

HILL OF IDENTITY

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Written by Hiram Pérez Concepción

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Photo: Juan Pablo Carreras

Rising to the blue and crowning its summit, a Christian cross rises overlooking the village of San Isidoro de Holguín in memory of the one placed by Antonio de Alegrias, prior of the Order of St. Francis, on the top of former Cerro Bayado hill on the 3rd of May, 1790, known since that moment on as Loma de la Cruz (The Cross Hill).

But 127 meters above the city after climbing 458 steps will take the visitor enjoy the view of a wonderful city, whose unique system of squares in the Historical Center drove calling Holguín la Ciudad Cubana de los Parques (The Cuban City of the Parks).

Starting 1790 it hosted the Romerías de la Cruz de Mayo, a traditional religious celebration of Spanish origin, which in our case was tinged with fun.

Since very early, every May 3rd, Holguin people headed to La Loma de la Cruz in a procession that parted from the Parish Church of San Isidoro, but also from the Plaza de Armas - today's Calixto García Park. Making their way along San Isidoro Street (Libertad), people either walking or riding on horseback, proceeded to climb to the top of the hill; however, the majority remained on the base of the slopes. After a mass was officiated, a massive party began with cockfights, ribbon race, and other games; people drank zambumbia, agualojas, soft drinks and ate the traditional roast suckling pig. With the passing of time the religious event became a popular celebration on the slope of the hill, on the streets and houses, however, without losing its

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religious root.

Holguin people used to climb the hill on Resurrection Sundays, but the hill and its cross have also being used for other beliefs proper of the religious syncretism of the Cuban culture.

As the hill was steep, thus making it hard to climb it, and to find a way to ease the religious celebration there, Oscar Albanes Carballo promoted the construction of the staircase, an eclectic style project by Vicente Biosca that also included an oratory, a roundabout, lookouts and the reconstruction of a colonial fort in 1895. The construction of the staircase that lasted 23 years, from January 28, 1927 to May 3, 1950, was a pride for Holguin people s then, who considered it the ninth wonder of the world.

During the war initiated in 1895, the use of a heliograph allowed communication between the hill with Jaguaní town as well as some other points of the Holguín - Gibara defensive line. The height also witnessed the siege of Holguin city by mambi forces (Cuban freedom forces), but also the killing of several local people and foreigners who fought side by patriots for Cuba's independence.

On the flat land facing the hill, (El Llano neighborhood today) was built in 1831 the Quinta de Caleagno - a leisure place for local governors, later became a Military Hospital and in 1917 a Civil Hospital. In the 60's of the 20th century, a college and today is one of the headquarters of the Holguin province branch of the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment (Citma).

On April 4, 1893, the railway station linking Gibara and Holguín was inaugurated in this area. Years later, the place started to be largely populated, and in the 50s the highway to link the city of Holguin and the top of Loma de la Cruz was built, in addition to placing up there a TV tower and its station.

Today Loma de la Cruz keeps history and the time it is also present and future with restaurants, cafeterias and the Historical-Natural Theme Park Projects, the City at your Feet (heliograph ceremony) and the celebration by the Hermanos Saiz Association every year, from the 2nd to 8th of May, of the festival of tradition and modernity called Romerías de Mayo, inspired on the motto: There is no today without yesterday, where the whole city becomes a huge stage for concerts, workshops, exhibitions, thought events, among many other activities.