

With its red tiles, neoclassical façades with their louver-boards and pilasters, windows and carved screens, the city of Camagüey, the birthplace of Cuba's national poet Nicolás Guillén, offers its visitors a haughty and legendary beauty.

Legendary Camagüey



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One of the emblematic sites of Camagüey (Cuba).

As my friend, the Cuban poet Roberto Méndez, a native of Camagüey, tells it, the indigenous chief Camagüebax welcomed the Spaniards with open arms when they arrived in 1514 in what they would call Villa Santa María del Puerto Príncipe. The chief gave them a ribbon of land stretched between the Tinima and Hatibonico rivers so they could settle. They, in exchange, murdered him and threw him off a mountaintop. Legend has it the land all around immediately turned red.

That said, the capital of Cuba's

most extensive province, also called Camagüey, had to be re-founded several times in diverse circumstances down through history. First the indigenous people rose up against the conquistadores, then pirates attacked and finally in 1616 a dreadful fire reduced all the ecclesiastical archives to ashes. Difficult, then, to piece together the history of the city, which, in the past, was characterized by narrow and sinuous streets like a medieval town, in flagrant contrast to the rectangular shape of its main square today.

Following the 1616 fire, the city's

first parish church, La Parroquial, was rebuilt. It was moved from its original site facing the city council to a side of Arms Square. From then on, urban geography adopted the church as its core and the square as its centre. It was around the latter, renamed Agramante Park, that the most important government buildings were erected.

The city with the earthenware jars

Residential buildings definitely take up the most space within the central historical heritage, which is probably the largest in Cuba. We must remember that in 1800, at the start of the 19th century, the Royal Justice Palace of Santo Domingo Island was transferred to Camagüey, when the former Spanish colony became French under the Treaty of Basel. As a result prominent families came to live in the city, giving impetus to majestic architecture with its own particularities, consisting mainly of what we call today neoclassical houses, which still bear the names of their owners in olden times.

These large palaces, built in the second half of the 19th century, conform to the fashion of the era that favoured neoclassical style and had as antecedents the vast two-storey houses of the previous century. We can therefore affirm that, starting in 1850, architecture took on a new aesthetic. The most eloquent example is the Socarrás building, designed in 1862 by the Spanish architect Dionisio de la Iglesia, whose influence is evident on all subsequent buildings. Everywhere we find the rhetorical alternation of pilasters and bay windows as well as balconies defined by wrought-iron balustrades.

In 1841, Camagüey comprised 125 streets composed of 1033 blocks of houses, and already standing since the 18th century were buildings like the convent and hospital of San Juan de Dios, the churches of La Merced and La Soledad, the Jesuit college and the women's hospital, all imposing constructions typical of the century's architecture.

But if there is one thing that gives personality to this city the Cubans call 'Legendary', it is the enormous earthenware jars, like those in Andalusia, placed on the patios of houses and in gardens and parks which fill with rainwater and are intended to keep epidemics from spreading. They started making them in 1620, at the same time as the bricks and tiles used in the construction of all the city's buildings.

Camagüey is also scattered with an impressive number of churches, which earned it the nickname 'city of temples'. All of them share the same feature, a single tower. The architectonic complex that includes the Iglesia de Nuestra Señora del Carmen, the Ursuline convent and the women's hospital is the most typical example.

If the cart had not got stuck in the mud...

But the church that goes farthest back in time is the old Ermita de Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, haunted by a legend. The story



Daily life in Camagüey.

goes that at the beginning of the 17th century, a cart drawn by oxen came to a halt at the future site of the church, stuck in the mud. The load was removed to lighten the cart and a mysterious bundle fell to the ground, containing the image of Our Lady of La Soledad. Brother José de la Cruz Espí, known as Father Valencia, recognized this as a sign and had the church built, along with a number of other Christian houses of worship.

It was in Camagüey, furthermore, that what is considered Cuba's first literary work, *El Espejo de Paciencia*, the Mirror of Patience, materialized, written by the public writer from the Canary Islands Nicolás Guillén, the island's national poet.

In the general cemetery is pre-

served the epitaph that poet and barber Agustín de Moya is believed to have written in memory of his beloved and inaccessible Dolores Rondón. According to Méndez, Dolores, the illegitimate daughter of a Catalan merchant, chose out of self-interest to accept the advances of a Spanish officer instead of those of the love-struck Moya. In 1863, the barber found her in the women's hospital, disfigured and dying of the pox. Above the common grave where she was buried, an epitaph appeared on a piece of wood. Anonymous hands renewed the inscription as the years passed, until finally in the 19th century the mayor, Pedro García Argenot, decided to build a tomb in the central part of the cemetery.

The epitaph on it reads:

Here Dolores Rondón came
to the end of her path.
Come, mortal, and consider,
How great are pride and
self-importance
Opulence and power
Everything withers in the end
Because nothing is immortal
Except the harm we keep
ourselves from doing
And the good we are able to do.

Marilyn Bobes,
Cuban poet



Pilasters and wrought-iron balustrades are part of Camagüey's charm.

(The UNESCO Courier, 2008, n°6)