

# ¡Viva Little Havana!

*The smell of cigars mixes with the rhythm of rapid-fire Spanish in Miami's Cuban district.*

BY JILL YOUNG MILLER

Little Havana may be authentically Cuban in most respects, but touches of Americana can't help but creep in. (Nobody, it seems, can resist Charlie Brown or Balman.)

At a restaurant called Centro Vasco, we were packed in a room full of laughing, clapping people as we watched a comedian in platform shoes strut across the stage and tell bawdy jokes in Spanish. Because my knowledge of Spanish is limited to ordering food and asking for directions to the bathroom, I turned to my companion, David Flum, for translations. David, a medical student at the University of Miami, is fluent, but even he couldn't keep up. "Do you know what it's like to follow a whole joke," he asked me in frustration, "and then miss the punch line?" Pretty soon, we just gave up and listened to the others laugh.

But then came an act that we could appreciate even without knowing Spanish. Two guitarists played while flamenco dancers in black-and-white polka-dotted dresses stomped their feet and clicked their castanets. As the dancers swirled their skirts, we'd see flashes of hot-pink slips. They put on such a show that we forgave (almost, anyway) the price of the drinks—nearly 20 bucks for a pitcher of sangria. Here, the food and entertainment may be old-world Spanish, but the audience is new-world Cuban-American. If a singer shouts "*Viva España!*" he follows it up with "*Viva Cuba!*" After all, this is Little Havana.

SOME 30 YEARS AGO, CUBANS FLEEING CASTRO flooded a neighborhood just west of downtown Miami that came to be known as Little Havana. Cubans and Anglos alike call Southwest Eighth Street, the neighborhood's chief thoroughfare, Calle Ocho (kah-yav OE-choe). And the best way to come to some understanding of the area is to stroll down this exotic version of Main Street, where the thick smells of cigars and Cuban food mingle with rapid-fire Spanish. "[Little Havana is] worth checking out," says University of Miami third-year medical student Tony Gayoso, whose grandparents live in Little Havana. "It's really a piece of Cuba transplanted to Miami."

So ditch the car, maybe around the McDonald's at 14th Avenue. Then go exploring, because what's best about Little Havana—and ethnic neighborhoods in general (see next page)—is that you can learn about another culture without having to leave the country. In Little Havana, the Cuban culture isn't watered down by tacky souvenir shops, either. Instead, you'll find authentic Cuban bakeries and outdoor counters where people drink doll-size cups of sweet, strong *café cubano* and argue about their homeland. The coffee counters are everywhere; just look for clumps of people standing on the sidewalk.

Don't worry about fitting in; you probably won't.

