

the Servi-Cupet gas station has a good location. It's basic, but you won't find another hotel in central Vedado for this price.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Colina (Gran Caribe; ☎ 33 40 71; cnr Calles L & 27; s/d low season CUC\$40/50, high season CUC\$44/54; 🏠) Well-worn rooms, bored staff and sparse facilities; the Colina often gets a bad press. But with its central location opposite the university and its slightly cheaper prices compared with other midrange options, budget travelers will find a good base here. An added bonus: it isn't normally full.

Hotel St John's (Gran Caribe; ☎ 33 37 40; Calle O No 216 btwn Calles 23 & 25; s/d incl breakfast low season CUC\$50/67, high season CUC\$56/80; 🏠 🏠) The rooftop pool is small and the staff unresponsive, but the beds are good, the baths clean and western-facing rooms have killer Malecón views. Vibrant Vedado awaits outside your window. Use the safe deposit box when you hit the town and check out the 14th-floor Pico Blanco nightclub (p134).

Hotel Vedado (Gran Caribe; ☎ 832-2806; Calle O No 244 btwn Calles 23 & 25; s/d low season CUC\$50/67, high season CUC\$56/80; 🏠 🏠 🏠) St John's versus

CASAS PARTICULARES – VEDADO

Angela Muñoz Rubio (☎ 879-6851; San Miguel No 1116 btwn Mazón & Basarrate; r CUC\$25) Rents rooms near Museo Napoleónico, two with private bath.

Armando Gutiérrez (☎/fax 832-1876; Calle 21 No 62 apt 7 btwn M & N; r CUC\$25-30) Nice room with balcony and fridge. Friendly; English spoken; elevator.

Basilía Pérez Castro (☎ 832-3953; bpcdt@hotmail.com; Calle 25 No 361 apt 7 Bajos btwn K & L; r CUC\$25) Two rooms with independent entrances, fridge, phone, TV. Mellow, good value.

Beatriz & Julio (☎ 832-5778; Calle 25 No 367 btwn K & L; r CUC\$25-30; 🏠) Close to university and central hotels. Separate entrance.

Casa de Jannett (☎ 831-7367; Calle F No 610 btwn 25 & 27; r CUC\$25) Colonial house, close to university.

Casa Teresita (☎ 832-0777; Calle 21 No 4 apt 54 btwn O & N; r CUC\$25) Clean room, doting hostesses. Good for bikes.

Conchita García (☎ 832-6187; conchitagarcia21@hotmail.com; Calle 21 No 4 apt 74 btwn N & O; r CUC\$30-35) Well-kept apartment with two rooms, TV, nice terrace. Numerous others in this building.

Doris Jorge (☎ 32 50 29; Calle 21 No 15, Apt 9, btwn N & O; r CUC\$25) Penthouse with views. Rooms are huge and hostess amiable. Ascend in elevator to 6th floor.

Eddy Gutiérrez Bouza (☎ 832-5207; Calle 21 No 408 btwn F & G; r CUC\$30; 🏠 🏠) Huge colonial house with fantastic host. Eddy is an excellent source of information about Habana.

Guillermina & Roberto Abreu (☎ 833-6401; Paseo No 126 apt 13A btwn 5 & Calzada; r CUC\$25) Two spacious rooms with views. Elevator here.

Iraida Carpio (☎ 832-4084; Calle 19 No 376 fl 10A btwn G & H; r CUC\$25) Take antiquated elevator. A splendid view.

Julio Padilla Martín (☎ 832-5709; juliop_martin@hotmail.com; Calle K No 210 apt 7B btwn Línea & 15; r CUC\$30-35) Good for groups. English spoken.

Manuel Martínez (☎ 832-6713; Calle 21 No 4 apt 22 btwn N & O; r CUC\$30-35) There are 10 to 12 casas in this magnificent art-deco building constructed in 1945 opposite the Hotel Nacional. This one overlooks the hotel gardens; it's a classic view.

Maribel y Luis Garcé (☎ 832-1619; Calle 19 No 356 upstairs btwn G & H; r CUC\$25) Nice young couple rent smallish room, little balcony.

Marta Vitorte (☎ 885-7792; martavitorte@hotmail.com; Calle G No 301 apt 14 btwn 13 & 15; r CUC\$35-40) Two rooms in deluxe apartment with phenomenal views, great beds, wraparound terrace. English spoken.

Melba Piñeda Bermudez (☎ 832-5929; lienafp@yahoo.com; Calle 11 No 802 btwn Calles 2 & 4; r CUC\$25-30) Sweet room with nice furnishings and private terrace in beautiful colonial home. Quiet street. Helpful owners.

Natalia Rodas (☎ 832-8909; Calle 19 No 376 fl 11B btwn G & H; r CUC\$25) Shared bath, nice bed, expansive views.

Nelsy Alemán Machado (☎ 832-8467; Calle 25 No 361 apt 1 btwn K & L; r CUC\$25) Independent, laid-back place. Fridge.

Pilar Palma (☎ 831-8918; Calle O No 202 apt 9 btwn 23 & 25; r CUC\$25) Prime La Rampa location; friendly.

MARRIED TO THE MOB

'We invented Havana and we can goddamn well move it someplace else if [Batista] can't control it' boasted Mafia boss Meyer Lansky in the Sydney Pollack-directed movie *Havana*.

Brazen and hyperbolic, Lansky's comments carry a certain amount of historical weight. Cuba's on-off marriage with the American Mafia first took root in the 1920s when Prohibition in the US sent pleasure-seeking Americans flocking south to line up their rum cocktails in the bars and hotels of sensuous Habana. Al Capone was an early adherent, financing an illegal molasses-supplying racket for illicit Cuban rum factories; though the real deal – high-stakes gambling – didn't take off until after World War II.

Lansky and notorious Mafia Don, Salvatore 'Lucky' Luciano were the main second-phase instigators. In December 1946, the two corpulent mobsters coordinated the largest ever get together of North American mafia hoods in Habana's Hotel Nacional under the cover of a Frank Sinatra concert. Hatching a plan to open up the Cuban capital to narcotics, pornography and large-scale gambling houses, the duo enlisted the clandestine support of opportunist ex-President Fulgencio Batista.

The plan reached fruition in March 1952 when a Batista coup toppled the regime of Carlos Prío Socarrás and enacted laws that gave organized crime a free rein in Cuba's corrupt capital. Over the next eight years Habana became a gambling and vice mecca to rival Las Vegas, a veritable den of iniquity where – in the words of Graham Greene – 'anything was possible.'

Greatly underestimating the popular force of Fidel Castro, the Mob was largely taken by surprise when the scruffily-attired *barbudas* rolled into Habana in January 1959 with their puritanical socialist ideals taped to their rifles. Greeting them gruffly at the door of the Hotel Capri, famous Hollywood actor and Mafia henchman George Raft is said to have furiously slammed the door in their faces. Fatefully, such bold acts of arrogance weren't to last. With the casinos closed down and the high spending tourists packed off across the water to Florida, Lansky and the rest of his cash-embezzling cronies were summarily kicked out of Cuba in June 1959, after which they beat a hasty retreat back to the US with their tail between their legs. The era of loose morals and decadent high-rolling gambling was over as quickly as it had begun.

Vedado is a toss-up. Stakeout the lobbies of both (they're virtually next door to each other) and see which staff seem *less* stropy. The hotel itself is reasonable enough, with swimming pool, small gym and nightly cabaret show, but at this price you're better off treating yourself to a night in the Old Town.

Hotel Victoria (Gran Caribe; ☎ 33 35 10; fax 33 31 09; Calle 19 No 101; s/d incl breakfast low season CUC\$55/70, high season CUC\$65/90; 🏠 🏠 🏠 🏠) This intimate five-story hotel off the main strip has only 31 rooms and is a good Vedado option if you want more personable service than the Nacional or Habana Libre offer. Rooms are tight, but well-equipped with fridge, safe and minibar. Built in the roaring '20s, it has buckets of style.

TOP END

Hotel Riviera (Gran Caribe; ☎ 33 40 51; www.grancaribe.cu; cnr Paseo & Malecón; s/d incl breakfast low season CUC\$74/105, high season CUC\$91/130; 🏠 🏠) Built by US Mafia boss Meyer Lansky in

1957, this hotel oozes character – all the spacious lobby lacks is a lounge lizard in a sharkskin suit. Some of the 354 rooms have terrific sea views and balconies; two have been laid out for disabled guests. The big pool catches sea breezes and the Copa Room here hosts top bands nightly. There are lots of facilities (bank, shops, tourism desks etc), making this a decent choice, especially if you want to be by the water and not pay through the nose. The location means lots of walking, guaguas (local buses) or taxis.

Hotel Presidente (Gran Caribe; ☎ 55 18 01; www.grancaribe.cu; cnr Calzada & Calle G; s/d CUC\$90/140; 🏠 🏠 🏠 🏠) Fully restored in 2000, this 160-room hotel wouldn't be out of place on a street just off Times Square in New York. Built the same year as the Victoria (1928), the Presidente is similar but larger, with gruffer staff. Unless you're a walker or are comfortable working Habana's transport system, the location can be awkward.