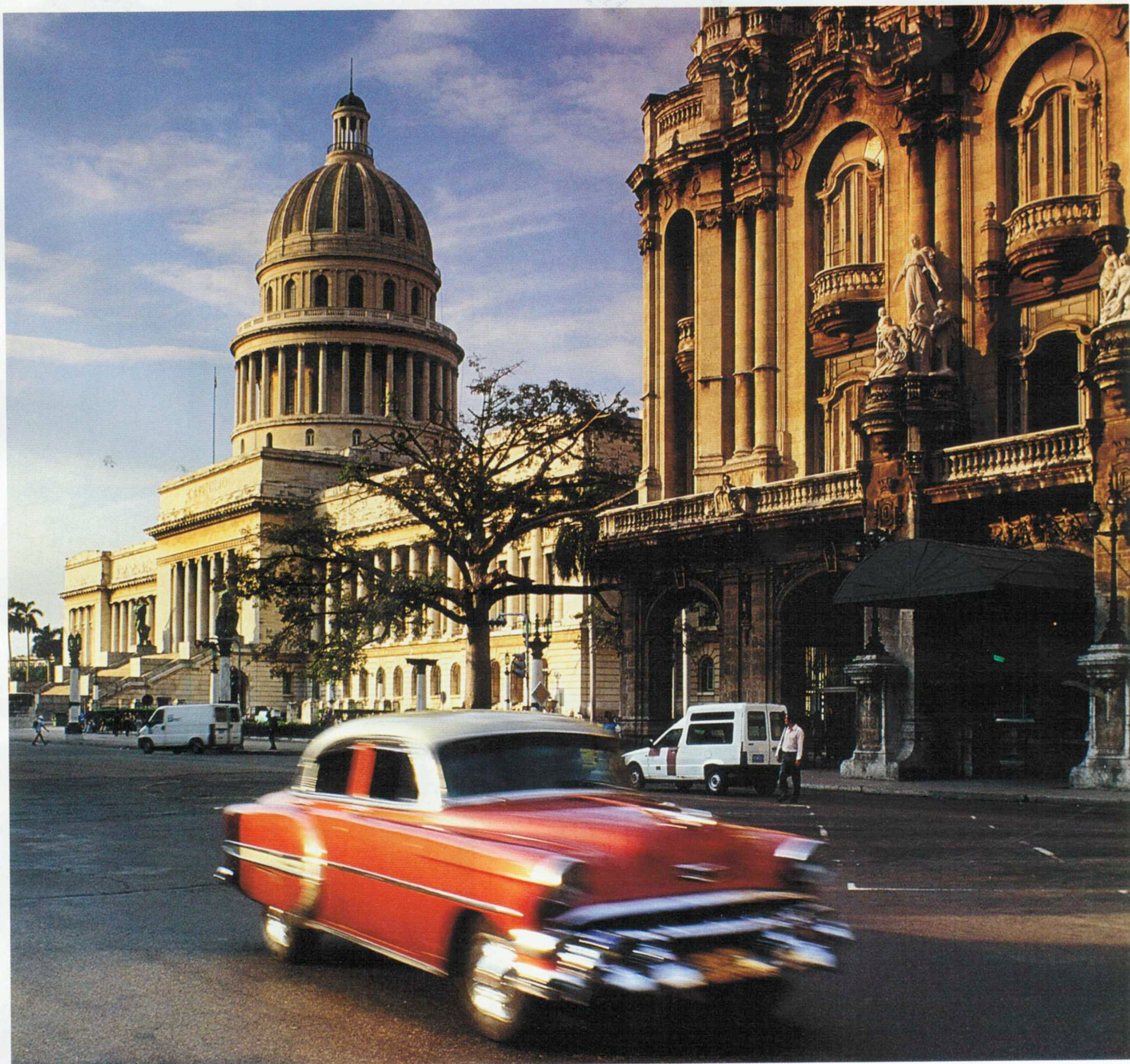


in HAVANA

It's all change in the Cuban capital – so join the party before the new (Western) dawn



If you come expecting a Havana steeped in aspic, you're in for an eye-opener. While it's true you'll see '50s motors swarming about decaying colonial buildings, the old smell of poverty from crumbling blocks is gradually being overpowered by the new scent of fresh plaster – thanks to a decades-long restoration project. And as for the cars – there are now as many government-issue Ladas as classic Buicks. These dilapidated-but-delightful Cuban icons owe their presence to one man and his revolution. Even though he's been bedridden for three years

street eulogises Fidel Castro, whose 1959 ousting of American influence froze Cuba in time.

So do as the locals do: get used to the timewarp, and celebrate. The streets of Old Havana are in permanent party mode. Carnival processions swagger down the cobbles, and music – salsa, son, and the hip-hop-inspired reggaetón – blasts through every doorway. And don't fret about museums and galleries – just go with the flow. If the city's layout were a clock face, Old Havana sits at three o'clock (on a first trip, you'll probably

Cuban wheels: a classic car by the Gran Teatro. The majestic Capitolio (left) was inspired by the White House

Centro at six o'clock, home to the iconic Capitolio (the ex-government building based on the White House, later taken over by Fidel and Che). At nine o'clock is Vedado – all decrepit mansions and tree-lined streets, while midday is the Malecón, or waterfront.

For years, people have been saying of Havana, 'Go now, before it changes'. Well, it already is – which means there's something for revolutionaries and revellers alike. But with Obama easing restrictions on American travel, the 21st century is about to hit the city head on. Watch out for the wet paint. >