self-proclaimed communist by the time of the abortive Moncada attack in 1953, Raúl first introduced Fidel to Che Guevara in Mexico City, and – along with Che – became the most vociferous voice in the push for Soviet-style economic reforms in the years that followed.

Promoted to the rank of *comandante* (commander) during the war in the Sierra Maestra, Raúl's transformation from mild-mannered *guajiro* (country person) to cold-blooded revolutionary was as dramatic as it was rapid. Ruthlessly suppressing an easy-going sentimentality, the increasingly radicalized Castro metamorphosed into Raúl the Terrible, a widely feared military commander who meted out summary trials and executions with chilling detachment.

In June 1958 the 27-year-old Raúl made a daring incursion into Guantánamo naval base, where he audaciously kidnapped 50 US and Canadian servicemen in a carefully planned publicity stunt (Fidel promptly ordered the men returned). Six months later, on the eve of the guerrilla victory in Santiago, Raúl purportedly rounded up 70 officers from Batista's army and ordered them shot by a firing squad – an act that cast him as the revolution's bloody Robespierre.

But such reckless acts of political vengeance were quickly brushed underneath the carpet. With the rebel army victorious and the new revolutionary government safely installed in Habana, Fidel proceeded to confer a plethora of titles upon his industrious younger brother, including the offices of vice president, defense minister, general of the armed forces and the second secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

For critical observers, the appointments were as shrewd as they were nepotistic. Hard working, meticulous and fanatically loyal, Raúl has long been content to play Mark Anthony to Fidel's Julius Caesar, a ploy that has ensured that both brothers have survived for over 45 years with their political authority virtually unchallenged.

A feared radical in the 1960s and '70s, Raúl has become more pragmatic and flexible with age. In the early '90s he advocated limited free market reforms after the breakup of the Soviet Union, and in 2002 he willingly cooperated with US authorities by promising to extradite any Al-Qaeda prisoners who strayed into Cuban territory from Guantánamo naval base.

Away from the political spotlight, Raúl is said to be humorous, charming and dedicated to his family. Married for nearly 50 years to fellow revolutionary Vilma Espin, Raul has four grown-up children, including wayward daughter Mariela, who is the head of the Cuban National Center for Sex Education and a major advocate of gay rights.

Having lived for so long in the shadow of his pugnacious and internationally recognizable older brother, it is difficult to predict how Raúl will react when – or indeed if – he gets his hands permanently on the powers of state. Patient and a little more forgiving than his volatile older sibling, the younger Castro, insiders claim, is a cagey and diplomatic negotiator who does not share his brother's pathological hatred of the US – a factor that could play an important part in reopening dialogue with Cuba's neighbors to the north. But negotiation skills aside, Raúl is still a formidable political survivor and part of one of the most enduring double acts (and sibling rivalries) in modern history. On the basis of this fact alone, the potential King Castro II shouldn't be underestimated.

ENVIRONMENT

THE LAND

Habana is perched strategically on Cuba's northwestern coast, abutting the choppy Atlantic Ocean. One hundred and fifty kilometers to the north lies the US, the country's longtime political nemesis and ideological antagonist, while 200km to the west is the friendlier Spanish-speaking state of Mexico.

Habana's exact location was originally chosen by the Spanish for its excellent natural harbor and, later on, the city was chosen over Santiago de Cuba as the colonial capital due to its favorable position on the North Atlantic trade routes. Heaving Spanish galleons on

PREVENTING CHILD-SEX TOURISM IN HABANA *By ECPAT*

The exploitation of local children by tourists is becoming more prevalent throughout Latin America, including Cuba. Various socioeconomic factors make children susceptible to sexual exploitation, and some tourists choose to take advantage of their vulnerable position. Sexual exploitation has serious, life-long effects on children. It is a crime and a violation of human rights.

Cuba has laws against sexual exploitation of children. Many countries have enacted extraterritorial legislation that allows travelers to be charged as though the exploitation happened in their home country. Responsible travelers can help stop child sex tourism by reporting it. It is important not to ignore suspicious behaviour. You can report the incident to local authorities and if you know the nationality of the perpetrator, report it to their embassy.

ECPAT (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes) is a global network working on these issues with over 70 affiliate organizations around the world. You can find its website at www.ecpat.org. Beyond Borders is the Canadian affiliate of ECPAT. It aims to advance the rights of children to be free from abuse and exploitation without regard to race, religion, gender or sexual orientation. Its website can be found at www.beyondborders.org.

their way back home to Spain from Mexico and Peru regularly used the city's port facilities to restock their ships and replenish their hardworking crews.

Located on the narrowest point of Cuba's alligator-shaped Isla Grande, Habana's terrain is relatively flat. Within the city, the neighborhood of Vedado, settled in the late 19th century, is the only definably 'hilly' area, with a collection of gentle inclines that culminate in the breezy Loma de las Catalones (where the Plaza de la Revolución is now situated).

Habana is bisected in the west by the Río Almendares, a 45km-long river that rises in Tapaste to the southeast and provides the bulk of the city's water supply. The Habana coastline is rugged and rocky, though further to the east the shore gives way to a 9km stretch of sandy beaches known collectively as Playas del Este.

Habana today exhibits little of the tropical forest that once covered the entire island, though plenty of indigenous royal palms (the country's national symbol) still dot the surrounding countryside.

Boasting a warm tropical climate, the city's weather is tempered by trade winds and, during the winter, cold fronts blow in from the north, causing the temperature to drop at night into the high teens (centigrade). Thanks to its position in the volatile Caribbean hurricane belt, the city is particularly susceptible to strong storms such as Hurricane Wilma, which caused widespread flooding and damage to Centro Habana in October 2005.

GREEN HABANA

Environmentally, Habana presents a perplexing dichotomy. On the one hand, the city is a model for sustainable development, boasting urban gardens, local organic markets, modest consumption levels and one of the lowest people-to-car ratios in Latin America. In October 2006, the WWF even touted Cuba as the 'world's most sustainable country' (on the merit of its high levels of literacy and life expectancy, and low levels of consumption).

On the other side of the coin, Habana suffers from the traditional growing pains of the economically dispossessed. The city's harbor is filthy, the local industry positively asphyxiating, and most of those streamlined 1950s American cars that ply their way so romantically along the Malecón and down Paseo de Martí (Prado) chuck out a ton of unregulated diesel fumes.

But the portents of change are encouraging. Although Cuba essentially first jumped on the world environmental bandwagon because the strictures of the *período especial* meant it had to, recent efforts to bolster national sustainability have been a lot more credible. In early 2006, Fidel Castro announced that the country was entering the Año de la Revolución de Energia (Year of the Energy Revolution). Starting in Pinar del Río province, every household across the country was refitted with energy-efficient lightbulbs, refrigerators and pressure cookers. Similarly, plans are now afoot to phase out many of the country's fume-belching trucks and buses and replace them with cleaner, more modern Chinese models.

The Author

Brendan Sainsbury

Brendan is a British freelance writer based in British Columbia, Canada. In between penning travel stories for the likes of *Africa Geographic* and the *Sydney Morning Herald,* he has hitchhiked across Mozambique, taught English in Thailand, dug latrines in Angola, and worked as an adventure-travel guide in Spain and Morocco.

Brendan first 'discovered' Cuba in 1997 after throwing in a career running health-and-fitness clubs in central London. Fascinated by the country's exotic mix of melodious *trova* (traditional poetic singing) and bombastic Che Guevara iconology, he returned again in 2002 to lead a succession of cultural and cycling trips. He's been coming back ever since, most recently to pen the 4th edition of *Cuba*.

Brendan's Top Habana Day

With the sun rising above the Malecón (Av de Maceo), I start my day pounding the sidewalks, dodging waves and jumping across holes in the paving. One by one I'll pass the early-morning fishermen, the cigar hustlers, the cavorting couples and the remains of last night's spontaneous salsa party. If I'm feeling flush I'll be staying at the Hostal Conde de Villanueva (p159) in Habana Vieja, and I'll return here for a refreshing shower and breakfast in the magnificent courtyard. The morning's the best time to sightsee, so maybe I'll drop into the Museo de la Revolución (p81) or take a peek at the new exhibits in the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (p82). Being a lifelong caffeine junkie, I'll certainly grab a midmorning coffee at Café de las Infusiones (p111) and listen to the great resident pianist tinkle the ivories. Lunch is a movable feast, but the overpriced Hemingway places are best avoided at midday so I'll settle instead for an enormous sandwich at Café O'Reilly (p112). Vedado's a good bet in the afternoon, and getting there via the open-air street theater of Centro Habana and the Malecón is half the fun. I've always had a penchant for the art deco Hotel Nacional (p85) and an indescribable fascination for the ice-cream parlor Coppelia (p119); chances are I'll take in both, then spend a couple of hours strolling along Calle 17 and seeing what's on offer in the local agropecuarios (free-enterprise vegetable markets). Dinner's at a Playa paladar (privately owned restaurant) – La Esperanza (p125), preferably, or La Cocina de Lilliam (p125) – and then, of the 1001 options for nighttime entertainment, I'll plump for the Copa Room cabaret (p136) so I can loll around in the lobby of the Hotel Riviera and imagine I'm back in the 1950s.

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