



Holguín Province

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Why Go?

Cuba's contradictions collide in Holguín. This is the province that bred Fidel Castro and his ideological opposite, Fulgencio Batista; a place where the pine-scented purity of the Sierra del Cristal Mountains is muddied by the environmental degradation of the Moa nickel mines; and a region that juxtaposes the inherent Cuban-ness of Gibara with the tourist swank of Guardalavaca.

The resulting hodgepodge is rarely dull. Holguín's beauty was first spotted by Christopher Columbus who, by most historical accounts, docked near Gibara in October 1492 and promptly described the region's broccoli-green forests and shapely coastal hills as the most beautiful land he had ever laid eyes on.

The hills are still here, though the forests were cleared long ago by United Fruit and other sugar-hungry plantation owners. In more recent times giant resort enclaves have sprung up along the coast pushing tourism as the primary breadwinner. Say *hola* to Guardalavaca, Esmeralda and super-posh Playa Pesquero.

When to Go

In April movie aficionados convene in Gibara for the Festival Internacional del Cine Pobre. One month later, the city of Holguín shows its religious spirit during the Romerías de Mayo. Holguín was wracked by a destructive hurricane in 2008. To avoid peak storm season, arrive when the season ends in mid-November. You can enjoy the Guardalavaca and Playa Pesquero resorts in vacation mode until early March.

History

Most historians agree that Christopher Columbus first made landfall in Cuba on October 28, 1492 at Cayo Bariay near Playa Blanca, just west of Playa Don Lino (now in Holguín province). The gold-seeking Spaniards were welcomed ashore by Seborucos and they captured 13 of them to take back to Europe as scientific 'specimens.' Bariay was boycotted in favor of Guantánamo 20 years later when a new colonial capital was set up in Baracoa, and the hilly terrain north of Bayamo was gifted to Captain García Holguín, a Mexican conquistador. The province became an important sugar-growing area at the end of the 19th century when much of the land was bought up and cleared of forest by the US-owned United Fruit Company. Formerly part of the Oriente territory, Holguín became a province in its own right in 1975.

Holguín

POP 264,927

Home to the nation's largest brewery, a mercurial baseball team nicknamed Los Perros (the Dogs) and a beer-drinking donkey called Pancho, Holguín is anything but ordinary. This is a city of the understated and the underrated where spontaneous shindigs rule over organized excursions, and visceral experiences are infinitely more relevant than visual ones. You won't see too many of your fellow travelers here, but you probably won't miss them either. Come here for a large dose of Cuban reality and watch as the city's stalwart survivors go industriously about their daily business.

History

In 1515 Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar, Cuba's first governor, conferred the lands north of Bayamo to Captain García Holguín, one of the island's original colonizers. Setting up a cattle ranch in the province's verdant and fertile hinterland, Holguín and his descendants presided over a burgeoning agricultural settlement that by 1720 had sprouted a small wooden church and more than 450 inhabitants. In 1752 San Isidoro de Holguín (the settlement was renamed after the church) was granted the title of city and by 1790 the population had expanded to 12,000.

Holguín was the setting of much fighting during the two wars of independence when ferocious Mambí warriors laid siege to

the heavily fortified Spanish barracks at La Periquera (now the Museo de Historia Provincial). Captured and lost by Julio Grave de Peralta (after whom one of the squares is named), the city was taken for a second time on December 19, 1872, by Cuban general and native son Calixto García, Holguín's posthumous local hero.

With the division of Oriente into five separate provinces in 1975, the city of Holguín became a provincial capital. It suffered a severe mauling from Hurricane Ike in 2008.

Sights

Holguín is known, somewhat euphemistically, as the 'city of parks' (they're more like squares). Base yourself around the four central squares and you'll see most of what's on offer. No walk is complete without a climb up to La Loma de la Cruz – a little off the grid, but well worth the detour.

INTOWN

Museo de Historia Provincial

MUSEUM

(Map p348; Frexes No 198; admission CUC\$1; ☉8am-5pm) Now a national monument, the building on the northern side of Parque Calixto García was constructed between 1860 and 1868 and used as a Spanish army barracks during the independence wars. It was nicknamed La Periquera (Parrot Cage) for the red, yellow and green uniforms of the Spanish soldiers who stood guard outside. The prize exhibit is an old axe-head carved in the likeness of a man, known as the Hacha de Holguín (Holguín Axe), thought to have been made by indigenous inhabitants in the early 1400s and discovered in 1860. Looking even sharper in its polished glass case is a sword that once belonged to national hero and poet, José Martí.

Parque Peralta

SQUARE

(Map p348) This square (called Parque de las Flores locally) is named for General Julio Grave de Peralta (1834–72), who led an uprising against Spain in Holguín in October 1868. His marble statue (1916) faces the cathedral. Dazzling white and characterized by its twin domed towers, the **Catedral de San Isidoro** (Map p348; Manduley) dates from 1720 and was one of the town's original constructions. Added piecemeal over the years, the towers are of 20th-century vintage and in 1979 it became a cathedral. A hyperrealistic statue of Pope John Paul II stands to the right of the main doors.