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TRAVEL

> DEPARTURES FLORIDA



JENNIFER BAIN PHOTOS/TORONTO STAR

Tampa's Ybor City neighbourhood draws on its Cuban, Spanish, Italian, Sicilian and Jewish roots to create a unique neighbourhood that was once the cigar capital of America.

Tampa's hidden city

JENNIFER BAIN
TRAVEL EDITOR

TAMPA, FLA.—Roosters strut around Ybor City, congregating in the public parking lot, loitering in the park, cock-a-doodle-dooing like they own the joint.

They do, actually.

These privileged chickens are descendants of the backyard birds raised by the neighbourhood's first residents — the melting pot of immigrants that started arriving in the 1880s to work in cigar factories.

Ybor City is now a National Historic Landmark District and, somewhat oddly, a bird sanctuary.

Roosters and hens are officially protected. They're charming, photogenic and "the only living creature that connects us to our past," proclaims Wallace Reyes, a cigar maker, historian and Cigar Industry History Tours guide.

"They lay their eggs in the park. There's a Florida state park ranger that protects them. Even the cats don't mess with the chickens."

Little Miami and New Orleans' Latin Quarter know how to market themselves, but Ybor City (named for Vicente Martinez Ybor, who bought swampland here in 1885 and started building cigar factories) is just starting to tap into its tourist potential.

The neighbourhood, connected to downtown by a retro streetcar, was once the cigar capital of the world. "Cigar City" is the birthplace of the Cuban sandwich and home to Florida's oldest restaurant. It boasts a multicultural heritage (Cuban, Spanish, Sicilians/Italians, Jewish), still sells hand-rolled cigars and even has a mafia tour.

YBOR continued on T4

Little-known Ybor City neighbourhood celebrates cigars, Cuban sandwiches and coffee



Wally Reyes, co-owner of Gonzales Habano Cigar Co., is also a historian and author.

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>> TRAVEL



VISIT TAMPA BAY

Ybor City (named for Vicente Martinez Ybor, who bought swampland here in 1885 and started building cigar factories) is connected to downtown Tampa by a retro streetcar.

An off-the-radar Latin Quarter

YBOR from TI

Let's eat first.

The Cubano was invented here, not in Miami like people think, and it's the city's official sandwich.

Cigar workers needed something portable for lunch in the late 1800s and so the mixto ("the mixed") was born. The combination of Cuban bread and pork with ham (for the Spaniards), Genoa salami (for the Italians) and Swiss cheese, kosher pickles and yellow mustard (for the Germans) is now called the Cuban sandwich.

At the Columbia restaurant, Andrea Gonzmart Williams, one of the fifth-generation owners of the family-run business, takes me into the kitchen.

Columbia, which started in 1905 and is the state's oldest restaurant, makes its own sugar-glazed ham and mojo-marinated pork and gets Cuban bread from La Segunda Central Bakery twice a day.

"My father (Richard Gonzmart) is a firm believer that if you don't layer the meat in the proper order, it won't hit the palate properly," says Williams.

Ham goes first, then pork, then salami. Salami "is the difference between a Tampa Cuban and a Miami Cuban." One big slice of Swiss goes next and two pickles. Mustard gets slathered on the inside of the top bun.

Eat it cold if you must, like the factory workers used to, but it's infinitely better buttered on the outside and pressed until the cheese melts and it gets crisp.

"Mayo's great but I've never had it on a Cuban, though. My father would kick my butt," allows Williams, who likes her sandwiches extra crispy and sliced on the diagonal.

You don't have to look hard to find Cubanos in this town, but locals swear by the perpetually packed Brocato's Sandwich Shop, and U.S. President Barack Obama visited the West Tampa Sandwich Shop and inspired

the Honey Cuban Obama Sandwich. Another Ybor City hot spot is Carmine's, where Leon Boone has been making sandwiches for 21 years.

"I make about 100 a day, on Saturday I make like 200 and the most I ever made is 600 in a day. I've made billions and billions. I'm like McDonald's."

Boone doesn't eat many of his creations (occupational hazard), but he "makes 'em good." Ask for yours "all the way" and you'll get mustard, mayo, lettuce and tomatoes.

"You've got to put love in there" is Boone's final word on the subject.

Like Columbia, Carmine's gets its Cuban bread from La Segunda Central Bakery, which has been around since 1915. Come here for pastries, bread, Cuban toast and sandwiches and coffee.

Third-generation co-owner Anthony More takes me in the back to see how Cuban bread is baked. It's shaped like a baguette but uses a slightly different recipe.

His late grandfather moved to Ybor City from Catalan after fighting in the Spanish-American War in Cuba. "We think he learned some of this in Cuba, especially the palm leaf part of it," says More.

Fronds from the palmetto tree are split, sanitized, dried and laid on handmade baguettes that are flipped and baked. As the bread goes into the oven for a rapid rise, the fronds cause a crease along the seam. Customers like the inedible greenery left on.

"It's a pretty unique process and pretty much only in Tampa," boasts More.

The cigar industry may have gone bust, but at one point there were about 230 factories here employing 12,000 cigar makers and producing 700 million cigars a year.

Cigar culture is still a unique part of Ybor City (which is pronounced e-bore). Monica Barbie makes purses from vintage cigar boxes, while her mom, Rose Barbie, sells framed or unframed vintage cigar labels and posters. Watch cigar makers at work in shops on the 7th Ave. commercial strip where you can have a smoke and drink Cuban coffee.

Reyes, the tour guide, shows people Ybor City Museum, a community in the throes of revitalization and Nica-habana Cigars. His most unique pit-stop is Parque Amigos de Jose Marti, one of two Cuban-owned pieces of land in America (the other is the embassy in Washington that reopened last summer).

People come to see a statue of the poet, journalist and Cuban national hero who visited often in the 1890s to raise money and support from the cigar workers to help free Cuba from Spanish rule.

The tiny park is fenced, locked at night and under Cuban rule.

"There's nothing quite like Ybor City," says Reyes with a proud smile. Jennifer Bain's trip was sponsored by Visit Tampa Bay, which didn't review or approve this story.



JENNIFER BAIN PHOTOS/TORONTO STAR

La Segunda Central Bakery has been making authentic Cuban bread since 1915. Third-generation owner Anthony More shows off how they use palmetto fronds on the baguettes to create a seam.



At Carmine's restaurant, Leon Boone has been running the sandwich station and making Cuban sandwiches for 21 years.

> WHEN YOU GO

- > Ybor City: visittampabay.com/unlock-tampa-bay/districts/ybor-city/, yborcityonline.com
- > Cigar Industry History Tours, Ybor City: yborcitytours.com
- > Columbia restaurant (with local branches in Ybor City, Tampa International Airport, Tampa Bay History Center): columbiarestaurant.com
- > Brocato's Sandwich Shop, Tampa: brocatosandwich.com
- > West Tampa Sandwich Shop, Tampa: westtampasandwich-shoprestaurant.com
- > Carmine's restaurant, Ybor City: carminesybor.com
- > La Segunda Central Bakery, Ybor City: lasegundabakery.com
- > Nica-habana Cigars, Ybor City: nicahabanacigar.com
- > Ybor City Museum: yborcitymuseum.org
- > Parque Amigos de Jose Marti (Jose Marti Park) is at 1303 E. 8th Ave. at the corner of N. 13th St.
- > For more, explore Visit Tampa Bay (visittampabay.com).
- > There are several hotels in Ybor City, including Don Vicente de Ybor Historic Inn, the Ritz Ybor, Hilton Garden Inn Tampa Ybor Historic District and Hampton Inn & Suites Tampa/Ybor City/Downtown.



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Tuesday March 22		
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Kitchener	Holiday Inn - 30 Fairway Road South	3:00 pm
Wednesday March 23		
Simcoe	Rec Centre - 182 South Drive	10:30 am
Brantford	Best Western - 19 Holiday Drive	3:00 pm
Thursday March 24		
Barrie	Holiday Inn - 20 Fairview Road	10:30 am
Orillia	Mariposa Inn - 400 Memorial Ave.	3:00 pm
Monday March 28		
St. Catharines	Holiday Inn - 327 Ontario Street	3:00 pm
Tuesday March 29		
Guelph	Holiday Inn - 601 Scottsdale Drive	10:30 am
Orangeville	Best Western - 7 Buena Vista Drive	3:00 pm
Wednesday March 30		
Toronto	Botanical Gardens - 777 Lawrence Ave. E.	10:30 am
Oshawa	Quality Hotel - 1011 Bloor St. East	3:00 pm
Thursday March 31		
Peterborough	Best Western - 84 Lansdowne St.E.	10:30 am
Belleville	Fairfield Inn - 407 North Front Street	3:00 pm

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HAWAII

Our Holland America rep Tami Normann was in the office updating us on what's new - from the exciting new feel of their larger ms Koningsdam to upgrades in their suites on other ships (starting with the ms Oosterdam), to livelier entertainment and more modern options. Another new booking incentive that helps us Canadians is now we can pre-buy onboard credits and save approx. 10-20% of the exchange costs. HAL is rebranding and enhancing its charm and long-time reputation as a 5 star product. There is also an anniversary sale starting this week that adds even more value for many of their sailings.

Here's a last minute deal on a relaxing 19 night package on April 26 aboard the ms Zaandam. This is a convenient roundtrip Vancouver sailing visiting the most popular Hawaiian ports with plenty days for enjoying the ship - take advantage of all the amenities and enjoy your easy tropical journey. If you like getting off the ship everyday - this is not the sailing...! An ocean-view stateroom with \$50 US pp onboard credit, roundtrip Toronto air, one night 4 star hotel in Vancouver and all taxes is **\$3299 CAD** pp. On October 1, the ms Westerdam does a similar 17 night trip. We have exceptional pricing on this package - please ask our Consultants for details.

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