

Arts

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Far from dampening Habana's artistic heritage, the Cuban revolution actually strengthened it, ridding the city of insipid foreign commercial influences and putting in their place a vital network of art schools, museums, theater groups and writers unions. Indeed, Cuba is one of the few countries in the world where mass global culture has yet to penetrate and where being 'famous' is usually more to do with genuine talent than good looks, luck or the right agent.

Despite the all-pervading influence of the Cuban government in the country's vibrant cultural life, Habana's art world remains surprisingly experimental and varied. Thanks to generous state subsidies over the past 50 years, traditional cultural genres such as Afro-Cuban dance and contemporary ballet have been enthusiastically revisited and revalued, resulting in the international success of leading Cuban dance troupes such as the Habana-based Conjunto Folklórico Nacional (p139) and the Ballet Nacional de Cuba.

Much of Cuba's best art is exhibited in apolitical genres such as pop art and opera, while more cutting-edge issues can be found in movies such as *Fresa y Chocolate*, a film that boldly questioned social mores and pushed homosexuality onto the public agenda.

DANCE & THEATER

Described by aficionados as 'a vertical representation of a horizontal act,' Cuban dancing is famous for its libidinous rhythms and sensuous moves. It comes as no surprise to discover that the country has produced some of the world's most exciting dancers. With an innate musical rhythm at birth and the ability to replicate perfect salsa steps by the age of two or three, Cubans are natural performers who approach dance with a complete lack of self-consciousness – something that leaves most visitors from Europe or North America feeling as if they've got two left feet. Most Cuban dances are connected with a specific genre of music, including rumba and mambo; see p36 for more details.

ALICIA ALONSO

In a country famous for its machismo, it might seem strange that the traditionally graceful art of ballet has risen to a position of such eminence. Yet not only does Cuba possess one of the world's most prestigious ballet companies, it also boasts one of its oldest, greatest and most enduring ballet divas, Alicia Alonso.

Born Alicia Ernestina de la Caridad del Cobre Martínez Hoya in Habana in 1921, Alonso was a child dancing prodigy who relocated to New York in the 1930s to study at the School of American Ballet. Despite suffering from an eye condition that left her partially blind at the age of 19, she quickly became a regular in such illustrious Broadway shows as *Stars in Your Eyes* and *Great Lady*. Married at the age of 15 to fellow dancer Fernando, Alonso's talent ultimately led her to the American Ballet Theater, with whom she traveled to the Soviet Union in the '40s and '50s, where she became the first American representative to dance with the Bolshoi. She returned to Habana in 1948 where, patronized by Cuban president Fulgencio Batista, she founded the Alicia Alonso Ballet Company. But the institution's early days were far from easy and in 1956, after objecting to the gross excesses of Cuba's Mafia-run capital, she moved into exile.

In stark contrast to other disaffected artists, Alonso was lured back to Cuba in 1959, where she set up the Ballet Nacional de Cuba with a gift of US\$200,000 from Fidel Castro. A longtime supporter of both Castro and his revolution, her loyalty has been richly rewarded over the years with state funding, professional recognition, and a countrywide network of teachers and schools.

As synonymous with Cuban ballet as Fidel Castro is with facial hair and military fatigues, Alonso regularly scours the country for bright young protégés to star in her prize-winning and widely lauded dance productions, which cover everything from definitive versions of *Giselle* (which she has taken to the Paris Opera) and *Sleeping Beauty* (showcased in Vienna and Milan) to her own compositions.

A veteran of over 50 foreign tours as both a dancer and choreographer, Alonso is now well into her eighties and is nearly blind. Thanks largely to her skill, foresight and lifelong dedication to the art, she has made ballet one of Cuba's most famous and widely respected international exports. It is hard to imagine Cuban dance without her.

ART & THE REVOLUTION

The marriage of art and communism has rarely been harmonious. In the former Soviet Union, outspoken writers such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn were unceremoniously packed off to Siberia for their literary 'indiscretions,' while in communist China the Cultural Revolution put an end to any realistic freedom of thought.

But Cuba, as ever, presents a confusing dichotomy. On the one hand, art on this colorful and highly literate island has been actively encouraged, while on the other, many liberal freethinkers have been repeatedly suppressed.

After coming to power in 1959, Fidel Castro made a decision to level the social playing field within Cuba's already vibrant cultural life, making good art and entertainment available to all. As a result, entry fees to everything from the baseball to the opera were all but eradicated, and huge state subsidies were handed out to bodies such as the Ballet Nacional de Cuba and the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (Icaic; Cuban Film Institute).

Founded in 1960, the influential Casa de las Américas was delegated with the task of redefining Cuban intellectualism within a post-1959 sociopolitical reality, while the Unión Nacional des Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (Uneca; National Union of Cuban Writers & Artists) initiated a series of heated debates about the future of art within the new 'framework.'

For a brief period, the experiment appeared to work. Far from being ostracized by Western intellectuals, Castro and his poetry-scribbling cohort Che Guevara were viewed as romantic figures in Europe and America, and few left-leaning writers or artists remained impervious to their charm. Indeed, considered an unreliable hothead by his stern-faced allies in the Kremlin, Fidel often preferred to go his own way in the cultural sphere, hobnobbing with literary luminaries such as Jean-Paul Sartre and forming a lifelong friendship with Nobel Prize-winning author Gabriel García Márquez.

But it wasn't all wine and roses. Determined to promote an ethos of 'in the revolution everything, against the revolution nothing,' Castro's artistic judgment became increasingly bellicose in the late '60s and early '70s, when skeptical writers and critics were treated with growing intolerance. With the press effectively silenced by the mid-'60s and criticism of the revolution viewed as treasonable, many leading intellectuals fled into exile (see p21).

Yet, despite the draconian clampdown, Cuba somehow managed to avoid the artistic famine of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Part of the reason for this is the country's high literacy rate (Cubans are avid readers), as well as its already strong tradition of music and dance. The loyalty of key cultural icons such as ballerina Alicia Alonso, poet Nicolás Guillén and writer Alejo Carpentier has also gone a long way in promoting Cuba's artistic image abroad. Finally, there's Fidel, a vociferous reader who, despite an unhealthy dose of political paranoia, has rubbed shoulders with members of the international arts community, including such famous figures as movie director Oliver Stone and media magnate Ted Turner.

Cuba might not yet be a font of intellectual freedom but, within its limits, it has tackled prickly issues such as homosexuality and individual repression, and continues to lead the world in a whole host of colorful cultural genres.

Cuban ballet is synonymous with prima ballerina Alicia Alonso (opposite). Now well past her pointe days, Alicia cofounded the Ballet Nacional de Cuba in 1948 and her choreography is still in heavy use – classic stuff like *Don Quixote* and *Giselle*, with few surprises save for the powerful dancers themselves.

The Festival Internacional de Ballet de la Habana (p14) takes Habana by storm every other year, when you can see a *Swan Lake* matinee and an evening performance of *Carmen* – a ballet junkie's dream.

Original Cuban theater is limited but the Cubans create excellent interpretations of classic foreign works, including the plays of Federico Lorca and the comedies of Shakespeare. Habana's theaters also put on surprisingly edgy (and funny) comedy shows, professional rumba dancing and music performed by the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba, and some fantastic children's theater.

For dance and theater performances, see p131 and p131, respectively.

LITERATURE

In a country strewn with icons like rice at a wedding, José Martí (1853–95) is the master. Visionary, patriot and rebel, he was also a literary giant whose collected plays, essays and poetry fill 30 volumes. Exiled before he was 20, Martí lived most of his life outside Cuba. *Versos Sencillos* (Simple Verses) is, as the title proclaims, full of simple verses and is arguably one of his best works. Though written over a century ago, the essays collected in *Nuestra America* (Our America) and *Los Estados Unidos* are remarkably forward thinking, providing a basis for Latin American self-determination in the face of US hegemony.

LITERARY HABANA

Wild, romantic, vivid and sensuous – Habana has long acted as an inspiration to a whole host of expat writers and poets. Here's a quick exposé of two of the city's most erudite literary spokesmen.

Ernest Hemingway

Ernest Hemingway's towering literary ghost is plastered all over Habana. The irrepressible Papa – as he was affectionately known – spent most of the 1930s holed up in the pastel pink Hotel Ambos Mundos (p160), where he put the finishing touches to his Spanish civil war classic *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (Fidel's book of choice in the Sierra Maestra) before buying the hillside Finca Vigía, a splendid colonial villa where he lived from 1940 to 1959. The property now hosts the fascinating Museo Hemingway (p97).

Always a sucker for a lunchtime tippie, Hemingway took his daily daiquirí in El Floridita (p134), while copious mint-laced mojitos were downed later on in the bohemian Bodeguita del Medio (p134), adjacent to the Plaza de la Catedral. Unfortunately both establishments have cashed in shamelessly on their Hemingway-once-got-drunk-in-here reputation and the drink prices have been hiked up accordingly (to a hefty CUC\$6 a cocktail in the Floridita).

Other must-see Hemingway haunts in Habana include the cheaper and less touristy Dos Hermanos (p133) in Habana Vieja, the Restaurante La Terraza (p127) in the seaside village of Cojimar and the neoclassical Hemingway bust (p95), situated a short walk along the harbor wall in the same neighborhood.

Graham Greene

Conceived as early as 1938, *Our Man in Havana*, Graham Greene's comic take on British espionage in prerevolutionary Cuba, was originally planned to be set in the Soviet-occupied city of Tallinn in Estonia. But with the long shadows of an impending European conflict gathering pace, Greene temporarily shelved the idea and elected to look elsewhere.

It wasn't until after WWII that the author became acquainted with Habana, a loose-living diplomatic outpost that had already seduced such notable literary luminaries as Federico Lorca and Ernest Hemingway.

For Greene, a former MI6 spy and one of the 20th century's best traveled and most insightful writers, it was an opportunity too good to miss. By the early 1950s, Habana had become the Las Vegas of the Caribbean, a disreputable 'city of sin' caught in the dying throes of a malevolent and laughably corrupt dictatorship run by Fulgencio Batista and a clutch of unscrupulous Mafia henchmen.

'Suddenly it struck me that here in this extraordinary city, where every vice was permissible and every trade possible, lay the true background to my comedy,' Greene wrote enthusiastically in his autobiography *Ways of Escape*.

Greene fans can follow the author's literary ghost in the Hotel Sevilla (p80), where Wormold, the book's protagonist, goes for a secret meeting with British agent Hawthorne in Room 501 (a noisy suite next to the lift shaft). Other favorite Greene hangouts include the Hotel Nacional (p85), where Wormold delivers a speech to the European Traders Association, and the Tropicana cabaret (p136), where he takes his daughter Milly for her 17th birthday.

Like Martí, Nicolás Guillén (1902–89) is considered one of Cuba's world-class poets. Ahead of his time, he was one of the first mainstream champions of Afro-Cuban culture, writing rhythmic poems like *Sóngoro Cosongo* (1931). A communist who believed in social and racial equality, Guillén lived in exile during Batista's regime, writing *Elegía a Jesús Menéndez* and *La Paloma de Vuelo Popular: Elegías*. Some of his most famous poems are available in the English collection entitled *New Love Poetry: Elegy*. He returned after the revolution and cofounded the Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas Cubanos (Unecac; National Union of Cuban Writers & Artists). Guillén was Cuba's national poet until his death.

Cubans are crazy for poetry, so don't be surprised when someone starts reeling off verses by Dulce María Loynaz (1902–97), recipient of Spain's coveted Miguel de Cervantes award; Eliseo Diego (1920–94), the poet's poet, whose words give wings to the human spirit; or singer-songwriter Silvio Rodríguez (1946–), who is a good guitar player, but a great poet.

In literature, as in poetry, the Cuban bibliography is awe inspiring. Novelist Alejo Carpentier (1904–80) was another exiled writer, returning after the revolution to write *El Recurso del Método* (Resource of the Method) and *Concierto Barroco* (Baroque Concert), both published in 1974. The latter is considered his masterpiece. Habana fans will want to check out his *Ciudad de las Columnas* (City of Columns), which juxtaposes black-and-white photographs of the city's architectural details with insightful prose.

Paradiso by José Lezama Lima (1910–76) was a ‘scandalous novel’ when it appeared in 1966 because of its erotic homosexual scenes. Now it’s considered a classic. Lezama was a poet and essayist who cofounded the influential magazine *Orígenes* in 1944.

Notable writers who left Cuba after the revolution include queer playwright Reinaldo Arenas, whose autobiography *Before Night Falls* (1943–90) was made into a critically acclaimed drama for the silver screen, and Guillermo Cabrera Infante (1929–), whose *Tres Tristes Tigres* (Three Trapped Tigers) describes cultural decadence during the Batista era. Of course, Cuba’s most famous foreign writer-in-residence was Ernest Hemingway, who wrote *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in the Hotel Ambos Mundos (p71) in Habana.

PAINTING

Painting and art is alive and well in Habana, despite more than four decades of asphyxiating on-off censorship. From the classical realism of Guillermo Collazo (1850–96) to the futuristic murals of Amelia Peláez (1896–1968), a colorful and broad-ranging artistic pastiche has been painstakingly conserved through arts schools, government sponsorship and an eclectic mix of cross-cultural influences.

Cuba’s art legacy goes back nearly 200 years to 1818, when the San Alejandro National Academy of Arts was founded in Habana. Established as the second-oldest academy of its type in Latin America, the institute had as its first director French painter Jean Baptiste Vermay (1786–1833), the artist responsible for creating the huge historic canvases that decorate the walls of El Temple (p75), a diminutive temple in Habana’s Plaza de Armas. Other important 19th-century artists include Miguel Melero (1836–1907) and Esteban Chartrand (1840–83), a Cuban of French descent, both of whom created nostalgic classical landscapes that combined bold European influences with a noticeable Cuban tinge.

The 20th century was a particularly fertile period for Cuban art, with many of San Alejandro’s restless academy members rejecting traditional painting ideas and going off on their own to search for new inspiration in Barcelona and Paris. As a result, the decade of the 1920s onwards saw the popularization of many distinct new artistic genres in Cuba, such as cubism, surrealism, pop art, poster art and mural painting.

Cuba’s most influential artist of this period was Wifredo Lam (1902–82), a painter, sculptor and ceramicist of mixed Chinese, African and Spanish ancestry. Born in Sagua Grande, Villa Clara province, in 1902, Lam studied art and law in Habana before departing for Madrid in 1923 to pursue his artistic ambitions in the fertile fields of post-WWI Europe. Displaced by the Spanish Civil War in 1937, he gravitated toward France, where he became friends with Pablo Picasso and swapped ideas with the pioneering surrealist André Breton. Having absorbed various cubist and surrealist influences, in 1941 Lam returned to Cuba, where he produced his own seminal masterpiece *La Jungla* (The Jungle), considered by critics to be one of the Third World’s most emblematic paintings.

By the 1930s modern art in Habana had been consolidated into a national movement known as the Vanguardia, a group of artists who combined traditional *guajiro* (country) and Afro-Cuban influences with Lam’s modern primitivism, René Portocarrero’s colorful stained glass and the striking murals of Amelia Peláez.

The revolution ushered in an important sea change in the Cuban art world, but local painters have remained shocking, engaging and visceral. Forced into a corner by the constrictions of the Castro shake-up, budding artists have invariably found that by cooperating with the Socialist regime opportunities for training and encouragement are almost unlimited.

In such a volatile creative climate, graphic art – well established in its own right before the revolution – has evolved almost independently of global artistic trends. Poster art exploded in Cuba after the revolution, using a distinctive style of silk-screening known as serigraphy. Recruited by new cultural bodies such as the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (Icaic; Cuban Film Institute) and the Editoria Política, artists were sponsored to create informative posters designed to rally the Cuban population behind the huge tasks needed to create a glowing ‘new society.’ Cuba’s most celebrated exponent of poster art in the 1960s was Raúl Martínez (1927–95), who elevated the genre to a high art form with a series of Warhol-like studies of Castro, Che Guevara, José Martí and others.

Street art is one of Habana's most striking and exciting modern styles. Mixing pop art and mural painting with a sprinkling of Afro-Cuban influences, the genre is wonderfully showcased in Habana's Callejón de Hamel (p139), a lurid alleyway full of Santería symbolism and colorful political graffiti that was the brainchild of local artist Salvador González Escalona.

Habana's unique artistic heritage is lovingly preserved in Habana Vieja's Centro Wifredo Lam (p70) and the Instituto Superior de Arte (p91) in outlying Cubanacán. The capital is also blessed with a splendid national art museum, the sprawling Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (p82).

CINEMA & TELEVISION

The Cubans are crazy about cinema and this passion is reflected in the plethora of movie houses that dot Habana and its suburbs. Since 1959 the film industry has been run by Icaic, headed up by Alfredo Guevara who, along with other influential filmmakers such as Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (1928–96), is widely recognized as putting cutting-edge Cuban cinema on the international map. Indeed, for years cinema has led the way in cultural experimentation and innovation on the island, exploring themes such as homosexuality, misogyny and bureaucratic paranoia, which are generally considered taboo in other parts of Cuban society.

Cuba's first notable postrevolutionary movie, the Cuban-Soviet-made *Soy Cuba* (I am Cuba) dramatized the events leading up to the 1959 revolution in four interconnecting stories. Once described by an American film critic as 'a unique, insane, exhilarating spectacle,' the movie has been consistently lauded by contemporary Hollywood directors such as Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola for its innovative tracking shots and poetic plot.

Serving his apprenticeship in the 1960s, Cuba's most celebrated director, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, cut his teeth directing intellectual art-house movies such as *La Muerte de un Burocrata* (Death of a Bureaucrat), a satire on excessive socialist bureaucratization, and *Memorias de Subdesarrollo* (Memories of Underdevelopment), the story of a Cuban intellectual who is too idealistic for Miami yet too decadent for the austere life of Habana. Teaming up with fellow director Juan Carlos Tabío in 1994, Gutiérrez went on to make the Oscar-nominated *Fresa y Chocolate* (Strawberry and Chocolate), the tale of Diego, a skeptical homosexual who falls in love with a heterosexual communist militant. It remains Cuba's cinematic pinnacle.

HABANA ON SCREEN

Cuba's photogenic capital has long lured American film directors with an eye for the exotic, but of the countless Hollywood movies that have been made about Habana since 1959, less than a handful have actually been filmed in the city itself. More often than not, frustrated film-location managers – bored by the bureaucracy and anxious not to upset draconian US travel restrictions – have searched for potential Habana substitutes elsewhere.

Alternative locations have ranged from the Caribbean to Europe. In 1974, Francis Ford Coppola filmed Michael Corleone's infamous Habana hotel scene in *The Godfather: Part II* in the El Embajador Hotel in Santo Domingo, while Pierce Brosnan's shaken-not-stirred Habana espionage in the Bond movie *Die Another Day* was recreated in Cádiz, Spain. Other Habana wannabes have included Andy García, who filmed his 2005 epic *The Lost City* in the Dominican Republic; Sydney Pollack, who shot 1990's *Havana* with Robert Redford in Florida and Santo Domingo; and Richard Fleischer, who tackled the truly awful Che Guevara biopic *Che* in Puerto Rico.

Indeed, the only notable Habana-themed films that have sneaked past the censors in the years since the revolution are Carol Reed's 1959 adaptation of Graham Greene's *Our Man in Havana*, deemed by a freshly victorious Castro as an appropriate critique of the Batista regime, and Wim Wenders' astounding 1999 account of Ry Cooder's resurrection of the *Buena Vista Social Club* (though Cooder was ultimately stung with a US\$25,000 US Treasury Department fine for 'spending US dollars in Cuba').

For incurable Habana junkies, the best way to see the city re-created in glorious Technicolor is to check out a recent Cuban-made movie with English subtitles. Good contemporary flicks include 2006's Benny Moré biopic *El Benny*, 2005's highly underrated *Viva Cuba* and 1994's Oscar-nominated (and truly brilliant) *Fresa y Chocolate*.

Habana's growing influence in the film culture of the American hemisphere is highlighted at the Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano (p14), held every December in Habana. Described alternatively as the ultimate word in Latin American cinema or Cannes without the ass kissing, this annual get-together of critics and filmmakers has been fundamental in showcasing recent Cuban classics such as *Viva Cuba*, a study of class and ideology as seen through the eyes of two children, and *El Benny*, a biopic of mambo king, Benny Moré.

To say that Cubans are cinema buffs would be a massive understatement: the crush of a crowd shattered the glass doors of a movie theater during the 2001 film festival and an adoring mob nearly rioted trying to get into Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* premier in 2002. If you're headed for a flick, queue early.

Cuban TV has three national channels, no commercials and an obligatory nightly dose of unedited speeches by Fidel Castro (or his stand-in). Elsewhere, educational programming dominates, with Universidad Para Todos offering full university-level courses in everything from astronomy to film editing. The news is a predictable litany of good things Cuba has done (eg big tobacco harvest, sending doctors to Africa) and bad things the US is up to (eg mucking around in the Middle East, big corporations buying influence). *Mesa Redonda* (Round Table) is a nightly 'debate' program where several people sharing the same opinion sit around discussing a topic of national or global importance. *Telenovelas* (soap operas) are a national obsession, and the latest favorite, *La Cara Oculta de la Luna* (The Dark Side of the Moon), has been known to bring the country to a virtual standstill.

Music ■

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Music

In Habana, it is often said that if you can't dance you sing, and if you can't sing you play an instrument – and judging by the rich diversity of talented bands that ply their trade in the bars of Habana Vieja, this rings resoundingly true. Music is a given in this most effervescent of cities. Everywhere you go, rhythms and melodies drift tantalizingly out of buildings, squares, hotels and shops: the sharp beat of a *batá* (conical, two-headed drum) in the Callejón de Hamel, the sudden stab of a trumpet in a rehearsal room off the Gran Teatro, the lazy lilt of a guitar as a busker serenades you on the Malecón (Av de Maceo). 'In Cuba music flows like a river,' wrote Ry Cooder in his sleeve notes for the *Buena Vista Social Club* CD. 'It takes care of you and rebuilds you from the inside out.'

Rich, vibrant, hip gyrating and soulful, Cuban music has long acted as a standard-bearer for the sounds and rhythms emanating from Latin America, and Habana has often been its busiest crossroads. From the crowded and *caliente* (hot) rap clubs of Centro Habana to the glittering cabaret shows of Vedado and Playa, everything from *son*, salsa, rumba, mambo and *chachachá* to *charanga* and *danzón* owe at least a part of their existence to the magical musical dynamism that was first ignited here.

Aside from its obvious Spanish and African roots, Cuban music has called upon a number of other important influences in the process of its development; mixed into an already exotic melting pot are genres from France, the US, Haiti and Jamaica. Conversely Cuban music has also played a key role in developing various melodic styles in other parts of the world. In Spain they called this process *ida y vuelta* (literally 'round trip'), and it is most clearly evident in a style of flamenco called *guajira*. Elsewhere the 'Cuban effect' can be seen in forms as diverse as New Orleans jazz, New York salsa and West African Afrobeat.

FOLKLORE ROOTS

Son, Cuba's instantly recognizable signature music, first emerged from the mountains of the Oriente region in the second half of the 19th century, though the earliest known descriptions of the style go back as far as 1570. Famously described by Cuban ethnologist Fernando Ortiz as 'a love affair between the African drum and the Spanish guitar,' the roots of this eclectic and intricately fused rural music lie in two distinct subgenres: rumba and *danzón*.

While drumming in the North American colonies was ostensibly prohibited, the Spanish were slightly less mean-spirited in the treatment of their African brethren. As a result,

THE HABANERA: CUBA'S EARLIEST MUSICAL EXPORT

While the city of Santiago de Cuba lays claim to the lion's share of Cuba's musical heritage, Habana's role in the island's grand cultural dissemination has been just as important. Indeed, the locally concocted *habanera* was one of Cuba's earliest and most influential musical exports. Evolving from the French contredanse, which arrived in Cuba from Haiti in the early 1800s, the *habanera* was a hybrid music style that interwove traditional European dance themes with the more earthy rhythms practiced by imported African slaves. Characterized by their suave romantic melodies and repeated anticipated bass line, *habaneras* created catchy and enduring new dance rhythms that sprouted many different offshoots in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including the *bolero* (romantic love song), *danzón* (traditional Cuban ballroom dance), Argentinean tango and New Orleans jazz.

Brought back to France via Spain in the 1860s, the *habanera* was popularized by Spanish composer Sebastián Yradier, who wrote the classic song 'La Paloma' after a visit to the island in 1860. Embraced enthusiastically by admirers from England to Italy, the music's influence mushroomed, and before long the style had been incorporated into elegant ballroom dances all over Europe. One of the genre's most celebrated advocates was romantic French composer Georges Bizet who famously 'borrowed' the music's distinctive anticipated bass rhythm for his rousing 'Habanera Aria' in the opera *Carmen* in 1875.

RUMBA

Rumba, Cuba's hypnotic dance music, was first concocted in the dock areas of Habana and Matanzas during the 1890s when ex-slaves began to knock out soulful rhythms on old packing cases in imitation of various African religious rites. As the drumming patterns grew more complex, vocals were added, dances emerged and, before long, the music had grown into a collective form of social expression for all Afro-Cubans.

Spreading in popularity throughout the 1920s and '30s, rumba gradually diverged into three different but related dance formats: *guaguanco*, an overtly sexual dance; *yambú*, a slow couples' dance; and *columbia*, a fast, aggressive male dance often involving fire torches and machetes.

Pitched into Cuba's cultural melting pot, these rootsy yet highly addictive musical variants quickly gained acceptance among a new audience of middle-class whites and, by the 1940s, the music had fused with *son* in a new subgenre called *son montuno* which, in turn, provided the building blocks for salsa.

Indeed, so influential was Cuban rumba by the end of WWII that it transposed itself back into African music, with experimental Congolese artists such as Sam Mangwana and Franco Luambo (of OK Jazz fame) using ebullient Cuban influences to pioneer their own variation on the rumba theme – a genre popularly known as *soukous*.

Raw, expressive and exciting to watch, Cuban rumba is a spontaneous and often informal affair performed by groups of up to a dozen musicians. Conga drums, *claves*, *palitos* (sticks), *marugas* (iron shakers) and *cajones* (packing cases) lay out the interlocking rhythms while the vocals alternate between a wildly improvising lead singer and an answering *coro* (chorus).

The best place to see and hear authentic rumba in Habana is at the Sábados de Rumba performed by the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional (p139) or at the Callejón de Hamel (p139) in Habana Centro. Slightly further out but equally transfixing are the weekend shows at Las Orishas (p139), a bar-restaurant and performance space in the eastern neighborhood of Guanabacoa.

Cuban slaves were able to preserve and pass on many of their musical traditions via influential *Santería cabildos* (association of tribes), which re-enacted ancient African percussive music on simple *batás* or *chekeres* (gourds covered with beads to form rattles). Performed at annual festivals or on special Catholic saint's days, this rhythmic yet highly textured dance music was offered up as a form of religious worship to the *orishas* (deities).

Over time the ritualistic drumming of *Santería* evolved into a more complex genre known as rumba (above). Rumba was originally viewed as a lewd and unsophisticated form of entertainment for Afro-Cubans only, but while the music itself sat well outside the cultural mainstream, the dances and rhythms of rumba gradually permeated more accepted forms of popular Cuban music such as *son montuno*.

On the other side of the musical equation sat *danzón*, a refined Cuban dance that had taken Europe by storm at the end of the 19th century. Pioneered by innovative Matanzas bandleader Miguel Failde in the 1880s, the Cuban *danzón* quickly developed its own peculiar syncopated rhythm borrowing heavily from Haitian slave influences and, later on, adding such improbable extras as conga drums and vocalists. By the early 20th century, Cuban *danzón* had evolved from a stately ballroom dance into a jazzed-up free-for-all known alternatively as *charanga*, *danzonete* or *danzón-chá*.

Welded together, rumba and *danzón* provided the musical backbone for *son*, a distinctive blend of anticipated African rhythms and melodic rustic guitars, over which a singer improvised from a traditional 10-line Spanish poem known as a *décima*.

In its pure form, *son* was played by a sextet consisting of guitar, *tres* (guitar with three sets of double strings), double bass, bongo, and two singers who played *maracas* and *claves* (sticks that tap out the beat). Arising in the mountains of Cuba's east, the genre's earliest exponents were the legendary Trio Oriental, who stabilized the sextet format in 1912 when they were reborn as the Sexteto Habanero. Another early *sonero* was singer Miguel Matamoros, whose self-penned *son* classics such as 'Son de la Loma' and 'Lagrimas Negras' are still de rigueur among Cuba's musical entertainers.

By the 1930s, the sextet had become a septet with the addition of a trumpet, and exciting new musicians such as blind *tres* player Arsenio Rodríguez – who Harry Belafonte once called the 'father of salsa' – were paving the way for mambo and *chachachá*. See p137 for places to hear *son* in Habana.

MAMBO & CHACHACHÁ

In the '40s and '50s, the *son* bands grew from seven pieces to eight and beyond until they became big bands, boasting full horn and percussion sections that played rumba, *chachachá* and mambo. The reigning mambo king was Benny Moré (below) who, with his sumptuous voice and rocking 40-piece all-Black band, was known as *El Bárbaro del Ritmo* (the Barbarian of Rhythm).

Mambo grew out of *charanga* music, which itself was a derivative of *danzón*. Bolder, brassier and altogether more exciting than its two earlier incarnations, the music was characterized by exuberant trumpet riffs, belting saxophones and regular enthusiastic interjections by the singer (usually in the form of the word *dilo!* or 'say it!'). The style's origins are mired in controversy. Some argue that it was invented by native *habanero* (inhabitant of Habana) Orestes López after he penned a new, rhythmically dexterous number called 'Mambo' in 1938. Others give the credit to Matanzas band leader Pérez Prado, who was the first musician to market his songs under the 'mambo' umbrella in the early 1940s. Whatever the case, mambo had soon spawned the world's first universal dance craze and, from New York to Buenos Aires, people couldn't get enough of its infectious rhythms.

A variation on the mambo theme, the *chachachá* was first performed by Habana-based composer and violinist Enrique Jorrín in 1951 while playing with the Orquesta América. Originally known as 'mambo-rumba,' the music was intended to promote a more basic kind of Cuban dance that less-coordinated North Americans would be able to master, but it was quickly mambo-ized by overenthusiastic dance competitors who kept adding complicated new steps.

BENNY MORÉ

No one singer encapsulates Cuban music more eloquently than Bartolomé 'Benny' Moré, a legendary vocalist and showman who blended African rhythms and Spanish melodies with effortless ease, and successfully mastered every musical genre of his age. Born in the small village of Santa Isabel de las Lajas in Cienfuegos province in 1919, Moré first arrived in Habana in 1936, where he earned a precarious living selling damaged fruit on the streets of Cuba's swinging capital. Saving up enough cash to buy a cheap guitar he graduated to playing and singing in the smoky bars and restaurants of Habana Vieja's tough dockside neighborhood, where he passed the hat and made just enough money to get by.

His first big break came in 1943, when his velvety voice and pitch-perfect delivery won him first prize in a local radio singing competition and landed him a regular job as lead vocalist for a Habana-based mariachi band called the Cauto Quartet.

His meteoric rise was confirmed two years later when, while singing at a regular gig in Habana's El Temple bar, he was spotted by Siro Rodríguez of the famed Trio Matamoros, then Cuba's biggest *son-bolero* band. Rodríguez was so impressed by what he heard and saw that he asked Moré to join the band as lead vocalist for an imminent tour of Mexico.

In the late 1940s, Mexico City was like Hollywood for young Cuban performers and Moré wasted no time in making a name for himself. Staying behind when the rest of the band returned home, he was promptly signed up by RCA records and his fame rapidly spread.

Moré returned to Cuba in 1950 a star, and was quickly baptized the Prince of Mambo and the Barbarian of Rhythm by an adoring public, who claimed him as their own. Never one to rest on his laurels, he kept obsessively busy in the ensuing years, inventing a brand-new hybrid sound called *batanga* and putting together his own 40-piece backing orchestra, the explosive Banda Gigante. Along with the Banda, Moré toured Venezuela, Jamaica, Mexico and the US in 1956–57, culminating in a performance at the 1957 Oscars ceremony. But the singer's real passion was always Cuba, and from Santiago to Cienfuegos his beloved countrymen couldn't get enough of him. Indeed, legend has it that whenever Benny performed in Habana's Centro Gallego, hundreds of people would fill the parks and streets around the Capitolio in the hope of hearing him sing.

With his multitextured voice and signature scale-sliding glissando, Moré's real talent lay in his ability to adapt and seemingly switch genres at will. As comfortable with a tear-jerking *bolero* (romantic love song) as he was with a hip-grating rumba, Moré could convey tenderness, exuberance, emotion and soul all in the space of five tantalizing minutes. Although he couldn't read music, Moré composed many of his most famous numbers, including 'Bonito y Saboroso' and the big hit 'Que Bueno Baila Usted.' When he died in 1963 of cirrhosis of the liver brought on by a lifelong penchant for rum, over 100,000 people turned up at his funeral. Unsurprisingly, no one in Cuba has yet been able to fill his shoes.

NUEVA TROVA

Cuba's original *trovadores* were old-fashioned traveling minstrels who plied their musical trade across the island in the early part of the 20th century, moving from village to village and city to city with the carefree spirit of perennial gypsies. Armed with simple acoustic guitars and furnished with a seemingly limitless repertoire of soft, lilting rural ballads, early Cuban *trovadores* included Sindo Garay, Nico Saquito and Joseito Fernández, the man responsible for composing the Cuban blockbuster 'Guantanamera.' As the style developed into the 1960s, new advocates such as Carlos Puebla gave the genre a grittier and more political edge, penning classic songs such as 'Hasta Siempre Comandante,' his romantic if slightly sycophantic ode to Che Guevara.

Nueva trova was very much a product of the revolution and paralleled – though rarely copied – folk music in the US and the emerging *nueva canción* (protest song) scene that was taking shape in Chile and Argentina. Stylistically the music also paid indirect homage to the rich tradition of French chansons (cabaret songs) that had been imported into Cuba via Haiti in the 19th century. Political in nature yet melodic in tone, *nueva trova* first burst forth from the Oriental towns of Manzanillo and Bayamo in the early '70s before being driven outwards and upwards by such illustrious names as Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés. Highly influential throughout the Spanish-speaking world during the 1960s and '70s, *nueva trova* was often an inspirational source of protest music for the impoverished and downtrodden populations of Latin America, many of whom looked to Cuba for spiritual leadership in an era of corrupt dictatorships and US cultural hegemony. This solidarity is echoed in many of Rodríguez' internationally lauded classics, including 'Canción Urgente para Nicaragua,' which supported the Sandinistas in Nicaragua; 'La Maza,' which supported Salvador Allende in Chile; and 'Canción para mi Soldado,' which supported Cuban soldiers in Angola.

SALSA, TIMBA & JAZZ

Salsa is an umbrella term used to describe a variety of musical genres that emerged out of the fertile Latin New York scene in the '60s and '70s, when jazz, *son* and rumba blended to create a new, brassier sound. While not strictly a product of Cubans living in Cuba, salsa's roots and key influences come from *son montuno* and owe an enormous debt to innovators such as Pérez Prado, Benny Moré and Miguel Matamoros. See p137 for places to hear salsa in Habana.

The self-styled 'queen of salsa' was Grammy-award winning singer and performer Celia Cruz. Born in Habana in 1925, Cruz served the bulk of her musical apprenticeship in Cuba before leaving for self-imposed exile in the US in 1960. But due to her longstanding opposition to the Castro regime, Cruz's records and music have remained largely unknown on the island, despite her enduring legacy elsewhere. Far more influential on their home turf are the legendary salsa outfit Los Van Van, formed by Juan Formell in 1969 and still performing regularly at venues across Habana. With Formell at the helm as the group's great improviser, poet, lyricist and social commentator, Los Van Van are one of the few contemporary Cuban groups to have created their own unique musical genre – that of *songo-salsa*. The band also won top honors in 2000 when they memorably took home a Grammy for their classic album, *Llego Van Van*.

Modern salsa evolved further in the '80s and '90s, allying itself with cutting-edge musical genres such as hip-hop, *reggaeton* (Cuban hip-hop) and rap before coming up with some hot new alternatives, most notably *timba* and *songo-salsa*.

Timba is Cuba's own experimental and fiery take on traditional salsa. Mixing New York sounds with Latin jazz, *nueva trova*, American funk, disco, hip-hop and even some classical influences, the music is more flexible and aggressive than standard salsa, and incorporates greater elements of the island's potent Afro-Cuban culture. Many *timba* bands such as Bambaleo and La Charanga Habanera use funk riffs and rely on less conventional Cuban instruments, including synthesizers and kick drums. Others such as NG La Banda, formed in 1988 (and often credited as being the inventors of *timba*), have infused their music with a more jazzy dynamic.

Traditional jazz, considered the music of the enemy in the revolution's most dogmatic days, has always seeped into Cuban sounds. Jesus 'Chucho' Valdes' band Irakere, formed in 1973, broke the Cuban music scene wide open with its heavy Afro-Cuban drumming laced with jazz and *son*, and Habana now boasts a number of decent jazz clubs (p138). Other musicians associated with the Cuban jazz set include pianist Gonzalo Rubalcaba, Isaac Delgado and Adalberto Álvarez y Su Son.

RAP, REGGAETON & BEYOND

The contemporary Cuban music scene is an interesting mix of enduring traditions, modern sounds, old hands and new blood. With low production costs, solid urban themes and lots of US-inspired crossover styles, hip-hop and rap are taking the younger generation by storm.

Born in the ugly concrete housing projects of Alamar in Habana, Cuban hip-hop, rather like its US counterpart, has gritty and impoverished roots.

First beamed across the nation in the early 1980s when American rap from Miami-based radio stations was picked up on homemade rooftop antennae, the new music quickly gained ground among a population of young urban Blacks, who were culturally redefining themselves during the inquietude of the *período especial* (special period). By the 1990s, music from groups such as Public Enemy and NWA were de rigueur on the streets of Alamar, and in 1995 there was enough local hip-hop talent to throw a festival.

Tempered by Latin influences and censored by the parameters of strict revolutionary thought Cuban hip-hop – or *reggaeton* as locals prefer to call it – has shied away from the US mainstream and taken on a progressive flavor all of its own. Instrumentally the music uses *batás*, congas and electric bass, while lyrically the songs tackle important national issues such as sex tourism and the difficulties of the stagnant Cuban economy.

Despite being viewed early on as subversive and antirevolutionary, Cuban hip-hop has gained unlikely support from inside the Cuban government, whose art-conscious legislators consider the music to have played a constructive social role in shaping the future of Cuban youth. Fidel Castro has gone one further, describing hip-hop as 'the vanguard of the revolution' and – allegedly – once tried his hand at rapping at a Habana baseball game.

Today there are upwards of 800 hip-hop groups in Cuba and the Festival Internacional Habana Hip-Hop (p14) is in its second decade. The event even has a sponsor, the fledgling Cuban Rap Agency, a government body formed in 2002 to give official sanction to the country's burgeoning alternative music scene. Groups to look out for include Obsession, 100% Original, Freehole Negro and Anónimo Consejo, while the best venues are Anfiteatro Parque Almendares (p139) and La Madriguera (p140), both in Vedado.

It's hard to categorize Interactivo, a collaboration of young, talented musicians led by pianist Robertico Carcassés. Part funk, jazz and rock, and very 'in the groove,' this band jams them to the rafters – it's a guaranteed good time. Interactivo's bassist is Yusa, a young Black woman whose eponymous debut album made it clear she's one of the most innovative musicians on the Cuban scene today. Other difficult-to-categorize modern innovators include X Alfonso, an ex-student of the Conservatorio Amadeo Roldán, and dynamic *trova*-rock duo Buena Fé, whose guitar-based riffs and eloquent lyrics push the boundaries of art and expression within the confines of the Cuban revolution.

Meanwhile, back at base camp, US guitar virtuoso Ry Cooder inadvertently breathed new life into *son* music 10 years ago with his remarkable *Buena Vista Social Club* album. Linking together half a dozen or so long-retired musical sages from the '40s and '50s, including 90-year-old Compay Segundo (writer of Cuba's second-most-played song, 'Chan Chan') and pianist Rúben González (ranked by Cooder as the greatest piano player he has ever heard), the American producer sat back in the studio and let his ragged clutch of old-age pensioners work their magic. Over two million albums later, European and North American audiences are still enraptured by their sounds.

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Architecture

Habana is, without doubt, one of the most attractive and architecturally diverse cities in the world. Shaped by a colorful colonial history and embellished by myriad foreign influences from as far afield as Italy and Morocco, the Cuban capital gracefully combines Mudéjar, baroque, neoclassical, art nouveau, art deco and modernist architectural styles into a visually striking whole.

But it's not all sweeping vistas and broad tree-lined boulevards. Habana doesn't have the architectural uniformity of Paris or the instant knock-out appeal of Rome. Indeed, two decades of economic austerity has meant many of the city's finest buildings have been left to fester in an advanced state of dilapidation. Furthermore, attempting to classify Habana's houses, palaces, churches and forts as a single architectural entity is extremely difficult. Cuban building – rather like its music – is unusually diverse. Blending Spanish colonial with French belle époque, and Italian Renaissance with Gaudi-esque art nouveau, the overriding picture is often one of eclecticism run wild. While basic themes mix and merge, for architectural experts it's almost impossible to recognize any purity of style.

Thankfully, none of this takes away from the wonder of Habana's glorious urban pastiche. In their architecture, the *habaneros* (inhabitants of Habana) have acquired an uncanny habit of taking a theme, reinventing it for their own purposes and coming up with some utterly enchanting alternatives. Thus, rather than following traditional baroque styles, Habana produced 'Cuban baroque', a sturdier and notably less decorative form of the European original. As well as pursuing streamlined art deco, the *habaneros* came up with Cuban art deco, a skillful blend of neocolonialism, neoclassicism and modernism, best exemplified in the magnificently eclectic Hotel Nacional (p85).

Emerging relatively unscathed from the turmoil of three separate revolutionary wars, Habana's well-preserved historical core has survived into the 21st century with the bulk of its original colonial features remarkably intact. The preservation was helped initially by the nomination of Habana Vieja as a Unesco World Heritage site in 1982 and has been

HABANA VIEJA'S SOCIAL PROJECTS

In the streets and squares of majestic Habana Vieja, remodeled buildings are only half the story. Unique among restoration projects of its type, the city's ambitious preservation program has come out firmly in favor of a 'living' historic center. Of the US\$160 million that government-run agency Habaguanex generates annually in tourist profits, only 45% goes back into further restoration efforts; the other 55% is earmarked for deserving social programs elsewhere in the neighborhood.

For the long-suffering inhabitants of Habana's oldest neighborhood, the rehabilitation has been long overdue. With a population of over 70,000 crammed into an area of just 4.5 sq km, Habana Vieja is one of the most crowded quarters in Latin America; over 45% of the people in the neighborhood live in houses deemed unfit for human habitation. Since 1994, when eminent city historian Eusebio Leal set up Habaguanex, the situation has been improving dramatically, with renovation projects providing employment for over 10,000 workers. On top of this, the restoration and repairs have also enhanced education and health facilities, fostered better community services and improved vast tracts of the city's infrastructure.

Examples of Habaguanex successes exist everywhere. Amid the tourist sights on Calle Mercaderes is the Hogar Materno Infantil, a maternity home where high-risk pregnant women are sent for expert medical provision and care. A block further north in the Casa de Obrapia, local women practice the traditional art of embroidery in a government-built cooperative that doubles as a tourist souvenir outlet. The neighborhood's youth are another important focus. A slum little more than a decade ago, Plaza Vieja is now home to the Angela Landa elementary school, where local children rub shoulders with busloads of foreigner visitors. Meanwhile a few blocks further west on Calle Lamparilla, the Centro de Rehabilitación Infantil treats children with disabilities relating to the central nervous system.

To get the lowdown on Habana Vieja's groundbreaking social projects, you can organize a specialist tour of the various facilities with Habaguanex travel agency San Cristóbal (p67).

enhanced further by the work and vision of longstanding city historian Eusebio Leal Spengler. Acting in tandem with government-sponsored agency Habaguanex, Leal has been meticulously putting Habana Vieja's classical palaces and baroque town houses back together, square by square and street by street (see p62). Rather fortuitously, he has been aided in his work by the economic peculiarities of the Cuban revolution. Due to the asphyxiating 45-year US trade embargo, Habana has largely missed out on the rampant modernization so common in other Latin American cities. Left to languish in a historical time warp, the city has nurtured an architectural legacy that is wonderfully unique. Undisturbed by the braying bulldozers of modern property development, the city's streets are nothing short of mesmerizing.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COLONIAL CORE

Habana grew up in the late 16th and early 17th centuries on the western shores of the harbor channel, fanning out from the area surrounding present-day Plaza de Armas. As most of the settlement's earliest houses were made of wood, the only surviving buildings from this initial construction boom are a small clutch of churches and a network of Spanish fortresses erected around the city to deter attacks from pirates and corsairs. Notable examples of forts include the Castillo de la Real Fuerza (p69), the second-oldest fort in the Americas; the Castillo de los Tres Santos Reyes Magnos del Morro (p93), designed by Italian military architect Giovanni Bautista Antonelli; and the massive Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña (p93), the largest fort on the American continent. Fully restored by the City Historian's Office during the 1980s and '90s, these forts now act as major tourist sites and present visitors with some of the best surviving examples of Renaissance military architecture in the world.

Habana Vieja's cityscape in the 17th and 18th centuries was dominated by ecclesial architecture, reflected in the noble cloisters of gargantuan colonial buildings such as the Convento de Santa Clara (p73), built in 1632, and the Convento Nuestra Señora de Belén (p72), built in 1718. Early churches, including the Iglesia Parroquial del Espíritu Santo (p72), were equally decorative, with beautifully gilded altars and delicately chiseled facades, though the baroque influence reached its apex in the 1770s with the magnificent Catedral de San Cristóbal de la Habana (p70), considered by many as the country's most outstanding religious monument. Some of the best architecture from this period can be viewed in Habana Vieja, whose peculiar layout around *four* main squares – only two of which boasted a church – set it apart from other Spanish colonial capitals.

Neo-Gothic architecture never really gained a foothold in Cuba, although a couple of impressive churches were built in Habana in this style during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The most distinguished example is the soaring Iglesia del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús (p81) in Centro Habana, a building so un-Cuban in its design that it could quite conceivably have been lifted out of a medium-sized English city. Another white elephant worth checking out is the neo-Romanesque Iglesia Jesús de Miramar (p90) in Playa.

MUDÉJAR

Most of Habana's earliest permanent structures exhibited recognizable Mudéjar features. Built during the 16th and 17th centuries, before the islandwide sugar boom inflated the backluster Cuban economy, Mudéjar buildings were relatively modest in size, consisting of one or two levels that opened out onto a shady central courtyard or patio. Stylistically the genre, which was imported from Andalucía in Spain, incorporated strong Moorish influences such as *azulejos* (glazed tiles), wooden window grilles, large doors and often a small storage well. Mudéjar houses differed from later baroque constructions in that they were smaller and less decorative.

The best surviving examples of Mudéjar architecture in Habana can be found in Habana Vieja, in buildings such as the Casa de los Arabes (now the Al Medina restaurant; p111) on Calle Oficios, the Casa del Mayorazgo de Recio (now the Museo de Pintura Mural; p74) in Calle Obispo, and the Museo de Naipes (p74) on Plaza Vieja.

CUBAN BAROQUE

Baroque architecture arrived in Cuba via Spain in the early 1700s, a good 50 years after its high-water mark in Europe. Fuelled by the rapid growth of the island's nascent sugar industry, Habana's nouveau riche slave owners and sugar merchants used their juicy profits to construct larger and more grandiose urban buildings. The finest examples of baroque in Cuba adorn the homes and public buildings of Habana Vieja, including the Catedral de San Cristóbal de la Habana (p70) and the surrounding Plaza de la Catedral (p77).

Due to various climatic and stylistic considerations, traditional baroque (the word is taken from the Portuguese noun *barroco*, which means 'elaborately shaped pearl') was quickly 'tropicalized' in Cuba, with local architects adding their own personal flourishes to the new municipal structures that were springing up all over Habana Vieja. Indigenous features included *rejas* (wooden window grilles), *vitrales* (colorful stained glass), *entresuelos* (mezzanine floors) and elegantly arched *portales* (galleried exterior walkways that provided pedestrians with shelter from the sun and the rain). Signature baroque buildings, such as the Palacio de los Capitanes Generales (p76) in Plaza de Armas, were made from hard local limestone dug from the nearby San Lázaro quarries and constructed using slave labor. As a result, the intricate exterior decoration that characterized baroque architecture in Italy and Spain was noticeably toned down in Cuba, where local workers lacked the advanced stonemasonry skills of their more accomplished European counterparts.

NEOCLASSICISM

Neoclassicism first evolved in the mid-18th century in Europe as a reaction to the lavish ornamentation and ostentation of baroque. Conceived in the progressive academies of London and Paris, the movement's early adherents advocated sharp primary colors and bold symmetrical lines, coupled with a return to the architectural 'purity' of ancient Greece and Rome. The style eventually reached Habana at the beginning of the 19th century via groups of French émigrés who had fled from Haiti following a violent slave rebellion in 1791 and, within a couple of decades, it had established itself as the city's primary architectural style.

Habana's first true neoclassical building was El Templete (p75), a diminutive Doric temple constructed in Habana Vieja in 1828 next to the spot where Fray Bartolomé de las Casas is said to have conducted the city's first Mass. As the city gradually spread westward in the mid-1800s, outgrowing its 17th-century walls, use of the style quickly mushroomed, including in buildings such as the Palacio de Aldama in Centro Habana, the famous Hotel Inglaterra (p80) overlooking Parque Central, and the Partagás tobacco factory (p83). With neoclassicism bringing into vogue new residential design features such as spacious classical courtyards and rows of imposing street-facing colonnades, Habana grew in both size and beauty during this period, leading seminal Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier to christen it the 'city of columns.'

A second neoclassical revival swept Habana at the beginning of the 20th century, spearheaded by the growing influence of the US on the island. Prompted by the ideas and design ethics of the American Renaissance (1876–1914), the city underwent a full-on building explosion, sponsoring such gigantic municipal buildings as the Capitolio Nacional (p79), the Universidad de la Habana (p89), and the dense cluster of banks and trust companies in Habana Vieja known colloquially as 'Little Wall Street.'

ART NOUVEAU

The dynamic curves of art nouveau first materialized in Europe during the 1890s before crossing the Atlantic approximately half a decade later. While the style is most closely associated with the Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí, Cuban art nouveau made its own local adaptations, often sculpting ornate Gaudí-esque facades onto existing neoclassical bases.

An important transitional architectural style in Habana, art nouveau flourished on pivotal east–west axis streets such as Av Simón Bolívar (Reina) and the Malecón (Av de Maceo) as the new city expanded rapidly westward in the 1910s and '20s. For sharp-eyed observers, some

fantastic examples of the genre, now dilapidated after 50 years of virtual neglect, can still be seen amid the tightly packed apartment blocks and townhouses of Centro Habana.

The city's most recognizable art nouveau structure is the wonderfully ornate Palacio Cueto (p76) in Plaza Vieja, a former hotel and hat shop that has been recently earmarked by Habaguanex for a full makeover.

ART DECO

Art deco was an elegant, functional and modern architectural movement that originated in France at the beginning of the 20th century and reached its apex in America in the 1920s and '30s. Drawing from a vibrant mix of cubism, futurism and primitive African art, the genre promoted lavish yet streamlined buildings with sweeping curves and exuberant sunburst motifs.

Brought to Cuba via the US, Habana quickly acquired its own clutch of signature art deco buildings, including one of Latin America's finest: the magnificent Edificio Bacardí (p70) in Habana Vieja, built in 1930 to provide a Habana headquarters for Santiago de Cuba's world-famous rum-making family. Another striking art deco creation was the Rockefeller Center-inspired, 14-story López Serrano building (p85) in Vedado, constructed as the city's first real *rascacielo* (skyscraper) in 1932. Other more functional art deco skyscrapers followed, including the Teatro América (p132) on Av de la Italia (Galiano), the Teatro Fausto (p132) on Paseo de Martí and the Casa de las Américas (p84) on Calle G (Av de los Presidentes). A more diluted and eclectic interpretation of the genre can be seen in the famous Hotel Nacional (p85), whose sharp symmetrical lines and decorative twin Moorish turrets dominate the view over the Malecón.

ECCLECTICISM

Eclecticism is the term often applied to the nonconformist and highly experimental architectural zeitgeist that grew up in the US during the 1880s. Rejecting 19th-century ideas of 'style' and categorization, the architects behind this revolutionary new genre promoted flexibility and an open-minded 'anything goes' ethos, drawing their inspiration from a wide range of historical precedents.

Thanks to the strong US presence in Cuba in the decades before 1959, Habana quickly became a riot of modern eclecticism with rich American and Cuban landowners constructing huge Xanadu-like mansions in the burgeoning upper-class residential district of Miramar. Expansive, ostentatious and, at times, outlandishly kitschy, these fancy new homes were garnished with crenellated walls, oddly shaped lookout towers, rooftop cupolas and leering gargoyles. Classic examples of eclecticism in Habana include La Maison (p138) in Miramar, the Palacio Presidencial (now the Museo de la Revolución; p81) in Centro Habana, and the Centro Asturianos (now the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes; p82) on the east side of Parque Central.

In Cuba, the term 'eclectic' is also applied to buildings that exhibit a mixture of different architectural styles or, alternatively, constructions that revisit an older genre outside of its original historical timeframe. Hence hybrid buildings such as the neocolonial-neoclassical-art deco Hotel Nacional (p85) are often confusingly described as 'eclectic,' as is the neobaroque Centro Gallego (p80), a Spanish social-club-theater that was built over 200 years after the baroque period fizzled out.

MODERNISM

Habana's brief flirtation with modernism began in earnest in the early 1950s, before being cut short by the revolution. Historically speaking, the abrupt change was a blessing in disguise. If the process had been allowed to continue unchecked – experts argue – Habana today would look more like Las Vegas than one of Latin America's best-preserved Unesco World Heritage sites.

Modernist Habana revolves around the rather ugly nexus of the Plaza de la Revolution (p87). Laid out in the 1950s during the presidency of Fulgencio Batista, this gargantuan urban square was based loosely on the plans of Belgian urbanist Jean Forestier, who had drawn up designs for a progressive new city 30 years earlier. But, while Forestier had envisaged a refined modern cityscape on a par with Paris or Madrid, what Habana actually got was something more akin to an uninspiring Soviet housing development. Those in doubt should check out the gray concrete Biblioteca Nacional José Martí (p84), the hideous Ministerio del Interior building (p86) and the insipid Teatro Nacional de Cuba (p88), a building eerily reminiscent of London's Festival Hall.

Elsewhere, Habana's myriad modernist skyscrapers are a little easier on the eye. Lauded for its groundbreaking use of function over form, the Hotel Habana Libre (p85) is an angular concrete and glass high-rise that first opened its doors as the Havana Hilton Hotel in 1958. Close by, the similarly lofty Edificio Focsa (p84) was built with revolutionary new construction techniques between 1954 and 1956 and, for a time, was the tallest building of its type in the world. Between them, these two indomitable concrete giants completely altered the Habana skyline during the 1950s.

POSTREVOLUTIONARY

Habana's small collection of postrevolutionary buildings is modest and relatively unimpressive. Thirty years of Soviet domination followed by a decade and a half of severe economic austerity has shunted inspirational architecture well down the list of government priorities. Most of the minor successes have focused on the tourist sector and include large hotels such as the spacious Hotel Meliá Cohiba (p168), built in 1994, and the highly contemporary Meliá Habana (p170), which opened in 1998.

Cuba's brief flirtation with Soviet architectonics threw up some interesting and highly incongruous buildings. Concrete oddities from this period include the 28-floor Hospital Nacional Hermanos Ameijeiras (p85) overlooking the Malecón, the obelisk-like Russian embassy (p91) in Miramar, and the flying-saucer-shaped Coppelia ice-cream parlor (p84) in Vedado. In a land of picturesque palm trees and diamond-dust beaches, none of them are particularly attractive.

A slightly more adventurous architectural experiment can be seen in Las Ruinas (p127), a restaurant in Parque Lenin where the ruins of an 18th-century sugar mill have been incorporated into a funky postmodern building that pays more than a passing nod to the influence of American architect Frank Lloyd-Wright. The structure, which was the work of Cuban modernist Joaquín Galvín in 1972, also showcases colorful stained-glass windows designed by noted Habana artist René Portocarrero.

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History

Habana's 488-year history is a classic tale of invasion, colonization, revolution and rebirth. Perched on the storm-lashed shores of the strategically important Straits of Florida, the city has been successively ransacked by pirates, fortified by the Spanish, conquered by the British, turned into a disreputable gambling den by the Americans and used as a mass exodus point by thousands of fleeing Cuban refugees. Action, adventure, drama and intrigue – Habana has it all. Read on...

THE RECENT PAST

Not much happens in Habana these days that isn't prefaced by the health and fitness of Cuba's ailing octogenarian leader, Fidel Castro. Emerging from a recent bout of acute diverticular disease, Castro is either making a miraculous recovery or suffering from a debilitating terminal illness; it all depends on which TV network you happen to be watching.

But with or without the faltering Fidel at the helm, the Cuban economy is in far better shape these days than it was 15 years ago. Fuelled by growing trade ties with India and China, and reignited by a 'new left tide' in Latin American politics spearheaded by groundbreaking alliances with Venezuela and Bolivia, the effects of the hated US *bloqueo* (embargo) – while still felt widely across Habana society – have lessened dramatically since the dark days of the *período especial* (special period; p23).

In the political sphere, Cuba has enjoyed an equally unlikely renaissance. After decades of lolling around in the diplomatic wilderness, the formerly friendless Castro – a dangerous liability less than a decade ago – is suddenly back on everyone's Christmas-card list. From São Paulo to Caracas, Cuba's gnarly bearded global warrior has become every wannabe Latin American strongman's inspiration and mentor – a feisty survivor of the Cold War, crippling economic crises and several hundred failed assassination attempts.

First in the line of fans is Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez, a fervent anti-American and, more importantly, the man with his finger in some of the world's largest oil wells. Famous for spouting the nationalist rhetoric of Latin American liberator Simon Bolívar, Chávez has pledged to supply cash-strapped Cuba with a valuable supply of cheap oil (to the tune of 90,000 barrels a day) in return for the medical services of thousands of Cuban doctors.

The Cuban-Venezuelan alliance culminated in the 2004 Bolivian Alternative of the Americas (ALBA) accords which, as well as strengthening the countries' nascent oil trade, gifted Cuba with US\$500 million in credit to buy Venezuelan consumer goods. Further initiatives included a joint venture to build cheap housing, the promise of Cuban assistance in developing the Venezuelan sugar industry, and the pioneering Misión Milagros (p189), a program to provide free eye treatment for poor Venezuelans in Cuban hospitals.

The new alliance got further boosts throughout 2005–06 with the victory of Michelle Bachelet in Chile, the reincarnation of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua and the emergence of Evo Morales in Bolivia, all potential Castro-philés.

Meanwhile, daily life in Habana continues in the shimmering light of a faded 1950s time capsule. While ostensibly little has changed here since Fidel first rolled into the city atop an American jeep in 1959, international tourism has left its bloody mark on a tired and worn-down populace. With the carrot of capitalism dangled in front of the Cubans in the form of all-inclusive tourism, limited private enterprise and the legalization of the US dollar (1993–2004), the psychology of Cuban socialism has been irrevocably damaged and people have gradually started to look elsewhere for inspiration.

TIMELINE 2000 BC

Guanahatabey people live in the caves of western Cuba

1492

Christopher Columbus 'discovers' Cuba, where he finds the local Tainos smoking rolled up tobacco leaves

Over two million visitors arrived on the island in 2006, the majority of whom spent at least part of their time in Habana. The upside of the tourist growth is that the restoration of Habana Vieja has been allowed to continue largely unhindered. The downside is that, exposed to 21st-century capitalism, Habana's inhabitants been given a tantalizing glimpse of the things they ultimately can't have (new cars, consumer goods, the freedom to travel). What happens next in this embattled yet enduringly beautiful city is anybody's guess.

FROM THE BEGINNING

PRE-COLUMBIAN HISTORY

According to exhaustive carbon dating, Cuba has been inhabited by humans for over 4000 years. The first known civilization to settle on the island were the Guanahatabeys, a primitive Stone Age people who lived in caves not far west of present-day Habana and eked out a meager existence as hunter-gatherers. At some point over the ensuing 2000 years, the Guanahatabeys were gradually displaced by the arrival of the Siboneys, a significantly more developed group of fishermen and small-scale farmers who settled comparatively peacefully on the archipelago's sheltered southern coast.

The island's third and most important pre-Columbian civilization, the Taínos, first started arriving in Cuba around 1100AD in a series of waves, concluding a migration process that had begun in the Orinoco River delta in South America several centuries earlier. Taíno culture was far more developed and sophisticated than its two archaic predecessors. Related to the Greater Antilles Arawaks, the new natives were skillful farmers, weavers and boat builders, and their complex society boasted an organized system of participatory government that was overseen by a series of local *caciques* (chiefs). Taínos are thought to be responsible for pioneering approximately 60% of the crops still grown in Cuba today, and they were the first pre-Columbian culture to nurture the delicate tobacco plant into a form that could be processed for smoking.

Despite never reaching the heights of the Aztec or Inca civilizations in South America, the Taíno culture left its indelible mark on the island. Cuba's traditional *guajiros* (country people, from a Taíno word meaning 'one of us') still industriously work the land for a living, and evidence of Taíno ancestry in modern Cuban bloodlines remains surprisingly intact in the villages of eastern Guantánamo. Furthermore, in keeping with their tobacco-addicted predecessors, a whole generation of Cuban cigar aficionados continues to obsessively smoke *cohibas* (cigars) for their aroma and taste.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE SPANISH

When Columbus neared the Cuban coast at Gibara in present-day Holguín province on October 27, 1492, he described it as 'the most beautiful land human eyes had ever seen.' But deluded in his search for the kingdom of the Great Khan, and finding little gold in Cuba's lush and heavily forested interior, the great explorer quickly abandoned the territory in favor of Hispaniola.

The colonization of Cuba didn't begin until nearly 20 years later. In 1511, Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar led a flotilla of four ships and 400 men from Hispaniola destined to conquer the island for the Spanish Crown. Docking near present-day Baracoa, the conquistadors promptly set about establishing seven pioneering settlements throughout their new colony in Baracoa, Bayamo, Trinidad, Sancti Spiritus, Puerto Príncipe (Camagüey), Habana and Santiago de Cuba. From the safety of their *bohios* (thatched-roof huts), a scattered population of Taínos looked on with a mixture of fascination and fear.

Despite Velázquez's attempts to protect the local Indians from the gross excesses of the Spanish swordsmen, things quickly got out of hand and the invaders soon found that they

1508

Sebastián de Ocampo charts the current location of Habana during his pioneering circumnavigation of Cuba

1519

The settlement of San Cristóbal de la Habana is founded on its present site on the western shores of Bahía de la Habana

had a full-scale rebellion on their hands. Leader of the embittered and short-lived insurgency was the feisty Hatuey, an influential Taíno *cacique* and the archetype of the Cuban resistance, who was eventually captured and burned at the stake, Inquisition style, for daring to challenge the iron fist of Spanish rule.

With the resistance decapitated, the Spaniards set about emptying Cuba of its relatively meager gold and mineral reserves, using the beleaguered natives as forced labor. As slavery was nominally banned under a papal edict, the Spanish got around the various legal loopholes by introducing a ruthless *encomienda* system, whereby thousands of hapless natives were rounded up and forced to work for Spanish landowners on the pretext that they were receiving free 'lessons' in Christianity. The brutal system lasted 20 years before 'Apostle of the Indians' Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas appealed to the Spanish Crown for more humane treatment, and in 1542 the *encomiendas* were abolished. Catastrophically the call came too late for the unfortunate Taínos. Those who had not already been worked to death in the gold mines quickly succumbed to fatal European diseases such as smallpox, and by 1550 only about 5000 scattered survivors remained.

THE EMERGING CAPITAL

The area now occupied by the city of Habana was first charted by Europeans in 1508 during an exploratory circumnavigation of the island of Cuba by Spanish navigator Sebastián de Ocampo. Established as the westernmost of Diego Velázquez' seven settlements in August 1515, the original village of Habana was founded on Cuba's south coast near the present-day town of Surgidero de Batabanó. A disaster from the start, the site – which was mired in a mosquito-infested swamp – was moved a few years later to the north coast between present-day Vedado and Miramar. Only in 1519 did the town finally re-establish itself at its third and present site, 8km further east at the Puerto de Carena – the name originally given by de Ocampo to Bahía de la Habana (Habana Bay). On November 25, 1519, San Cristóbal de la Habana was officially christened by Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, who convened a solemn Mass under a ceiba tree on the ground now occupied by Plaza de Armas (p77) in Habana Vieja.

Testimonies suggest that Habana was originally named by Spanish conquistador Pánfilo de Nárvaez by combining the city's patron saint, San Cristóbal (St Christopher), with the name of the daughter of a local Taíno *cacique*; the chief was called Habaguanex and his daughter was known colloquially as Habana.

Despite its early foundation, Habana's growth was slow and ponderous in the early years. Cuba was colonized from the east and its three most important towns up until the 1550s were Baracoa, Bayamo and Santiago de Cuba, all of which lay closer to the Spanish colony of Hispaniola. Stuck out on the northwest corner of the island, Habana appeared isolated and remote and when Baracoa relinquished its role as Cuban capital in the 1520s, the mantle passed without argument to Santiago de Cuba.

It took the Spanish conquest of Mexico and Peru to swing the pendulum in Habana's favor. As Spanish trade with the Americas grew in the 1530s and '40s, increasing numbers of heaving galleons laden down with gold, silver, dyes and spices plied their way east through the Straits of Florida, where they became prime fodder for pirates and buccaneers. One of their more audacious brethren, Frenchman Jacques de Soros, attacked Habana itself in 1555, where he kidnapped a group of its richest citizens and demanded a ransom of 80,000 gold pieces. When the demand wasn't met, he razed the city.

The Spanish responded with two history-defining decisions. Firstly they built a network of formidable forts around Habana, spearheaded by the Castillo de San Salvador de la Punta (p79) and the Castillo de los Tres Santos Reyes Magnos del Morro (p93) on either side of the harbor channel. Secondly a royal decree in 1561 stipulated that all ships heading for Spain should, in future, congregate in Habana harbor before making the voyage east to Spain as part of a huge communal treasure fleet. The new measures enhanced Habana's

1555

Habana is sacked by French pirate Jacques de Soros, who holds many of the city's inhabitants to ransom

1592

King Philip II of Spain confers the title of 'city' on Habana

commerce and trade exponentially, and in 1556 the settlement replaced Santiago as the seat of the Spanish captain general. More progress followed. Benefiting from its new strategically important position in the Spanish Indies, Habana was declared a city in 1592, and in 1607 the capital of the colony was officially moved there. The stage was finally set: for the next 200 years, Habana was the most important port in the Americas and the key to the vast Spanish colonial empire.

THE BRITISH WREST CONTROL

Habana expanded rapidly in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, spreading out around the four main squares of Plaza Vieja, Plaza San Francisco de Asís, Plaza de Armas and Plaza de la Catedral. Riches from the New World financed the construction of lavish new buildings and intricately decorated churches, and gave birth to the resplendent city that still forms the basis of today's Unesco World Heritage site. Between 1674 and 1740 Habana, ever wary of the threat of attack, sprouted a 5m-long defensive wall and by 1750 it was the third-biggest city in the Americas – behind Mexico City and Lima, and ahead of New York.

In 1762, Spain joined in the Seven Years' War on the side of France against the British. For Habana the intervention quickly turned out to be disastrous. Unperturbed by their new Spanish foes and sensing an opportunity to disrupt trade in Spain's economically lucrative Caribbean empire, 20,000 British troops homed in on the city on June 6, landing in the small village of Cojimar, and attacking and capturing the seemingly impregnable castle of El Morro from the rear. Worn down and under siege, the Spanish reluctantly surrendered Habana two months later, leaving the British to become the city's (and Cuba's) rather unlikely new overlords.

The British occupation turned out to be brief but important. Bivouacking themselves inside Habana's formidable city walls for 11 months, the enterprising occupiers flung open the doors to free trade and sparked a new rush of foreign imports into the colony in the form of manufacturing parts and consumer goods. Not surprisingly, it was the sugar industry that benefited most from this economic deregulation and in the years that followed the British handover (they swapped Habana for Florida at the Treaty of Paris in 1763), the production of sugarcane boomed like never before.

SUGAR HIGH

When the Spanish regained Habana in 1763, they began a crash program to upgrade the city's defenses in order to avoid a repeat performance of the previous year's military debacle. A gargantuan new fortress, Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña (p93), was built along the harbor ridge from where the British had shelled El Morro, and by the time the work was finished in 1766, Habana had become the most heavily fortified city in the New World. It was also during this period that many of the city's finest buildings were constructed on the huge profits that were being generated by the burgeoning sugar industry. In 1787, Habana's magnificent baroque cathedral (p70) was completed and the city became a bishop's seat. In the 1790s, the neighborhoods of El Prado and Parque Central took Habana outside of its traditional colonial walls for the first time. Then, in 1837, Cuba became only the sixth country in the world to construct a fully functioning railroad, a 51km track that stretched from Habana Vieja to the outlying town of Bejucal.

By the 1820s, Cuba was the world's largest sugar producer and the freshly inaugurated United States – hooked on sugar and spice and all things nice – was its most prestigious market. Situated just 90 miles from the American mainland, Habana became the focus of a growing movement inside the US to annex Cuba. In 1808, Thomas Jefferson became the first of four US presidents to offer to buy the island from its increasingly beleaguered Spanish owners, and in 1845 President Polk upped the ante further when he slapped down a massive US\$100 million bid for the jewel of the Caribbean.

1607

Habana succeeds Santiago de Cuba as the colony's new capital

1674

Work on Habana's city walls begins

For better or for worse, Spain refused to sell, preferring instead to import more slaves and bank more pesetas. By 1840 there were 400,000 slaves incarcerated on the island, the bulk of them of West African origin.

In 1862 the British finally began enforcing the ban on slave trading across the Atlantic that they had first enacted in 1820. Most slaves in Cuba still arrived on US ships, but with the distraction of the US Civil War in 1861–65 the British were able to act without fear of major repercussions. To plug the new labor gap, indentured Chinese workers and Mexican Indians were brought to the island to serve as *macheteros* (sugarcane cutters). The first Chinese laborers arrived in Cuba in 1847, and by the 1880s there were tens of thousands of them, living primarily in Habana in a neighborhood centered on the Zanja canal that quickly became known as Barrio Chino (Chinatown).

THE FIRST WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

Fed up with Spain's reactionary policies and enviously eyeing Lincoln's new American dream, *criollo* (Spaniards born in the Americas) landowners around the eastern city of Bayamo began plotting rebellion in the late 1860s. The spark was lit on October 10, 1868, when Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, a lawyer, sugar-plantation owner and budding poet, launched an uprising from his Demajagua sugar mill near Manzanillo in the Oriente. Calling for the abolition of slavery, and freeing his own slaves in an act of solidarity, Céspedes proclaimed the famous *Grito de Yara*, a cry of liberty for an independent Cuba, encouraging other disillusioned separatists to join him. For the colonial administrators in Habana, such a bold and audacious bid to wrest control from their grasp was an act tantamount to treason. The furious Spanish reacted accordingly.

Fortuitously for the loosely organized rebels, the cagey Céspedes had done his military homework. Within weeks of the historic *Grito de Yara*, the diminutive lawyer-turned-general had raised an army of over 1500 men and marched defiantly on Bayamo, taking the city in a matter of days. But initial successes soon turned to lengthy deadlock. A tactical decision not to invade western Cuba, along with an alliance between *peninsulares* (Spaniards born in Spain but living in the Americas) and the Spanish, soon put Céspedes on the back foot. Temporary help arrived in the shape of mulatto general Antonio Maceo, a tough and uncompromising *santiaguëno* (inhabitant of Santiago de Cuba) nicknamed the 'Bronze Titan' for his ability to defy death on countless occasions, and the equally formidable Dominican Máximo Gómez, but although they were able to disrupt the economy and periodically destroy the sugar crop, the rebels lacked a dynamic political leader capable of uniting them behind a singular ideological cause.

With the loss of Céspedes in battle in 1874, the war dragged on for another four years, reducing the Cuban economy to tatters and leaving an astronomical 200,000 Cubans and 80,000 Spanish dead. Finally in February 1878, a lackluster pact was signed at El Zanjón between the uncompromising Spanish and the militarily exhausted separatists, a rambling and largely worthless agreement that solved nothing and gave little to the rebel cause. Maceo, disgusted and disillusioned, made his feelings known in the 'Protest of Baraguá,' but after an abortive attempt to restart the war briefly in 1879, both he and Gómez disappeared into a prolonged exile.

Spared any direct fighting in the war, Habana rose in grandeur during the 1880s as conditions on the rest of the island continued to plummet. The long-superfluous city wall had been knocked down in 1863 and, fuelled by strong sugar prices and the lofty ambitions of its prosperous inhabitants, Habana burst its boundaries into the once forbidden forests of Vedado. Punctuated by theaters, palaces, broad boulevards and verdant parks, the new city cut a pretty picture by the end of the 19th century with its colonnaded streets and distinctive neoclassical architecture. But it wasn't all one-way traffic. A fall in the price of sugar on the world market in the late 1880s precipitated an economic crisis and forced many of the island's old landowning oligarchy to sell out to a newer and slicker competitor – the

1728

The University of Habana is founded

1762

Habana is attacked and taken by the British, who occupy the city for 11 months before exchanging the island of Cuba for Florida

US. By the end of the 19th century, US trade with Cuba was larger than US trade with the rest of Latin America combined and Cuba was America's third-largest trading partner after Britain and Germany. The island's sweet-tasting mono-crop economy – a thorn in its side since time immemorial – was translating into a US monopoly and some wealthy Cuban landowners were advocating annexation.

THE SECOND WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

Cometh the hour, cometh the man; José Martí – poet, patriot, visionary and *habanero* (inhabitant of Habana) – was a patriotic figure of Bolivarian proportions, not just in Cuba, but in the whole of Latin America.

After his arrest at the age of 16 during the First War of Independence for a minor indiscretion, Martí had spent 20 years formulating his revolutionary ideas abroad in places as diverse as Guatemala, Mexico and the US. Although impressed by American business savvy and industriousness, he was equally repelled by the country's all-consuming materialism, and was determined to present a workable Cuban alternative.

Dedicating himself passionately to the cause of the resistance, Martí wrote, spoke, petitioned and organized tirelessly for the island's independence for well over a decade, and by 1892 he had created enough momentum to coax Maceo and Gómez out of exile under the umbrella of the Partido Revolucionario Cubano (PRC). At last, Cuba had found its Bolívar.

Predicting that the time was right for another revolution, Martí and his compatriots set sail for Cuba in April 1895, landing near Baracoa two months after PRC-sponsored insurrections had tied down Spanish forces in Habana. Raising an army of 40,000 men, the rebels headed west engaging the Spanish on May 19 in a place called Dos Ríos. It was on this bullet-strafed and strangely anonymous battlefield that Martí, conspicuous on his white horse and dressed in his trademark black dinner suit, was shot and killed as he charged suicidally toward the Spanish lines. Had he lived he would certainly have become Cuba's first president; instead, he became a hero and a martyr whose life and legacy would inspire generations of Cubans in the years to come.

Conscious of mistakes made during the First War of Independence, Gómez and Maceo stormed west toward Habana, utilizing a scorched-earth policy that left everything from the Oriente to Matanzas in flames. Early victories quickly led to a sustained offensive, and by January 1896 Maceo had broken through to Pinar del Río province, while Gómez was tying down Spanish forces near Habana. But once again the city escaped any major damage.

Unleashing a devastating counterpunch, the Spanish dispatched to Cuba a ruthless general named Valeriano Weyler, who quickly set about building countrywide north-south fortifications and attempted to break the underground resistance by herding *guajiros* into camps in a process called *reconcentración*. The brutal tactics started to show results and on December 7, 1896, the *Mambises* (rebels) suffered a major military blow when Antonio Maceo was killed in a field near Santiago de las Vegas, south of Habana, trying to break out to the east.

By this time Cuba was a mess: thousands were dead, the countryside was in flames and William Randolph Hearst and the tub-thumping US tabloid press were leading a hysterical war campaign to draw America into the fray.

Preparing perhaps for the worst, the US battleship *Maine* was sent to Habana in January 1898 on the pretext of 'protecting US citizens.' But its peacekeeping mission never came to fruition. On February 15, 1898, the *Maine* exploded in Habana harbor, killing 258 US sailors and bringing the country to the brink of war (p54).

After the *Maine* debacle, the US scrambled to take control. They offered Spain US\$300 million for Cuba and, when this deal was rejected, demanded a full withdrawal. The long-awaited US-Spanish showdown that had been simmering imperceptibly beneath the surface for decades had finally ended in war.

1796

The remains of Christopher Columbus are transported to Habana, where they rest in the cathedral until 1898

1837

Cuba becomes only the sixth country in the world to get a railroad, with a 51km line running from Habana to Bejucal

REMEMBER THE MAINE – AND TO HELL WITH SPAIN

Few attacks on American interests abroad have provoked as much anger and controversy as the explosion of the battleship *Maine* in Habana harbor in 1898, which sparked an international conflict, fuelled a bitter newspaper circulation war and left 258 of the ship's 350-strong crew dead.

Dispatched to Habana in January 1898 by US President McKinley on the pretext of protecting US interests in Cuba, the *Maine* – which measured 319ft in length and displaced 6682 tons – was the largest battleship ever constructed in a US shipyard.

But on February 15, 1898, while undertaking routine duties in Habana harbor, a massive explosion ripped the giant vessel apart, causing it to start sinking within minutes.

Suspicion for the explosion fell immediately on the Spanish, whose relationship with the US had become increasingly fraught since the reignition of the Cuban independence war in 1895. But the real backlash was caused by a vitriolic newspaper war between William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* and Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, both of which shamelessly whipped up American public opinion into a hysterical prowar frenzy in a desperate bid to become the first periodical to achieve one million subscribers.

Journalistically speaking, the tactics were far from ethical. Ever keen to fan the political flames, Hearst had for months been planting his reporters in Cuba, where they had cabled home stories of macabre Spanish atrocities that dangerously distorted the truth. But such was the *Journal* owner's enduring national influence that not only was he able to masterfully manipulate public opinion, he was also able to wield considerable political pressure within the higher echelons of the US government.

With the *Maine* explosion, Hearst finally had his damning scoop. 'Remember the Maine and to hell with Spain' screamed the headlines of the *Journal* over the ensuing few weeks, inventing a new catchphrase and stifling any serious political dialogue about what really happened. Indeed, before any form of independent inquiry could be undertaken, US public opinion had unceremoniously declared the Spanish guilty of sabotage and President McKinley found himself sliding into a war that he was powerless to stop.

Modern analyses suggest that the explosion of the *Maine* was an accident caused by badly packed gunpowder – though this hasn't stopped various conspiracy theorists from speculating that the Americans blew the ship up themselves to invent a pretext for invading Cuba via the back door. Some cynics even hold Hearst himself responsible.

A monument to the 258 American sailors killed in the *Maine* explosion (Map pp224–5) adorns a traffic island on the Malecón (Av de Maceo) in front of the Hotel Nacional.

The only important land battle of the conflict was on July 1 in Santiago, when the US Army attacked Spanish positions on San Juan Hill, just east of the city. Despite vastly inferior numbers and limited, antiquated weaponry, the Spanish held out bravely for over 24 hours before future US president Theodore Roosevelt broke the deadlock by leading a celebrated cavalry charge of the Rough Riders up San Juan Hill. It was the beginning of the end, and an unconditional surrender was offered to the Americans on July 17, 1898.

On December 12, 1898, a peace treaty ending the war was signed in Paris by the Spanish and the Americans. Despite three years of blood, sweat and sacrifice, no Cuban representatives were invited. After a century of trying to buy Cuba from the Spanish, the US, wary of raised voices among short-changed Cuban nationalists, decided to appease the situation temporarily by offering the island a form of quasi-independence that would dampen internal discontent while keeping any future Cuban governments on a tight leash. In November 1900, the US governor of Cuba, General Leonard Wood, convened a meeting of elected Cuban delegates, who drew up a constitution similar to that of the US. Connecticut senator Orville Platt attached a rider to the US Army Appropriations Bill of 1901, giving the US the right to intervene militarily in Cuba whenever they saw fit. This was approved by President McKinley, and the Cubans were given the choice of accepting what became known as the Platt Amendment or remaining under a US military occupation indefinitely. The US also used their significant leverage to secure a naval base in Guantánamo Bay in order to protect their strategic interests in the Panama Canal region.

1838

Teatro Tacón (now the Gran Teatro de la Habana) opens; it's generally believed to be the oldest surviving theater in the Americas

1853

Cuban national hero José Martí is born in a small house in Habana Vieja on January 28

MARRIED TO THE MOB

Habana entered the 20th century on the cusp of a new beginning. Despite gaining nominal independence in 1902, Cuba became inexorably linked both politically and economically to the US. Intervening militarily three times between 1906 and 1923, the US walked a tight-rope between benevolent ally and exasperated foreign meddler. There were, however, some coordinated successes, most notably the eradication of yellow fever using the hypotheses of Cuban doctor Carlos Finlay and the transformation of the ravaged Cuban economy from postwar wreck into nascent sugar giant.

Cuba's early-20th-century economic growth was nothing short of astounding and Habana was once again its main beneficiary. Thanks to substantial financial aid from the dollar-wielding *Yanquis*, the Malecón (Av de Maceo; p86) was laid out in 1901, the Presidential Palace (now the Museo de la Revolución; p81) was opened in 1920 and, nine years later, the champagne corks popped over the Capitolio Nacional (p79), a carbon copy of the US's Capitol Building that was actually a few inches taller. By the late 1920s, US companies owned two-thirds of Cuba's farmland and most of its mineral resources, and close to 20,000 rich Cuban-American businessmen were living in Habana's new garden suburbs of Miramar and Marianao.

With the economy booming and the US gripped by Prohibition, the Mafia homed in on Habana in the 1920s, and gangsters such as Al Capone began to milk the lucrative tourist sector by setting up hotels and clubs based on drinking, gambling and prostitution. One such venture was the Hotel Nacional (p85), which opened in 1930 and was designed with an art deco influence that was very much in vogue in the US at the time.

But there were setbacks ahead. When commodity prices collapsed in 1929, Habana was plunged into chaos and president-turned-dictator Gerardo Machado y Morales (1925–33) went on a terror campaign to root out the detractors. But Machado was no Mussolini (upon whom he allegedly modeled himself). When he was toppled during a spontaneous general strike in August 1933, it was left to a seemingly innocuous army sergeant named Fulgencio Batista to step into the power vacuum after a swiftly enacted military coup.

Batista was a wily and shrewd negotiator who presided over Cuba's best and worst attempts to establish an embryonic democracy in the 1940s and '50s. Elected president in a relatively free and fair election in 1940, Batista began to enact a wide variety of social reforms and set about drafting Cuba's most liberal and democratic constitution to date. But neither the liberal honeymoon nor Batista's good humor were to last. Stepping down in 1944, the former army sergeant handed over power to the politically inept President Ramón Grau San Martín, and corruption and inefficiency soon reigned like never before.

Aware of his underlying popularity and sensing an easy opportunity to line his pockets with one last big paycheck, Batista cut a deal with the American Mafia in Daytona Beach, Florida, and positioned himself for a comeback. Grau would be paid off (with a 'gift' of US\$250,000), Batista would regain the presidency, and organized-crime boss Meyer Lansky would be left to run Habana's hotels and gambling syndicates pretty much as he pleased. But it began to look like Batista would lose the scheduled elections, and on March 10, 1952, three months before the election, he staged a second military coup. Wildly condemned by opposition politicians inside Cuba but recognized by the US government two weeks later, Batista quickly let it be known that his second incarnation wasn't going to be quite as enlightened as his first.

REVOLUTION

After Batista's second coup, a revolutionary circle formed in Habana around the charismatic figure of Fidel Castro, a qualified lawyer and gifted orator who had been due to stand in the cancelled 1952 elections. Though Castro himself was an 'easterner' from the bucolic province of Holguín, most of his early followers hailed from Habana, where they used the

1863

Habana's city walls are demolished

1898

The US battleship *Maine* explodes in Habana harbor

house of his trusty lieutenant Abel Santamaría (later tortured to death by Batista's thugs) on the corner of Calle 25 and O in Vedado as a clandestine meeting place. Appalled by Batista's corruption, Castro saw no alternative to the use of force in ridding Cuba of its detestable dictator. Low on numbers but adamant to make a political statement, he led 119 rebels in an attack on the strategically important Moncada army barracks in Santiago de Cuba on July 26, 1953. The audacious and poorly planned assault failed dramatically when the rebel's driver (who was from Habana) took the wrong turning in Santiago's badly signposted streets and the alarm was raised.

Foiled, flailing and hopelessly outnumbered, 64 of the Moncada conspirators were rounded up by Batista's army, and brutally tortured and executed. Castro and a handful of others managed to escape into the nearby mountains, where they were found a few days later by a sympathetic army lieutenant named Sarriá, who had been given instructions to kill them. 'Don't shoot, you can't kill ideas,' Sarriá is alleged to have shouted on finding Castro and his exhausted colleagues. By taking him to jail instead of doing away with him, Sarriá – a foresighted and highly principled man – ruined his military career, but saved Fidel's life. (One of Fidel's first acts after the revolution triumphed was to release Sarriá from the prison where Batista had incarcerated him and to give him a commission in the revolutionary army.) Castro's capture soon became national news, and he was put on trial in

THE 1946 HABANA CONFERENCE

Deported from the US in February 1946 on a charge of pandering, notorious New York Mafia don Salvatore 'Lucky' Luciano made a beeline for Sicily, where he sought out the local crime bosses and surreptitiously plotted his return. In the early fall of 1946 the opportunistic mobster received a note from his childhood friend and associate Meyer Lansky containing just three words: 'December – Hotel Nacional.' For the ambitious Luciano, the message needed no further explanation. Taking a necessarily circuitous route in order to avoid US police detection, he was on the next plane bound for Habana, Cuba.

Met by the corpulent Lansky at Habana airport, Luciano quickly retook control of the North American crime syndicate by buying a \$150,000 stake in a lucrative casino situated in the Hotel Nacional, co-owned at the time by Lansky and his silent partner, Cuban president Fulgencio Batista. The cash for the venture was raised via a series of 'gifts' brought out to Habana by visiting mobsters from the US, who were congregating in the Cuban capital on Luciano's orders for the biggest get-together of North American hoods in Mafia history.

Convened on the mezzanine floor of the Hotel Nacional on December 22, 1946, the infamous Habana Conference was attended by every major figure in the US postwar Mafia hierarchy and was to play a pivotal role in organized crime activity in the decades that followed. In order to provide a pretext for such a heavy Italian-American presence in the Cuban capital (and to cover the tracks of Luciano, who US authorities had prohibited from leaving Italy), the Mob brought in rising singing star Frank Sinatra for a Christmas Eve concert. Sinatra allegedly flew in with the Fischetti brothers (Al Capone's cousins) from Chicago, stoking rumors about the singer's supposed Mob connections and setting alight a controversy that haunted him until his death.

The main focus of the conference was to relaunch Luciano as a major North American crime figure, or the 'Boss of Bosses' as he was known in popular Mafia folklore. Additional business included discussions on Mob involvement in the global narcotics trade (using Cuba as a base) and the planned assassination of mobster Bugsy Siegel, whose new hotel venture in a small Nevada desert town called Las Vegas had turned out to be an embarrassing flop (and had cost the Mob millions).

With the big business settled, Luciano elected to remain in Habana while awaiting a convenient opportunity to return to the US. But when federal drug agent Harry Anslinger got wind of the mobster's presence in the city, he asked President Truman to put pressure on the Cuban government to expel the already deported Italian. Acting under Lansky's and ex-president Batista's influence, the Cuban government initially refused the order, causing the Truman administration to halt deliveries of medical supplies to Cuba. In retaliation, Luciano hired an attorney and concocted a plan to stop Cuban sugar shipments to the US, but with the Americans undiplomatically turning the screws, he found himself in a lose-lose situation and desisted. In April 1947, in order to avoid any further international incidents, Salvatore 'not-so-lucky' Luciano was placed on a slow transatlantic cargo ship to Italy where he served out an ignominious exile.

1902

Cuba gains independence from Spain under the auspices of the US

1930

The Hotel Nacional, one of Habana's greatest landmarks, opens

the full glare of the media spotlight. A lawyer by profession, the loquacious Fidel defended himself in court with an eloquent and masterfully executed speech that he later transcribed into a comprehensive political manifesto entitled *History Will Absolve Me*. Basking in his new-found legitimacy and backed by a growing sense of restlessness with the old regime in the country at large, Castro was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment on Isla de Pinos. Cuba was well on the way to gaining a new national hero.

In February 1955, Batista won the presidency in what were widely considered to be fraudulent elections and, in an attempt to curry favor with growing internal opposition, agreed to an amnesty for all political prisoners, including Castro. Realizing that Batista's real intention was to assassinate him once out of jail, Castro fled Habana for Mexico. Behind him he left a small band of loyal supporters trapped in a city that – thanks to Batista's ever spiraling corruption – had degenerated into a decadent all-night gambling den that was scooping crooked fortunes into the pockets of American mobsters such as Meyer Lansky.

But despite its moral decline, Habana's expansion continued apace. The 1950s saw the final institution of the plans of Belgian urbanist Jean Forestier, who 30 years earlier had drawn up a Parisian-style street layout for Vedado based along the three modern-day axes of Paseo, Calle G (Av de los Presidentes) and the Plaza de la Revolución. Elsewhere, the city grew outwards and upwards with a frenzied New York-skyscraper-building craze that culminated in the completion of the Focsa building (p84) in 1956 and the Havana Hilton hotel (now the Habana Libre; p85) in 1958. Not to be outdone, the Mob used their own money to emulate the lurid hotel strips of Las Vegas with the lavishly decorated Hotel Capri and the ritzy Hotel Riviera (p167). Habana's skyline was changed forever.

Meanwhile, cocooned in Mexico, Fidel and his compatriots plotted and planned afresh, drawing in key new figures such as Camilo Cienfuegos and the Argentine doctor-turned-revolutionary Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, both of whom added strength and panache to the nascent army of disaffected rebel soldiers. On the run from the Mexican police and determined to arrive in Cuba in time for an uprising that underground leader Frank País had planned for late November 1956 in Santiago, Castro and 81 companions set sail for the island on 25 November in an old and overcrowded leisure yacht named *Granma*. After seven dire days at sea, they arrived at Playa Las Coloradas near Niquero on December 2, two days late. Three days later, after a catastrophic landing – 'it wasn't a disembarkation it was a shipwreck,' a wry Guevara later commented – they were spotted and routed by Batista's soldiers in a sugarcane field at Alegria de Pío.

Of the 82 rebels who had left Mexico, only 12 managed to escape. Splitting into three tiny groups, the survivors wandered around hopelessly for days half-starved, wounded and assuming that the rest of their compatriots had been killed in the initial skirmish. 'At one point I was commander in chief of myself and two other people,' commented Fidel years later. However, with the help of the local peasantry, the dozen or so hapless soldiers finally managed to reassemble two weeks later in Cinco Palmas, a clearing in the shadows of the Sierra Maestra, where a half-delirious Fidel gave a rousing and premature victory speech. 'We will win this war,' he proclaimed confidently. 'We are just beginning the fight!'

The comeback began on January 17, 1957, when the guerrillas scored an important victory by sacking a small army outpost on the south coast. This was followed in February by a propaganda coup when Fidel persuaded *New York Times* journalist Herbert Matthews to come up into the Sierra Maestra to interview him. The resulting article made Castro internationally famous and gained him much sympathy among liberal Americans. On March 13, 1957, university students led by José Antonio Echeverría attacked the Presidential Palace (now the Museo de la Revolución) in Habana in an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate Batista. Thirty-two of the 35 attackers were shot dead as they fled, and reprisals were meted out on the streets of Habana with a new vengeance. Cuba was rapidly disintegrating into a police state run by military-trained thugs.

Back in the Sierra Maestra, Fidel's rebels overwhelmed 53 Batista soldiers at an army post in El Uvero in May and captured more badly needed supplies. The movement seemed to be

1940

Ernest Hemingway purchases La Finca Vigía, a private villa in the Habana suburb of San Francisco de Paula

1952

Batista stages his second coup and opens the doors to widespread repression and corruption

gaining momentum and despite losing Frank País to a government assassination squad in Santiago in July, support and sympathy around the country was starting to mushroom. By the beginning of 1958, Castro had established a fixed headquarters in a cloud forest high up in the Sierra Maestra and was broadcasting propaganda messages from Radio Rebelde (710AM and 96.7FM) all across Cuba. The tide was starting to turn.

Sensing his popularity waning, Batista sent an army of 10,000 men into the Sierra Maestra in May 1958 on a mission known as Plan FF (*Fin de Fidel* or 'End of Fidel'). The intention was to liquidate Castro and his merry band of loyal guerrillas, who had now burgeoned into a solid fighting force of 300 men. Outnumbered 30 to one, and fighting desperately for their lives, the rebels – with the help of the local *campesinos* (country people) – gradually halted the onslaught of Batista's young and ill-disciplined conscript army. With the Americans increasingly embarrassed by the no-holds-barred terror tactics of their one-time Cuban ally, Castro sensed an opportunity to turn defensive into offensive and signed the groundbreaking Caracas Pact with eight leading opposition groups, calling on the US to stop all aid to Batista. Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos were promptly dispatched to the Sierra del Escambray to open up new fronts in the west, and by December, with Cienfuegos holding down troops in Yaguajay and Guevara closing in on Santa Clara, the end was in sight. It was left to Che to seal the final victory, employing classic guerrilla tactics to derail an armored train in Santa Clara and split the country's battered communications system in two. By New Year's Eve 1958, the game was up, a sense of jubilation filled the country, and Che and Cienfuegos were on their way to Habana unopposed.

In the small hours of that night, Batista fled by private plane to the Dominican Republic, taking US\$40 million in embezzled government funds with him. Materializing in Santiago on January 1, meanwhile, Fidel made a rousing victory speech from the town hall in Parque Céspedes before jumping into a jeep and traveling across the breadth of the country to Habana in a Caesar-like cavalcade. The triumph of the revolution was complete. Or was it?

CONSOLIDATING POWER

On January 5, 1959, the Cuban presidency was assumed by Manuel Urrutia, a judge who had defended the M-26-7 (the 26th of July Movement; Fidel Castro's revolutionary organization) prisoners during the 1953 Moncada trials, though the leadership and real power remained unquestionably with Fidel. Riding on the crest of a popular wave, the self-styled *Líder Máximo* (Maximum Leader) began to mete out revolutionary justice with an iron fist, and within a matter of weeks hundreds of Batista's supporters and military henchmen had been rounded up and executed inside the walls of Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña in Habana. Already suspicious of Castro's supposed communist leanings, the US viewed these openly antagonistic developments with a growing sense of alarm and when Fidel visited Richard Nixon in the White House on a state visit in April 1959, the vice president gave him a decidedly cool and terse reception.

As Castro's star ascended, the cautious President Urrutia was forced to resign in July 1959 after denouncing the new regime's increasingly communist credentials. Riding on the crest of a populist wave, Fidel handed the presidency to Osvaldo Dorticós Torrado, a Cienfuegos lawyer, who held the post until 1976 (when Fidel became president). But despite a rather industrious work ethic, Dorticós was realistically little more than a token figurehead who bowed to Castro's every whim.

After closing down Habana's casinos and brothels, the new government largely turned its back on the once decadent Cuban capital, preferring instead to focus its energies on instituting the much lauded First Agrarian Reform Act, a piece of landmark legislation that nationalized all rural estates over 400 hectares (without compensation) and infuriated Cuba's largest landholders, the bulk of whom were American. Habana, meanwhile, slipped into a long period of decline, with former city mansions stripped down and redistributed among the urban poor as their once powerful proprietors headed north for Miami.

1959

1977

Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos enter Habana on behalf of Fidel Castro's victorious guerrilla army

The US opens up an Interests Section in Habana

Back on the political scene, entities with vested interests in Cuba were growing increasingly bellicose. Perturbed by Castro's intransigent individual style and increasingly alarmed by his gradual and none-too-subtle shift to the Left, dissidents started voting with their feet. Between 1959 and 1962, approximately 250,000 judges, lawyers, managers and technicians left Cuba, primarily for the US, and throughout the top professions Cuba began to experience an economically debilitating brain drain. Fidel, meanwhile, hit back at the counter-revolutionaries with draconian press restrictions and the threat of arrest and incarceration for anyone caught being outwardly critical of the new regime.

Crisis begot crisis, and in June 1960 Texaco, Standard Oil and Shell refineries in Cuba buckled under US pressure and refused to refine Soviet petroleum. Sensing an opportunity to score diplomatic points over his embittered American rivals, Castro dutifully nationalized the oil companies. President Eisenhower was left with little choice: he cut 700,000 tons from the Cuban sugar quota in an attempt to get even. Rather worryingly for Cold War relations, the measure played right into the hands of the Soviet Union. Already buttered up by a 1959 visit from Che Guevara, the USSR stepped out of the shadows the following day and promised to buy the Cuban sugar at the same preferential rates. The tit-for-tat war that would come to characterize Cuban-Soviet-US relations for the next 30 years had well and truly begun.

The diplomatic crisis heated up again in August when Cuba nationalized US-owned telephone and electricity companies, and 36 sugar mills, including US\$800 million in US assets. Outraged, the American government forced through an Organization of American States (OAS) resolution condemning 'extracontinental' (Soviet) intervention in the Western hemisphere, while Cuba responded by establishing diplomatic relations with communist China and edging ever closer to its new Soviet ally, via a hastily signed arms deal.

By October 1960, 382 major Cuban-owned firms, the majority of its banks and the whole rental housing market had been nationalized, and both the US and Castro were starting to prepare for the military showdown that by this point seemed inevitable. Turning the screw ever tighter, the US imposed a partial trade embargo on the island as Che Guevara nationalized all remaining US businesses. In the space of just three short years, Fidel had gone from darling of the American liberals to US public-enemy number one. The stage was set.

CONFLICT WITH THE USA

The brick finally hit the window in early 1961 when Castro ordered US embassy staff reductions in Habana. Barely able to conceal their fury, the Americans broke off diplomatic relations with Cuba, banned US citizens from traveling to the island and abolished the remaining Cuban sugar quota. At the same time, the government and the CIA began to initiate a covert program of action against the Castro regime that included invasion plans, assassination plots and blatant acts of sabotage. At the center of subterfuge lay the infamous Bay of Pigs invasion, a poorly conceived military plot that honed 1400 disaffected Cuban exiles into a workable fighting force in the jungles of Guatemala. On April 14, 1961, deemed sufficiently armed and ready to fight, the émigrés sailed with a US navy escort from Puerto Cabeza in Nicaragua to the southern coast of Cuba. But military glory wasn't forthcoming. Landing at Playa Girón and Playa Larga three days later, the US-backed expeditionary forces took a conclusive drubbing, in part because President Kennedy canceled US air cover during the landings, a decision that has since been the subject of much revisionist analysis.

Rocked and embarrassed by what had been a grave and politically costly military defeat, the Americans declared a full trade embargo on Cuba in June 1961, and in January 1962 the US used diplomatic pressure to expel the island from the OAS. Much to the Americans' chagrin, their closest neighbors, Mexico and Canada, refused to bow to US pressure to sever diplomatic relations with Cuba completely, thus throwing the country a valuable lifeline that – in the case of Canada – still exists to this day. Spinning inexorably into the Soviet sphere of influence,

1980

Between April and October, 125,000 Cubans depart for the US from the port of Mariel, 30km west of Habana

1982

Habana Vieja is listed as a Unesco World Heritage site

Castro began to cement closer relations with Khrushchev and upped the ante even further in April 1962 when, exploiting American weakness after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, he agreed to effect the installation of Soviet-made medium-range missiles on the island.

The Americans were understandably furious and, anxious not to loose any more face on the international scene, the Kennedy administration acted quickly and decisively. On October 22, 1962, President Kennedy ordered the US Navy to detain Cuba-bound Soviet ships and search for missiles, provoking the Cuban Missile Crisis, which brought the world closer to the nuclear brink than it had ever been before or has been since. Six days later, after receiving a secret assurance from Kennedy that Cuba would not be invaded, Khrushchev ordered the missiles dismantled. Castro, who was not consulted nor informed until it was a done deal, was livid and reputedly smashed a mirror in his anger.

BUILDING SOCIALISM

The learning curve was steep in the revolution's first decade. The economy continued to languish in the doldrums despite massive injections of Soviet aid, and production was marked by all of the normal inconsistencies, shortages and quality issues that characterize uncompetitive socialist markets. As National Bank president and later the minister of industry, Che Guevara advocated centralization and moral (rather than material) incentives for workers. But despite his own tireless efforts to lead by example and sponsor voluntary work weekends, all attempts to create the 'new man' ultimately proved to be unsustainable.

The effort to produce a 10-million-ton sugar harvest in 1970 was equally misguided and almost led to economic catastrophe as the country ditched everything in pursuit of one all-encompassing obsession.

Determined to learn from its mistakes, the Cuban government elected to diversify and mechanize after 1970, ushering in a decade of steadier growth and relative economic prosperity. As power was decentralized and a small market economy was permitted to flourish, people's livelihoods gradually began to improve and, for the first time in decades, *habaneros* (inhabitants of Habana) started to live more comfortably, due in no small part to burgeoning trade with the Soviet bloc, which increased from 65% of the total trade in the early 1970s to 87% in 1988.

COMMUNISM IN CRISIS

After almost 25 years of a top-down Soviet-style economy, it was obvious that quality was suffering and ambitious production quotas were becoming increasingly unrealistic. In 1986, Castro initiated the 'rectification of errors' campaign, a process that aimed to reduce malfunctioning bureaucracy and allow more local-level decision. Just as the process was reaping some rewards, the Eastern bloc collapsed in the dramatic events that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall in Europe. As trade and credits amounting to US\$5 billion vanished almost overnight from the Cuban balance sheet, Castro – determined to avoid the fate of Honecker in East Germany and Ceaușescu in Romania – declared a five-year *período especial* austerity program (p23) that sent living standards plummeting and instituted a system of rationing that would make the sacrifices of wartime Europe almost pale in comparison.

Sniffing the blood of a dying communist animal, the US tightened the noose in 1992 with the draconian Torricelli Act, which forbade foreign subsidiaries of US companies from trading with Cuba and prohibited ships that had called at Cuban ports from docking at US ports for six months. Ninety percent of the trade banned by this law consisted of food, medicine and medical equipment, which led the American Association for World Health to conclude that the US embargo has caused a significant rise in suffering – even deaths – in Cuba.

In August 1993, with the country slipping rapidly into an economic coma and Habana on the verge of riot, the US dollar was legalized, allowing Cubans to hold and spend foreign currency and open US-dollar bank accounts. Spearheaded by the unlikely figure

1991

Habana hosts the Pan American games

1994

The Habana-made film *Fresa y Chocolate* (Strawberry and Chocolate) becomes the first Cuban movie to be nominated for an Oscar

of Raúl Castro, other liberal reforms followed, including limited private enterprise, self-employment, the opening of farmers markets and the expansion of the almost nonexistent tourist sector into a mainstay of the burgeoning new economy.

But the recovery was not without its problems. Class differences reemerged as people with US dollars began to gain access to goods and services not available in pesos, while touts and prostitutes took up residence in tourist areas where they preyed upon rich foreigners.

Although some of the worst shortages have been alleviated thanks to the reinvestment of tourist revenue into public services, the *período especial* has left a nasty scar. Much to the popular chagrin, the government also started to go back on some of its earlier liberalization measures in an attempt to re-establish an updated brand of old socialist orthodoxy.

Following the 1994 *balsero* crisis (when thousands of Cubans attempted to escape to the US on barely seaworthy rafts) and a handful of further shots in the ongoing diplomatic war that had been plaguing US-Cuban relations for decades, the US pulled the embargo a notch tighter in 1996 by signing the Helms-Burton Bill. Widely condemned by the international community, and energetically leapt upon by Castro as a devastating propaganda tool, the bill allows US investors to take legal action in the American courts against foreign companies utilizing their confiscated property in Cuba. It also prevents any US president from lifting the embargo until a transitional government is in place in Habana.

THE MARIEL BOATLIFT

On April 1, 1980, Hector Sanyustic – a disgruntled Cuban dissident – drove a public bus through the fence of the Peruvian embassy in downtown Habana in an audacious escape bid. Despite being fired upon by guards in the street outside (one of whom was killed in the cross fire), Sanyustic and his four accomplices made it safely inside the embassy perimeter where they successfully claimed political asylum.

Hearing the news, a furious Castro immediately demanded that Sanyustic and his colleagues be handed back to the Cuban authorities to be tried on charges of manslaughter. When Peru refused, Fidel decided to remove the guards from the embassy gates.

Few observers – Fidel included – could have predicted the chaos that followed. As word of the new security arrangements quickly spread among other disaffected Cubans, the grounds of the Peruvian embassy filled up with over 11,000 Cuban refugees determined to leave the island in the wake of a worsening economic crisis and a thaw in US-Cuban relations that had been orchestrated by the Carter administration.

With a major confrontation brewing, Castro did what he always does best: he passed the problem onto the US. On April 9, incensed at a comment by US president Jimmy Carter that had stated that America would ‘welcome the refugees with open arms,’ Fidel announced that the port of Mariel, 45 km west of Habana, would be open to any Cubans wanting to leave, as long as they had someone to pick them up. Moving quickly to bail out their beleaguered compatriots, Cuban exiles in Miami and Key West resourcefully rustled up a Dunkirk-like flotilla of ships that was dispatched off to Mariel on a spontaneous rescue mission.

It was a lengthy and highly disorganized evacuation. Within weeks, the US had been inundated with Cuban refugees, many of whom – it later turned out – had been released from Cuban jails and mental institutions in a cynical bid by Castro to rid the island of its so-called undesirables. Indeed, by the time the two governments finally ended the debate in October 1980, the US had accepted approximately 125,000 Cuban immigrants from an estimated flotilla of 1700 dangerously overloaded boats. Twenty-seven people died during the sea crossing, while over 2700 were denied asylum on the grounds that they were violent felons.

In America the episode became known as the Mariel Boatlift and the refugee crisis that it created – along with the ongoing Iranian hostage affair – played a major part in Jimmy Carter’s diminishing popularity. Meanwhile Castro, in a shrewd act of damage limitation, embarked upon a series of fiery nationalistic speeches that lambasted the emigrants as *lumpen* (traitors) and vowed to continue defending the revolution at all costs.

The Mariel Boatlift is fictionally portrayed in the 1983 Brian de Palma movie *Scarface*, which starred Al Pacino in the role of Tony Montana, an unscrupulous cocaine-addicted *marielito* (Cuban who came to the US as part of the Mariel Boatlift) who is let out of a Cuban jail to run amok in Miami.

1998

Pope Jean Paul II visits Habana and address over one million people in the Plaza de la Revolución

2003

Three Cubans attempting to hijack a cross-harbor Habana ferry in an audacious escape bid are foiled by authorities

REVIVAL & RESTORATION

Up until the 1970s, Habana Vieja was a poor and physically uninspiring urban neighborhood that had been in decline for the best part of a century. The slide was precipitated in the mid-19th century when the city burst its old colonial walls and sent coachloads of rich sugar barons spilling west into Vedado and Miramar. Abandoned on the shores of the harbor, Habana Vieja was left to fester in a dust-coated time capsule, its soul sequestered and its historical significance temporarily forgotten.

The 'saving' of Habana Vieja is often put down to the work of one individual: Eusebio Leal Spengler, city historian, dedicated taskmaster and – perhaps more importantly – a man with a voice close to the ear of one Fidel Castro. The program that he initiated in the '70s and '80s shouldn't be underestimated. Architectural preservation wasn't a priority when the revolutionary government rolled triumphantly into the capital in a fug of cigar fumes, but Leal had other ideas. Succeeding Dr Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring as city historian in 1967, his first big project was to restore the Palacio de los Capitanes Generales (p76), a task that he completed in 1979, uncovering a museum's worth of treasures in the process. By this point he had already co-opted the Cuban government into declaring Habana Vieja a 'national monument,' and in 1982, thanks primarily to his tireless lobbying, Habana Vieja, along with Habana's eastern forts, was declared a Unesco World Heritage site.

With more money and greater publicity, the master plan could now be confidently put into place. But Leal's primary motivation has never just been tourist money. 'The most important aspect of a city for tourists should be a knowledge of its own culture,' he stated portentously in the 1990s, and much of his work has reflected this theme (see p42).

Since 1982, Leal has been piecing Old Habana back together brick by brick with the aid of Unesco and a variety of foreign investors. The development isn't as straightforward as it might first appear. Leal must fight against the odds in a country where shortages are part of everyday life and money for raw materials is often scarce. Furthermore, many buildings of historical significance have long been homes for Cuban families and, in a state where it is not permissible to either buy or sell property for profit, these people must first be moved and rehoused elsewhere. The cultural and architectural results, however, are clear. Habana Vieja is a triumph of urban regeneration and a mini Rome in the making.

THE 21ST CENTURY

Cuba entered the new millennium in the throes of the Elián González drama, a tragic family crisis that became an allegory for the all-pervading senselessness of the ongoing Cuban-US immigration showdown. Not that much changed.

Failing to learn the lessons of its nine predecessors (all of whom had tried and failed to 'get rid of' Castro), the Bush administration came out all guns blazing in November 2000, following the victory-clinching Florida vote recount – a state in which conservative Cuban exiles have always punched way above their weight.

Promising to crack down on Cuba's purported human-rights abuses, George W Bush's rhetoric turned venomous after September 11, when the president began mentioning the Castro regime in the same breath as North Korea and Iraq. Subsequently, US policy was rolled back to resemble that of the worst of the Cold War years, with draconian travel restrictions, damaging financial constraints and no-compromise political rhetoric.

Rather than score much-needed capital out of Bush's belligerence, Castro elected to shoot himself in the foot by proceeding to arrest scores of so-called dissidents who had – allegedly – been sponsored by US Special Interests Office chief James Cason to spread social unrest across the island. Whether or not this was true, the trials and hefty prison sentences meted out to over 100 or more of these 'dissidents' horrified human-rights groups worldwide, and Castro's heavy-handed crackdown was condemned by everyone from Amnesty International to the Vatican.

2004

The US dollar is taken out of circulation

2006

The WWF declares Cuba to be the world's most sustainable country

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