

Eating ■

Habana Vieja	111
Centro Habana	116
Vedado	118
Playa & Marianao	122
Eastern Habana	126
Outer Habana	127

Eating

Habana is not renowned for its cuisine and, although the food here isn't universally awful, don't bank on it being a highlight of your trip. Fifty years of austerity, rationing and on-off food shortages has left most of the city's state-controlled restaurants stumped for ingredients and starved of creativity. And, with a lack of any real incentive to perform, the service often isn't that much better.

There are, of course, some welcome exceptions to this rule. Habana Vieja has a growing clutch of attractive government-run restaurants set up by the City Historian's Office, Habaguanex, with the palates of foreign visitors in mind, while Playa and Vedado boast a plethora of inviting and gastronomically adventurous paladares (privately run restaurants; p124). If you want to excite your taste buds and try something a bit different, these are the places to head.

See p17 for information about food in Habana.

Opening Hours

As a general rule, most restaurants are open 10:30am to 11pm daily. Paladares tend to open at noon and stay open a little later, often until midnight.

How Much

In Cuba simple street food and light lunchtime snacks are normally relatively cheap, as long as you steer clear of the main tourist hubs (or any bar associated with the late, great Ernest Hemingway). Real aficionados can even swap

their convertibles for Cuban pesos and go shopping at the agropecuarios (free-enterprise vegetable markets; p112), thus saving pocketfuls. In and around the tourist areas the picture is a little different. Here you'll find meals and drinks priced at similar rates to Europe and North America. Count on CUC\$4 to CUC\$6 for a cocktail in a posh hotel and don't expect much change from CUC\$20 for a full dinner in one of the city's more upscale paladares or restaurants.

PRICE GUIDE

The price symbols in this chapter indicate the price of a two-course meal for one person, excluding drinks.

\$\$\$	over CUC\$15
\$\$	CUC\$8-15
\$	under CUC\$8

Booking Tables

Booking tables is only necessary in the evenings at the more popular paladares where space is limited. Reservations are recommended at Paladar La Guarida (p118) in Centro Habana, Paladar El Hurón Azul (p121) and Paladar Gringo Viejo (p121) in Vedado, and any of the half-dozen or so paladares in Playa and Miramar.

Tipping

Remembering to tip is important in Cuba where leaving a couple of convertibles in the bread basket at the end of the meal can effectively make or break a person's week. As most Cubans earn their salaries (the equivalent of US\$10 to US\$25 a month) in Cuban pesos, access to hard currency is vital in order to make up the shortfall. However mediocre your food, a convertible or two isn't just a show of appreciation; it's a vital contribution to the local economy.

In Cuba, a 10% tip is usually sufficient, with CUC\$1 being the appropriate minimum in a restaurant that accepts convertibles. Tipping in peso restaurants is not compulsory, but is greatly appreciated. Leaving 10 pesos or CUC\$0.50 in convertibles is a generous tip.