

Walking & Cycling Tours ■

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Walking & Cycling Tours

So much of Habana's daily life is acted out in the streets and squares of the captivating Cuban capital that to miss a stroll through the atmospheric neighborhoods of Habana Vieja, Centro Habana and Vedado is to miss out on the gritty essence of the city itself. Fortunately for walking enthusiasts, Cuba's majestic capital is a compact and relatively safe city that is easily negotiated on foot. Furthermore, should your legs (and spirits) start to flag at any point, there are always plenty of passing taxis to whisk you quickly back to your casa particular (private house that lets out rooms to foreigners) or hotel.

HABANA VIEJA BY NIGHT

Music is what Habana does best and there is no better way of summoning up the sultry spirit of rumba, mambo, salsa and chachachá than to take a walk through the atmospheric streets of Habana Vieja after dark.

Warm up with a cocktail in the **El Louvre 1** (p80), the alfresco bar outside the Hotel Inglaterra, and a longtime meeting place for travelers of all types. With your mojito swiftly dispatched, head east across Parque Central, to the top end of Obispo where, if you're feeling flush, you can sink a quick CUC\$6 daiquirí in **El Florida 2** (p134), one of Ernest Hemingway's favorite watering holes. Back outside, the music revs up, and for the next 10 blocks on Calle Obispo myriad sights and sounds – not to mention overzealous waiters – will lure you enthusiastically from bar to bar.

La Casa del Escabeche 3 (cnr Obispo & Villegas; ☎ 11am-midnight), on your right at the intersection with Villegas, is a good early diversion, a tiny bar with an accompanying restaurant that somehow manages to squeeze a guitarist, singer, drummer and double bass into its packed and smoky interior. Enjoy the music from the street outside as it drifts through the wooden grilles. If you fancy a bite to eat, the **Bosque Bologna 4** (p133), where energetic local bands perform 24/7 in front of a mixed audience of drinkers and diners, is a good pit stop; the fare is Cuban-Italian. **La Dichosa 5** (p135) on the corner of Obispo

WALK FACTS

Start El Louvre
End Taberna de la Muralla
Distance 1.5km
Duration One hour and up

and Compostela is another vibrant, if claustrophobic, Habana drinking joint that churns out good thumping music morning, noon and night, and often showcases a skillful flautist.

One block further east and you'll encounter the busy **La Lluvia de Oro 6** (p135), a longtime travelers' haunt and a popular stomping ground for legions of haranguing *jineteras* (women who attach themselves to male foreigners for monetary or material gain) – not that this detracts from the regular live music. Another old favorite is the **Café Paris 7** (p133), on the corner of Obispo and San Ignacio, where you might even get a seat and where you can tune into old Buena Vista Social Club favorites such as 'Chan Chan' and 'Cuarto de Tula.'

If you want to take the beat down a little, the **Hotel Ambos Mundos 8** (p71), a block further east, has some talented resident pianists who can rally flagging spirits (and eardrums) with excellent renditions of old Sinatra classics on a full-size grand. Head right on Mercaderes and you'll happen upon the **Mesón de la Flota 9** (p131), the font of Habana's earthy flamenco scene, where feisty 9pm singing-and-dancing extravaganzas rival anything in Spain.

If its refined classical music you're after, divert along Calle Amargura to the magnificent **Basilica Menor San Francisco de Asís 10** (p131), which holds regular chamber concerts (advance bookings are recommended). For salsa with a jazzy touch, stay on Mercaderes until Plaza Vieja, where the **Café Taberna 11** (p134) pays homage to the late, great Benny Moré, with big, brassy bands raising the roof every weekend in honor of the erstwhile *Bárbaro del Ritmo* (Barbarian of Rhythm).

It would be a shame to get this far and miss Habana's only microbrewery, the **Taberna de la Muralla 12** (p135), which sits pretty on the southwest corner of Plaza Vieja. Cool down amid the lilting musical *mélange* with a glass of the local amber nectar, or reinforce yourself with a couple of *Cuba libres* (rum and Cokes) before heading off elsewhere.

CENTRO HABANA'S ARCHITECTURE

This leisurely amble through some of Centro Habana's eclectic architectural sights begins at the end of Paseo de Martí, a salubrious tree-lined avenue known to locals by its old name, **El Prado 1** (p80).

Heading south toward Parque Central, the more interesting buildings lie initially to your left. Exhibiting the sharp lines and pure cubist simplicity of Depression-era America, the **Teatro Fausto 2** (p132), on the corner of Paseo de Martí and Colón, is an art deco classic. Still a functioning performance venue for a new generation of budding thespians, the theater is famous for its light plays and hilarious comedy shows.

One block further down on the left, the **Casa del Científico 3** (p162), now a budget hotel, is an eclectic masterpiece that was once the residence of former Cuban president José Miguel Gómez. Furnished with sweeping staircases, elaborate balconies and an eye-catching rooftop lookout, this veritable urban palace is dripping with diverse architectural influences ranging from art nouveau to Italian Renaissance.

Contrasting sharply with other modern architectural styles on Calle Trocadero, the neo-Moorish **Hotel Sevilla 4** (p80) harks back to a bygone age of Spanish stucco and intricate Mudéjar craftsmanship. A glimpse inside its gilded lobby, with its blue-tinted *azulejos* (glazed tiles) and decorative wooden ceilings, calls to mind a scene from Granada's Alhambra, though the hotel itself was built in 1908.

Turn right on Agramonte (Zulueta), and detour down Animas and Av de los Misiones (Monserrate) for Habana's – and perhaps Latin America's – most emblematic art deco building, the kitschy **Edificio Bacardí 5** (p70), a vivid and highly decorative incarnation of this popular interwar architectural genre garnished with granite, Capellania limestone and multicolored bricks.

On the northwest corner of Parque Central, the royal blue **Hotel Telégrafo 6** (p164), renovated in 2002 by the City Historian's Office, retains many features of an earlier hotel constructed on this site in 1886. Take a peep inside its airy lobby to admire the funky furnishings and intricate bar mosaic.

Eclecticism meets neobaroque at the flamboyant **Centro Gallego 7** (p80), erected as a Galician social club in 1915 around the existing Teatro Tacón. Facing it across leafy Parque Central is the equally eclectic **Centro Asturianas 8** (now part of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes; p82), with four separate rooftop lookouts and a richly gilded interior. According to in-the-know locals, these



WALK FACTS

Start Corner Paseo de Martí and Malecón
End Corner Paseo de Martí and Malecón
Distance 4km
Duration Three hours



two Spanish social clubs entered into silent competition during the 1910s and '20s to see who could come up with the most grandiose building. The winner? You decide.

Habana's **Capitolio Nacional 9** (p79), built between 1926 and 1929, captures Latin America's neoclassical revival in full swing, with sweeping stairways and Doric columns harking back to a purer and more strident Grecian ideal.

Few travelers venture down Calle Cárdenas behind the Fuente de los Indios, but those who do quickly fall upon some of Habana's most engaging art nouveau and art deco town houses. For pure artistic cheek, check out the pink-and-white wedding-cake structure on the southeast corner of **Cárdenas and Apodaca 10** before heading along Calle Cienfuegos to the Parque de la Fraternidad.

Av Simón Bolívar (Reina) is another architectural mishmash that will leave modern-day urban designers blinking in bewilderment. It also contains one of Habana's finest Gaudí-esque buildings, an outrageously ornate apartment dwelling on the southwest corner of **Bolívar and Campanario 11**.

Go north on Campanario, right on Salud and left on San Nicolás, and you're in the Barrio Chino, Habana's bustling Chinatown. **Cuchillo 12** is the main drag here, a short, narrow pedestrian street with plenty of color, but few buildings of architectural note. Merge into Zanja and proceed one block southeast to the next junction. Here on the corner of **Zanja and Av de Italia 13** is one of Habana's zaniest art deco creations, a narrow turreted town house with cubelike balconies, and sharply defined vertical and horizontal lines.

Turn left on Av de Italia (Galiano to locals) and stroll north to the **Teatro América 14** (p132), one of a trio of classic art deco *rascacielos* (skyscrapers) put up in the 1920s and '30s to house new shops and apartments. Continue north on Av de Italia for six more blocks and turn right at the Hotel Deauville into the **Malecón 15** (Av de Maceo; p86). Habana's storm-lashed sea drive is a museum of brilliant eclecticism, with each building differing defiantly from the last. The style reaches its apex two buildings from the junction with Paseo de Martí in the faux-Egyptian **Centro Hispanoamericano de Cultura 16**. Admire the gaudy granite gargoyles before heading off for a well-earned drink.

VEDADO

In Habana, different neighborhoods have different flavors, but few are as intimate as the commercial district of Vedado, which lies between Centro Habana and the Río Almendares.

In order to uncover some of the quarter's most tantalizing sights, start this land-based voyage on the **Malecón 1** (p86) in front of the Hotel Nacional before tracking inland along arterial Calzada de Infanta. The eye-catching church on the corner of Infanta and Neptuno is the **Parroquial de Nuestra Señora del Carmen 2**, notable for its lofty bell tower crowned with an imposing statue of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus. Turn right on Neptuno and head northwest up the hill to the Plaza de Mella, which contains the **Monumento a Julio Antonio Mella 3** (p86), a small obelisk in

memory of the founder of the Cuban Communist Party, who was assassinated by government agents in Mexico City in 1929. Towering atop a hill to your left is the **Universidad de la Habana 4** (p89), a formidable neoclassical building fronted by the famous *escalerita*, a sweeping concrete stairway where earnest students come daily to linger, flirt, study and debate.

The proliferation of traffic on San Lázaro and Neptuno signals your proximity to Habana's busiest road intersection, at **Calle L and Calle 23 5**. The latter street, more popularly known as La Rampa (the Ramp), is a wide four-lane thoroughfare that climbs gently 400m uphill from the glistening Malecón. In the 1950s this is where Habana's famously lewd nightlife was lit up in neon in a plethora of casinos, nightclubs, brothels and hotels. A 360-degree turn on Calles L and 23 reveals three of the city's most striking sights. To the east stands the **Hotel Habana Libre 6** (p85), a functional modernist skyscraper that was requisitioned by Castro's rebel army in 1959. To the north lies the **Cine Yara 7** (p142), Cuba's most prestigious movie house and the headquarters of the annual Habana film festival. Finally, to the west, are the leafy confines of the **Coppelia 8** (p119), the city's famous ice-cream parlor, which is housed in a structure that looks more like a flying saucer than a restaurant.

Staying on Calle L, continue one block west before turning right onto Calle 21. Two blocks down is the now empty **Hotel Capri 9**, a former Mafia crash pad run by Hollywood actor George Raft that was fictionally depicted in the movie *The Godfather: Part II* (in the scene when Michael Corleone travels to Habana to meet Hyman Roth).

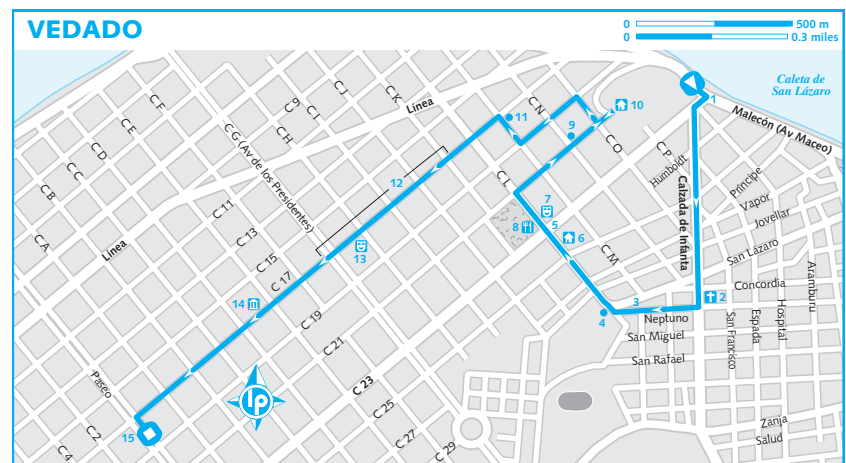
The Mafia connections continue in the **Hotel Nacional 10** (p85) on Calles 21 and O, one of Habana's most famous architectural icons, which in December 1946 hosted the largest get-together of North American hoods in Mob history (p56). Rest your feet awhile and admire the resplendent Moorish lobby or grab a cool mojito in the breezy Galería Bar.

Turn right when you exit the hotel and then hang a left on Calle 19. The concrete colossus directly in front of you is the **Edificio Focsa 11** (p84), constructed between 1954 and 1956 from the bottom up with no cranes. A right turn on Calle M and a left on **Calle 17 12** will bring you onto an archetypal Vedado street, lined by rows of gnarly laurel trees and embellished by a clutch of impossibly ornate eclectic mansions. Two of the most magnificent piles are **Uneac 13**,

the headquarters of Cuban artists and writers union, located on the corner of Calles 17 and H, and the **Museo de Artes Decorativas 14** (p86), on the corner of Calles 17 and E. To earn your cooldown drink, stroll along Calle 17 to Paseo until you reach the **Casa de la Amistad 15** (p137), where beers and music await in a beautiful Italian Renaissance style garden.

WALK FACTS

Start Corner Calle 23 and Malecón
End Casa de la Amistad
Distance 6km
Duration 3½ hours



HABANA'S STATUES

Statues can tell an important historical story in any major city and the Cuban capital is no exception. This monumental cycling tour starts at **El Orbe 1** (p145), Habana's friendly bike-hire store in the *Manzana de Gómez* shopping arcade, and proceeds north along Paseo de Martí. Just before you merge with the busy Malecón in front of the Castillo de San Salvador de la Punta you'll see a large equestrian statue of **General Máximo Gómez 2** on the right-hand side. Gómez (p52) was a war hero from the Dominican Republic who fought tirelessly for Cuban independence in both the 1868 and 1895 conflicts against the Spanish. The impressive statue of him sitting atop a horse faces heroically out to sea and was created by Italian artist Aldo Gamba in 1935. On a small traffic circle close by is the **Memorial a los Estudiantes de Medicina 3**, a fragment of wall encased in marble at the spot where eight Cuban medical students chosen at random were shot by the Spanish in 1871 as a reprisal for allegedly desecrating the tomb of a Spanish journalist (in fact, they were innocent).

Proceed carefully along the Malecón for 14 blocks and you'll reach Parque Maceo, a large traffic island dominated by the **Monumento a Antonio Maceo 4**, the mulatto general (p52) who, along with Gómez, cut a blazing trail across the whole of Cuba during the First War of Independence. Erected in 1916, the monument was sculpted by another talented Italian, Domenico Boni.

Continue west along the Malecón and, soon after passing the Hotel Nacional, you'll come to another traffic island. This one contains the **Monumento a las Víctimas del Maine 5** erected in 1926 to honor the 258 American men who were killed when the US battleship *Maine* mysteriously exploded in Habana harbor in 1898 (p54). The structure once boasted an American eagle atop its two classical pillars, but the figurine was decapitated in 1959 and now resides in the garden of the American ambassador in the suburb of Cubanacán.

Pedal west past the Plaza Tribuna Anti-Imperialista and you'll fall upon the Malecón's third major equestrian statue, the **Monumento a Calixto García 6**, dedicated to the valiant Cuban general who was prevented by US military leaders in Santiago de Cuba from attending the Spanish surrender in 1898. Twenty-four bronze plaques around the base of the structure provide a history of García's 30-year struggle for Cuban independence.

Many busts and statues line Calle G (Av de los Presidentes). The first, outside the Hotel Presidente, isn't actually a monument at all, but rather an empty plinth that formerly displayed a statue of Cuba's first president **Tomás Estrada Palma 7**. Despite being a lifelong friend of José Martí, Palma is now considered a traitor in Cuba for selling out national interests to the Americans in the early 1900s. As a result, his statue has been toppled and all that remains are his shoes.

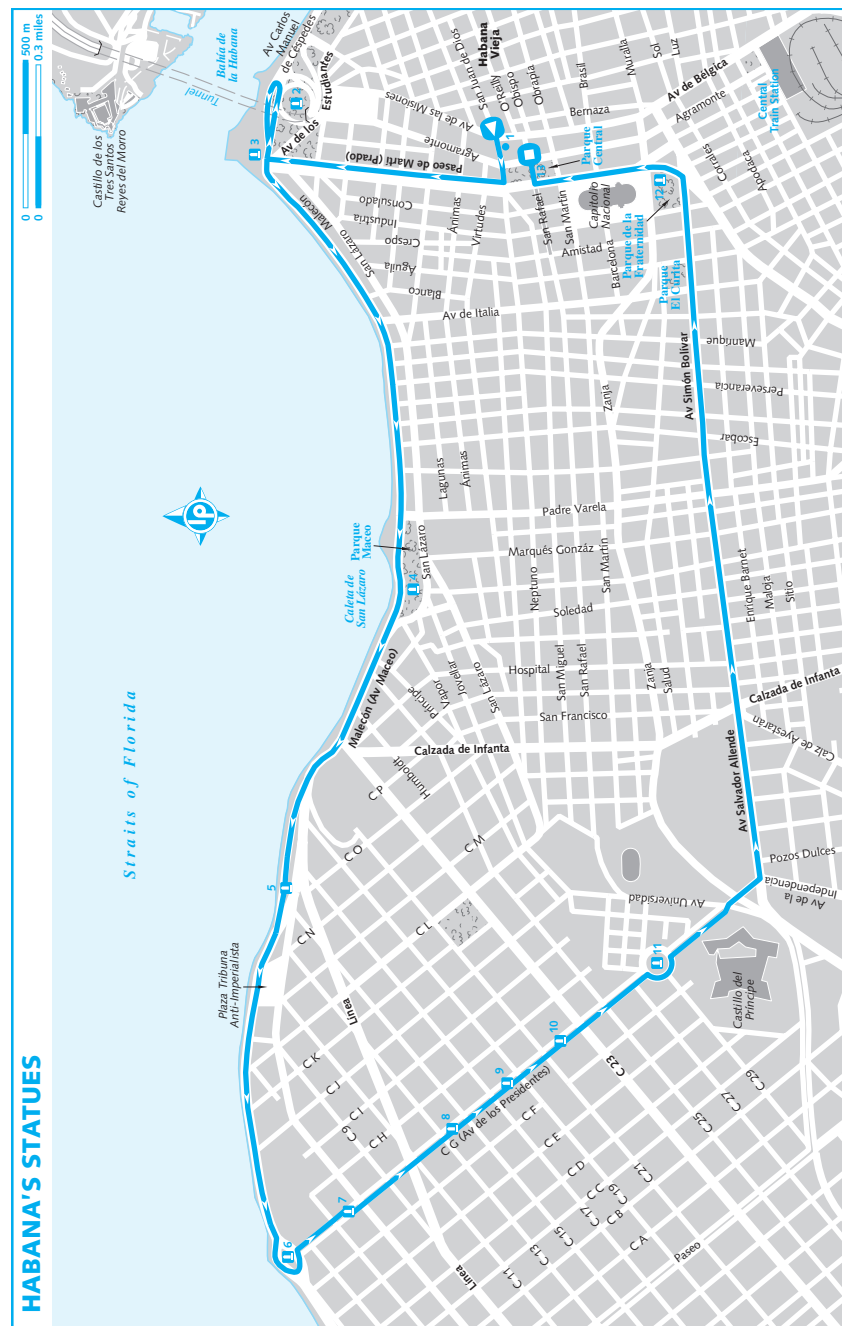
A few blocks further south you'll spy three statues in quick succession adorning the boulevard's wide central walkway. The first is a memorial to **Simón Bolívar 8**, Latin America's great liberator; the second is a sculpture of **Benito Juárez 9**, Mexico's first non-White president; and the third is a more modern memorial to Socialist Chilean president **Salvador Allende 10**, who was toppled in a US-backed military coup in 1973, after which he – allegedly – shot himself with a rifle given to him by his old friend Fidel Castro.

The crowning glory of Calle G is the **Monumento a José Miguel Gómez 11**, which sits atop a hill below the Castillo del Príncipe. This wonderful classical memorial is the work of another industrious Italian, Giovanni Nicolini, and was sculpted from Boltiano and Carrera marble in 1936. Ironically Gómez is yet another disgraced former president and his bronze figure has also been removed from its plinth.

Merge with Av Salvador Allende (Carlos III) and continue until it becomes Av Simón Bolívar. After about 1km you'll emerge in the Parque de la Fraternidad (p82), a popular green space that is replete with bronze busts of American leaders through the ages. The most interesting and ironic statue here (considering Cuba's recent history) is that of **Abraham Lincoln 12**, which stands authoritatively on a white base opposite the Hotel Saratoga; apparently it's Cuba's only public nod to a US president, living or dead.

CYCLE FACTS

Start La Manzana de Gómez
End Parque Central
Distance 12km
Duration Three hours



HABANA'S STATUES



Saving the best till last, pedal the last few hundred meters past the Capitolio and you'll end up where you began in the Parque Central. Here you can grab a well-earned drink in the Hotel Inglaterra (p80) or the Hotel Telégrafo (p164), and admire the white marble statue of Cuban national hero **José Martí 13** (p82) that gleams from behind a ring of 28 royal palms in the middle of the park.

NECRÓPOLIS CRISTÓBAL COLÓN

Declared a national monument in 1987, the Necrópolis Cristóbal Colón (p87) is one of Latin America's most fascinating cemeteries, renowned for its striking religious iconology and elaborate marble-sculpted statues. The cemetery is far from being eerie though, and a walk through these 56 hallowed hectares can be an educational and captivating stroll through the annals of Cuban history.

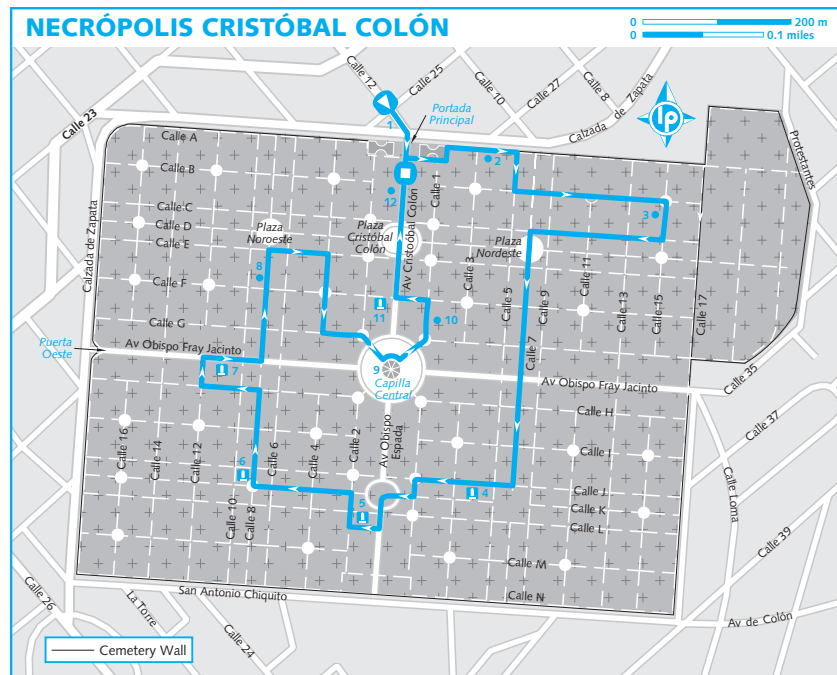
The Romanic-Byzantine **Puerta de la Paz 1** (Door of Peace) on Calle 12 and Zapata was designed by Spanish architect Calixto de Loira Cardoso in 1871 and is said to have been inspired by the Triumphal Arch in Rome. Pay your CUC\$1 entry fee at the door before turning left and proceeding along Calle A parallel to the cemetery's northeast wall. A short walk from the entrance you'll find the grave of Cuban novelist **Alejo Carpentier 2** (1904–80), a white marble tomb topped by a simple cross and surrounded by a white metal fence. The inscription on the grave reads *Hombre de mi tiempo soy y mi tiempo trascendent es el de la*

revolución Cubana (I am a man of my time and my historic time is that of the Cuban revolution).

Turn right on Calle 5 and left on Calle B and walk four blocks to the intersection with Calle 15, where you'll find the grave of pioneering Cuban physician and scientist **Carlos Finlay 3** (1833–1915), the first person

WALK FACTS

Start Corner Calle 12 and Zapata
End Corner Calle 12 and Zapata
Distance 2.5km
Duration 1½ hours



to identify the mosquito as the carrier of the organism that caused yellow fever. It's an understated grass-covered family plot with a dedication from the Oficina Sanitoria Panamericano added in 1946.

Doubling back along Calle C, turn left at the Plaza Nordeste and head seven blocks south to Calle J, where you turn right. The strange modern sculpture ahead of you integrating elements of the Cuban flag is in honor the **Martyrs of the Assault on the Presidential Palace 4** who, led by student leader José Echeverría, staged an abortive plot to assassinate President Batista in March 1957.

Continue two blocks to the west, turn left and then right and you'll find yourself on Av Obispo Espada, the cemetery's central thoroughfare. Just west of here lies the **Mausoleum of the Revolutionary Armed Forces 5**, a large memorial to Cuban soldiers killed in action in various wars. It consists of a simple arch guarded by two palm trees and a couple of military figures carved in bronze. The many vaults here are often decorated with flowers. Head north on Calle 2 and turn left on Calle K to reach the **Martyrs of Granma 6** memorial. This monument, in honor of the men killed when Fidel's yacht arrived in Cuba in December 1956 to start the revolutionary war, is well tended and includes a carved image of the famous boat, along with the names of 19 deceased.

An earlier conflict is remembered three blocks to the north on Av Obispo Fray Jacinto at a memorial to the **Veterans of the Independence Wars 7**. This large monument commemorates those who fought in the two independence wars of 1868–78 and 1895–98. Backed by five royal palms and fronted by two prickly cacti, the edifice depicts the deaths of Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, José Martí and Antonio Maceo in battle and contains a quote from the latter: *La libertad se conquista con el filo de machete, no se pide* (Freedom is won with the blade of a machete, not by asking for it).

Cutting up Calle 8 you'll see the family grave of former Orthodox party leader **Eduardo R Chibás 8** (1907–51), a relentless anticorruption campaigner in the 1940s and '50s who shot himself dead during a radio broadcast as a form of protest. At his funeral in 1951 – which was attended by thousands – fellow Orthodox Party member Fidel Castro jumped up onto Chibás' grave and made a fiery speech denouncing the old establishment.

Cut east on Calle E, south on Calle 4 and east again on Calle G and you'll arrive at the neo-Romanesque **Capilla Central 9**, Cuba's only octagonal church, where more often than not a funeral service will be taking place. Close to here at Calle 1 and F is the cemetery's most visited tomb, that of Señora Amelia Goyri or **La Milagrosa 10** (Miraculous One), a Habana woman who died while giving birth on May 3, 1901. When the bodies were exhumed one year later, the baby – who had been buried at her feet – was said to be in her arms. Señora Amelia thus became the focus of a miraculous cult, and to this day flowers adorn her tomb and local devotees maintain a regular attendance.

Go left on Calle F and continue straight up the Av Cristóbal Colón. On your left you'll spy one of the cemetery's tallest structures, the **Monument to the Firefighters 11**, which honors a group of firemen who were killed in the line of duty in 1890. Among the many garlands and figures depicted here are a pelican (to signify self-sacrifice) and an angel atop a lofty column clasping an injured fireman.

Heading back toward the entrance gate, don't miss the surprisingly inconspicuous grave of Dominican-born Cuban war hero **General Máximo Gómez 12** (1836–1905). The plot, which is on your left, is distinguished by a brown marble obelisk that sports Gómez' bronze image on a circular medallion. The entrance gate, and the end of this tour, is 100m to the north.

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