Embellished by breathless feats of revolutionary derring-do, and plagued routinely by meddling armies of foreign invaders, Cuban history has achieved a level of importance way out of proportion to its size. Indeed, with its strategic position slap-bang in the middle of the Caribbean and its geographic closeness to its powerful US neighbor to the north, the historical annals of the Cuban archipelago often read more like the script of an action-packed Hollywood movie production than a dull end-of-year school exam paper. Read on.

PRE-COLUMBIAN HISTORY

According to exhaustive carbon dating, Cuba has been inhabited by humans for over 4000 years. The first known civilization to settle on the island were the Guanahatabeys, a primitive Stone Age people who lived in caves around Viñales in Pinar del Río province and eked out a meager existence as hunter-gatherers. At some point over the ensuing 2000 years the Guanahatabeys were gradually displaced by the arrival of a new preceramic culture known as the Siboneyes, a significantly more developed group of fishermen and small-scale farmers who settled down comparatively peacefully on the archipelago’s sheltered southern coast.

The island’s third and most important pre-Columbian civilization, the Taínos (see boxed text, p451) first started arriving in Cuba around AD 1100 in a series of waves, concluding a migration process that had begun in the Orinoco River delta in South America several centuries earlier. Taíno culture was more developed and sophisticated than that of its two archaic predecessors; the adults practiced a form of cranial transformation by flattening the soft skulls of their young children (flat foreheads were thought to be a sign of great beauty). Related to the Greater Antilles Arawaks, the new natives were skillful farmers, weavers and boat-builders, and their complex society boasted an organized system of participatory government that was overseen by series of local caciques (chiefs). Taínos are thought to be responsible for pioneering approximately 60% of the crops still grown in Cuba today and they were the first of the world’s pre-Columbian cultures to nurture the delicate tobacco plant into a form that could easily be processed for smoking.

FROM COLONY TO REPUBLIC

When Columbus neared Cuba on October 27, 1492, he described it as ‘the most beautiful land human eyes had ever seen,’ naming it Juana in honor of a Spanish heiress. But deluded in his search for the kingdom of the Great

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**TIMELINE**

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<tr>
<th>BC 2000</th>
<th>AD 1100</th>
<th>1492</th>
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<td>The Guanahatabeys, Cuba’s earliest known Stone Age civilization is known to be living in the caves along the coast of present-day Pinar del Rio province.</td>
<td>Taíno people start arriving in Cuba after leapfrogging their way across the islands of the Lesser Antilles from the Orinoco River basin in present-day Venezuela.</td>
<td>Christopher Columbus lands in Cuba near modern Gibara in Holguín province. He sails for a month along the coast as far as Baracoa, planting religious crosses and meeting with the indigenous Taínos.</td>
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Khan, and finding little gold in Cuba’s lush and heavily forested interior, Columbus quickly abandoned the territory in favor of Hispaniola (modern-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic).

The colonization of Cuba didn’t begin until nearly 20 years later in 1511, when Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar led a flotilla of four ships and 400 men from Hispaniola destined to conquer the island for the Spanish Crown. Docking near present-day Baracoa, the conquistadors promptly set about establishing seven pioneering settlements throughout their new colony, namely at Baracoa, Bayamo, Trinidad, Sancti Spíritus, Puerto Príncipe (Camagüey), Havana and Santiago de Cuba (see also boxed text, p286). Watching nervously from the safety of their *bohíos* (thatched huts), a scattered population of Taino Indians looked on with a mixture of fascination and fear.

Despite Velázquez’ attempts to protect the local Indians from the gross excesses of the Spanish swordsmen, things quickly got out of hand and the invaders soon found that they had a full-scale rebellion on their hands. Leader of the embittered and short-lived insurgency was the feisty Hatuey, an influential Taino *cacique* and archetype of the Cuban resistance, who was eventually captured and burnt at the stake, inquisition-style, for daring to challenge the iron fist of Spanish rule.

With the resistance decapitated, the Spaniards set about emptying Cuba of its relatively meager gold and mineral reserves using the beleaguered natives as forced labor. As slavery was nominally banned under a papal edict, the Spanish got around the various legal loopholes by introducing a ruthless *encomienda* system, whereby thousands of natives were rounded up and forced to work for Spanish landowners on the pretext that they were receiving free ‘lessons’ in Christianity. The brutal system lasted 20 years before the ‘Apostle of the Indians,’ Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, appealed to the Spanish Crown for more humane treatment, and in 1542 the *encomiendas* were abolished. Catastrophically, for the unfortunate Taínos, the call came too late. Those who had not already been worked to death in the gold mines quickly succumbed to fatal European diseases such as smallpox and by 1550 only about 5000 scattered survivors remained.

**A Taste for Sugar**

In 1522, with the local natives perishing fast, the first slaves arrived in Cuba from Africa via Hispaniola. The Spanish colonizers were marginally less repressive in the treatment of their African brethren than the plantation owners further north, a situation that allowed Afro-Cubans greater freedom of expression and more scope to be creative. Cuba’s slaves were kept together in tribal groups, enabling them to retain certain elements of their indigenous culture and, in contrast to their counterparts in Haiti or the United States, they retained various legal rights: to own property, get married and even buy their own freedom.