



Havana

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Why Go?

Ah...Havana, city of jarring paradoxes and unfathomable contradictions where seductive beauty sidles up to spectacular decay and revolutionary iconography is juxtaposed with sun, sea, sand, sex and a diluting slice of austere socialism. There's fascinating history here, wrapped up in erudite museums and foresighted restoration projects, and tremendous music too, from gritty street rumba to kitschy cabaret. But Havana's greatest allure is its street theater, the raw snippets of everyday life that go on all around you: the mother in rollers and the baseball-playing schoolkids, the wandering troubadours and the cigar-smoking doctor trying to jump-start his 1951 Plymouth. The attraction is the authenticity. *Habaneros* (the people of Havana) don't just survive: they duck and dive, scheme and dream, create and debate, but most of all, they *live* – with a rare passion.

When to Go

One of Havana's most outstanding music festivals is the Festival Internacional de Jazz, which is held each year in February. Don't miss it! Havana's summer heat can be stifling. To avoid it, come in October, a wonderfully quiet month when there's still plenty to do – such as enjoy the annual Festival Internacional de Ballet. Busier (for a reason) is December, when people line up for the Festival del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano, Cuba's premiere movie shindig.

History

In 1514 San Cristóbal de La Habana was founded on the south coast of Cuba near the mouth of the Río Mayabeque by Spanish conquistador Pánfilo de Narváez. Named after the daughter of a famous Taíno Indian chief, the city was moved twice during its first five years due to mosquito infestations and wasn't permanently established on its present site until December 17, 1519. According to local legend, the first Mass was said beneath a ceiba tree in present-day Plaza de Armas.

Havana is the most westerly and isolated of Diego Velázquez' original villas, and life was hard in the early days. Things didn't get any better in 1538 when French pirates and local slaves razed the city.

It took the Spanish conquest of Mexico and Peru to swing the pendulum in Havana's favor. The town's strategic location, at the mouth of the Gulf of Mexico, made it a perfect nexus for the annual treasure fleets to regroup in its sheltered harbor before heading east. Thus endowed, its ascension was quick and decisive, and in 1607 Havana replaced Santiago as the capital of Cuba.

The city was sacked by French pirates led by Jacques de Sores in 1555; the Spanish replied by building the La Punta and El Morro forts between 1558 and 1630 to reinforce an already formidable protective ring. From 1674 to 1740, a strong wall around the city

was added. These defenses kept the pirates at bay but proved ineffective when Spain became embroiled in the Seven Years' War with Britain, the strongest maritime power of the era.

On June 6, 1762, a British army under the Earl of Albemarle attacked Havana, landing at Cojímar and striking inland to Guanabacoa. From there they drove west along the northeastern side of the harbor, and on July 30 they attacked El Morro from the rear. Other troops landed at La Chorrera, west of the city, and by August 13 the Spanish were surrounded and forced to surrender. The British held Havana for 11 months. (The same war cost France almost all its colonies in North America, including Québec and Louisiana – a major paradigm shift.)

When the Spanish regained the city a year later in exchange for Florida, they began a crash building program to upgrade the city's defenses in order to avoid another debilitating siege. A new fortress, La Cabaña, was built along the ridge from which the British had shelled El Morro, and by the time the work was finished in 1774, Havana had become the most heavily fortified city in the New World, the 'bulwark of the Indies.'

The British occupation resulted in Spain opening Havana to freer trade. In 1765 the city was granted the right to trade with seven Spanish cities instead of only Cádiz, and from 1818 Havana was allowed to ship

HAVANA IN...

Two Days

Explore Habana Vieja by strolling the streets between the four main colonial squares. There are a plethora of museums, so you'll want to weed out the good ones. The **Museo de la Ciudad** is a highlight in the colonial core, while in Centro Havana don't miss the **Museo de la Revolución** and the dual-sited **Museo de Bellas Artes**. You can cover a lot of ground on Havana's open-topped bus tour, although the **Malecón sea drive** is best plied on foot. For nightlife, soak up the nocturnal essence of Habana Vieja, dipping into bars on **Calle Obispo** and **Plaza Vieja**.

Four Days

With two extra days, make sure you check out the '50s-era kitsch of the Vedado neighborhood. Essential stops are the **Hotel Nacional** for a mojito on the alfresco terrace and **Plaza de la Revolución** for a look at the Che mural and the Memorial a José Martí. Stick around in the evening for some excellent nightlife in jazz clubs, lounge bars and cabarets.

One Week

Three more days gives you time to get out to suburban sights such as the **Museo Hemingway**, the historic colonial forts on the east side of the harbor and the **Aquarium** in Miramar.