



THE CUBAN CONNECTION

Miami's Cuban culture is well known, but Tampa, on Florida's Gulf Coast, has a Cuban community that predates Miami's by a century.

ASHWIN BHARDWAJ visits both in search of Florida's Latin history.

"Miami is the capital of Latin America," says Ricardo, the hotel concierge who moved here from Cuba in 1997. This is confusing because, the last time I checked, Miami was in the United States.

"By geography, yes," says Ricardo, "But 70 per cent of Miami's population speaks Spanish, and it's the city that all Latinos look to for inspiration. So a lot of companies have their Latin American headquarters here, making it the financial capital, too."

Miami's Latin importance was largely accidental. In 1959, following Fidel Castro's Communist revolution, Cuban businesses owners and industrialists fled to America. Almost all settled in Miami, creating a new community rich in entrepreneurs and ambition. Most expected to only stay for a few years, but when Castro's regime proved durable, the exiles put down roots in an area that became known as Little Havana.

In the 1960s, counter-revolutionary thinking was the neighbourhood's lifeblood. Its cafes and bars became meeting places for those planning Castro's downfall, and those who just wanted to reminisce about home. Today, the main street, Calle Ocho, oozes Cuban culture from every doorway, with cigar shops and art galleries adding to the Caribbean mix.

Miami Culinary Tours run guided walks of Little Havana, taking in the food hotspots. At El Pub, one of the oldest restaurants on Calle Ocho, a beef, onion and olive-filled pastry called picadillo empanadas, are the house speciality. You can sit at the bar amongst builders on their lunch break, or order from the hole-in-the-wall service windows known as "ventanitas."

Coffee has always been a part of Cuban culture, served sweet and milky. For those looking for something a little stronger, the Ball And Chain serves excellent daiquiris. It also has a great pedigree in live music, with Count Basie and Billie Holiday having played here in the 1950s. Even in the early afternoon of my visit, a band was playing Cuban fusion with saxophones, trumpets and drums, and there is salsa most nights. Over the road, at Maximo Gomez Park, more sedate entertainment is on display. Locals come here to play pick-up games of dominoes, although you have to be at least 60 years old to get a seat at the table. Many of those playing were part of the first wave of Cuban immigrants.

For their children and grandchildren, Miami is their home, creating a distinct culture, rooted in the music, food and language of Cuba, but with the brashness and opportunity – or at least the illusion thereof – of the US.

Half a century on, many successful Cubans have left Little Havana for areas like Coral Gables. Miami's ►



This page: Colourful rooster statues populate the streets of Little Havana. **Opposite:** A familiar mural hints at Miami's cultural roots



Clockwise from top: An entire roast pig is the centrepiece of one stall at the Calle Ocho festival in Miami; dancers in Little Havana; and lunch is served at La Carreta restaurant



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La Segunda Bakery, 2512 N 15th St, Tampa, Florida. lasegundabakery.com

Son Cubano, 2530 Ponce De Leon Boulevard, Coral Gables, Florida. soncubanomiami.com

For **Miami Culinary Tours** call +1 (786)-942-8856, or visit miamiculinarytours.com

The Florida Oceanographic Coastal Centre, 890 N.E. Ocean Boulevard, Stuart, Florida. floridaocean.org

Ohana Surf Shop, 652 NE Ocean Blvd, Stuart, Florida. ohanasurfshop.com

► wealthiest neighbourhood is home to politicians like Marco Rubio and new forms of Cuban integration, such as Son Cubano. This restaurant combines Asian flavours such as wasabi and Thai basil with Cuban ingredients including fried tortillas and stewed pork to create tasty fusion dishes.

But while Miami is the heartland of modern Cuban America, it wasn't the first Cuban outpost in Florida. To find that I headed north, aiming for the city of Tampa.

I drove the scenic route along the Atlantic Coast, and stopped at Jensen Beach, Martin County, for an insight into old-school Florida. I was expecting retirement villages and golf carts. Instead, I found start-up businesses and young families who had moved there for good weather, pristine beaches and North America's most ecologically diverse estuary, the Indian River Lagoon.

From Jensen Beach I took the I60 across Florida to the Gulf Coast. Until 1885, Tampa was just a minor town at the edge of swamplands. But once it became the southern terminus of the national railroad system, a group of cigar manufacturers, led by Don Vicente Martinez-Ybor, bought land next to the port, drained the swamps and founded Ybor City.

By 1890, Ybor was booming. Tobacco came in by boat, was rolled into cigars by hand, and then sent across the US by rail. Cuban cigar-rollers poured into the city, drawn by good wages and the chance to buy houses subsidised by the cigar companies. The Cubans were followed by Germans, Italians and Jews, who set up farms and shops to serve the growing community, and Ybor was eventually absorbed as a neighbourhood of Tampa.

Don Vicente set up banks, a port

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authority, and a real estate company, and by 1920 Ybor was producing half a billion cigars a year. Its main street, 7th Avenue, is still lined with old social clubs, such as the Cuban Club or Italian Society, in magnificent brick buildings with iron-wrought balconies that wouldn't look out of place in New Orleans.

Like Miami, it became a hotbed of political activism. In 1893, Jose Marti, the Cuban nationalist, came here to raise money for Cuba's War of Independence from Spain. Ybor became such a symbol of support that it was chosen as the departure port of Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders, an American Cavalry unit who fought alongside the Cubans.

An enduring legacy of this era is La Segunda Bakery. Copeland More is the fourth generation of his family to run the bakery, which was founded by his great grandfather, Juan More, in 1915. Juan learned to make bread in Cuba following the War of Independence and moved to Ybor City to feed the thriving Cuban community. La Segunda now produces 15,000 loaves a day, sending its Cuban bread as far afield as Alaska.

"It's the process that makes Cuban bread different," explains Copeland, "The dough is

left to ferment for eight to 10 hours in three stages, and we place a palmetto leaf on top. That helps to keep it moist during baking, and the bread rises around it, creating a split along the top."

The bakery shop is full of sweet treats, snacks and sandwiches. By lunchtime there is a queue of customers out of the door, and most of them are here for one thing: the Cuban sandwich.

"Every Cuban community will tell you their Cuban sandwich is the best," explains Copeland. "But, of course, ours is! They were invented for factory workers who didn't want a heavy lunch, and it's the culinary embodiment of the community here: Swiss cheese, German mustard and pickles, Italian salami, Spanish ham and Cuban pork, all wrapped up in Cuban bread."

The cigar industry declined during the Great Depression, and Ybor declined with it. Veterans returning from World War II used their military bonuses to move to other parts of Tampa, and the empty wooden houses from Don Vicente's time were cleared without being rebuilt.

In the 1980s, artists set up studios in the abandoned factories, and the brick buildings that once housed mutual aid societies became bars and nightclubs. It kick-started a renaissance that now sees tech companies moving into the neighbourhood, and new housing developments going up.

Cubans are part of Tampa's original fabric. Ybor might have boutique cafes, upscale bars and art galleries, but they are built on a Cuban heritage that's very different to Miami's. A journey between the two cities proves that Cuban America is more than just a monoculture, and that Florida's modern success is built on Cuban innovation. ■