



*Visiting Little Havana
is like going abroad,
with no passport required.
And don't worry. No Spanish?
No problem.*

living on cuban

BY CARLOS HARRISON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILLIAM C. MINARICH

Even the sign on the door lets you know life here marches to the beat of a different conga. "We open at 10 a.m. (Cuban Time!)," it announces—meaning it might really be 10:30 or 10:45.

The store is called Little Havana To Go. Inside, the rich, sweet aroma of Cuban coffee hangs thick in the air. It wafts over the shelves crowded with meticulously pleated *guayabera* (gwhy-ah-BARE-ah) shirts and mementos of bygone Cuba.

This is Little Havana, where the past and present converge and Spanish dominates. More often than not, you'll feel welcome even if you don't speak Español. Still, a sprinkling of the language couldn't hurt.

Technically, the neighborhood stretches along a 2½-mile strip, from just west of the gleaming glass-and-steel structures of Miami's bayfront banking district to the terra-cotta tile roofs of homes at Southwest 27th Avenue. Cultures commingle, pulsing with the rhythm and passion of Latin America. The latest salsa and merengue hits blare from music store speakers. And *botánicas* beckon with their odd collections of carved coconuts and herbal oils—the peculiar necessities of Santería rituals—all sold under the gaze of ceramic saints.

At *Botánica Mística*, owner Mimi Alvarez happily recounts how one of the Afro-Cuban deities rewarded her

time

faith by giving her winning lottery numbers in a dream. "He gave me a number," she says. "And I told him, 'Hey, buddy, I need more than that. You don't win anything with one number.' And he gave me the rest."

The center of activity in Little Havana is Eighth Street, but nobody calls it that. Here it's known by its



LATIN STYLE

- **DINING:** El Pub Restaurant, 1548 S.W. Eighth St., 305/642-9942. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner daily. Teté Restaurant, 1444 S.W. Eighth St., 305/858-8801. Lunch Monday–Friday, dinner Wednesday–Saturday. Casa Panza, 1620 S.W. Eighth St., 305/643-5343. Lunch and dinner daily; flamenco Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday.
- **SHOPPING:** Little Havana To Go, 1442 S.W. Eighth St., 305/857-9720. Old Cuba The Collection, 1561 S.W. Eighth St., 305/643-6269. Agustin Gainza Art Gallery, 1652 S.W. Eighth St., 305/644-5855. Botánica Mística, 1512 S.W. Eighth St., 305/631-0888. Los Pinareños Frutería, 1334 S.W. Eighth St., 305/285-1135. Moore & Bode Cigars, 1551 S.W. Eighth St., 866/622-4427.
- **PLAYING:** Maximo Gomez Park, S.W. 15th Avenue and Eighth Street, 305/285-1684. Open 9 a.m.–6 p.m. daily.

translation, *Calle Ocho* (KAH-yeh OH-choh). It's home to shops, restaurants, and cigar stores where Cuban craftsmen hand-roll dark brown Nicaraguan and Dominican tobacco leaves into versions of the smokes once famous in their homeland.

Little Havana was born in the 1960s as waves of Cuban exiles fleeing Fidel Castro rushed to Miami. Today it's experiencing a renaissance. It has attracted art galleries such as Agustin Gainza's, presenting his kaleidoscopic ceramic cityscapes. The work of Cuban and Cuban-American artists also hangs on display—and for sale—at shops and restaurants. On the last Friday of every month, huge crowds turn out for an open-air arts-and-crafts festival under the stars.

Then there's the food. El Pub offers lots of it, cheap. It serves hot Cuban sandwiches piled thick with slabs of pork and ham and cheese, and heaping mounds of such home-style classics as spicy lamb stew Creole with sweet fried plantains and rice.

At Teté, a glossy tile at the threshold declares everything is made "with a dash



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of salt and a dash of love.” Chef and co-owner Caprice Tassinari’s Caribbean-Cuban fusions blend contrasting flavors and textures. Plantain crab cakes, for example, wrap lump crabmeat and green plantains in crisp, deep-fried breading, with a cilantro rémoulade. On weekends, local musicians play old-time favorites and patrons sing along. “The room just vibrates,” Caprice says.

Not everything in Little Havana is about Cuba. The furious pounding of flamenco dancers’ feet and the lightning-quick strumming of a Spanish guitar reverberate inside Casa Panza most nights. *Panza* (PAHN-zah) means potbelly, and it’s a good place to get one. The tapas are meant to be shared. They range from deep-dish Spanish omelets stuffed with potatoes to sizzling hunks of octopus smothered in olive oil and served in an iron skillet. The restaurant is a replica of a Spanish tavern, down to the the smoked serrano hams hanging over the bar. It’s a little smoky and crowded but worth it for the authentic atmosphere. The staff treats everyone like family—and honorary fellow Spaniards. At 11 p.m., staff members pass out candles and everyone salutes Spain’s patron saint, mostly by shouting, “O-le! Ole, ole, ole!”

By day, the clatter of dominos resounds from the corner known officially as Maximo Gomez Park. To anybody who lives here, it’s Domino Park. Seven days a week, cigar-smoking men with straw hats or ball caps battle loudly over the game that is as Cuban as roast pork and rumba.

It’s quieter, but just as colorful, at the fruit market named *Los Pinares Frutería* (pee-nah-REE-ah), where Angel and Guillermina Hernandez offer frothy glasses of fresh sugarcane juice, just as they have since Little Havana’s earliest days—“when my husband had hair,” Guillermina says.

And while stores may not fling open their doors precisely at 10 a.m., Cuban Time works both ways. Stragglers won’t get booted at 6 p.m. sharp at most shops. “We kind of go with the flow,” says Jakelin Perez.

Her store, Old Cuba The Collection, stocks memorabilia celebrating Little Havana’s heritage. T-shirts displayed near the center of the store bear a slogan that seems to sum it up best—for her and for Little Havana: “Made in America, with Cuban parts.” 🌿

