



Holguín Province

📍 24 / POP 1,037,600

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Why Go?

In this beautiful hill-studded hinterland, Cuba's contradictions are magnified. For the visitor, there's rich landscapes ranging from the pine-scented mountains of the Sierra Cristal to the palm-fringed beaches around Guardavaca. Holguín's beauty was first spied by Christopher Columbus who, by most accounts, docked near Gibara in October 1492 where he was met by a group of curious Taíno natives. 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.

Perhaps something in the water breeds extremes. Fulgencio Batista, and his ideological opposite, Fidel Castro, were both reared in this province, as were dissident writers Reinaldo Arenas and Guillermo Infante. There's plenty of contrast in settings as well: the inherent Cuban-ness of Gibara contrasts sharply with the tourist swank of resort-complex Guardavaca.

When to Go

- ➔ Guardavaca and Playa Pesquero resorts are at their best during the prime tourist season from December until early March.
- ➔ Latin music fans should hit Holguín in late October for the Fiesta de la Cultura Iberoamericana
- ➔ In April movie aficionados take over the sleepy town of Gibara for the offbeat Festival Internacional de Cine Pobre.
- ➔ The city of Holguín shows off its religious spirit during the Romerías de Mayo in early May, culminating with a procession up the steep Loma de la Cruz.
- ➔ To avoid the peak storm period, don't travel during the hurricane season from July to mid-November.

Holguín

POP 288,400

The nation's fourth-largest city serves up authentic provincial Cuba without the wrapping paper. Though the city of San Isidoro de Holguín barely features in Cuba's tourist master plan, there's magic and mystery here for a certain type of traveler. There's an overabundance of shiny vintage Chevys, plazas filled with uniformed school children sharing wi-fi and interactions not marred by rushing or selling. Use it as a window to life in the interior: from the religious solemnity of the annual procession climbing Loma de la Cruz to the exuberant cheers pouring forth from the oversized baseball stadium.

Although Guardalavaca is nearby, there's little focus on tourism in the provincial capital. You won't find tour groups milling the streets in migratory herds, but you will find an easy authenticity. Think eager-to-please *casas particulares*, cheap food in pioneering restaurants and a city that loves – and brews – its own beer.



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; ☎ 24-46-33-95; Frexes No 198; CUC\$1; ☉ 8am-4:30pm Tue-Sat, 8am-noon Sun) Now a national monument, the building on the northern side of Parque Calixto García was constructed between 1860 and 1868 and was 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.

★ La Loma de la Cruz

LANDMARK

At the northern end of Maceo, a stairway built in 1950 ascends 465 steps to top a hill (275m) with panoramic views, a restaurant and a 24-hour bar. It's a 20-minute walk from the center or go via *bici-taxi* (CUC\$1) to the base. This walk is best tackled early in the morning when the light is pristine and temperature cooler.

A cross was raised here in 1790 in the hope of relieving a drought. During *Romerías de Mayo*, devotees climb to the summit on May 3 where a special Mass is held.

★ Catedral de San Isidoro

CATHEDRAL

(Map p352; Manduley) Dazzling white and characterized by its twin domed towers, the Catedral de San Isidoro, one of the town's original constructions, dates from 1720. Added over the years, the towers are of 20th-century vintage. A hyper-realistic statue of Pope John Paul II stands right of the main doors. If it's open, take a peek inside at the relatively austere interior.

Parque Céspedes

PARK

(Parque San José; Map p352) Holguín's youngest park is also its shadiest. Named for 'Father of the Motherland' Carlos Manuel de Céspedes – his statue stands center stage next to a monument honoring the heroes of the War of Independence – the cobbled central square is dominated by the Iglesia de San José.

The church, with its distinctive mezzanine floor, dome and belltower, was once used by the *Independistas* as a lookout tower. Locals still refer to the park by its old name, San José.

Parque Peralta

SQUARE

(Parque de las Flores; Map p352) This square 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 imposing Catedral de San Isidoro. On the western side of the park is the Mural de Origen, depicting the development of Holguín and of Cuba from indigenous times to the end of slavery.

Fábrica de Órganos

FACTORY

(Carretera de Gibara No 301; ☉ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) Visitors can tour the only mechanical music-organ factory in Cuba. This small factory produces about six organs a year, as well as guitars and other instruments.