

and Sunday) here has a philatelic shop. The post office at Obispo, Habana Vieja also has stamps for collectors.

Telephone

Etecsa Centro Habana (Map p100; Aguilar No 565; ☎ 8am-9:30pm); Habana Vieja (Map p94; cnr Habana 406 & Obispo) There's also a Museo de las Telecomunicaciones (open 9am to 6pm Tuesday to Saturday) here.

Toilets

Not over-endowed with clean available public washrooms, your best bet is to slip subtly into an upscale hotel. The following are all fairly relaxed about toilet security.

Hotel Ambos Mundos (Map p94; Obispo No 153) Tip the attendant.

Hotel Habana Libre (Map pp106-7; Calle L btwn Calles 23 & 25) Upstairs and by the elevators.

Hotel Nacional (Map pp106-7; Calle L btwn Calles 23 & 25) Right in the lobby and left past the elevators.

Hotel Sevilla (Map p100; Trocadero No 55 btwn Paseo de Martí & Agramonte) Turn right inside the lobby.

Tourist Information

Buró de Convenciones de Cuba (Map pp106-7; ☎ 66 20 15; Calle M btwn Calles 17 & 19, Vedado; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Conferences, special events and festival information available here.

Infotur Airport (Map p155; ☎ 66 61 01; Terminal 3 Aeropuerto Internacional José Martí; ☎ 24hr); Expocuba (Map p155; ☎ 66 43 96; Carretera de Rocio Km 3.5); Habana Vieja (Map p94; ☎ 33 33 33; Obispo btwn

Bernaza & Villegas); Habana Vieja (Map p94; ☎ 63 68 84; cnr Obispo & San Ignacio; ☎ 10am-1pm, 2-7pm) Books excursions, sells maps and phonecards, transport schedules.

Travel Agencies

Many of the following agencies also have offices in the international arrivals lounge of Terminal 3.

Cubamar (Map pp106-7; ☎ 831-3151; www.cubamar.viajes.cu; cnr Calle 3 & Malecón, Vedado; ☎ 8:30am-5pm Mon-Sat) Travel agency for Campismo Popular cabins countrywide. Also rents mobile homes.

Cubanacán Vedado (Map pp106-7; ☎ 873-2686; Hotel Nacional, cnr Calles O & 21; ☎ 8am-7pm); Vedado (Map pp106-7; Calle 23 btwn Calles N & O) Very helpful; head here if you want to arrange fishing or diving at Marina Hemingway; also in Hotel NH Parque Central, Hotel Inglaterra and Habana Libre.

Cubatur (Map pp106-7; ☎ 33 31 70/1; cnr Calles 23 & M, Vedado; ☎ 8am-8pm) Below Hotel Habana Libre. This agency pulls a lot of weight and finds rooms where others can't, which goes a long way toward explaining its slacker attitude.

Havanatur (Map pp106-7; ☎ 830- 8227; Galerías de Paseo, cnr Calle 1 & Paseo, Vedado)

San Cristóbal Agencia de Viajes (Map p94; ☎ 861-9171/2; www.sancristobaltravel.com; Oficios No 110 btwn Lamparilla & Amargura, Habana Vieja; ☎ 8:30am-5:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-2pm Sat, 9am-noon Sun) Habaguanex agency operates Habana Vieja's classic hotels; income helps finance restoration.

Sol y Son (Map pp106-7; ☎ 33 32 71; fax 33 51 50; Calle 23 No 64; ☎ 8:30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat) Sells Cubana flights.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Habana is an ostensibly safe city, and violent crime is rare. A heavy police presence on the streets and stiff prison sentences for crimes such as robbery and assault have acted as a major deterrent to potential thieves and kept the dirty tentacles of organized crime firmly at bay.

That is not to say that incidents do not occur. Indeed petty crime against tourists is on the rise in Habana, with bag snatching by youths mounted on bicycles a particular worry.

Keep your money belt on you at all times making sure that you wear it concealed – and tightly secured – around your waist.

In hotels always use a safety deposit box (if there is one) and never leave money/passports/credit cards lying around during the day. Theft from hotel rooms was particularly rife in Habana at the time of writing, with the temptation of earning three times your monthly salary in one fell swoop often too hard to resist.

In bars and restaurants it is wise to always check your change. Purposeful overcharging, especially when someone is mildly inebriated, is tediously common.

Visitors from the well-ordered countries of Europe or litigation-obsessed North America should be subconsciously aware of crumbling sidewalks, manholes with no covers, over-enthusiastic drivers, veering cyclists, carelessly lobbed front door keys (in Centro Habana) and badly-pitched baseballs (almost everywhere). Waves cascading over the Malecón sea-wall might look romantic, but the resulting slime-fest has been known to throw Lonely Planet-wielding tourists flying unceremoniously onto their asses.

For more popular scams see the boxed text, p114.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES Habana Vieja

Colonial Habana is packed full with museums, art galleries, churches, restaurants and drinking houses; way too much to see in a day or three, though most of the sights can be visited on foot. For a whistle-stop intro-

duction to the best parts of the city, check out the suggested walking tours (p111) or stick closely to the four main squares of Armas, Vieja, San Francisco and Catedral.

PLAZA DE LA CATEDRAL

Dominated by two unequal towers, the **Catedral de San Cristóbal de la Habana** (cnr San Ignacio & Empedrado; ☎ before noon) was described by novelist Alejo Carpentier as 'music set in stone.' Its striking baroque facade (à la Italian architect Francesco Borromini) creates unrivaled ambience, especially at night when live music mingles with laughter in the wide open plaza. The Jesuits began construction of the church in 1748, and work continued despite their expulsion in 1767. When the building was finished in 1787 the diocese of Habana was created. A year later the city became a bishop's seat, elevating the church to a cathedral – one of the oldest in the Americas. Perhaps the best time to visit is during Mass, celebrated Sunday at 10:30am; smaller services happen in the adjacent chapel Monday to Friday at 8pm.

While circumnavigating the plaza, be sure to visit the **Centro Wilfredo Lam** (☎ 862-2611; cnr San Ignacio & Empedrado; admission CUC\$3; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) next to the cathedral, which displays the works of one of Cuba's leading modern painters and hosts shows by local and international artists. A Cuban of Chinese and African ancestry, Lam was strongly influenced by Pablo Picasso, whom he met in 1936. Many other noble buildings face the Plaza de la Catedral, including the 1760 **Palacio de los Marqueses de Aguas Claras** (San Ignacio No 54), now drawing crowds as Restaurante El Patio. The outdoor tables make a nice spot for a break.

Across the square are the 18th-century **Casa de Lombillo** and the **Palacio del Marqués de Arcos** (1746), today a Telecorreo Internacional office. During the mid-19th century this palace served as Habana's main post office and the stone mask ornamental mailbox built into the wall is still in use.

The **Museo de Arte Colonial** (☎ 862-6440; San Ignacio No 61; unguided/guided CUC\$2/3, plus camera CUC\$2; ☎ 9am-6:30pm), on the southern side of the plaza, displays colonial furniture and decorative arts in the **Palacio de los Condes de Casa Bayona** (1720), the oldest house on the square. One of the funkier sights around here (aside from the folkloric mulattas

HABANA IN...

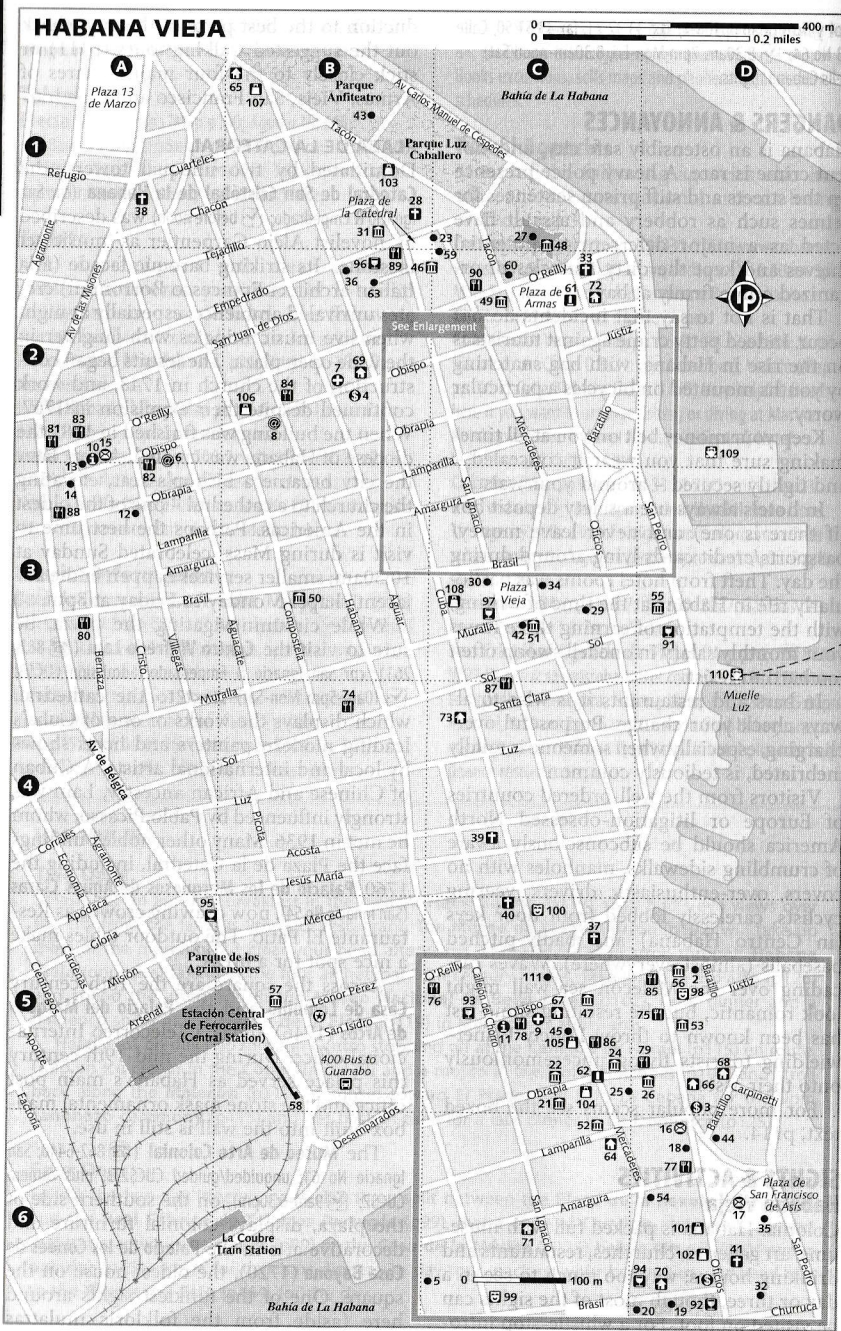
Two Days

Splash out on an early breakfast in the elegant **Hotel Sevilla** (p119), with bird's-eye views over the city from the famous 9th-floor restaurant. The **Museo de la Revolución** (p102) will take up most of the morning but clear your head afterwards with a revitalizing stroll through **Habana Vieja** (opposite) taking in the four archetypal 16th-century plazas. Take lunch in **El Patio** (p126) and spend the afternoon in the **Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes** (p102). Grab dinner and a flamenco show in the **Mesón de la Flota** (p119) in Mercaderes afterwards.

Head west on day two through Centro stopping off at the **Callejón de Hamel** (p115) en route. Grab an ice cream in the **Coppelia** (p130) and a mojito in the **Hotel Nacional** (p104) and stroll back along the **Malecón** (p110) at sunset toward El Prado. Taxi it to La Cabaña for the 9pm **cañonazo ceremony** (p115) and get back in time for a late dinner in **La Dominica** (p125).

Four Days

Follow the two-day itinerary, with day three split between the **Plaza de la Revolución** (p105), and the **Real Fábrica de Tabacos Partagás** (p99). Buy a copy of *Cartelera* and check out the nighttime activities at **Uneac** (p89) or the **Casa de la Música** (p135) before hitting the Miramar **paladar** (p151) scene for delicious dinner. On day four, pack up your beach bag and head out to the **Playas del Este** (p164) for the day.



INFORMATION		EATING	
banco Financiero Internacional.....1	D6	Agropecuaria Sol.....74	B4
Biblioteca Rubén M Villena.....2	D5	Al Medina.....75	D5
Cadeca.....3	D5	Bar-Restaurant La Luz.....(see 78)	
Cambio.....4	B2	Café de O'Reilly.....76	C5
Casa de la Cultura de La Habana Vieja.....5	C6	Café del Oriente.....77	D6
Cibercorreos.....6	A2	Café Santo Domingo.....78	C5
Drugería Johnson.....7	B2	Café Wilfredo Lam.....(see 31)	
Etecsa.....8	B2	Cafetería Torre La Vega.....79	D5
Farmacia Taquechel.....9	C5	El Meceruo.....(see 44)	
Infotur.....10	A2	Hanoi.....80	A3
Infotur.....11	C5	Harris Brothers.....81	A2
Lavandería Alaska.....12	A3	Heladería Obispo.....82	A3
Librería Cervantes.....(see 13)		La Julia.....83	A2
Librería Grijalbo.....(see 60)		La Lluvia de Oro.....84	B2
Librería La Internacional.....13	A3	La Mina.....85	D5
Moderna Poesía.....14	A3	La Torre de Marfil.....86	C5
Post Office.....15	A2	Paladar La Mulata del Sabor.....87	C4
Post Office.....16	D6	Restaurante El Castillo de Famés.....88	A3
Post Office.....17	D6	Restaurante El Patio.....89	B2
San Cristóbal Agencia de Viajes.....18	D6	Restaurante La Dominicana.....90	C2
		Restaurante La Paella.....(see 66)	
		Restaurante Mirador de la Bahía.....(see 56)	
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		DRINKING	
Aquarium.....19	D6	Bar Dos Hermanos.....91	D3
Cámara Oscura.....20	D6	Bar La Marina.....92	D6
Casa de África.....21	C5	Café Paris.....93	C5
Casa de la Obra Pía.....22	C5	Café Taberna.....94	D6
Casa de Lombillo.....23	C1	El Baturro.....95	A5
Casa de México Benito Juárez.....24	C5	La Bodeguita del Medio.....96	B2
Casa del Albanico.....25	C5	Taberna de la Muralla.....97	C3
Casa Osvaldo Guayamín.....26	D5		
Castillo de la Real Fuerza.....27	C1	ENTERTAINMENT	
Catedral de San Cristóbal de la Habana.....28	B1	Casa de la Comedia.....98	D5
Centro Cultural Pablo de la Torre.....29	C3	Casa de la Cultura de La Habana Vieja.....99	C6
Centro de Desarrollo de los Artes Visuales.....30	C3	Gimnasio de Boxeo Rafael Trejo.....100	C5
Centro Wilfredo Lam.....31	B1		
Coche Mambi.....32	D6	SHOPPING	
Diago Galería de Arte.....(see 42)		Casa de Carmen Montilla.....101	D6
El Templete.....33	C2	Estudio Galería Los Oficios.....102	D6
Fototeca de Cuba.....34	C3	Feria de la Artesanía.....103	B1
Fuente de los Leones.....35	D6	Fundación Havana Club Shop.....(see 55)	
Fundación Alejo Carpentier.....36	B2	Habana 1791.....104	C5
Iglesia de San Francisco de Paula.....37	C5	La Casa del Habano.....105	C5
Iglesia del Santo Angel Custodio.....38	A1	Longina Música.....106	B2
Iglesia Parroquial del Espiritu Santo.....39	C4	Palacio de la Artesanía.....107	B1
Iglesia y Convento de Nuestra Señora de la Merced.....40	C5	Taller de Serigrafía René Portocarrero.....108	C3
Iglesia y Convento de Santa Clara.....(see 73)			
		TRANSPORT	
		Cruise Ship Terminal.....109	D2
		Ferries to Regla & Casablanca.....110	D3
		Horse Carriages.....111	C5

posing for pictures) is the **Taller Experimental de Gráfica** (☎ 862-0979; tgrafica@cubearte.cult.cu; Callejón del Chorro No 6; admission free; ☞ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri) up the alley from the southwestern corner of Plaza de la Catedral. You will see reams of original prints freshly inked and hanging to dry; you can buy what you like. This work-

shop accepts serious students interested in mastering the art of engraving (see Courses, p114).

PLAZA DE ARMAS

This lovely plaza and book bazaar was the seat of authority and power in Cuba for

400 years. A square has existed on this site since 1582, although the present Plaza de Armas dates only from 1792. In the center of the park surrounded by stately royal palms is a marble **statue of Carlos Manuel de Céspedes** (1955), the man who set Cuba on the road to independence in 1868. Live music floats about, while the breeze flutters over from the Malecón – it's a nice spot to chill out.

With lots of stained glass and gigantic chandeliers, the baroque **Palacio de los Capitanes Generales**, on the western side of the Plaza de Armas, is one of Cuba's most majestic buildings. Construction began on the site of the old parochial church in 1776, and from 1791 until 1898 this was the residence of the Spanish governor. From 1899 until 1902, the US military governors were based here, after which the building became the presidential palace. In 1920 the president moved to the building now housing the Museo de la Revolución in Centro Habana and this palace became the city hall. The municipal authorities moved out in 1967 and since 1968 it has been home to the **Museo de la Ciudad** (☎ 861-6130; Calle Tacón No 1; unguided/guided CUC\$3/4, plus camera CUC\$2; ☎ 9am-6pm). Peacocks strut about the courtyard, there's a spooky crypt and an even more eerie Jesus. The marble bathtubs are marvelous. The guided tour gets you behind the velvet ropes and up close with the lush collection. Come early to beat the tour-bus crowd.

The **Palacio del Segundo Cabo** (O'Reilly No 4; admission CUC\$1), the former headquarters of the Spanish vice-governor at the northwestern corner of the plaza, is another baroque beauty, built in 1772. Later it became the Supreme Court, and today it houses the **Instituto Cubano del Libro**. It's worth glimpsing into the arcaded inner courtyard and visiting the very good (with air-con) bookshop here. Pop-art fans should take a look in the **Sala Galería Raúl Martínez** (☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat).

On the northeastern side of the Plaza de Armas is the oldest extant colonial fortress in the Americas, the **Castillo de la Real Fuerza**, built between 1558 and 1577 on the site of an earlier fort destroyed by French privateers in 1555. The west tower is crowned by the famous bronze weather vane called **La Giraldilla**, cast in Habana in 1632 by Jerónimo

Martínez Pinzón and popularly believed to be Doña Inés de Bobadilla, the wife of explorer Hernando de Soto. The original Giraldilla is in the Museo de la Ciudad and the figure also appears on the Havana Club rum label. The Spanish governor resided in the castle for 200 years until they finally got around to constructing a palace of their own across the square. La Fuerza now shelters the **Museo de la Cerámica Artística Cubana** (☎ 861-6130; admission CUC\$2; ☎ 9am-6pm) downstairs. Worth a look, this museum displays works by some of Cuba's leading contemporary artists. Upstairs affords a great view of the harbor entrance.

In 1519 the Villa de San Cristóbal de la Habana was founded on the spot marked by **El Templete** (admission CUC\$2; ☎ 8:30am-6pm) a neoclassical Doric chapel erected on the eastern side of the Plaza de Armas in 1828. The first Mass was held below a ceiba tree similar to the one presently in front of the building, and inside the chapel are three paintings of the event by the French painter Jean Baptiste Vermy. Adjacent to El Templete is the late-18th-century **Palacio de los Condes de Santovenia**, today the five-star, 27-room Hotel Santa Isabel. Nearby is the **Museo Nacional de Historia Natural** (☎ 863-9361; Obispo No 61; admission CUC\$3; ☎ 9:30am-7pm Tue-Sun), which contains examples of Cuba's flora and fauna. The restaurant-bar upstairs has fabulous vistas across the bay.

Perhaps one of Habana's most amusing sights is the small and vaguely surreal **Museo del Automóvil** (Oficio No 13; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 9am-7pm), stuffed full with ancient Thunderbirds and Pontiacs and Ford Model Ts, at least half of which appear to be in better shape than the asthmatic automobiles in the streets outside. They've even got the car that Che Guevara once drove (very badly apparently) after he was installed as a member of the revolutionary government as head of the National Bank.

ALONG MERCADERES & OBRAPÍA

This stretch is packed with quirky little places such as the **Museo de Arte del Lejano Oriente** (☎ 863-9740; Mercaderes No 111; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun), with Far Eastern art, and the **Museo de Tabaco** (☎ 861-5795; Mercaderes No 120; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat), where you can gawp at various indigenous pipes and idols. The **Maqueta de la Habana Vieja** (Mercaderes No 114;

unguided/guided CUC\$1/2; ☎ 9am-6pm) is a 1:500 scale model of Habana Vieja complete with an authentic soundtrack meant to replicate a day in the life of the city. It's incredibly detailed and provides an excellent way of geographically acquainting yourself with what the central historical district has to offer. Go here first. You might glimpse a young woman celebrating her *quincién* (Cuban rite of passage for girls turning 15) at **Casa de la Obra Pía** (Obrapía No 158; admission CUC\$1, plus camera CUC\$2; 9am-4:30pm Tue-Sat, ☎ 9:30am-12:30pm Sun) around the corner. This typical Habana aristocratic residence was originally built in the first half of the 17th century and rebuilt in 1780 soon after the British occupation. Decorative flourishes cover the exterior facade, and between the two inner courtyards is a wonderfully refreshing room. Across the street is the **Casa de África** (☎ 861-5798; Obrapía No 157) housing artifacts from Fidel Castro's 1977 African tour, plus sacred objects relating to Santería, formerly in the collection of ethnographer Fernando Ortíz.

On the corner of Mercaderes and Obrapía is a bronze **statue** of Latin America liberator Simón Bolívar, to whom a **museum** (☎ 861-3988; Mercaderes No 160; donations accepted; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) is dedicated nearby. The **Casa de México Benito Juárez** (☎ 861-8166; Obrapía No 116; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 10:15am-5:45pm Tue-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) exhibits Mexican folk art in an 18th-century palace; there's a specialized library here for all things *mexicana*. Just east is the **Casa Oswaldo Guayasamín** (☎ 861-3843; Obrapía No 111; donations accepted; ☎ 9am-2:30pm Tue-Sun), the old studio, now a museum, of the great Ecuadorian painter. (Fidel sat for Guayasamín; to see the portrait, visit the Fundación Naturaleza y El Hombre, p148.) Openings and exhibits of Cuban and international art are held here.

PLAZA DE SAN FRANCISCO DE ASÍS

Another of Habana Vieja's picturesque plazas, **Plaza de San Francisco de Asís** is a dockside beauty dominated by the domed **Lonja del Comercio**, a former commodities market erected in 1909 and restored in 1996 to provide office space for foreign companies with joint ventures in Cuba. Enter the building to admire its central dome. Across from 'La Lonja' is the white marble **Fuente de los Leones** (Fountain of Lions) carved by the Italian sculptor Giuseppe Gaginni in 1836.

The southern side of the square is taken up by the impressive **Iglesia y Monasterio de San Francisco de Asís**. Originally constructed in 1608 and rebuilt in the baroque style from 1719 to 1738, San Francisco de Asís was taken over by the Spanish state in 1841 as part of a political move against the powerful religious orders of the day, when it ceased to be a church. Today the church itself is a **concert hall** (☎ starting 5pm or 6pm) hosting classical, chamber and choral music and a **museum** (☎ 862-3467; admission CUC\$1, plus camera CUC\$2; ☎ 9am-5:30pm) in the two large cloisters. Price of admission allows access to the tallest church tower in Habana; money well spent.

MUSEO DEL RON

Even for teetotalers, the intriguing **Museo del Ron** (☎ 861-8051; San Pedro No 262; admission incl guide CUC\$5; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun) in the Fundación Havana Club is worth a turn. The interesting bilingual guided tour shows rum-making antiquities (check out the funky terra-cotta flask), plus explains the entire brewing process, from cane cutting to quaffing amber Añejo Reserva in the museum's tasting room. The scale model of the Central La Esperanza, with working train, is especially cool. The dancing lessons here are said to be excellent (see Courses, p114).

PLAZA VIEJA

Certainly one of Habana Vieja's most dazzling public spaces, **Plaza Vieja**, dating from the 16th century, is surrounded by several sites not to be missed. It was an open-air marketplace until 1835, and hideous underground parking lot during the Batista regime; since the mid-1990s there has been a concerted effort to restore this plaza to its former grandeur. On the northwestern corner is Habana's **cámara oscura** (admission CUC\$1; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun), providing live, 360-degree views of the city from atop a 35m-tall tower. Sheets flap in the breeze, old cars amble by and the docent does an admirable job explaining Habana's architectural highlights in Spanish and English. In the arcade adjacent is **Fototeca de Cuba** (☎ 862-2530; Mercaderes No 307; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, 9am-noon Sat), a photo gallery with intriguing exhibits by local and international artists.

On the southern side of the plaza is the quirky **Museo de Naipes** (Muralla No 101; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun), with a collection of every playing card imaginable. Rock stars, rum drinks, round cards – they've got 2000 of them here. Next door is **La Casona Centro de Arte** (☎ 861-8544; Muralla No 107; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat), with great solo and group shows by up-and-coming Cuban artists such as Abel Barroso. Also here is **Diago Galería de Arte** (☎ 863-4703). On the western side of the park is yet another gallery in another gorgeous colonial building at the **Centro de Desarrollo de los Artes Visuales** (☎ 862-2611; San Ignacio No 352; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat); here you'll find good contemporary Cuban art.

Around the corner, the **Centro Cultural Pablo de la Torriente Brau** (☎ 861-6251; www.centropablo.cult.cu; Muralla No 63; admission free; ☎ 9am-5:30pm Tue-Sat) hosts a variety of expositions of substance, including poetry readings and a live acoustic music series called 'Guitarra Limpia.' Its Salón de Arte Digital is renowned for its groundbreaking digital art.

Sidetrack up Brasil and you'll stumble upon the **Museo de la Farmacia Habanera** (cnr Brasil & Compostela; admission free) founded in 1886 by Catalan José Sará and once considered the second most important pharmacy in the

world. The museum got the Habaguanex makeover in 2004 and, aside from the elegant mock-up of an old drugstore with some interesting historical explanations, it still acts as a working shop for Cubans.

CHURCHES

South of Plaza Vieja are a string of stunning and important churches. The 1638–43 **Iglesia y Convento de Santa Clara** (☎ 866-9327; Cuba No 610; admission CUC\$2; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) stopped being a convent in 1920. Later this complex was the Ministry of Public Works, and today the Habana Vieja restoration team is based there. You can visit the large cloister and nuns' cemetery or even spend the night (with reservations far in advance, see p117). Habana's oldest surviving church (built in 1640, and rebuilt in 1674) is the **Iglesia Parroquial del Espíritu Santo** (☎ 862-3140; Acosta 161; ☎ 8am-noon, 3-6pm), with many burials in the crypt. Built in 1755 the **Iglesia y Convento de Nuestra Señora de la Merced** (Cuba No 806; ☎ 8am-noon & 3-5:30pm) was reconstructed in the 19th century. Beautiful gilded altars, frescoed vaults and a number of old paintings create a sacrosanct mood; there's a quiet cloister adjacent.

The **Iglesia de San Francisco de Paula** (☎ 41 50 37; cnr Leonor Pérez & Desamparados) is one of Hab-

na's most attractive churches. Fully restored in 2000, this church is all that remains of the San Francisco de Paula women's hospital from the mid-1700s. Lit up at night for concerts (most notably by the medieval ensemble Ars Longa) the stained glass, heavy cupola and baroque facade are utterly romantic and inviting.

MUSEO-CASA NATAL DE JOSÉ MARTÍ

If you visit only one *casa natal* (birth house) in Cuba, make it **Museo-Casa Natal de José Martí** (☎ 861-3778; Leonor Pérez No 314; admission CUC\$1, plus camera CUC\$2; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sat), the birthplace of José Martí. The apostle of Cuban independence was born in this humble dwelling on January 28, 1853, and the museum displays letters, manuscripts, photos, books and other mementos of his life. Nearby, to the west across Av de Bélgica, is the longest remaining stretch of the **old city wall** (building began in 1674). A bronze map shows the outline of the original layout. To the west is Habana's huge Estación Central de Ferrocarriles where *La Junta*, the steam locomotive that inaugurated the line to Matanzas in 1843, is on display.

Centro Habana CAPITOLIO NACIONAL

Washington, DC and Habana have more in common than you may think, evidenced by the dominating marble-covered **Capitolio Nacional** (☎ 863-7861; admission unguided/guided CUC\$3/4; ☎ 9am-8pm), which is similar to the US Capitol Building, but richer in detail. This is one of Habana's divine architectural highlights. To enter, climb the monumental stairway on the eastern side of the building. The tour is highly recommended.

Initiated by the US-backed dictator Gerardo Machado in 1929, the Capitolio took 5000 workers three years, two months and 20 days to build at a cost of the equivalent of US\$17 million. It was the seat of the Cuban Congress until 1959 and now houses the Cuban Academy of Sciences and the National Library of Science and Technology. Entering the great domed hall through huge bronze doors (notice the important events in Cuban history they depict) imbues just how monumental this building is.

Across what seems like kilometers of intricately laid portico marble is the 49-metric-ton, 17m statue of the republic (a

woman, don't you know?), the third-largest indoor bronze statue in the world; only the Buddha in Nava, Japan, and the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, are bigger. Directly below the Capitolio's 62m-high dome, a 24-carat diamond replica is set in the floor. Highway distances between Habana and all sites in Cuba are calculated from this point. Visitors are also shown the mahogany-covered library and the former chambers of the Senate and Deputies. It's an extraordinary edifice and you can spend a whole afternoon gawking at the architectural details, taking coffee at the lovely balcony café (see p129).

Behind the Capitolio is the **Real Fábrica de Tabacos Partagás** (☎ 862-0086; Industria No 520 btwn Barcelona & Dragones; ☎ tours every 15 min btwn 9:30-11am & 12:30-3pm); for tours of this and other Habana cigar factories, see the boxed text, p110.

PARQUE LA FRATERNIDAD

The **Fuente de la India** (the traffic island at Dragones near Máximo Gómez, east of the park) is a white Carrara marble fountain carved by Giuseppe Gaginni in 1837. Honoring heritage old and new, the sculpture is an indigenous girl seated above four dolphins, a famous symbol of Habana. She's embracing the city's coat of arms.

Just east of the sculpture across Paseo de Martí is the **Asociación Cultural Yoruba de Cuba** (☎ 863-5953; Paseo de Martí No 615; admission CUC\$6; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Sat). The museum here provides a worthwhile overview of the Santería religion, the saints and their powers. There are free *tambores* (Santería drum ceremonies) here alternate Fridays at 4:30pm (when you can check out the museum for free), and you can arrange consultations as well. Note that there's a church dress code for the *tambores* (no shorts or tank tops).

Across the street is leafy **Parque de la Fraternidad**, originally a Spanish military parade ground. The first park was laid out here in 1892 to commemorate the fourth centenary of the Spanish arrival in the Americas, and in 1928 the park was remodeled in honor of the Pan-American Conference hosted in Habana that year. The grand ceiba tree dominating the park was planted in a mixture of soil from all the countries of the Americas, and busts of prominent Latin and North Americans were set up in the vicinity

RESTORING OLD HABANA

Stuffed with architectural jewels from every era, Habana Vieja offers visitors one of the finest collections of urban edifices in the Americas. At a conservative estimate, Habana Vieja alone contains more than 900 buildings of historical importance with myriad examples of illustrious architecture ranging from intricate baroque to glitzy art deco.

Since 1982, when Unesco added Habana Vieja to its World Heritage list, a massive regeneration project has been rolled out under the auspices of longstanding city historian, Eusebio Leal.

Acting in tandem with a government-run company Habaguanex, Leal's restoration is being mapped out in stages with priority being given to buildings that once revamped will generate enough tourist Convertibles to finance further renovation schemes.

At any one time Habaguanex' combined operations employ more than 10,000 people and generate up to the equivalent of US\$160 million a year in profits. Of this cash approximately 45% is reinvested into new projects, 30% is earmarked for social programs, while the remaining 25% is channeled into state reserves for deserving schemes elsewhere in the city.

But remodeled buildings are only half the story. 'We have decided in favor of a living historic centre,' master plan architect Patricia Rodríguez is on record as saying.

Unique among projects of this type, Leal's makeover also includes major social and cultural benefits for Habana Vieja's long-suffering population of 70,000 people, 45% of whom still live in houses deemed unfit for human habitation.

Among the social projects sponsored by the institution in the last few years are a maternity home, 10 refurbished schools and a rehabilitation center for children with diseases of the central nervous system.