



# Holguín Province

📍 24 / POP 1,037,600

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## Best Beaches

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## Best Rural Accommodations

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## Why Go?

Cuba's contradictions are magnified in Holguín. Perhaps something in the undeniable beauty of the province's hill-studded hinterland breeds extremes. Fulgencio Batista, and his ideological opposite, Fidel Castro, were both reared here, as were Reinaldo Arenas and Guillermo Infante, dissident writers who didn't have a lot in common with either leader. Then there are the dichotomies in the landscape. The environmental degradation around Moa's nickel mines jars rather awkwardly with the pine-scented mountains of the Sierra Cristal, while the inherent Cuban-ness of Gibara contrasts sharply with the tourist swank of resort-complex Guardavaca.

Christopher Columbus was the first European to spy Holguín's beauty. By most accounts, he docked near Gibara in October 1492 where he was met by a group of curious Taíno. The Taínos didn't survive the ensuing Spanish colonization, though fragments of their legacy can be reconstructed in Holguín province, which contains more pre-Columbian archaeological sites than anywhere else in Cuba.

## When to Go

- ➔ In April movie aficionados convene in Gibara for the Festival Internacional del Cine Pobre.
- ➔ May sees the city of Holguín show its religious spirit during the Romerías de Mayo.
- ➔ Avoid the hurricane season: July to mid-November.
- ➔ You can enjoy the Guardavaca and Playa Pesquero resorts in prime tourist season from December 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 after 1975.

## Holguín

POP 277,000

Neither one of Cuba's seven founding villas nor a megaresort of carefully packaged Caribbean dreamscapes, the city of San Isidoro de Holguín barely features in Cuba's tourist master plan (which prefers to promote all-inclusive resorts over Cuba's hardworking cities). But, for a certain type of traveller, this is part of its magic – and mystery. Sit down in one of the city's central squares for an hour or two (Holguín is euphemistically coined the 'city of parks') and something interesting will undoubtedly distract you. It might be the religious solemnity of the annual procession to the hilltop Loma de la Cruz, or – more spontaneously – the exuberant cheers from the crowd in the oversized baseball stadium.

The nation's fourth-largest city serves up a slice of Cuba without the wrapping paper. What you won't find here is four-star hotels, revitalized colonial buildings or tour guides with shiny name badges talking to you in English. What you *will* find is eager-to-please *casas particulares*, cheap food in pioneering new restaurants and a city that loves (and brews) its own beer.

## 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 1976, the city of Holguín became a provincial capital. Besides beer, the key industries are agriculture and nickel. The city has also cultivated an international reputation for drug rehabilitation: Argentine soccer star Diego Maradona came here for rehab in 2000 (it was to be the start of a long-running friendship between the footballer and Fidel Castro). More recently, Holguín suffered a severe mauling from Hurricane Ike in 2008.



## Sights

Base yourself around the city's four central squares and you'll see most of what's on offer. However, no walk is complete without a climb up the emblematic Loma de la Cruz – a little off the grid, but well worth the detour.



## Museo de Historia Provincial MUSEUM

(Map p352; Frexes No 198; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 8am–4:30pm Tue–Sat, to noon Sun) 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.

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

(Parque de las Flores; Map p352) This square is named for General Julio Grave de Peralta