



Havana

📍 7 / POP 2,130,431

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Why Go?

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine you are there.

Waves crashing against a mildewed sea wall; a young couple cavorting in a dark, dilapidated alley; guitars and voices harmonizing over a syncopated drum rhythm; sunlight slanting across rotten peeling paintwork; a handsome youth in a *guayabera* shirt leaning against a Lada; the smell of car fumes and cheap aftershave; tourists with Hemingway beards; Che Guevara on a billboard, a banknote, a key-ring, a T-shirt...

No one could have invented Havana. It's too audacious, too contradictory, and – despite 50 years of withering neglect – too damned beautiful. How it does it, is anyone's guess. Maybe it's the swashbuckling history, the survivalist spirit, or the indefatigable salsa energy that ricochets off walls and emanates most emphatically from the people. Don't come here looking for answers. Just arrive with an open mind and prepare yourself for a long, slow seduction.

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 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 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.

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.

When the Spanish regained the city a year later in exchange for Florida, they began a 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 its sugar, rum, tobacco and coffee directly to any part of the world. The 19th century was an era of steady progress: first came the railway in 1837, followed by public gas lighting (1848), the telegraph (1851), an urban transport system (1862), telephones (1888) and electric lighting (1890).

By 1902 the city, which had been physically untouched by the devastating wars of independence, boasted a quarter of a million inhabitants. It had expanded rapidly west along the Malecón and into the wooded glades of formerly off-limits Vedado. There was a large influx of rich Americans at the start of the Prohibition era, and the good times began to roll with abandon; by the 1950s Havana was a decadent gambling city frolicking amid the all-night parties of American mobsters and scooping fortunes into the pockets of various disreputable hoods such as Meyer Lansky.

For Fidel Castro, it was an aberration. On taking power in 1959, the new revolutionary government promptly closed down all the casinos and sent Lansky and his henchmen back to Miami. The once-glittering hotels were divided up to provide homes for the rural poor. Havana's long decline had begun.

Today the city's restoration is ongoing and a stoic fight against the odds in a country where shortages are part of everyday life and money for raw materials is scarce. Since 1982 City Historian Eusebio Leal Spengler has been piecing Habana Vieja back together street by street and square by square with the aid of Unesco and a variety of foreign investors. Slowly but surely, the old starlet is starting to reclaim her former greatness.

DOWNTOWN HAVANA

For simplicity's sake downtown Havana can be split into three main areas: Habana Vieja, Centro Habana and Vedado, which between them contain the bulk of the tourist sights. Centrally located Habana Vieja is the city's atmospheric historic masterpiece; dense Centro Habana, to the west, provides an eye-opening look at the real-life Cuba in close-up; and the more majestic spread-out Vedado is the once-notorious Mafia-run