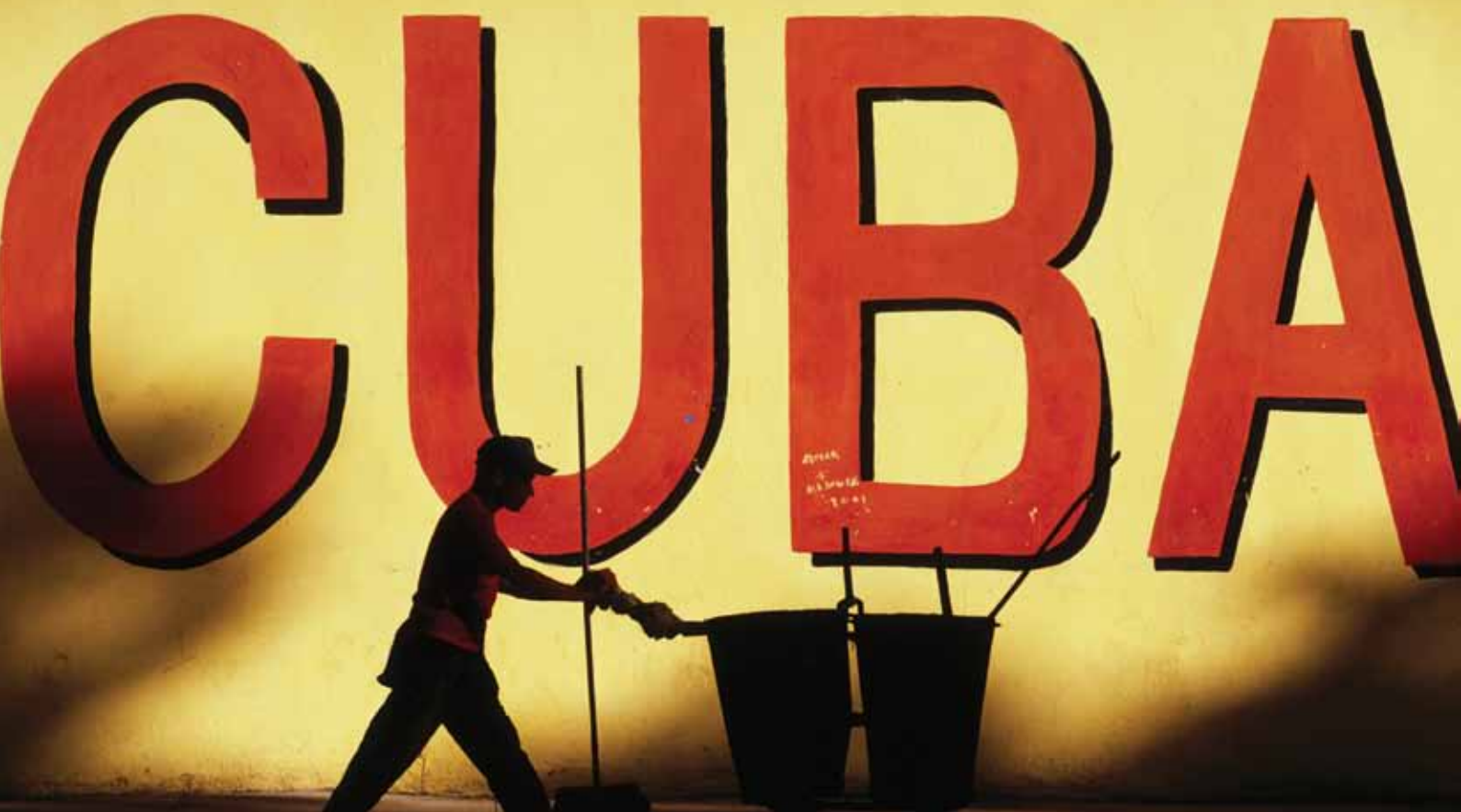




FOREVER





CUBA IS AN ISLAND OF UNDISPUTED BEAUTY AND PASSION, WITH A REVOLUTIONARY AND MUSICAL LEGACY STILL VERY MUCH IN EVIDENCE. CLAIRE BOOBYER TAKES A ROAD TRIP AND DISCOVERS ITS PRISTINE BEACHES, DRAMATIC MOUNTAINS AND THE TOWN FAMOUS AS THE BIRTHPLACE OF SALSA





When Christopher Columbus first spied the north coast of Cuba, he described it as the 'most beautiful land that human eyes had ever seen.' Ever since, the exact spot the Spanish conqueror first glimpsed of the New World Eden has been hotly contested. Fortunately, though, on a holiday to eastern Cuba, the modern-day explorer can make landfall at both places where Columbus was believed to have dropped anchor.

Many history books have Columbus arriving at the Bay of Bariay, on the north coast. However, as the first Spanish settlement on the island, the town of Baracoa, to the northeast, also stakes a claim to the title. Five hundred years on, today's explorers can navigate their way in by flying into Holguín, the gateway to eastern Cuba.

The island's Oriente (eastern) region is steeped in legend and saturated with the country's history, from its pre-Columbian roots to its association with the Revolution, which took place between 1953 – 59. Culturally, it is the source of globally famous tipples, superior smokes, and the birthplace of musical melodies that continue to rock around the world.

We hired a car at Holguín and headed north for Guardalavaca's beaches. Hiring a car is straightforward; driving one, though, requires a sense of humour, patience, a good road map, and a phrasebook. You would think that the lack of road signs heralds the arrival of the world's first humans to evolve with innate GPS. Not so. Stopping to ask a Cuban for directions is sensible, safe and a fast way to make new friends. (Many Cubans hitchhike due to the

ITS MUSICAL LEGACY AND REBELLIOUS STATUS HAVE IGNITED CENTURIES OF PASSION

insufferable public transport system.)

Guardalavaca's coves shelter quartz-white sandy beaches lapped by aquamarine seas. With their isolated resorts, shallow waters and watersports, they appeal to families and adults looking for quiet relaxation.

Some historians argue that Columbus first glimpsed the Bay of Bariay, west of Guardalavaca, in the autumn of 1492. Whether he did or not, the 'Admiral of the Ocean Sea' was not the first to appreciate the verdant beauty of the region. Indigenous Indians settled here and evidence of their existence is seen at the Museo El Chorro de Maíta, where around 100 skeletons of Taíno natives can be found. Look closely and you

will see deformed skulls – the result of a tribal beautification technique.

Many Taíno words resonate today: *huracán* (hurricane) and *cohiba* (tobacco). Columbus noted Indians puffing on rolled up leaves. Today, Cohiba are the world's most celebrated cigars and the Cohiba, Fidel Castro's signature smoke, is Cuba's most famous stogie.

Beyond Bayamo, we drove south through sugar country to Santo Domingo to hike to La Comandancia de la Plata. Fidel Castro masterminded the 1956 – 1959 rebel campaign from here and succeeded in toppling dictator Fulgencio Batista. The Sierra Maestra mountain range foiled all attempts to root out Castro – their ravines making the area completely inaccessible. Less challenging these days, but fascinating, is the humid four-mile return hike to the rebel fighters' huts (now a museum) at La Comandancia. En route, you'll see and hear the national bird, the tocororo (its feathers are red, white and blue, the colour of the national flag).

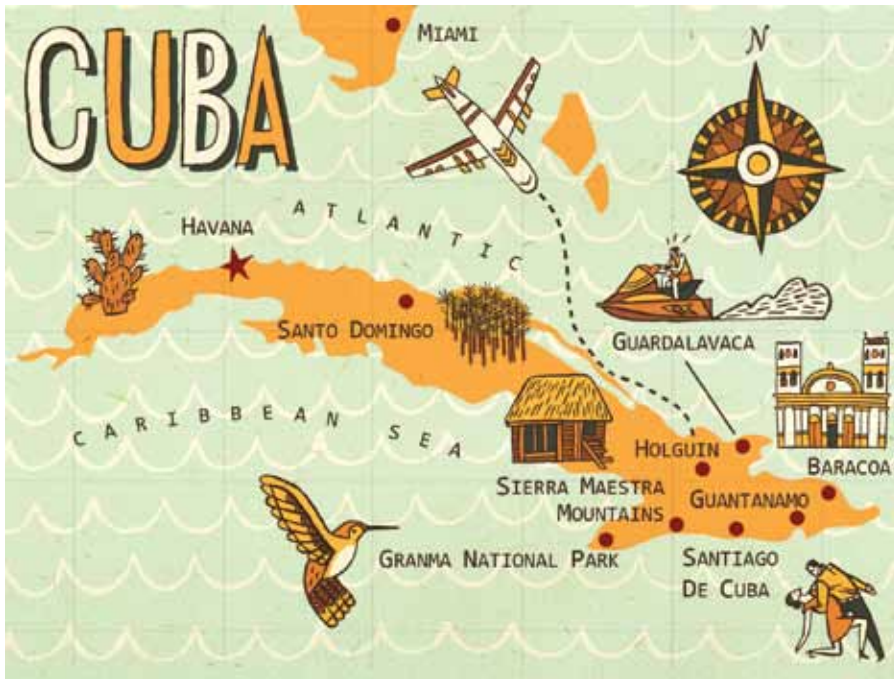
Castro's story starts much earlier, west of La Comandancia, at the heel of a peninsula on the southern coast. This remote coastal spot altered the path of Cuba's history: Fidel and his brother Raúl, along with Che Guevara, sailed from Mexico in 1956 on the yacht *Granma*. They landed here in the mangrove swamps to start the rebel campaign. Batista's troops had been tipped off and of the 82 men who landed, only 12 survived. Our guide regaled us with Revolution stories as we walked through the monstrous mangrove swamp to the landing spot. The Disembarkation of the Granma National Park also features a model *Granma* and the El Guafe trail that leads you through an eroded jagged limestone park, where hummingbirds flit, cacti soar unimpeded by man or nature, and carved Indian idols perch on the ledges of caves.

Driving to Santiago along the southern coastal road is a hair-raising drive, but well worth the jangling nerves. Beyond the black-sand beaches of Marea del Portillo, the road rollercoasters along the forested edges of the Sierra Maestra foothills, slumping steeply as it meets the sea. Clamped between towering trees and the jade green of the Caribbean, the road meanders through this most isolated of the country's landscapes. Roads cling to the edge of the sea, seemingly holding on after the many hurricanes that have pummelled the area. For this reason, it's essential you take advice in the town of Pilon before setting off for some adventurous driving.

Make sure you stop off at the Los Galeones Hotel, perching on a miniature peak and overlooking the sea at Chivirico, and drink in the view while sipping a daquirí. The famous rum cocktail was named after a mine, east of Santiago de Cuba. Officially Cuba's coolest city, Santiago's rebellious status and musical legacy have ignited centuries of passion. The 'cradle of the Revolution', it was also the birthplace of son ►



Previous page: Fort Santiago (top) bears witness to the city's turbulent past while the crystal clear waters of Guardalavaca beach (bottom) offer calm and beauty. Above: Along with stunning natural landscapes, visitors to Cuba seek out its cigars, rum cocktails and evidence of its passionate revolutionary and musical history



music, the foundation of modern-day salsa and originally a fusion of African rhythm instruments (bongos and claves) and the Spanish guitar. The first slave uprisings in Cuba were in Santiago, and the Spanish fought the Americans in a naval battle in 1898; more recently, Fidel Castro attacked the city's Moncada barracks (in 1953) in his first attempt to overthrow Batista.

Today, the historic spirit of Santiago is reflected in the city's vitality. From the top of the Casa Granda hotel, the view sweeps past the cathedral's cream towers, the town hall where Castro proclaimed the success of his Revolution, and down to the busy port. Its Spanish colonial streets are a tangle of wires, ornate ironwork, and crumbling doors, bustling with local residents as they go about their daily business. At night, with the heat of the day subsiding a little, it erupts to the sound of music that streams out of the Casa de la Trova. The tinkle of instruments only strengthens in July when the Chinese cornet, charged with leading the conga through the streets, heads the hip-gyrating Santiaguera crowd with its haunting call during La Fiesta del Fuego (The Festival of Fire), and Carnival.

From the musical maelstrom of Santiago, we drove east to Guantánamo, where ominous signs flag up the US naval base across Cuba's most arid landscape. Giant, phallic-shaped cacti cluster on rusty red ground and the wild, black rock coastline is roughed up by deep sea that swirls from inky black to a bright turquoise blue. And this strangely beautiful journey only gets better. Some 50 kilometres before Baracoa, the road climbs to the La Farola highway – this immense feat of engineering only linked Baracoa to the outside world in 1965. The surrounding mountains are cloaked in native

ESSENTIALS

WHEN TO GO

The Festival del Caribe (also known as the Festival of Fire) runs for a week at the beginning of July. Carnival runs for a week, pivoting around 26 July. Both July and August are the most humid months of the year. Hurricanes can strike between June and November. There will be huge celebrations in Baracoa this August, when the town turns 500 years old.

WHAT TO EAT AND DRINK

Most Cuban food is pretty bland; exceptions are the fish in coconut sauce (found in Baracoa), *ropa vieja* (shredded beef) and the plentiful tropical fruits. Cuba is cocktail central: rum is drunk as much as water! Local beer brews are Cristal and Bucanero.

WHAT IT COSTS

Cuba operates a dual currency – moneda nacional/peso (MNS/ CUP\$) and Cuban peso convertible (CUC\$). CUC\$1 is worth 24 Cuban pesos. Costs for tourists are much higher than for locals. A meal in an average restaurant will cost CUC\$10–20, a beer and coffee CUC\$1–1.50, bottled water CUC\$1–2. Car hire starts at CUC\$30 a day in low season, plus CUC\$10 a day insurance. Tourist petrol (Especial) is CUC\$1.30/litre.

Royal Palms, coconut palms, cocoa beans and coffee bushes, and crisscrossed by many rivers.

Nature's magnificence doesn't end in Baracoa; it is magnified. Flushed by the 29 rivers that flow to meet the sea, the area groans with fruits of the forest. When we arrived at our Cuban homestay (a type of bed and breakfast), we were offered the local delicacy of *cucurucho* (a cone-shaped palm leaf that contains a coconut and sugar candy). I can highly recommend it.

Our host also took us to the cathedral, founded in August 1511, to see the Cruz de La Parra, said to be the cross Columbus planted on arrival in Cuba and the oldest symbol of Christianity in the New World. The bust of the Taíno chief of Baracoa (Hatuey) – who rebelled against the Spanish and was burnt at the stake – stares defiantly at the church. We then climbed to the Hotel Castillo, the converted Spanish fort of Santa Bárbara used to deter pirates. From here, we could see the bay, the higgledy-piggledy terracotta roofs of the town, and the looming El Yunque, an anvil-shaped mountain, that dominates the skyline.

Behind the town is the Archaeology Museum, situated in dramatic caves and displaying Taíno skeletons in situ. Later, we traced the Indians' roots to a fishing village, Boca de Miel, situated at the mouth of the River of Honey, which it is named after. Today, you can still spy canoes made out of dugout trees (*cayucos*) – the same kind that Columbus spied 500 years before.

Fortified by coconut milk, we bathed upstream in the cool flow of the river. Legend dictates that those who swim in the River of Honey will always return to Baracoa. We said that we would, agreeing with Columbus that it was indeed one of the most beautiful lands ever seen.

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* Turn to page 126 for Ts & Cs.

