



# Camagüey Province

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## Why Go?

Neither Occidente nor Oriente, Camagüey is Cuba's provincial contrarian, a region that likes to go its own way in political and cultural matters – and usually does – much to the chagrin of its neighbors in Havana and Santiago.

The seeds were sown in the colonial era, when Camagüey's preference for cattle ranching over sugarcane meant less reliance on slave labor and more enthusiasm to get rid of a system that bred misery.

Today Cuba's largest province is a pastoral mix of grazing cattle and disused sugar mills. Devoid of any mountains of note, it is flanked by Cuba's two largest archipelagos: the Sabana-Camagüey in the north and the Jardines de la Reina in the south, both underdeveloped and almost virgin in places.

Staunchly Catholic Camagüey is the province as a microcosm, a city that nurtured revolutionary poet Nicolás Guillén, groundbreaking scientist Carlos J Finlay and an internationally famous ballet company.

## When to Go

There's debate about the actual year of Camagüey's founding, but that doesn't stop everyone taking to the streets in early February to celebrate the Jornada de la Cultura Camagüeyana (Days of Camagüeyan Culture). For outdoor enthusiasts, March is prime time for viewing migratory birds on the northern keys. To the east, in Playa Santa Lucía, the amazing underwater shark-feeding show is held when the sharks are in the area between June and January.

## Camagüey

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Welcome to the maze. Caught inadvertently in the tide of history, Camagüey is a Latin American city without precedent. The oddities lie in its unique urban layout. Two centuries spent fighting off musket-toting pirates such as Henry Morgan led the fledgling settlement to develop a peculiar labyrinthine street pattern designed to confuse pillaging invaders and provide cover for its long-suffering residents (or so legend has it). As a result, Camagüey's sinuous streets and narrow winding alleys are more reminiscent of a Moroccan medina than the geometric grids of Lima or Mexico City.

Sandwiched on Carretera Central halfway between Ciego de Ávila and Las Tunas, the city of *tinajones* (clay pots), as Camagüey is sometimes known, is Cuba's third-largest city and the bastion of the Catholic Church on the island. Well known for going their own way in times of crisis, the resilient citizens are popularly called 'Agramontinos' by other Cubans, after local First War of Independence hero Ignacio Agramonte, coauthor of the Guáimaro constitution and courageous leader of Cuba's finest cavalry brigade. In 2008 its well-preserved historical center was made Cuba's ninth Unesco World Heritage Site.

Some travelers love Camagüey with its secret nooks and crannies. Others are not so enamored, with its unsavory reputation for bike thieves and *jineteros* (touts). Take to the maze and find out for yourself.

### History

Founded in February 1514 as one of Diego Velázquez' hallowed seven 'villas', Santa María del Puerto Príncipe was originally established on the coast near the site of present-day Nuevitas. Due to a series of bloody rebellions by the local Taíno people, the site of the city was moved twice in the early 16th century, finally taking up its present location in 1528. Its name was changed to Camagüey in 1903.

Camagüey developed quickly in the 1600s – despite continued attacks by corsairs – with an economy based on sugar production and cattle-rearing. Due to acute water shortages in the area, the townsfolk were forced to make *tinajones* in order to collect rainwater and even today Camagüey is known as the city of *tinajones* – although the pots now serve a strictly ornamental purpose.

Aside from swashbuckling independence hero Ignacio Agramonte, Camagüey has produced several local personalities of note, including poet and patriot Nicolás Guillén and eminent doctor Carlos J Finlay, the man who was largely responsible for discovering the causes of yellow fever. In 1959 the prosperous citizens quickly fell foul of the Castro revolutionaries when local military commander Huber Matos (Fidel's one-time ally) accused El Líder Máximo of burying the Revolution. He was duly arrested and later thrown in prison for his pains.

Loyally Catholic, Camagüey welcomed Pope John Paul II in 1998 and in 2008 it beatified Cuba's first saint, 'Father of the Poor' Fray José Olallo, a member of the Order of Saint John who aided the wounded of both sides in the 1868–78 War of Independence. Raúl Castro attended the ceremony.

### Sights

#### Plaza San Juan de Dios

SQUARE

(cnr Hurtado & Paco Recio) Wide-open Plaza San Juan de Dios is Camagüey's most picturesque corner and the only town plaza to retain its original layout and buildings. Its eastern aspect is dominated by the **Museo de San Juan de Dios** (admission CUC\$1; ☺9am–5pm Tue–Sat, to 1pm Sun), housed in what was once a hospital administered by Father José Olallo, the Cuban friar who became Cuba's first saint. The hospital has a front cloister dating from 1728 and a unique triangular rear patio with Moorish touches, built in 1840. Since ceasing to function as a hospital in 1902, the building has served as a teachers college, a refuge during the 1932 cyclone, and the Centro Provincial de Patrimonio directing the restoration of Camagüey's monuments. The museum chronicles Camagüey's history and exhibits some local paintings.

#### Museo Casa Natal de Ignacio Agramonte

MUSEUM

(Av Agramonte No 459; admission CUC\$2; ☺10am–5:45pm Tue–Thu, 8am–noon Sun) Opposite Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de la Merced, on the corner of Independencia, is the birthplace of the independence hero Ignacio Agramonte (1841–73), the cattle rancher who led the revolt against Spain in this area in 1868. In July 1869 rebel forces under Agramonte bombarded Camagüey, and four years later he was killed in action (aged only 32) fighting bravely against the Spanish. You can hear Cuban folk singer Silvio Rodríguez' anthem to this hero, who was nicknamed 'El Mayor' (Major),