

Travel:

# YBOR CITY... A BIG REASON TO VISIT TAMPA!

by Don & Bonnie Woodland

In 1885, Don Vicente Martinez Ybor fled the political and labor unrest of his native Cuba to establish a cigar empire in a small, palmetto-covered area east of Tampa, Florida. The first cigar factory opened a year later, and soon blossomed into the "Cigar Capital of the World." But the Great Depression, the advent of cigar-rolling machines, and the increasing popularity of cigarettes precipitated Ybor City's decline.

A century later, however, the neighborhood has been restored to its new life, offering residents and visitors an enticing mix of restaurants, shops and entertainment. Today, Ybor City's beautiful, 50-block, historic district has been restored and renovated. The cigar factory itself is now Ybor Square, a shopping and dining complex. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Ybor City is a fascinating place to spend a day or two.

Strolling down palm-lined Seventh Avenue is a good way to experience the true essence of Ybor--wrought iron balconies, cigar factories, globe street lights, ethnic clubs, art galleries, an-

tique stores, charming shops and unique restaurants offer colorful entertainment. Look for Seventh Avenue's newest addition: Centro Ybor, with upscale shops, restaurants and a 20-screen Muvico Theatre. Also

there's free, 90-minute guided walking tours of historic Ybor City.

There's also two museums in Ybor City that should not be missed. They tell of the immigrant influx, and how Cubans, Sicilians, Italians, Germans,



*Visitors can see cigars being handmade at the Columbia Cigar Shop, located next to the Columbia Restaurant, on East 7th Ave. in Ybor City.*



*The 98 year old, 1600-seat Columbia Restaurant is a must-see in Ybor City.*

and Spanish lived in relative harmony in 1886. Women were paid the same scale as men. And there was the fascinating Cuban tradition of the "Lector", who was paid by Ybor City cigar workers to read to them as they worked in the factory. This made for better educated workers--a fact that did not go unnoticed by wary factory owners.

At the State Museum, you can also see the small homes (casitas) that the workers lived in. They could be rented or purchased by workers. (Cigar makers were considered craftsmen and were paid well.) For more information about the **Ybor City Museums**,

call 248-3712 or 247-6323. Visit the larger Ybor City State Museum at 1818 Ninth Ave. The Centro Ybor Museum and Visitor Information Cen-



*One section of East 7th St., the main drag of Ybor City*

ter is at 1600 E. 8th Ave. ([www.ybor.org](http://www.ybor.org))

Ybor City offers a wonderful nightlife. 7th Ave.--the main drag--is shut off for pedestrian use on weekend nights. And there's a wide variety of

nightclubs that cater to all tastes, from rock to blues to Latin.

The **Columbia restaurant** one of Ybor City's architectural splendors, will celebrate a century in business in 2005. Now the oldest restaurant in Florida and the nation's largest Spanish restaurant, the Columbia seats 1600 people, serves lunch and dinner, and over the years has featured entertainment varying from orchestras to stand up comedians to ballroom dancing. Currently, live jazz is performed in the bar several nights a week, and there is live flamenco dancing on the

weekends. The restaurant serves classic Spanish and Cuban cuisine. Menu favorites include: Spanish Bean Soup, Original "1905 salad", Paella, Red Snapper "Alicante", Merluza "Russian Style," Pompano en Papillot, Roast Pork "A La Cubana," Arroz con Pollo, Filet Mignon "Columbia," Cafe con Leche and Flan. ([www.columbiarestaurant.com/](http://www.columbiarestaurant.com/))

For more information on visiting Tampa, contact the Tampa Bay Convention & Visitors Bureau at 800.44.TAMPA, or go to [www.visit-tampabay.com](http://www.visit-tampabay.com).

And thanks for traveling! (*Editor's note: Don & Bonnie Woodland are free lance travel writers based on Cape Cod, Ma. They can be reached at 508-945-9455.*)



*A mediterranean-style dining room at the Columbia Restaurant*



*This indoor dining room at the Columbia Restaurant "feels" like you're outdoors.*