

# Entertainment

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In Habana singing and dancing are a way of life – as natural to the average *habanero* (inhabitant of Habana) as walking or breathing. Take a stroll around the atmospheric streets of Habana Vieja of an evening and you'll hear music pouring seductively out of every corner: the tap-tap-tap of a dancer's heel from behind a closed door in Calle Mercaderes, a piano melody drifting softly across dreamy Plaza Vieja, two guitarists slumped down in Calle Obispo belting out a romantic ode to Che. Follow the soundtrack and take your pick. Nearly every restaurant and bar in Habana's engaging old town has a resident band or roving salsa quintet, and listening privileges are almost always free.

But it's not all trumpet-stabbing *son* (Cuba's basic form of popular music) and starry-eyed troubadours. An obligatory night out in Habana is a rip-roaring cabaret show, closely followed by a stand-up comedy show or an evening at the opera. And the talent doesn't stop there. A central ethos of the Cuban revolution was that entertainment should be a right of the masses; by slashing entry prices and setting up organizations to promote music and theater, Castro and his cronies have been encouraging art and culture ever since.

## PERFORMING ARTS

The Cubans pursue the arts like they pursue their sport: passionately, dexterously and with a heartfelt desire to achieve great results from limited resources. It's an ethos that has ensured that the country is consistently rubbing shoulders with the world's cultural giants. However downbeat your theater/bar/venue, you can pretty much assume that the performance will be high quality.

## CLASSICAL MUSIC & OPERA

Boasting at least one internationally recognized homegrown composer in the shape of Amadeo Roldán, Habana's classical musical legacy is stronger than many give it credit for. The Teatro Amadeo Roldán is the place to go for the best-quality performances, and the Iglesia de San Francisco de Paula (p72) and the Basilica Menor de San Francisco de Asís also host regular chamber

### WHAT'S HAPPENING?

Plays, concerts, book launches, ballets, poetry readings, rap *peñas* (performances or get-togethers) – there's always something happening in Habana. The problem is finding out when and where. Here are some tips to get plugged in to what's on.

- The TV program *Hurón Azul* is a select schedule of the week's biggest cultural events, and is broadcast every Thursday night at 10:25pm on Cubavisión (Channel 6).
- *Cartelera de la Habana* has broader listings (in Spanish) of things happening all over town, and is published bi-weekly by the Ministry of Culture. This is one of your best resources; it's sold at newspaper kiosks for 20 centavos. Look for it on alternate Thursdays.
- The English-Spanish *Cartelera* is aimed at the tourist population. It comes out every Thursday but it lists what the ministry thinks you want to see; still, it's good for non-Spanish speakers. Look for it in big hotels.
- The daily newspaper *Juventud Rebelde* has decent cultural listings.
- Concert flyers usually appear around Calle 23 (La Rampa) from Calle L up to Parque de los Rockeros (Rocker's Park) at Calle G (Av de los Presidentes).
- Radio stations are constantly promoting upcoming cultural events; tune in to Radio Taino (93.3 FM) or Radio Habana (94.9FM).
- Check out [www.cubarte.cult.cu](http://www.cubarte.cult.cu) and [www.afrocubaweb.com](http://www.afrocubaweb.com) for concerts, dance and fine-art listings.
- There's nothing better than word of mouth. Because the state publishes *Cartelera* and produces *Hurón Azul*, you have no chance of learning of anything underground through these resources; also, by talking to people, you'll learn about spontaneous happenings.
- Every cinema posts its schedule for the upcoming week at every other city cinema, and theaters post a schedule at their box office.

music. Quality opera can be seen weekly at the Gran Teatro de la Habana in Centro Habana (right).

## BASILICA MENOR

**DE SAN FRANCISCO DE ASÍS** Map p220

Plaza de San Francisco de Asís, Habana Vieja; tickets CUC\$3-8; ☎ from 6pm Thu-Sat

Plaza de San Francisco de Asís' glorious church (p73), which dates from 1737, has been reincarnated as a 21st-century museum and concert hall. The old nave hosts choral and chamber music two to three times a week (check the schedule at the door), and the acoustics inside are excellent. It's best to bag your ticket at least a day in advance.

**TEATRO AMADEO ROLDÁN** Map pp224-5

☎ 832-1168; cnr Calzada & Calle D, Vedado; tickets CUC\$10

Constructed in 1922 and burnt down by an arsonist in 1977, this wonderfully decorative neoclassical theater was rebuilt in 1999 in the exact style of the original. Named after Amadeo Roldán, the Cuban composer who was responsible for bringing Afro-Cuban influences into modern classical music, the theater is one of Habana's grandest, boasting two different auditoriums. The Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional play in the 886-seat Sala Amadeo Roldán, while soloists and small groups are showcased in the 276-seat Sala García Caturla.

## DANCE

Thanks to dance diva Alicia Alonso (p28), the Cuban National Ballet is world famous, but Cubans also excel at plenty of other dancing styles, most notably flamenco.

**CENTRO ANDALUZ** Map p222

☎ 863-6745; Paseo de Martí No 104 btwn Genios & Refugio, Centro Habana; ☎ 6-11pm Tue-Sun

A major Habana flamenco venue, the spit-and-sawdust Centro Andaluz on Paseo de Martí (Prado) regularly hosts blinding performances of what Spanish playwright Federico Lorca once poetically referred to as 'the music of hope and despair.' The dancing embodies much the same essence. The venue serves food (p117), and you can inquire about guitar lessons (p191).

## GRAN TEATRO DE LA HABANA

Map p222

☎ 861-3096; cnr Paseo de Martí & San Rafael, Centro Habana; tickets CUC\$20

The amazing neobaroque Gran Teatro, located in the Centro Gallego (p80), is the seat of the acclaimed Ballet Nacional de Cuba, founded in 1948 by Alicia Alonso (p28). It is also the home of the Cuban National Opera. A theater since 1838, it contains the grandiose Teatro García Lorca, along with two smaller concert halls: the Sala Alejo Carpentier and the Sala Ernesto Lecuono, where art films are sometimes shown. For upcoming events check out the handwritten notices posted under the colonnades on the sidewalk outside, or inquire at the ticket office (☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sat, 9am-3pm Sun).

**MESÓN DE LA FLOTA** Map p220

☎ 863-3838; Mercaderes No 257 btwn Amargura & Brasil; admission free; ☎ shows from 9pm

The Mesón de la Flota is Cuba's take on an earthy Andalusian flamenco club – although it's also an excellent restaurant (p114) and hotel (p158). As they have done with other foreign cultural genres, the Cubans have taken to this traditionally Spanish musical art with gusto and stamped their own authority on such classic flamenco *toques* (forms) as *seguiriyas* (a deep, expressive style) and *soleares* (a solemn yet melodic form). Warming up at 9pm nightly, the in-house band and dancers raise the stakes gradually as they search for the indefinable and elusive spirit that aficionados know as *duende*.

## THEATER

With a well-entrenched and influential arts movement, Habana boasts a theater scene that is unmatched elsewhere in the Caribbean (and possibly Latin America), even if the auditoriums themselves may sometimes look a little run-down. Offerings run the whole gamut, ranging from plays by Lorca to rumba with the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional to close-to-the-bone comedy sketches to performances by internationally renowned ballet troupes. While the skill and professionalism of these performances easily matches European and North American standards, ticket prices rarely exceed CUC\$10.

**SALA TEATRO EL SÓTANO**

Map pp224-5

☎ 832-0630; Calle K btwn Calles 25 & 27, Vedado  
If you understand Spanish, it's well worth attending a performance of the Grupo Teatro Rita Montaner in the Sala Teatro El Sótano, not far from the Hotel Habana Libre. The best shows are on Friday and Saturday at 8:30pm, and Sunday at 5pm. This is cutting-edge contemporary Cuban theater at its best.

**SALA TEATRO HUBERT DE BLANCK**

Map pp224-5

☎ 830-1011; Calzada No 657 btwn Calles A & B, Vedado; tickets CUC\$5

This theater, named for the founder of Habana's first conservatory of music, is home to Cuba's leading theater company, Teatro Estudio. You can usually see plays in Spanish on Saturday at 8:30pm and Sunday at 7pm; tickets are sold just prior to the performance.

**TEATRO AMÉRICA** Map p222

☎ 862-5695; Av de Italia No 253 btwn Concordia & Neptuno, Centro Habana

Housed in a classic art deco *rasca* (skyscraper) on Av de Italia (Galiano), Teatro América seems to have changed little since its theatrical heyday in the 1930s and '40s. It plays host to vaudeville, comedy, dance, jazz and salsa, and shows are normally staged on Saturday at 8:30pm and Sunday at 5pm. You can also inquire about dance lessons (p146).

**TEATRO BRECHT** Map pp224-5

cnr Calles 13 & I, Vedado; ☎ shows 8:30pm Sat, 5pm Sun

The Brecht has varied performances on Saturday at 8:30pm and Sunday at 5pm. Tickets go on sale one hour before the performance.

**TEATRO FAUSTO** Map p222

☎ 863-1173; Paseo de Martí No 201, Centro Habana

Another art deco eye-catcher on Paseo de Martí, the Teatro Fausto is renowned for its sidesplitting comedy shows on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. There's an open-sided theater bar across the street on the corner of Colón.

**TEATRO KARL MARX** Map pp228-9

☎ 203-0801, 209-1991; cnr Av 1 & Calle 10, Miramar

An ugly building but a great venue – size-wise the Karl Marx puts other Habana theaters in the shade, with a seating capacity of 5500 in a single auditorium. The very biggest events in Habana happen here, such as the closing galas for the jazz and film festivals and rare concerts by *trovadores* (singers of traditional poetic songs) such as Carlos Varela and Silvio Rodríguez. It also hosted Welsh rockers the Manic Street Preachers in 2001, the first Western rock band to play live on the island (Fidel Castro was in the audience).

**TEATRO MELLA** Map pp224-5

☎ 833-5651; Línea No 657 btwn Calles A & B, Vedado

Occupying the site of the old Rodi Cinema on Línea, the Teatro Mella is named after the famous communist and revolutionary hero Julio Antonio Mella. The program here is one of Habana's most comprehensive, offering an international ballet festival (p14), comedy shows, theater, dance and intermittent performances from the famous Conjunto Folklórico Nacional. If you have kids, come to the children's show on Sunday at 11am. The theater has a seating capacity of 1475.

**TEATRO NACIONAL DE CUBA**

Map pp224-5

☎ 879-6011; cnr Paseo & Calle 39, Vedado; tickets CUC\$10

One of the twin pillars of Cuban cultural life in Habana, the Teatro Nacional de Cuba on the Plaza de la Revolución is the modern rival to the old-world Gran Teatro in Parque Central. Built in the 1950s as part of Jean Forestier's grand city expansion, the complex hosts landmark concerts, foreign theater troupes, La Colmenita children's company and the Ballet Nacional de Cuba. The main hall, the Sala Avellaneda, stages big events such as musical concerts or plays by Shakespeare, while the smaller Sala Covarrubias puts on a more daring program (the seating capacity of the two theaters combined is 3300). The 9th floor is a rehearsal and performance space where the newest, most experimental stuff happens. The ticket office (☎ 9am-5pm) is at the

far end of a separate single-story building beside the main theater. Also on the premises are the Café Cantante Mi Habana (p140) and the Piano Bar Delirio Habanero (p139).

**TEATRO NACIONAL DE GUIÑOL**

Map pp224-5

☎ 832-6262; Calle M btwn Calles 17 & 19

The Teatro Nacional de Guiñol, underneath the Focsa building, presents puppet shows for children on Saturday at 5pm and Sunday at 10:30am and 5pm.

**DRINKING**

Most bars in Habana have at least one resident band that serenades customers enthusiastically from dusk till dawn. The music is nearly always traditional and the musicians themselves are – almost without exception – enviably talented.

Barhopping is easiest in Habana Vieja, where Habaguanex has done a great job in restructuring some of the city's venerable old drinking houses into atmospheric bars and taverns. Here, in the heart of the old town, you'll find the city's only microbrewery, a couple of overhyped 'Hemingway-once-got-drunk-in-here' bars and the perennially lively Calle Obispo.

Centro Habana's bars are edgier and a little more down-at-heel than their Habana Vieja counterparts, while Vedado and Playa are the domain of cabaret shows and smoky nightclubs.

**BAR DOS HERMANOS** Map p220

☎ 861-3436; San Pedro No 304, Habana Vieja; ☎ 24hr

Out of the way and a little seedy, Bar Dos Hermanos was a favorite Habana hangout of Spanish poet Federico García Lorca during his three months in Cuba in 1930. With its long wooden bar and salty seafaring atmosphere, it can't have changed much since.

**BAR LA MARINA** Map p220

cnr Oficinas & Brasil, Habana Vieja; ☎ 10am-11pm  
This pleasant outdoor courtyard with a 'ceiling' made out of twisted vines is as agreeable old-town nook as any. You can grab a bite to eat, feast on popcorn, or just sip quietly on a mojito while the resident Cuban combo strums along.

**TOP FIVE HOTEL BARS**

- Courtyard bar-café – Hotel Telégrafo (p164)
- Galería Bar – Hotel Nacional (p167)
- El Pórtico – Hotel NH Parque Central (p164)
- La Marina Bar – Hotel Armadores de Santander (p161)
- Roof terrace bar – Hotel Ambos Mundos (p160)

**BAR-CLUB IMÁGENES** Map pp224-5

☎ 33-36-06; Calzada No 602, Vedado; drink minimum CUC\$5; ☎ 9pm-5am

This upscale piano bar attracts something of an older crowd with its regular diet of *boleros* (romantic love songs) and *trova* (traditional poetic songs), but sometimes there are surprise concerts by big-name musicians; check the schedule posted outside. Meals are available (and affordable).

**BOSQUE BOLOGNA** Map p220

Obispo No 460, Habana Vieja; ☎ 10am-midnight  
A fern-filled terrace that fills the space of a demolished building on Calle Obispo, the Bologna is always busy with drinkers and diners drawn in by a combination of its effervescent music and highly persuasive waiters. It's a perfect warm-up for an extended Habana Vieja bar crawl.

**CAFÉ FRESA Y CHOCOLATE**

Map pp224-5

Calle 23 btwn Calles 10 & 12, Vedado; ☎ 9am-11pm

A small patio bar at the Centro Cultural Cinematográfico, this place is the nerve center of Habana's cinema community, with a young, hip clientele of actors, writers and film lovers. Named after Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's Oscar-nominated movie, it hosts a number of regular happenings, both here and in the adjoining building, including the once-monthly El Último Jueves del Mes (p134) debate night.

**CAFÉ PARÍS** Map p220

Obispo No 202, Habana Vieja; ☎ 24hr

Jump into the mix by grabbing one of the rough-hewn tables at this Habana Vieja standby known for its live music and gregarious atmosphere. On good nights, the rum flows, talented musicians jam, and spontaneous dancing and singing erupt in the crowd.

## EL ÚLTIMO JUEVES DE CADA MES

Habana is a city of many secrets, and few are more revealing than the topical and upfront discussion nights that convene once a month at the **Centro Cultural Cinematográfico** (Map pp224-5; Calle 23 btwn 10 & 12; admission free; ☎ 4-6pm) under the banner of El Último Jueves de Cada Mes.

Held – as the Spanish title implies – on the last Thursday of every month, these interactive debate nights are hosted by a small panel of academics, intellectuals and experts from the arts magazine *Temas* in front of a respectful but enthusiastic public audience. While subjects are invariably film or TV orientated, debates can be forthright and feisty, covering such potentially divisive issues as public morals or the validity of a recent Cuban soap opera entitled *La Cara Oculta de la Luna* (The Dark Side of the Moon), which highlights homosexuality and the contraction of the AIDS virus. Audience participation is encouraged and the forum is not only highly informative, it also provides a fascinating insight into the parameters of public debate in a supposedly totalitarian society.

El Último Jueves de Cada Mes is open to anyone wishing to attend and entrance is free. The topics for upcoming debates are usually posted up on a board in the adjacent Café Fresa y Chocolate a few days in advance. Foreign visitors should note that all debates take place in Spanish.

### CAFÉ TABERNA Map p220

☎ 861-1637; cnr Mercaderes & Brasil, Habana Vieja; ☎ noon-midnight

A rocking bar-restaurant that pays both pictorial and musical homage to Cuba's *Barbaro del Ritmo* (Barbarian of Rhythm), Benny Moré, the Café Taberna is where you can witness some of Habana's biggest and brassiest salsa sounds. Characterized by its long, well-stocked bar, and evocative images of Moré and other assorted mambo kings, the building fills a pale blue 18th-century house on the corner of Plaza Vieja and is always busy.

### EL BATURRO Map p220

cnr Av de Bélgica & Merced, Habana Vieja; ☎ 11am-11pm

Part of a long tradition of drinking houses situated next to train stations, El Baturro is a rough-and-ready Spanish bistro with a long wooden bar and an all-male – aggressively so – clientele.

### EL FLORIDITA Map p220

☎ 867-1300; Obispo No 557, Habana Vieja; ☎ 11am-midnight

Promoting itself as the 'cradle of the daiquirí,' El Floridita was a favorite of expat Americans long before Ernest Hemingway dropped by in the 1930s (hence the name, which means 'little Florida'). Indeed its fame began soon after WWI when a bartender named Constante Ribalagua began using shaved ice to make frozen daiquirís. Hemingway developed a penchant for the refreshing cocktail and ultimately they christened a drink in

his honor: the Papa Hemingway special (basically, a daiquirí made with grapefruit juice). His record – legend has it – was 13 doubles in one sitting. Any attempt to equal it at the current prices (CUC\$6 a single shot) will cost you a small fortune – and a huge hangover.

### FUNDACIÓN HAVANA CLUB

Map p220

Museo del Ron, San Pedro No 262, Habana Vieja; ☎ 9am-midnight

The bar in the famous Museo del Ron (p75) is one of the best places to get acquainted with Cuba's potent national drink. Try taking it like the Cubans do: straight up with no ice.

### LA BODEGUITA DEL MEDIO Map p220

☎ 867-1374; Empedrado No 207, Habana Vieja; ☎ 11am-midnight

Made famous thanks to the rum-swilling exploits of Ernest Hemingway, a visit to Habana's most celebrated bar has become de rigueur for literary sycophants and Walt Whitman wannabes. Notables including Salvador Allende, Fidel Castro, Nicolás Guillén, Harry Belafonte and Nat King Cole have all left their autographs on La Bodeguita's wall. These days the clientele is less luminous, with package tourists bussed in from Varadero delighting in the bottled bohemian atmosphere and the CUC\$4 mojitos, which – though good – have lost their Hemingway-esque shine. The B del M has proved to be so popular that it has been successfully exported; branches now exist in Puerto Vallarta (Mexico) and Palo Alto (California).

### LA DICHOSA Map p220

cnr Obispo & Compostela, Habana Vieja;

☎ 10am-midnight

It's hard to miss the rowdy La Dichosa on busy Calle Obispo, despite the fact that it doesn't display its name outside. Small and cramped, with at least half the space given over to the resident band, this is a good place for a quick drink before heading off down the road.

### LA LLUVIA DE ORO Map p220

☎ 862-9870; Obispo No 316, Habana Vieja; ☎ 24hr

It's on Obispo and there's always live music belting through the doorway – so it's always crowded. But with a higher-than-average hustler-to-tourist ratio, it might not be your most intimate introduction to Habana. Small snacks are available and the musicians' 'hat' comes round every three to four songs. Bring plenty of small change.

### LA TABERNA DE LA MURALLA

Map p220

☎ 866-4453; cnr San Ignacio & Muralla, Habana Vieja; ☎ 11am-midnight

Habana's best (and only) homebrew pub is situated on Plaza Vieja. Set up by an Austrian company in 2004, this no-nonsense drinking establishment serves smooth, cold homemade beer at sturdy wooden benches set up outside on the cobbles or indoors in an atmospheric beer hall. Get a group together and the staff will serve the amber nectar in a tall plastic tube; you draw the beer out of a tap at the bottom. There's also an outside grill where you can order good helpings of chorizo, fish and kebabs.

### MONSERRATE BAR Map p220

☎ 860-9751; Obrapia No 410, Habana Vieja; ☎ 10am-midnight

Traveler's tip: the Monserrate Bar daiquirís are half the price of those sold at the El Floridita one block down the road, thanks to the fact that a certain Ernest Hemingway never drank here. Skip the cheap food (it's cheap for a reason) and concentrate on cramming in the cocktails.

### OPUS BAR Map pp224-5

cnr Calzada & Calle D, Vedado; ☎ 3pm-3am

With individual candlelit tables, overstuffed chairs and Sly and the Family Stone on the

airways, this is Habana's (good) approximation of a lounge. The wall of windows make it a great sunset spot and performances in the Teatro Amadeo Roldán downstairs are broadcast via closed-circuit TV – a good alternative if the show is sold out.

### PRADO NO 12 Map p222

Paseo de Martí No 12, Centro Habana;

☎ noon-11pm

This slim flat-iron building on the corner of Paseo de Martí and San Lázaro serves drinks and simple snacks. Despite a major renovation five years ago, Prado No 12 still seems to be in a 1950s time warp. Soak up the atmosphere of this amazing city here after a sunset stroll along the Malecón (Av de Maceo).

## LIVE MUSIC

Cabarets and nightclubs mean dancing and, not surprisingly, Habana has plenty of stellar options. Venues to look out for are La Zorra y El Cuervo in Vedado for jazz, the hip Havana Café in the Hotel Meliá Cohiba for hot contemporary sounds, and the legendary Casa de la Música in Miramar for scorching salsa. At all these places you can see Cuba's top musical acts performing for less than CUC\$20.

## CABARET

Habana is famous for its glitzy cabaret shows with big bands, skillful dancers, stylish singers and lots of glamorous pizzazz. The most celebrated cabaret of all is held outdoors at the flamboyant Tropicana nightclub in Marianao, which has been running continuously since 1939. Many cabarets become nightclubs after their shows have finished for the night.

### CABARET NACIONAL Map p222

☎ 863-2361; cnr Paseo de Martí & San Rafael, Centro Habana; admission CUC\$10; ☎ 10pm-3am

The Cabaret Nacional, below the Gran Teatro de la Habana, has a show nightly at 11:30pm if enough patrons are present. It's a little camper than other Habana cabarets and the noise sometimes filters through into the Lorca auditorium next door. Its couples-only here and there's a minimum dress policy – no shorts or T-shirts. The

Nacional also has a CUC\$5 matinee known to locals as the *disco temba*. These popular afternoon get-togethers feature taped music from the 1970s and '80s, and are all the rage in Habana at the moment with the 35-plus set.

### CABARET PARISIÉN

Map pp224-5  
Hotel Nacional, cnr Calles 0 & 21, Vedado; admission CUC\$35; 🕒 from 9:10pm  
Cabaret Parisiën, in the Hotel Nacional, is one rung down from the Tropicana in both price and quality. Nonetheless, this longstanding nightly cabaret show is well worth a look, especially if you're staying in or around Vedado. Typically, the doors open at 9:10pm, with dinner at 9:30pm (an extra CUC\$20) and then the show. It's the usual mix of frills, feathers and seminaked women, but the choreography is first class and the whole spectacle has excellent kitsch value. As with most cabarets, after midnight the Parisiën becomes a disco.

### CABARET SALÓN ROJO

Map pp224-5  
📍 33-37-47; Calle 21 btwn Calles N & O, Vedado; admission CUC\$10; 🕒 from 10pm Tue-Sun  
Although George Raft's opulent Hotel Capri closed a couple of years back, it's once notorious cabaret show, the Salón Rojo (Red Room), seems to have been given an indefinite reprieve. While the cabaret is no longer the Mob-infested gambling den of yesteryear, the acts and music in the trussed up and revamped Salón Rojo are still hot, pulsating and ever popular with affluent Cubans. For heated music and no-holds-barred dancing, this is the place to come.

### CABARET TURQUINO

Map pp224-5  
25th fl, Hotel Habana Libre, cnr Calles 23 & L, Vedado; admission CUC\$10; 🕒 10:30pm-4:30am  
If you want a classy but affordable cabaret show, look no further than the Turquino on the 25th floor in the Hotel Habana Libre. Popular bands (including Los Van Van) play here regularly, and the views are spectacular. Locals swear by this place.

### COPA ROOM

Map pp224-5  
📍 33-40-51; Hotel Riviera, cnr Paseo & Malecón, Vedado; admission CUC\$20; 🕒 10pm-4am  
Doormen in tuxes and an atmosphere that's pure 1950s kitsch make the refurbished Copa Room a nostalgic draw.

Built as part of Mafia boss Meyer Lansky's Hotel Riviera in 1957, the nightclub was requisitioned by Castro's rebel army two years later (Fidel actually held a press conference in the Copa Room on January 21, 1959) as the glitter was quickly taken out of Lansky's hedonistic honeymoon. But the Copa Room lived to fight another day. Reopened in the early 2000s as a cabaret-nightclub, the Copa Room has nightly shows that are sharp, professional and highly entertaining, and with only a CUC\$20 entry fee (including one cocktail), it's more economical than either the Parisiën or the Tropicana.

### HAVANA CAFÉ

Map pp224-5  
📍 833-3636; Hotel Meliá Cohiba, Paseo btwn Calles 1 & 3, Vedado; admission CUC\$10; 🕒 from 9:30pm  
The Havana Café is a fancy nightclub-cum-cabaret at the Hotel Meliá Cohiba that is open nightly from 9:30pm. The decor is 1950s American retro, with old cars, motorcycles, gas pumps, and even an airplane hanging from the ceiling. It's hip and trendy (this, after all, is the Meliá), and most people come here to have dinner and dance. After 1am the tables are cleared and the place rocks to 'international music' until the cock crows.

### TROPICANA

Map pp228-9  
📍 267-1871; Calle 72 No 4504, Marianao; admission CUC\$70; 🕒 from 8:30pm Tue-Sun  
A city institution since it opened in 1939, the world-famous Tropicana was one of the few examples of Habana's Las Vegas-style nightlife to survive the clampdowns of the Castro revolution. Immortalized in Graham Greene's 1958 classic *Our Man in Havana*, this open-air cabaret show is where the book's protagonist, Jim Wormold, takes his overindulged daughter Milly to celebrate her 17th birthday. 'Chorus girls paraded 20 feet up among the great palm trees, while pink and mauve searchlights swept the floor,' wrote Greene of the gaudy proceedings. He may as well have been filing a modern-day entertainment review. The Tropicana still features a bevy of scantily clad señoritas who climb down from the palm trees to salsa dance amid colorful flashing lights on stage. The only difference is that these days the tickets sell for a slightly less-than-socialist CUC\$70.

## FOLK, SALSA & TRADITIONAL

Cuba's traditional *son* and salsa music can be heard for free almost anywhere but if you just can't get enough of the real deal, check out any of the places below.

### CASA DE LA AMISTAD

Map pp224-5  
📍 830-3114; Paseo No 406, Vedado; admission free; 🕒 Tue-Sun  
Housed in a lovely rose-colored mansion on leafy Paseo, the Casa de la Amistad hosts *son* and salsa music every night except Monday in an Italian Renaissance-style garden. Buena Vista Social Club luminary Compay Segundo was a regular before his death in 2003, and a number of Cuban TV shows have been made at the site. Other perks include a reasonably priced restaurant, a bar, a cigar shop and the house itself, which is a real Cuban beauty.

### CASA DE LA TROVA

Map pp224-5  
📍 879-3373; San Lázaro No 661, Vedado; admission free; 🕒 6pm-midnight Tue-Sun  
Strangely, Habana's Casa de la Trova is a bit of a damp squib compared to other famous Casas de la Trova in Santiago de Cuba and Camagüey. It's traditionally a haven for *son* music of the type popularized by Ry Cooder's Buena Vista Social Club, but the schedule here is sporadic. Check the upcoming program before turning up.

### CASA DE LAS AMÉRICAS

Map pp224-5  
📍 55-27-06; cnr Calles G & 3, Vedado  
This cultural institution founded by the Cuban government in April 1959 hosts talks, workshops, expositions and an annual literature prize, as well as sporadic music concerts in its 1st-floor function room. Call by or check the latest *Cartelera* for upcoming events.

### EL GATO TUERTO

Map pp224-5  
📍 66-22-24; Calle 0 No 14 btwn Calles 17 & 19, Vedado; drink minimum CUC\$5; 🕒 noon-6am  
Once the headquarters of Habana's alternative artistic and sexual scene, this chic bar with live music still packs in the baby boomers in its role as a well-known shrine to the Cuban *bolero*. Hidden in a quirky two-story house with turtles swimming in a pond out front, the 'One-Eyed Cat' (as 'Gato Tuerto' translates into English) boasts an

upstairs restaurant, Café Concerto El Gato Tuerto (p119), along with a downstairs bar and performance space. Come here at weekends to witness scores of 40-somethings belting out *boleros* word for word with the band, shouting requests and cramming the dance floor.

### EL HURÓN AZUL

Map pp224-5  
📍 832-4551; cnr Calles 17 & H, Vedado; admission CUC\$1-5  
El Hurón Azul is the social club of the Unión Nacional des Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (Uneac; National Union of Cuban Writers & Artists), Cuba's leading cultural institution. Frequented by a number of famous writers and intellectuals, this charming mansion hosts musical performances outside in its garden. Wednesday is the Afro-Cuban *Peña del Ambía* (admission CUC\$5) and Saturday it's authentic Cuban *boleros* (admission CUC\$1; 🕒 10pm to 2am); there's jazz (admission CUC\$1; 🕒 5pm) and *trova* (admission CUC\$1; 🕒 5pm) on alternate Thursdays. It doesn't get much better than this.

### LA CASA DE LA MÚSICA CENTRO HABANA

Map p222  
📍 878-4727; Av de Italia btwn Concordia & Neptuno, Centro Habana; admission CUC\$5-25; 🕒 shows 4pm & 10pm  
Imagine seeing U2 play live for \$5. One of the understated successes of the Cuban revolution is that you can witness top musical performers playing in person for next to nothing. This Casa de la Música is edgier than its counterpart in Miramar (below) – some have complained it's too edgy – and there are big salsa bands and plenty of 'name' acts thrown in for good measure. There are two daily shows, and both are popular with locals. Check the upcoming weekly schedule on the door outside.

### LA CASA DE LA MÚSICA MIRAMAR

Map pp228-9  
📍 202-6147; Calle 20 No 3308, Miramar; admission CUC\$10-20; 🕒 10pm Tue-Sat  
The Casa de la Música in Miramar is one of Habana's top music venues, launched with a concert by renowned jazz pianist Chucho Valdés in 1994. It's run by national Cuban recording company Egrem, and the programs are generally a lot more authentic than the cabaret entertainment you see at the hotels.

## GAY & LESBIAN HABANA

The acceptance of homosexuality, transvestism and transsexualism in Cuba has grown considerably since the 1980s, thanks primarily to the work of Mariela Castro, daughter of Cuban vice president Raúl Castro and niece of Fidel. As director of the Cuban National Center for Sex Education, based in Habana, Mariela has long been an important activist for gay and lesbian rights on the island, and her voice and persistence on issues such as bisexuality and AIDS has often been highly influential. Recent developments include a proposal for free sex-reassignment surgery and the emergence of a popular new Cuban soap opera called *La Oculita de la Luna* (The Dark Side of the Moon), which has tackled such formerly prickly topics as homosexual love and the contraction of the AIDS virus.

For gay travelers in search of an active alternative Habana nightlife, opportunities are slowly opening up. Same-sex couples should have few problems shooting the breeze with the weekend crowds on the Malecón (Av de Maceo) or mingling with the masses at the Tropicana. While there still aren't any gay venues per se in the city, a burgeoning colorful nighttime scene offers plenty of safe cruising opportunities in Vedado, plus the chance to attend some stomping unofficial parties in the suburbs. Longtime gay meeting places in Vedado (Map pp224-5) include outside Cine Yara on the intersection of Calles 23 and L, and in the streets and spaces surrounding the Coppelia.

Head to any of these spots on a Friday and Saturday night and you'll soon get wind of the private fiestas – spontaneous parties that are mostly gay, with a healthy dose of bisexuals and friends thrown in for good measure. Habana's scene is renowned for its talented drag shows, although you'll rarely see transvestites flaunting it in public. A popular venue for bigger shindigs is Parque Lenin (p96) – it's a little removed from the center but, by all accounts, it's an excursion that is well worth making.

As with other foreign-Cuban couplings, non-Cubans will often be expected to pick up the bill for drinks, taxis etc when escorting Cuban partners to these places.

As well as Valdés, platinum players such as NG la Banda, Los Van Van, Aldaberto Alvarez and Su Son play here regularly, and you'll rarely pay more than CUC\$20. Many travelers have said that this Casa de la Música has a more relaxed atmosphere than its namesake in Centro Habana (p137).

### LA MAISON Map pp228-9

☎ 204-1543; Calle 16 No 701, Miramar; admission CUC\$30; ☎ from 6pm

Located in a beautiful eclectic mansion, La Maison (p155) hosts a nightly fashion show with an accompanying program of music. Entry includes a meal in the complex's fancy restaurant (p125).

### SALÓN ROSADO BENNY MORE

Map pp228-9

El Tropical; ☎ 206-1281; cnr Av 41 & Calle 46, Miramar; admission CUC\$10; ☎ 9pm-late

For something completely different, check out the very *caliente* (hot) action at this outdoor venue. The Rosado packs in hot, sexy Cuban youths dancing madly to Los Van Van, Pupi y Su Son Son or Habana Abierta; it's a fierce scene and female travelers should expect aggressive come-ons. Some travelers pay pesos, others dollars – more of that Cuban randomness for you. Friday to Sunday is best.

## JAZZ

Cuban jazz is synonymous with Chucho Valdés and – this being Habana – seeing the great Grammy-winning improviser in person is by no means out of the question. Should Chucho be taking a night off, however, don't worry; Señor Valdés has left a great trio of quirky jazz venues rocking in his wake.

### JAZZ CAFÉ Map pp224-5

☎ 55-33-02; top fl, Galerías de Paseo, cnr Calle 1 & Paseo, Vedado; drink minimum CUC\$10;

☎ noon-late

This upscale joint overlooking the Malecón is like a jazz supper club, with tables and a decent menu; come here for cocktails at sunset. Locals will tell you it is one of Habana's best jazz venues – at night, the club swings into action with jazz, *timba* (modern salsa mixed with funk, rap and rock) and occasionally straight-up salsa. Pity the dance floor is just a strip between the tables.

### JAZZ CLUB LA ZORRA Y EL CUERVO

Map pp224-5

☎ 66-24-02; cnr Calles 23 & 0, Vedado; admission CUC\$5; ☎ from 10pm

Vedado's most famous jazz club is La Zorra y El Cuervo (the Vixen and the Crow), which

attracts long lines of committed jazz fiends. The subterranean performance space is smoky and a little cramped (the official capacity is 130), but the freestyle jazz showcased here is second to none. In the past, this club has hosted such big names as Chucho Valdés and George Benson.

### PIANO BAR DELIRIO HABANERO

Map pp224-5

☎ 873-5713; cnr Paseo & Calle 39; admission CUC\$5; ☎ 3-7pm & 10pm-3am Tue-Sun

This suave and sophisticated lounge upstairs in the Teatro Nacional hosts everything from young *trovadores* to smooth, improvised jazz. The deep-red couches about a wall of glass overlooking the Plaza de la Revolución and it's stunning at night with the Martí memorial alluringly backlit. This is where to escape when the action at the adjoining *Café Cantante Mi Habana* (p140) nightclub gets too hot. There's a daily *peña* at 3pm.

## RUMBA

The music of Black slaves, rumba (p37) is one of Habana's most spontaneous musical genres. To be sure of catching some of the city's earthiest contemporary rhythms head to one of the following venues.

### CALLEJÓN DE HAMEL Map pp224-5

Vedado; ☎ from noon Sun

Aside from its funky street murals and psychedelic art shops, the main reason to come to Habana's high temple of Afro-Cuban culture is for the frenetic rumba music that kicks off every Sunday at around noon. For aficionados, this is about as raw and hypnotic as it gets, with interlocking drum patterns and lengthy rhythmic chants powerful enough to summon up the spirit of the *orishas* (Santería deities). Due to a liberal sprinkling of tourists these days, some argue that the Callejón de Hamel has lost much of its basic charm. Don't believe them. This place can still deliver.

### CONJUNTO FOLKLÓRICO NACIONAL

Map pp224-5

El Gran Palenque, Calle 4 No 103 btwn Calzada & Calle 5, Vedado; admission CUC\$5; ☎ 3pm alternate Sat

The Conjunto Folklórico Nacional, founded in 1962, specializes in Afro-Cuban dancing

(all of the drummers are Santería high priests) and offers some of the best rumba in the city. It has toured the world – everywhere from New York to Angola – and is internationally famous. You can see the group perform at the Sábado de Rumba on every other Saturday at El Gran Palenque, or to get in on the action you can organize dance lessons (p191).

### LAS ORISHAS Map p231

cnr Martí & Lamas, Guanabacoa; admission CUC\$3; ☎ from 10pm

Situated in the heart of Habana's Santería community, Las Orishas is a funky restaurant (p126) that on the weekend hosts live rumba music, including regular visits from the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional. The pleasant garden bar is surrounded by colorful Afro-Cuban sculptures that depict various Santería deities, such as Babalou Aye, Yemaya and Changó. Well off the beaten track and hard to get to at night, this quirky music venue is usually visited by foreigners in groups. Few leave unhappy. Indeed, if you want to see rumba dancing at its gritty best, this is the place to be.

## ROCK, RAP & REGGAE

In the modern kaleidoscope of Cuban music, there's room for almost anything, including myriad North American and European influences. Rock's resurgence was given the official nod of approval in 2000 with the unveiling of a statue of John Lennon (p87) at a park in Vedado by Fidel Castro. One year later, the Cuban leader was a surprise attendee at a concert given in the Karl Marx Theater by Welsh rockers the Manic Street Preachers. The acceptance of rap and *reggaeton* (Cuban hip-hop) goes back even further to the emergence of the annual Alamar hip-hop festival in 1995; these days it's all over town.

### ANFITEATRO PARQUE ALMENDARES

Map pp224-5

Calle 23, Vedado; admission 2 pesos

This riverside amphitheater hosts regular musical events and special concerts by the likes of Frank Delgado and Interactivo. It's an intimate place to catch some terrific music. Regular *peñas* include reggae (☎ 8pm Friday) and rap (☎ 8pm Sat).

**LA MADRIGUERA** Map pp224-5

☎ 879-8175; Quinta de los Molinos, cnr Calzada de Infanta & Salvador Allende, Vedado; admission 20 pesos; 🕒 9am-7pm Mon-Wed, Fri & Sat, 9am-midnight Thu

Locals bill it as a 'hidden place for open ideas,' while outsiders are bowled over by the musical originality and artistic innovation on display here. Welcome to La Madriguera, home to the Asociación Hermanos Saiz, the youth wing of Uneac. Located in Quinta de los Molinos, this is where the pulse of Cuba's young musical innovators beats the strongest. Come here for arts, crafts, spontaneity and, most of all, music. The program is varied but there is a strong bias towards the Cuban three Rs: *reggaeton*, rap and rumba.

**PATIO DE MARÍA** Map pp224-5

☎ 81-07-22; Calle 37 No 262 btwn Paseo & Calle 2, Vedado

Unique in Cuba for a number of reasons, the Patio de María is a nexus point for Habana's burgeoning counterculture, hosting everything from rock music to poetry readings. Run by María Gattorno, the venue has received heavy media coverage in Cuba and abroad, partly due to Gattorno's AIDS and drug-prevention educational work. You can catch all kinds of entertainment here, from videos and debates to workshops and theater, but the real deal is the rock nights (to canned music) that take off most weekends. Check the schedule posted at the door or head to Parque de los Rockeros on the corner of Calles 23 and G to find out what's happening.

**DANCE CLUBS**

Habana's dance clubs range from the suave Café Cantante Mi Habana in the Teatro Nacional de Cuba to wall-vibratingly loud hotel discos such as Pico Blanco, which continue playing pop music, techno and salsa well into the small hours of the morning, washed down with plenty of Cuban rum. Alternatively you can visit an infinitely more *caliente* venue such as the Karachi Club in Vedado or the Palermo in Centro Habana, where you can mingle congenially with local Cubans as they dance energetically to *timba*, salsa-jazz, *reggaeton* and rap.

**CABARET LAS VEGAS** Map pp224-5

☎ 870-7939; Calzada de Infanta No 104 btwn Calles 25 & 27, Vedado; admission CUC\$5; 🕒 10pm-4am

Don't get duped into thinking this is another Tropicana. On the contrary, Cabaret Las Vegas is a rough and seedy local music dive where a little rum and a lot of *No moleste, por favors* will help you withstand the overzealous entreaties of the hordes of haranguing prostitutes. There is, however, a midnight show.

**CAFÉ CANTANTE MI HABANA**

Map pp224-5

☎ 879-0710; cnr Paseo & Calle 39; admission CUC\$10; 🕒 4pm-5am Tue-Sat

The Café Cantante Mi Habana, below the Teatro Nacional de Cuba (use the side entrance), is a hip disco that offers live salsa music and dancing as well as bar snacks and food. With a clientele consisting mainly of 'yummies' (young urban Marxist managers) and aging sugar-daddy tourists with their youthful Cuban girlfriends in tow, this place tends to get more feisty than the adjacent *Piano Bar Delirio Habanero* (p139). The music, however, is quality, and the disco has regular appearances from name performers such as Haila María Mompie. There's a dress code (no shorts, T-shirts or hats may be worn inside), there's no entry for those under 18 and no photos are allowed. Café Cantante has 4pm matinees for the older folks, including a rap matinee on Saturday.

**CLUB LA RED** Map pp224-5

☎ 832-5415; cnr Calles 19 & L, Vedado; admission CUC\$3-5; 🕒 10pm-5am

Club La Red is a Vedado disco-club that rarely gets animated before 11:30pm on a Friday or Saturday. Expect piped Western dance music with the odd revved-up *reggaeton* number thrown in for good measure.

**CLUB TROPICAL** Map pp224-5

☎ 832-7361; cnr Línea & Calle F, Vedado; admission CUC\$5; 🕒 9pm-2am

Cheap but a little out of the way, this Vedado nightclub is where you come when your budget's blown but you still want to dance the night away to a variety of salsa, pop and rap.

**VOICES OF HABANA: TONY TELLA****Taxi driver, Miramar**

**Sum up Habana in one sentence.** Habana is incredible! It has such a great mix of architecture and people – and here everyone is the same, there is no class. **What defines a habanero?** *Habaneros* [inhabitants of Habana] are great talkers. They talk louder and live faster than other Cubans. They like to think that the best of everything is in Habana. **What is the best Cuban rum and why?** Caney rum *añejo* [aged] 12 years is my favorite. It is still made in the old Bacardi factory in Santiago de Cuba. I always drink it straight up with no ice. **What's the best thing about your neighborhood?** The cleanliness and the tranquility. **Is the food here so terrible?** No. It depends on where you eat. For government places you've got El Palenque, El Aljibe and La Cecilia; for private places try La Cocina de Lilliam, Paladar Vistamar or Los Nardos. **What is your favorite Habana night out?** The Macumba Habana in Playa; it's got food, drink, dancing, the lot, all in one place. **How can the inquisitive traveler find the 'real' Cuba?** Check out Barrio Chino [Chinatown], stroll down El Bulevar [Calle San Rafael] or wander along Galiano [Av de la Italia]. Or you can visit a *disco temba*, a place where people go after work [from 3pm onwards] to listen to American and Cuban music from the '70s and '80s. There's a good one in the Casa de la Música in Centro Habana.

*As related to Brendan Sainsbury*

**DISCOTECA AMANECER**

Map pp224-5

☎ 832-9075; Calle 15 btwn Calles N & O, Vedado; admission CUC\$3-5; 🕒 10pm-4am

Discoteca Amanecer (Dawn Disco) is another cheap Vedado nightspot that mixes pop and rap. Whether you'll want to stay here until dawn is another matter.

**EL CHEVERE** Map pp224-5

☎ 204-5162; Parque Almendares, cnr Calles 49A & 28A, Vedado; admission CUC\$6-10; 🕒 from 10pm

One of Habana's most popular discos, this alfresco place in a lush park gets local tongues wagging, and hosts a good mix of Cubans and tourists.

**KARACHI CLUB** Map pp224-5

☎ 832-5415; cnr Calles 17 & K, Vedado; admission CUC\$3-5; 🕒 10pm-5am

The Karachi is a ferociously *caliente* disco situated on a leafy Vedado street corner. Rumba dancing has been reported here, but you're far more likely to encounter Euro-disco, techno and rap.

**MACUMBA HABANA**

☎ 33-05-68/9; cnr Calle 222 & Av 37, La Lisa; admission CUC\$10-20; 🕒 from 10pm

Cocooned in a residential neighborhood southwest of Cubanacán is Macumba, one of Habana's biggest venues for live salsa.

The outdoor setting is refreshing and the sets are long, so you'll get a lot of dancing in. You can also dine at La Giradilla (from 🕒 6pm) in the same complex. This is a great place to catch jazz-salsa combos and *timba* music; NG La Banda performs regularly. Hotels and Infotur (p197) sell excursions here, but you're better off organizing the trip yourself (a taxi should cost around CUC\$8 to CUC\$10).

**PALERMO** Map p222

☎ 861-9745; cnr San Miguel & Amistad, Centro Habana; admission CUC\$2; 🕒 from 11pm Thu-Sun

Don't tell the respectable owners of your casa particular (private house that lets out rooms to foreigners) you're heading here – they'll run a mile. Palermo is a dance club with a heavy rap scene. Fun but *fuerte* (tough).

**PICO BLANCO** Map pp224-5

☎ 833-4187; 14th fl, Hotel St John's, Calle O No 216 btwn Calles 23 & 25, Vedado; admission CUC\$5; 🕒 from 9pm

An average hotel with a surprisingly less-than-average nightclub, the Pico Blanco is situated on the 14th floor of the Hotel St John's in Vedado. The program can be hit or miss: one night it's karaoke and cheesy *boleros*, another it's jamming with some rather famous Cuban musicians. Check the schedule posted in the hotel window. The rooftop bar has terrific views.

## CINEMAS

As the host of the annual Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano (p14), movie-loving Habana has a plethora of popular cinemas and movie houses – over 200, in fact – and maintains the cutting-edge Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (Icaic; Cuban Film Institute). Most foreign films are shown here in their original language with Spanish subtitles, although Hollywood blockbusters are more common than many visitors imagine. Fortunately, there are plenty of thought-provoking Cuban and Latin American movies to balance out the banality.

Film-showing times tend to vary, although most cinemas will have a matinee and a couple of evening shows. There is always a daily schedule posted outside every cinema that highlights what films are showing at other cinemas all over Habana, plus session times.

Tickets generally cost CUC\$2.

### CINE ACTUALIDADES Map p222

☎ 861-5193; Av de Bélgica No 262, Centro Habana  
The Actualidades is a timeworn cinema in a central location behind the Hotel Plaza in Centro Habana. Check out the handwritten schedule posted on the window to find out what's on.

### CINE CHARLES CHAPLIN Map pp224-5

☎ 831-1101; Calle 23 No 1157 btwn Calles 10 & 12, Vedado  
The Chaplin is an art-house cinema that shows quality Cuban movies and other rare cinematic gems.

### CINE LA RAMPA Map pp224-5

☎ 878-6146; Calle 23 No 111, Vedado  
La Rampa hosts film festivals and houses the country's extensive film archive. You can catch specialist movie seasons here dedicated to contemporary film icons such as Robert de Niro.

### CINE PAYRET Map p222

☎ 863-3163; Paseo de Martí No 505, Centro

#### Habana

Habana's largest and most popular cinema is situated opposite the Capitolio Nacional, and presents a good variety of both Spanish-speaking and Hollywood movies. The Payret has been in operation since 1878.

### CINE RIVIERA Map pp224-5

☎ 830-9564; Calle 23 No 507, Vedado

Another classic movie house that shows a good selection of North American, Cuban, Latin American and European films.

### CINE YARA Map pp224-5

☎ 832-9430; cnr Calles 23 & L, Vedado;

🕒 12:30pm

The city's most prestigious cinema, Cine Yara was put up in the 1950s as part of the Habana's Radiocentro development. The second-largest cinema in Habana, it has three auditoriums and opens at 12:30pm daily.

### CINECITO Map p222

☎ 863-8051; cnr San Rafael & Consulado, Centro

#### Habana

Tucked behind the Hotel Inglaterra on pedestrianized San Rafael, Cinecito shows films for children.

### MULTICINE INFANTA Map pp224-5

☎ 878-9323; Calzada de Infanta No 357, Vedado

Habana's fanciest cinema was refurbished for the prestigious 2006 Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano, and its four auditoriums sparkle afresh.

## CIRCUSES

### CIRCO TROMPOLOCO Map pp228-9

cnr Av 5 & Calle 112, Playa; admission CUC\$10

Habana's permanent big top has performances at 7pm Thursday to Sunday plus a weekend matinee. It's great for the kids.

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