



Travel Industry **TODAY**



Winter Sun packages
BOOK NOW, BEACH LATER PROMOTION >
 Book by September 30 with only a \$100 deposit

[HOME](#)[ABOUT](#) [VIDEOS](#) [COLUMNISTS](#) [CONTACT](#) [SEARCH](#)

WHY WE ENJOY CUBA

Holguin Province Sets the Tone

Steve Gillick

[SHARE ON FACEBOOK](#)

15 MAY 2017: And to think it all started with an uppity teenager. Over one million Canadians visit Cuba each year to enjoy the beaches and dine on fish and seafood, but there are probably very few who actually know why they are able to do this. The answer lies under a thatched roof, at the edge

of a cliff on Cayo Bariya, a place that's a bit off the beaten track in Cuba's Holguin Province.

The advertisement features a dark teal background with white text. At the top, the title "Get TODAY Tomorrow" is displayed in large, bold, sans-serif letters. Below the title is a bulleted list of six descriptive words: "informative", "provocative", "opinionated", "infuriating", "revealing", and "amusing". Following this list is the phrase "... essential" in a smaller, italicized font. At the bottom of the ad is a blue button with the white text "SUBSCRIBE NOW!".

Here, a descendent of the native Taino people, dressed in loincloth and body paint interpreted the meaning of a strange wooden statue, pointing out that the round disk represented a pumpkin, and what appeared to be irregular-shaped sticks flowing out of the pumpkin, represented fish.

He explained the myth of Yaya, the son of the Supreme God Yaya, who in his teen years became rebellious and disrespectful of his father. In a fit of anger, Yaya killed his son and put his body inside a pumpkin. Yaya's mother longed to see her son, so one day she picked up the pumpkin thinking she would open it, but it fell to the ground and broke, and water and fish poured out and covered the earth.

This is how the oceans, fish and seafood, all of which sustained the Taino people for thousands of years, came to be...and this is why travellers come to Cuba over and over again, to enjoy all these miraculous bounties of nature!



Our visit to Cayo Bariay was one of the trips arranged for the media at FITCuba, the annual tourism fair that took place this year in Holguin, Cuba's third most populous province. The beauty and variety of the land harken back to Christopher Columbus's oft-quoted statement that the area was 'the most beautiful land, eyes have ever seen' and certainly when you travel throughout Holguin and experience the wonderful soft-sand beaches as well as rugged rocks and forested mountains, each destination seems to lay claim to the actual site to which Columbus landed.

The strongest contenders seem to be Guardalavaca (where a statue of Columbus stands by the ocean), Gibara (where Columbus' ships took shelter from stormy weather) and Cayo Bariay (where an Indian Village matches the descriptions in Columbus' diary). But similar to the Columbus guessing game, most places in Holguin Province inspire awe, exploration, relaxation and ultimately, satisfaction.

On May 3, 1790, the Franciscan Friar Antonio Joseph Alegría, carried a cross up the hill in Holguin City and planted it on top, as was the Spanish custom, to protect all the surrounding lands from epidemics, witchcraft and natural disasters. A tradition started whereby locals would climb the hill (La Cruz Hillock) on May 3rd, and this annual event gradually evolved into both a religious and entertainment experience.



On May 3, 2017 for example, Las Romerias de Maya (The Pilgrimages of May) Festival was in full swing in front of Parque Calixto Garcia when we arrived in Holguin's city centre. This included a parade featuring an eye-popping display of dancers that ranged from Samba to Ballet to Chinese Dragon dancing, baton twirlers, costumed stilt walkers, a display of flags that included Canadians, a second group of Quebecers, horse carts festooned with flags and groups carrying super-sized Cuban and Revolutionary Flags.

And there were cultural displays, men and women showing off political body art (Unblock Cuba), cartoon characters, dancing skeletons and traditional costumes. Every few minutes the entire procession halted as the main stage filled with entertainers who performed bouncy Cha Cha tunes and hip-swirling Cuban rhythms, all to the absolute delight of the crowd gathered under the shade of trees and umbrellas as well as on the roofs and balconies of nearby buildings.

Afterward while we drove to the top of La Cruz Hillock, many of the locals climbed the 458 steps, including the man balancing a bottle of rum on his head (not a drop was spilled), a group carrying the "Hacha de Holguin", the symbol of the city that honours the first inhabitants, and groups of spirited Cuban and Revolutionary-flag carriers.

At Cayo Bariya the next afternoon, the idea of honouring the past was again emphasized at Punta de Sabaneta or the Encounter of Two Cultures.

One part of this monument-park resembles white arches from European ruins, arranged symbolically in the shape of the prow of a Spanish ship. The second part features red earth-coloured statues, arranged in a circle, that reflect the beliefs and traditions of the Taino people who lived in Cuba 10,000 years before Columbus' arrival. The statues represent community, fertility, fire, family, rain, sun, tobacco, the beginning and end of life, human beings and Yaya--the God of the gods.

And to dramatically tie the cultural encounters together, a nearby Indian Village presented a short (but a bit hokey) skit involving one man dressed like a 15th century Spaniard and carrying a cross, while several Taino people ran away in fear.

However, anthropologists seem to have agreed that this indeed is the exact village where Columbus landed, based on artifacts found in the area (and on display) as well as passages from Columbus' diary describing the village, the coastline and the beaches that existed at the time. So perhaps the skit was not that hokey after all!



On the last day of FITCuba, we drove 90 minutes to Antilla, another off-the-beaten-track town, where we boarded Catamarans for a one-hour ride to Cayo Saetia, a National Park on Nipe Bay. The Catamaran ride was one of those sun, fun, drink and dance experiences that loosens up travellers for the Park encounter that can include swimming, snorkelling, horseback riding and a jeep safari.

We took the Safari, carefully scouting the red earth terrain for endemic species, however our first encounter was with an Ostrich (!) who happily ran toward the jeep, apparently looking for handouts. The driver held the 'wild' bird in place so we could take photos. As we continued our drive, we spotted small groups of antelope and deer. At one point we stopped the jeep to look at a herd of buffalo sitting contentedly under a tree. They stared back at us for a few minutes, then got up,

crossed the road (Why did the Buffalo cross the Road?) and just kept walking.

As we continued our adventure we saw horses with their foals, some Zebra who had been rolling in the red earth (what's black and white and red all over?), and several very large Jurassic-looking Iguanas. All in all, Cayo Saetia was a laid back, fun experience.



Aside from the Ocean, the Bays (Bahia), the Keys (Cayos), those who love to explore, will love to spend time in Cuba because of the people, the myths and legends and the serendipitous discoveries that can be found in National Parks and natural settings. Holguin Province sets the tone for enjoying Cuba in a totally unique way.

**Get TODAY
Tomorrow**

- informative
- provocative
- opinionated
- infuriating
- revealing
- amusing

... essential

SUBSCRIBE NOW!



The statue at Cayo Bariya that explains the myth of Yayael and the origin of the Oceans and Fish





Share on Facebook

Twitter



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

[Read more from Steve Gillick](#)

Comments for this thread are now closed.

Important Update

When you log in with Disqus, we process personal data to facilitate your authentication and posting of comments. We also store the comments you post and those comments are immediately viewable and searchable by anyone around the world.

- I agree to Disqus' Terms of Service
- I agree to Disqus' processing of email and IP address, and the use of cookies, to facilitate my authentication and posting of comments, explained further in the Privacy Policy

Proceed