

Introduction

Despite the fact that Puerto Rico has been part of the territorial United States since 1898, most Americans know little or nothing about the island. Yet Puerto Rico is one of the most exotic places in the nation — a miniature Latin America set in the Caribbean. And San Juan was a thriving town when Jamestown was still an undeveloped plot of land.

This very attractive island contains numerous forest reserves, beaches, ancient indigenous sites, an abundance of historical atmosphere, and the only tropical National Forest in the US.

Sadly, the vast majority of visitors get stuck in the tourist traps of Condado and never experience the island's charms.

The Land

The islands of the Caribbean stretch in a 2,800-mile (4,500-km) arc from the western tip of Cuba to the small Dutch island of Aruba. The region is sometimes extended to include the Central and South American countries of Belize (the former Colony of British Honduras), the Yucatán, Surinam, Guiana, and Guyana. The islands of Jamaica, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, the US

and British Virgin Islands, along with Cuba, the Caymans, and the Turks and Caicos islands form the Greater Antilles. Early geographers gave the name “Antilia” to hypothetical islands thought to lie beyond the equally imaginary “Antilades.”

In general, the land is steep and volcanic in origin: chains of mountains run across Jamaica, Cuba, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico, and hills rise abruptly from the sea along most of the Virgin Islands.

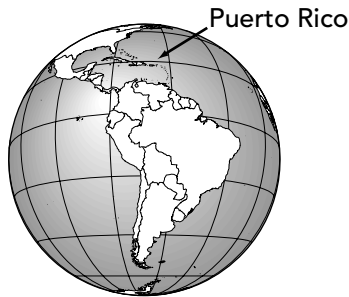
Geography

Smallest and most easterly of the Greater Antilles, Puerto Rico's 3,435 sq. miles (8,768 sq. km — roughly the size of Connecticut, Crete, or Corsica) serve as one of the barriers between the waters of the Caribbean and the Atlantic: the N coast faces the Atlantic while the E and S coasts face the Caribbean. The Virgin Islands lie to the E; to the W the 75-mile-wide (121-km) Mona Passage separates the island from neighboring Hispaniola.

The seas off the coast are peppered with numerous cays and some small islands. The small archipelago of Culebra and the island of Vieques lie off the E coast, while the even smaller Mona lies to the W. An irregular submarine shelf, seven miles at its widest, surrounds the island. Two miles off the N coast

fast find

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Puerto Rican Festivals and Events

Jan. 1	New Year's Day
Jan. 6	Epiphany or Three Kings Day; traditional day of gift-giving
Jan. 11	Birthday of Eugenio De Hostos, Puerto Rican educator, writer, and patriot (half-day)
Jan. 15	Martin Luther King Day (half day)
Jan.	San Sebastian Street Fiesta in Old San Juan. Crafts, shows, arts, games, processions, dancing, and <i>paso fino</i> horses on display.
Feb.	Washington's Birthday (half-day, movable)
March 22	Emancipation Day
April	Good Friday (movable)
April 16	José de Diego's Birthday
May	Memorial Day (movable)
June 24	St. John the Baptist Day
July 4	Independence Day
July 17	Luiz Muñoz Rivera's Birthday
July 25	Commonwealth Constitution Day
July 27	Dr. José Celso Barbosa's Birth
Sept.	Labor Day (movable)
Oct.	Columbus Day (movable)
Nov. 11	Veteran's Day
Nov. 19	Puerto Rico Discovery Day
Nov.	Thanksgiving (movable)
Dec. 25	Christmas Day

internationally. A friend and collaborator of Casals, he promoted both symphonic music on the island and the *danza*, recording, editing, and performing the latter.

OPERA: Puerto Rico is also the birthplace of famed operatic tenor **Antonio Paoli** (1872-1946), who performed for Czar Nicholas II of Russia, Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, and the Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria. The latter bestowed upon him the



Putumayo Records has an excellent series of world music compilations. Their **Puerto Rico** disk contains tunes by major salsa artists.

title of Court Singer. After earning and spending an estimated \$2 million, Paoli returned home to the island in 1922, where he taught music to the island's youth. Other famous Puerto Rican opera singers include Pablo Elvira and Justino Diaz.

MODERN MUSIC: Although born and bred in New York's Caribbean melting pot, **salsa** (Spanish for "sauce") and the Dominican-originated **merengue** blare from every car stereo and boom box on the island. El Gran Combo, comprised of 13 or so members and led by pianist Rafael Ithier, who is the band's only remaining original member, is one of Puerto Rico's contributions to the *salsa* scene. They have recorded more than 60 albums. Major *salsa* figures of Puerto Rican extraction include pianists (and brothers) the late Charlie and (still alive and kicking) Eddie Palmieri, trombonist Willie Colón, percussionist Ray Barretto, and the late, great timbale wizard Tito Puente. Born in Ponce, José "Cheo" Feliciano was one of the most famous island-born *salsa* singers. Ismael Rivera is another famous Puerto Rican bandleader, composer, and percussionist. Vocalist Gilberto Santa Rosa is another homeboy made good.

Of late, upstart Neoricans such as Marc Anthony and Ricky Martin have garnered wide acclaim by mixing salsa with pop in a very successful effort to reach a wider audience. Pop singer Chayanne (the stage name of Puerto Rico-born Elmer Figueroa Maple) has recently joined their ranks. While good for the financial well being of the artists concerned, this does not mean that there has

The 58-rm. **Gran Hotel El Convento** (☎ 787-723-9020, ☎ 787-721-2877; Box 1048, San Juan 00902), a restored 300-year-old Carmelite Convent is situated in the heart of the old town at C. Cristo 100, on the corner of Caleta de San Juan and across from the Catedral de San Juan. First opened as a hotel in 1962, it was completely renovated at a cost of \$15 million in 1996. It's worth a visit even if you aren't staying here. Facilities include a restaurant, casino, small pool, sun-decks, meeting facilities, and Jacuzzi.

Guests use a card in the elevator to take them to the hotel's floors. There is a breakfast lounge (breakfast is included) which has newspapers and serves wine and *hors d'oeuvres* in the late afternoon.

Rooms have TV/VCR, phone, hair dryer, CD player and tape deck, and other amenities, including a perhaps unwelcome bathroom scale. Much more expensive suites are also available. It's come a long way from a nunnery. Rates run around \$200-375 d.

<http://www.elconvento.com>
elconvento@aol.com

The 30-room **Hotel Milano** (☎ 787-729-9050, 877-729-9050, ☎ 787-722-3379), C. Fortaleza 307, is a great new addition to the limited number of hotels here. It has a bar and good restaurant on its roof. Rates are \$80-\$135 which includes continental breakfast. Rooms have cable TV, phone, a/c, and small refrigerator.

<http://www.hotelmilanopr.com>
hmilano@coqui.net

Formerly the Hotel Central, the 51-rm. **Hotel Plaza de Armas** (☎ 787-722-2751, 888-300-8008), C. San José, charges around \$105 s, \$115 d plus tax. It has some handicapped-accessible rooms and continental breakfast is included in the rates.

<http://www.ihppr.com>

LOW BUDGET: There's not much to offer in this area. The old town could really use a youth hostel! One alternative, recommended by readers, is the **Enrique Castro Guest House** (☎ 787-722-5436; Box 947, Old San Juan PR 00902), C. Tanca 205, which offers rooms for around \$20 d and \$80 pw (a/c rooms are \$120 pw). Don't expect much in terms of facilities here.

LONGER TERM: If staying for an extended period, ask around about renting a room or an apartment. One of the most pleasant places to stay is **The Caleta** (☎ 787-725-5347; San Juan, PR 00901), Caleta de las Monjas 11, which offers modest but fully furnished studio apartments (phone optional) right in the heart of town near the Rogativa statue. Above a coin laundry, it's quiet, friendly, safe, and secure, and manager Michael is friendly and hospitable. He also has a wide variety of rentals at other locations available. Expect to pay from around \$400/mo. He also offers daily and weekly rates at this and other locations.

<http://www.thecaleta.com>
reservations@thecaleta.com

FOOD: The streets are lined with various eating houses and restaurants ranging from the comparatively plush ones lining C. Cristo to budget eateries on the other side of the town.

Highly recommended and reasonable is **Gopal** (☎ 787-724-0229), a *restaurante vegetariano* run by a Hare Krishna-ized Puerto Rican family. Natural food dishes like *sopa de vegetales*, tortillas, spinach, broccoli, lasagna, and a variety of fresh fruit drinks (rather sugary) are lovingly dished out by Jayapatni and her family. Try the combination plate (\$4.25 for a "small" plate). It's at C. Tetuan 201 B and is open from 7-3, Mon. to Friday. The spacious, elongated room features some great Indian miniature paintings that are well worth checking out. Saturdays at 4:30 PM you'll

Wed. to Sun. It serves grilled items.

OUTLYING HOTEL DINING: The **Inn on the Blue Horizon** has **Café Blu** (☎ 787-741-3318), a locally-famous gourmet restaurant, which also has a “Cigar Tree” where you can light up a stinky and imbibe Port.

La Casa del Frances (☎ 787-741-3751) serves gourmet food made with tropical ingredients. You may dine poolside or in the dining room.

SERVICES: **Zoraida Morales** (☎ 787-741-6031), C. Magnolias 425, offers **babysitting** services.

ENTERTAINMENT: Two popular hangouts are **Amapola Tavern** (☎ 787-741-1382), C. Flamboyán 144, and **Bananas** (☎ 787-741-8700). Amapola is more of a sports scene (with a wide-screen TV) while Bananas is livelier and sometimes has live music.

ENTERTAINMENT: **Eddie's** is on C. Flamboyán at Orquídea. **El Trapezon Oriental** has lots of flashing lights, chicken wire, and neon Budweiser signs. It has live music which starts late.

SHOPPING: **La Copa de Oro** is next to the tennis courts. A small boutique despite the name, **The Mall** is at Casa de Frances. Behind **Kim's Cabin** which offers clothing and other items, **Peppers** has spicy condiments as well as crafts.

Bali Llama is a boutique which sells clothing from Bali for men, women, and children.

Casa Vieja Gallery is out at Inn on the Blue Horizon.

Near Esperanza across from the pineapple factory, **Taller de Arte Taina** (☎ 787-741-0848) is a women's pottery workshop that recreates indigenous-style pieces. Constructing handmade works using the

tried-and-true coil method, it has operated since 1991.

Esperanza Outdoor Activities

BICYCLING: **Bike rentals** are available for \$10 pd from Inn on the Blue Horizon, or from **Don't Yank My Chain Bike Rental** (☎ 787-741-3042).

La Dulce Vida (☎ 787-617-2453) are located at the bottom of the road leading to Hacienda Tamarindo on Carr. 996 at Calle Orquídeas #69. They offer a variety of trips.

<http://www.bikevieques.com>

DIVE SHOPS: Dive shops include **18 Degrees North** and **Blue Caribe Dive Shop** (☎ 787-741-2522 ☎ 787-741-1313; Box 1574, Vieques, PR 00765). Blue Caribe also rents kayaks, and they offer PADI certification and snorkeling trips.

<http://www.divevieques.com/index.htm>
bcaribe@coqui.net

DIVE SITES: There are a lot of good spots off of Esperanza.

Directly S of the pier and to the W of Cayo Real, **Castle Reef** is a novice dive which runs from 30 to 35 ft. (9-11 m). This low-lying reef hosts spotted drums, snapper, and other fish.

The Caves is an intermediate dive site set near the end of Cayo Tierra (Land Cay), a long and narrow sandy spit set to the E of Esperanza which gives the illusion of being an island. This intermediate dive ranges from 25-35 ft. (7.5-11 m). Visibility is not the best, the current can be rough, and it has been damaged by storms. However, the caves host nurse sharks, croakers, and other species.

Just 15 min. by boat and 1.5 mi. (2.4 mi.) from shore, **Anchor Reef** is a novice dive named after its hallmark Spanish anchor. This is a low-lying reef, at a depth of 50 to 60 ft. (15-18 m), which has two bowl-like depressions filled with soft coral. Watch for barracuda, spider crabs, rays, and creole jacks.