

# Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico is where the easy-going Caribbean collides with the slick efficiency of modern America. The result is a colorful, diverse and culturally unique island that is often as confusing as it is cosmopolitan. Hip funky restaurants nestle next to 15th-century Spanish forts; sprawling shopping malls encroach upon fecund tropical rainforests; and glitzy casinos lie juxtaposed against some of the most stunning beaches in the Caribbean.

History is another draw card. While the United States struggles to emulate the erstwhile glories of 'old world' Europe, Puerto Rico gets out its killer trump card: beguiling Viejo San Juan, one of the oldest and best-preserved colonial cities in the Americas. Cocooned in what was the crucible of Spain's once-illustrious colonial empire, neighborly pensioners recline languidly in creaking rocking chairs; *bomba* drums light up the somnolence of a diminutive baroque plaza; and the walls of two great military forts rise like wizened sentinels above the depths of the untamed Atlantic.

Racing headlong into the 21st century, contemporary Puerto Rico can sometimes present a bewildering picture to culture-seeking visitors. Decades of unchecked American-style development have meant that, despite significant economic advances, the modern world has stamped its ugly mark on the idyllically named *Isla del Encanto* (Island of Enchantment). But purists can take heart. In Puerto Rico what you see isn't always what you get. Scratch under the surface and the soul of island will serendipitously reveal itself. Hop on a local bus, disappear off into the central mountains, or pedal your way around the beautiful island of Vieques; just be sure to tear up any cast-iron itineraries and let the open road lead you where it will.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 3500 sq miles
- **Capital** San Juan
- **Country code** ☎ 787
- **Departure tax** US\$14.10 (normally included in the ticket price)
- **Famous for** Rum, salsa, baseball
- **Language** Spanish, English
- **Money** US dollar (US\$); US\$1 = €0.65 = UK£0.51
- **Official name** Puerto Rico
- **People** Puerto Ricans
- **Phrase** *Qué pasa?* What's happening? *Esta todo hablado.* It's all understood.
- **Population** 3.9 million
- **Visa** Unnecessary for most countries; see p354



## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Old San Juan** (p329) Uncover the city's soul where over 500 years of history gets crammed into just seven square blocks
- **Vieques** (p343) Roam through a newly appointed wildlife refuge where the sound of exploding US navy shells has been replaced by the somnolence of over a dozen deserted beaches
- **El Yunque** (p343) Fall asleep to a chorus of frogs and wake up to a mug of locally grown coffee in El Yunque, Puerto Rico's dripping tropical rainforest
- **Ponce** (p348) Find out why Puerto Ricans are aficionados of salsa at an open-air music festival in Plaza Las Delicias in Puerto Rico's most colonial city
- **Parque de las Cavernas del Río Camuy** (p342) Head underground among stalagmites and stalactites in the island's cavernous karst country

## ITINERARIES

- **Three Days** Discover the wonders of Old San Juan, with its museums, galleries, monuments and forts. After dark, jump back into the 21st century and bar hop along Fortaleza. Take a trip to the rum factory in Cataño and hit the municipal beaches of Condado and Ocean Park.
- **One Week** Follow the three-day itinerary and on day four take an ecotour to El Yunque for hiking and river swimming. Check out Playa Luquillo, then head west to the Camuy caves and the Arecibo Observatory.
- **Two Weeks** Follow the one-week itinerary, lingering in karst country at the Casa Grande Mountain Retreat before heading east to Fajardo. Take the ferry to Vieques and visit the bioluminescent bay before heading over to Culebra. Check out Playa Flamenco and spend the night at Mamacitas. After a mid-morning ferry ride back, drive to Ponce and use that as a base to check out Guánica forest, then move up the coast to Rincón.

## CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit Puerto Rico is mid-December through late-April. The upside of visiting at this time is the weather, which is sunny (but not too hot) and free from the threat of hurricanes. The downside is that prices get hiked up and crowds are generally

heavier. Skirt the edges of the high season (ie November and May) and you could get lucky with both the weather and cut-price rates.

The Caribbean hurricane season runs from June to November, with the highest storm risk in September and October. Every year is different, however, and booking your trip around the weather can be a bit of a lottery.

Temperatures – aside from in the Central Mountains – rarely fall below 60°F (16°C). Generally it's 80°F (27°C) and sunny. Rains last from June to November and can be heavy with wash-outs occurring frequently.

## HISTORY

Indigenous peoples are thought to have arrived – via a raft from Florida – around the 1st century AD, quickly followed by groups from the Lesser Antilles. The Taínos created a sophisticated trading system on the island they named Borinquen and became the reigning culture, although they were constantly fighting off Carib invaders.

All that changed forever in 1508, when Juan Ponce de León came back for a second and closer look at the island he had glimpsed from one of Christopher Columbus' ships. Driven by a desire for gold, Spanish *conquistadores* enslaved, murdered, starved and raped natives with impunity. Virtually wiped out by war, smallpox and whooping cough, a few remaining Taínos took to the mountains. Soon Dutch and French traders became frequent visitors, dropping off human cargo from West Africa. By 1530 West African slaves – including members of the Mandingo and Yoruba tribes – numbered about half the population of 3000 in Puerto Rico.

And so it went for several generations. The Spanish-American War of 1898 finally pried Puerto Rico out from under the yoke of the Spanish empire, but it established the small island as a commonwealth of the United States – Borinquen was liberated from Spain, but not quite free.

Operation Bootstrap poured money into the island and set up highways, post offices, supermarkets and a few military posts. Puerto Ricans have accepted the US economic and military presence on their island, with varying degrees of anger, indifference and satisfaction, for more than 100 years now – and the strong *independentista* movement that wanted to cut all ties with the US in the 1950s has mostly receded into the background. The biggest



question for Puerto Ricans – a passionately political people who muster at least a 90% voter turnout on election days – is whether to keep the ‘status quo’ or become, officially, America’s 51st state.

In May 2006 a stalemate between Governor Aníbal Acevedo and the Puerto Rican legislature led to a massive budgetary crisis that forced the government to literally ‘shut down’ after it ran out of funds to pay over 100,000 public sector employees. The crisis lasted two weeks before a grudging compromise was reached, but it made a laughing stock out of the Puerto Rican government and drew intense criticism from business leaders, Puerto Rican celebrities and the general public. In March 2008 Acevedo was indicted by the US on corruption charges after a two-year grand jury investigation. He has denied any wrongdoing and faces up to 20 years in prison if convicted.

## THE CULTURE

As a predominantly Catholic country (albeit widely mixed with African and indigenous practices), Puerto Ricans treasure family values and family pursuits and often have three or more generations living in the same home. But they don’t interpret ‘family-friendly’ as being closed-minded. They are fiercely and justifiably proud of their mixed European, African and indigenous ancestry – in a country where skin tones range from the darkest coal to freckled white (sometimes even in the same family), it’s no mean feat to have created a culture where all are welcome.

## ARTS

Abundant creative energy hangs in the air all over Puerto Rico (maybe it has something to do with the Bermuda Triangle) and its effects can be seen in the island’s tremendous output of artistic achievement. Puerto Rico has produced renowned poets, novelists, playwrights, orators, historians, journalists, painters, composers and sculptors. The island’s two most influential artists are considered to be rococo painter José Campeche and impressionist Francisco Oller. As well as being a groundbreaking politician, Puerto Rican governor Luís Muñoz Marín was also an eloquent poet. In the world of entertainment, Rita Morena is the only Puerto Rican to have won an Oscar, a Grammy, a Tony and an Emmy, while the island’s hottest new film talent is actor Benicio

del Toro, star of Steven Soderbergh’s recent two-part biopic of Che Guevara.

While it’s known for world-class art in many mediums, music and dance are especially synonymous with the island.

## ENVIRONMENT

### The Land

At 100 miles long and 35 miles wide (161km x 56km), Puerto Rico is clearly the little sister of the Greater Antilles (Cuba, Jamaica and Hispaniola). With its four principal satellite islands and a host of cays hugging its shores, Puerto Rico claims approximately 3500 sq miles (9060 sq km) of land, making the commonwealth slightly larger than the Mediterranean island of Corsica or the second-smallest state in the USA, Delaware.

Puerto Rico has more than a dozen well-developed and protected wilderness areas, most of which are considered *reservas forestales* (forest reserves) or *bosques estatales* (state forests). The best known is the 43-sq-mile (111-sq-km) Caribbean National Forest, generally referred to as El Yunque, which dominates the cloudy yet sun-splashed peaks at the east end of the island. Bosque Estatal de Guánica, on the southwest coast, is home to a tropical dry forest ecosystem.

National forest campground and reservation information can be obtained by calling ☎ 800-280-2267.

### Wildlife

Endangered sea turtles, such as the hawksbill, green and leatherback, nest on Puerto Rican beaches, particularly on the island of Culebra. Puerto Rico’s vast coral reefs are the nurseries and feeding grounds for hundreds of species of tropical fish. It offers some of the best places in the world for divers to come face-to-face with large barracudas, manta rays, octopuses, moray eels and nurse sharks.

### HOW MUCH?

- San Juan–Fajardo taxi US\$80
- San Juan–Fajardo público US\$5
- Liter of gas US\$0.85
- Bottle of beer US\$2
- Cheapest hotel room US\$60

El Yunque is home to more than 60 species of bird, including the greenish-blue, red-fronted Puerto Rican parrot, which is on the edge of extinction. The coastal dry forest of Guánica features more than 130 bird species, largely songbirds.

Snakes are everywhere, but remember that none of them are poisonous, including the Puerto Rican boa, which grows to more than 7ft (2.1m).

Keep your eyes peeled for small-boned Paso Fino horses, brought to the island by the Spanish conquistadors. In many places, but particularly in Vieques, they roam freely across the roads in untamed herds.

## FOOD & DRINK

Thanks to a full-on culinary revolution, Puerto Rico now offers the best selection of food in the Caribbean, and restaurants in cities such as San Juan could confidently compete with their stateside counterparts in New York. But, though many of the island's menus popularly describe their food as 'fusion' or 'eclectic,' most owe more than a passing nod to Puerto Rico's real deal – *comida criolla*. The irony, for food lovers, is that *comida criolla* is itself a fusion of numerous international influences, from the indigenous natives to the colonizing Spanish. The *mélange* can be traced back to the pre-Columbian Tainos who survived on a diet of root vegetables, fish and tropical fruits. With the arrival of the Spanish came an infusion of more European flavors such as olive oil, rice, peppers, beef, pork and spices like cilantro and cumin. Slavery brought African influences to Puerto Rico including yams, plantains and coffee and a style of cooking that favored deep-fried food and stews. The US influence in Puerto Rican food is reflected more in the fast food boom than in *comida criolla* per se, though the Americans did introduce corn oil (for cooking), sausages and various fruits such as papaya, tomatoes and avocados.

A typical *comida criolla* dish today can consist of many different ingredients, though roast pork, rice, beans, deep-fried plantains and yucca are all popular staples.

## SAN JUAN

pop 442,447

Take note New York! Modern America started here. Well, almost. Established in 1521, San Juan is the second-oldest European-founded

settlement in the Americas (after Santo Domingo) and the oldest under US jurisdiction. Shoehorned onto a tiny islet that guards the entrance to San Juan harbor, the atmospheric 'Old City' juxtaposes historical authenticity with pulsating modern energy. Surreal sounds and exotic sights resonate everywhere. A stabbing salsa stanza in sonorous San Sebastián, timid cats scurrying under winking lanterns in Plaza de San José; and the omnipresent roar of Atlantic breakers battling mercilessly with the sturdy 500-year-old fortifications of El Morro.

But beyond its 15ft-thick walls, San Juan is far more than a dizzying collection of well-polished colonial artifacts. To get the full take on the capricious capital, visitors must first run the gamut of its distinct but ever-evolving neighborhoods. There's seen-it-all Condado, where Cuba's 24-hour gambling party got washed up in the early 1960s; tranquil Ocean Park, with its gated villas and strategically located B&Bs; and swanky Isla Verde, awash with luxurious resort hotels and kitschy casinos.

Choked by crawling traffic and inundated with nearly five million annual tourists, parts of San Juan can leave you wondering if you took a wrong turn at Miami airport and never left North America. But the confusion rarely lingers. Cultural borrowing has long been this city's pragmatic hallmark. For every gleaming office block you'll stumble upon a colorful Spanish fiesta, a strange African religious ritual, a delicate native woodcarving and architecture that could quite conceivably been ripped out of Seville, Cartagena, Buenos Aires, or even Paris.

## ORIENTATION

Starting at the westernmost tip of the city and working backward toward the Aeropuerto Internacional de Luis Muñoz Marín (LMM), you've got Old San Juan, the tourist center and most visually appealing part of town.

Next comes Condado, flashy and full of big buildings and hotels along Av Ashford and then Miramar and Santurce, a little south of the beach and mostly filled with working-class families. Ocean Park is a private community (with gates) lying along the water between Condado and Isla Verde; its main street is Av McLeary. The final stop in the city is Isla Verde (although technically it is in Carolinas, a suburb of San Juan). Av Isla Verde is a long stretch of hotels and casinos along a narrow but pretty

white beach. Its drawback is the proximity of the airport. Large jets thunder overhead every 20 minutes or so for most of the day.

## Maps

Travelers will find tourist maps of Old San Juan, Condado and Isla Verde readily available through the tourist information offices run by the Puerto Rico Tourism Company (right). The standard complimentary map can also be found online at [www.travelmaps.com](http://www.travelmaps.com).

## INFORMATION

### Bookstores

**Bell, Book & Candle** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 728-5000; 102 Av José de Diego, Condado) Pulls in the vacation crowd and offers a wide range of English titles.

### Emergency

In *any* kind of emergency, just call ☎ 911. Beware: you may find that the telephone directory and tourist publications list nonfunctioning local numbers for emergency services.

**Fire** (☎ 722-1120)

**Hurricane Warnings** (☎ 253-4586)

**Isla Verde Police** (☎ 449-9320)

**Medical** (☎ 754-2222, 343-2550)

**Rape Crisis Hotline** (☎ 877-641-2004)

**Río Piedras Police** (☎ 765-6439)

**Tourist Zone Police** (☎ 911, 726-7020; 📞 24hr)  
English spoken.

### Internet Access

**Cybernet Café** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 724-4033; 1128 Av Ashford; per hr US\$5-6; 📞 9am-11pm)

**Internet@active** (Map p330; ☎ 289-0345; JA Corretjer; per 15min US\$4)

### Medical Services

**Ashford Memorial Community Hospital** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 721-2160; 1451 Av Ashford) This is probably the best-equipped and most convenient hospital for travelers to visit.

### Money

**Banco Popular** LMM airport (☎ 791-0326; Terminal C); Old San Juan (Map p330; ☎ 725-2635; cnr Tetuán & San Justo) Near the cruise ship piers and Paseo de la Princesa; Condado (Map pp334-5; Av Ashford).

### Post

Greater San Juan has about 20 post offices.  
**Old San Juan Post Office** (Map p330; ☎ 723-1281; 100 Paseo de Colón; 📞 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) The one likely to be most convenient for travelers.

## Tourist Information

Puerto Rico Tourism Company (PRTC) distributes information in English and Spanish at two venues in San Juan, the LMM airport and La Casita in Old San Juan.

**Departamento de Recursos Naturales y Ambientales** (DRNA; Department of Natural Resources; ☎ 999-2200; [www.drna.gobierno.pr](http://www.drna.gobierno.pr) in Spanish; Km 6.3, Rte 8838, Sector El Cinco, Río Piedras) For information on camping, including reservations and permits, contact this department or visit its office.

**Puerto Rico Tourism Company** (PRTC; ☎ 800-223-6530, 721-2400; [www.prtourism.com](http://www.prtourism.com)) LMM airport (☎ 791-1014; 📞 9am-5:30pm); Old San Juan (Map p330; ☎ 722-1709; La Casita, Comercio & Plaza de la Darsena near Pier 1)

## SIGHTS

Most of San Juan's major attractions, including museums and art galleries, are in Old San Juan. Be aware that most museums are closed on Mondays.

### Old San Juan

Old San Juan is a colorful kaleidoscope of life, music, legend and history and would stand out like a flashing beacon in any country, let alone one as small as Puerto Rico. Somnolent secrets and beautiful surprises await everywhere. From the blue-toned cobblestoned streets of Calle San Sebastián to the cutting-edge gastronomic artistry of SoFo, you could spend weeks, even months, here and still only get the smallest taste.

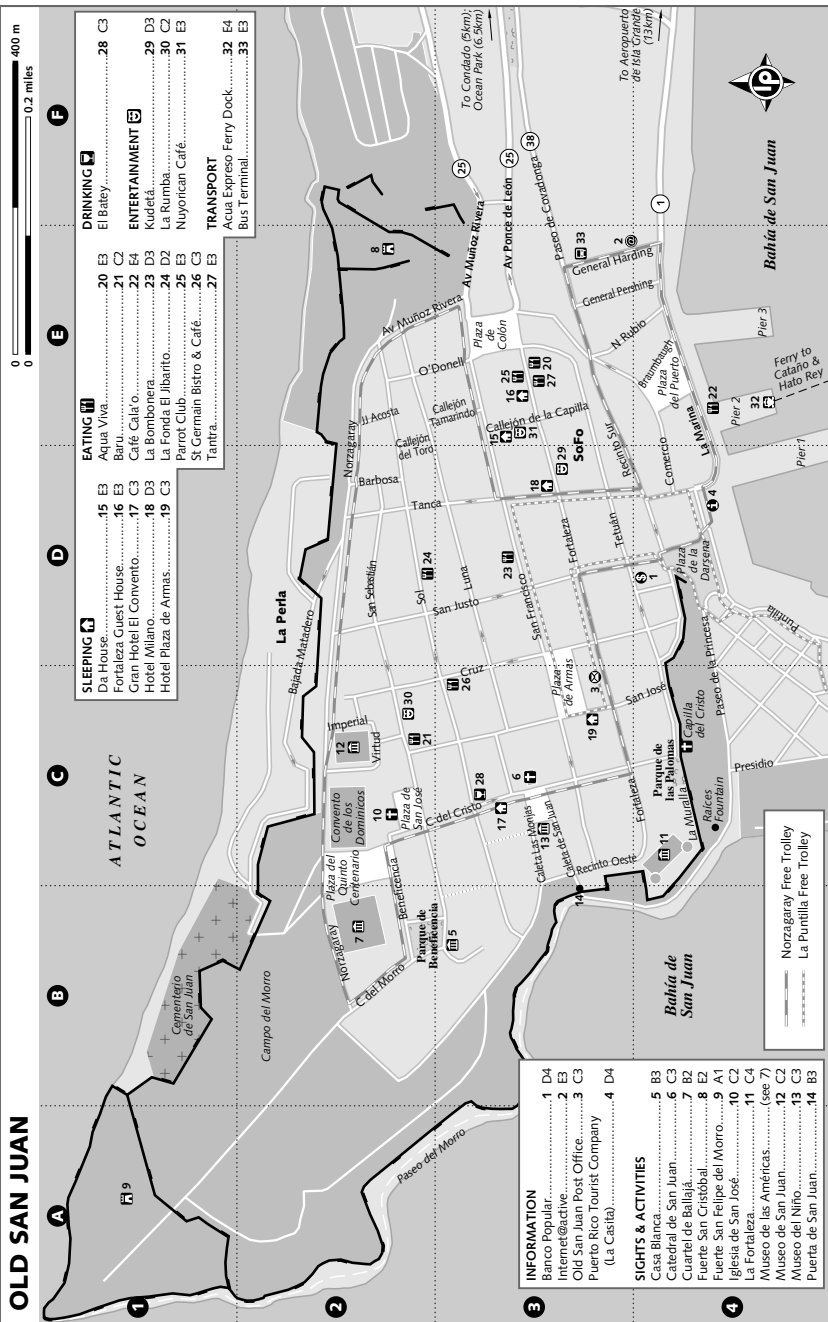
### CASA BLANCA

First constructed in 1521 as a residence of Puerto Rico's pioneering governor, Juan Ponce de León (who died before he could move in), the **Casa Blanca** (White House; Map p330; ☎ 724-4102; adult/child US\$2/1; 📞 9am-noon & 1-4:30pm Tue-Sun, guided tours Tue-Fri by appointment) is the oldest continuously occupied house in the western hemisphere. Today it is a historic monument containing a museum, secluded grounds, a chain of fountains and an Alhambra-style courtyard. The interior rooms are decked out with artifacts from the 16th to the 20th century. An animated guide can give you a theatrical complementary tour.

### CATEDRAL DE SAN JUAN

Noticeably smaller and more austere than other Spanish churches, the city **cathedral** (Map p330; ☎ 722-0861; 153 Calle del Cristo; admission

OLD SAN JUAN



<b>SLEEPING</b>	<b>EATING</b>	<b>DRINKING</b>
Da House.....15 E3	Aqua Viva.....20 E3	El Batey.....28 C3
Fortaleza Guest House.....16 E3	Barú.....21 C2	
Gran Hotel El Convento.....17 C3	Café Calle O.....22 E4	<b>ENTERTAINMENT</b>
Hotel Millano.....18 D3	La Bombonera.....23 D3	Kudetà.....29 D3
Hotel Plaza de Armas.....19 C3	La Fondra El Jibarito.....24 D2	La Rumba.....30 C2
	Parrot Club.....25 E3	Nuyorican Café.....31 E3
	St Germain Bistro & Café.....26 C3	<b>TRANSPORT</b>
	Tantra.....27 E3	Acua Expreso Ferry Dock.....32 E4
		Bus Terminal.....33 E3

<b>INFORMATION</b>	<b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>
Banco Popular.....1 D4	Casa Blanca.....5 B3
Internet@active.....2 E3	Catedral de San Juan.....6 C3
Old San Juan Post Office.....3 C3	Cuartel de Ballajá.....7 B2
Puerto Rico Tourist Company (La Casita).....4 D4	Fuente San Cristóbal.....8 E2
	Fuente San Felipe del Morro.....9 A1
	Iglesia de San José.....10 C2
	La Fortaleza.....11 C4
	Museo de las Américas.....12 C2
	Museo del Niño.....13 C3
	Puerta de San Juan.....14 B3

Norzagaray Free Trolley  
 La Puntilla Free Trolley

## SAN JUAN IN...

### Two Days

Find a midrange hotel or apartment in Old San Juan. Explore the historical sights of the colonial quarter and dine along **Fortaleza** (p337) before heading to **La Rumba** (p340) or **Nuyorican Café** (p340) after dark for mojitos and salsa music. Wander over to **Condado** (p332) on day two for some solitary sunbathing or beachside water sports.

### Four Days

Add a walking tour around **Old San Juan** (p333) and throw in a visit to the Cataño **Bacardi Rum Factory** (p342). Find an ecotour company to run you out to **El Yunque** (p343) for a day. Finally, scour the nightclubs of the big hotels in **Condado** (p336) and Isla Verde, or dine in one of the beautiful restaurants in **Gran Hotel El Convento** (p335).

### One Week

Head into the 'burbs for Santurce's **Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico** (p332) or head further south to the **Mercado de Río Piedras** (p332) in Río Piedras. Rent a bike from **Hot Dog Cycling** (p333) and pedal out to Piñones for the beach kiosks and laid-back Puerto Rican ambience. Round up by hiring some beach toys on **Playa Isla Verde** (p332).

free; ☎ 8am-4pm) nonetheless retains a simple earthy elegance. Founded in the 1520s, the first church on this site was destroyed in a hurricane in 1529. A replacement was constructed in 1540 and, over a period of centuries, it slowly evolved into the Gothic-neoclassical-inspired monument seen today. Most people come to see the marble tomb of Ponce de León and the body of religious martyr St Pio displayed under glass.

### FUERTE SAN FELIPE DEL MORRO

A six-level fort with a gray, castellated light-house, **El Morro** (Map p330; Fuerte San Felipe del Morro; San Felipe Fort; ☎ 729-6960; [www.nps.gov/saju/morro.html](http://www.nps.gov/saju/morro.html); adult/child US\$3/free; ☎ 9am-5pm Jun-Nov, 9am-6pm Dec-May, free tours at 10am & 2pm in Spanish, 11am & 3pm in English) juts aggressively over Old San Juan's bold headlands, glowering across the Atlantic at would-be conquerors. The 140ft walls (some up to 15ft thick) date back to 1539 and El Morro is said to be the oldest Spanish fort in the New World. The National Park Service (NPS) maintains this fort and the small military museum on the premises. It was declared a Unesco World Heritage site in 1983. Pay US\$5 and you also gain entry to Fuerte San Cristóbal.

### FUERTE SAN CRISTÓBAL

San Juan's second major fort is **Fuerte San Cristóbal** (San Cristóbal Fort; Map p330; ☎ 729-6777; [www.nps.gov/saju/sancristobal.html](http://www.nps.gov/saju/sancristobal.html); adult/child US\$3/free; ☎ 9am-5pm Jun-Nov, 9am-6pm Dec-May), one of the

largest military installations the Spanish built in the Americas. In its prime, San Cristóbal covered 27 acres with a maze of six interconnected forts protecting a central core with 150ft walls, moats, booby-trapped bridges and tunnels. The fort was constructed to defend Old San Juan against land attacks from the east via Puerta de Tierra. It became a National Historic site in 1949 and a Unesco World Heritage site in 1983. Facilities include a fascinating museum, a store, military archives, a reproduction of a soldiers' barracks and prime city views. There are also regular historical reenactments.

### IGLESIA DE SAN JOSÉ

This **church** (Map p330; ☎ 725-7501; admission free; ☎ 8:30am-4pm Mon-Sat, Mass noon Sun) in the Plaza de San José is the second-oldest religious building in the Americas, after the cathedral in Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. Established in 1523 by Dominicans, this church with its vaulted Gothic ceilings still bears the coat of arms of Juan Ponce de León, whose family worshipped here; a striking carving of the Crucifixion; and ornate processional floats. For 350 years the remains of Ponce de León rested in a crypt here before being moved to the city's cathedral, down the hill.

### LA FORTALEZA

Also known as El Palacio de Santa Catalina, **La Fortaleza** (The Fortress; Map p330; ☎ 721-7000 ext 2211 or 2358; admission free; ☎ 9am-3:30pm Mon-Fri) is



the oldest executive mansion in continuous use in the western hemisphere and dates from 1533. Once the original fortress for the young colony, La Fortaleza eventually yielded its military pre-eminence to the city's newer and larger forts and was remodeled and expanded to domicile island governors for more than three centuries. If you are dressed in respectful attire, you can join a free guided tour.

### MUSEO DE LAS AMÉRICAS

Built in 1854 as a military barracks, the **Cuartel de Ballajá** (Map p330; off Norzagaray) is a three-story edifice with large gates on two ends, ample balconies, a series of arches and a protected central courtyard that served as a plaza and covers a reservoir. It was the last and largest building constructed by the Spaniards in the New World. Facilities included officers' quarters, warehouses, kitchens, dining rooms, prison cells and stables. Now its 2nd floor holds the **Museo de las Américas** (Museum of the Americas; Map p330; ☎ 724-5052; admission free; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Fri, 11am-5pm Sat & Sun, guided tours available weekdays 10:30am, 11:30am, 12:30pm & 2pm), which gives an excellent overview of cultural development in the New World.

### MUSEO DE SAN JUAN

Located in a Spanish colonial building overlooking the ocean on Calle Norzagaray, this **museum** (Map p330; ☎ 724-1875; 150 Norzagaray; donations accepted; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun) is the definitive take on the city's 500-year history. The well laid out exhibition showcases pictorial and photographic testimonies from the Caparra ruins to modern-day shopping malls. There's also a half-hour TV documentary about the history of San Juan.

### PASEO DE LA PRINCESA

Emanating a distinctly European flavor, the **Paseo de la Princesa** (Walkway of the Princess; Map p330) is a 19th-century esplanade just outside the city walls. Lined with antique street lamps, trees, statues, benches, fruit vendors' carts and street entertainers, this romantic walkway culminates at the magnificent **Raíces Fountain** (Map p330), a stunning statue-cum-water-feature that depicts the island's Taíno, African and Spanish heritage.

### PUERTA DE SAN JUAN

Spanish ships once anchored in the cove just off these ramparts to unload colonists and sup-

plies, all of which entered the city through a tall red portal known as **Puerta de San Juan** (San Juan Gate; Map p330). This tunnel through the wall dates from the 1630s. It marks the end of the Paseo de la Princesa and stands as one of three remaining gates into the old city. Turn right after passing through the gate and you can follow the **Paseo del Morro** northwest, paralleling the city walls for approximately three-quarters of a mile.

### Santurce

While the Old Town's historic attractions are universally famous, fewer people are aware that San Juan boasts one of the largest and most celebrated art museums in the Caribbean. The **Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico** (MAPR; Map pp334-5; ☎ 977-6277, for tours ext 2230 or 2261; www.mapr.org; 299 Av José de Diego, Santurce; adult/child/senior US\$6/3/3; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue & Thu-Sat, to 8pm Wed, 11am-6pm Sun) opened in 2000 and rapidly inserted itself as a important nexus in the capital's vibrant cultural life. Housed in a splendid neoclassical building that was once the city's Municipal Hospital, MAPR is located in the city's revived Santurce district and boasts 18 exhibition halls spread over an area of 130,000 sq ft.

### Río Piedras

If you like the smell of fish and oranges, the bustle of people and trading jests in Spanish as you bargain for a bunch of bananas, the **Mercado de Río Piedras** (Paseo de Diego; ☎ 9am-6pm) is for you. As much a scene as a place to shop, the market continues the colonial tradition of an indoor market that spills into the streets.

### Beaches

San Juan has some of the best municipal beaches this side of Río. Starting a kilometer or so east of the Old Town, you can go from rustic to swanky and back to rustic all in the space of 12 kilometers.

**Balneario Escambrón** (Map pp334-5) is a sheltered arc of raked sand with decent surf breaks, plenty of local action and a 17th-century Spanish fort shimmering in the distance.

Hemmed in by hotel towers and punctuated by rocky outcrops, visitors to the **Condado** beaches can expect splashes of lurid graffiti, boisterous games of volleyball and plenty of crashing Atlantic surf.

Resort planners will tell you that **Playa Isla Verde** is the Copacabana of Puerto Rico with

its legions of tan bodies and dexterous beach bums flexing their triceps around the volleyball net. Other more savvy travelers prefer to dodge the extended families and colonizing spring break hedonists that stake space here and head west to **Ocean Park**.

## ACTIVITIES

### Diving & Snorkeling

While Puerto Rico is well known for its first-class diving, San Juan is not the best place for it. Strong winds often churn up the water. Condado has an easy dive that takes you through a pass between the inner and outer reefs into coral caverns, overhangs, grottoes and tunnels.

**Eco-Action Tours** (☎ 791-7509; www.ecoactiontours.com; tours US\$40-130) can do just about any tour imaginable, from rappelling to nature walks. It operates out of a van and comes to you. Check out the website or phone the company. The guides are knowledgeable and very accommodating.

**Caribe Aquatic Adventures** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 281-8858; snorkel/dive US\$50/135) operates out of the Normandie Hotel in Puerta de Tierra and offers dives near San Juan but also further afield: eg the islands off the coast of Fajardo (Icacos for snorkeling and Palomino and Palominito for diving). The company's shore dives from the beach behind the hotel are said to be some of the best in the Caribbean. Cruise passengers love utilizing this place.

### Kayaking

**Ecoquest** (☎ 616-7543; www.ecoquestpr.com) offers a great three-hour long trip to Piñones and its adjacent lagoon. The excursion includes information on local flora and fauna, a one-hour kayak on the lagoon and traditional food from one of the local fish restaurants. Prices start at US\$69 per person.

### Fishing

**Benitez Fishing Charters** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 723-2292; San Juan Bay Marina, Miramar) is captained by the celebrated Mike Benitez who has carried the likes of former US President Jimmy Carter. If you want to trade White House gossip while fishing for dolphin, tuna, wahoo and white and blue marlin, book a space on his deluxe 45' boat for some serious deep-sea fishing. Prices start at US\$185 per person for a four-hour excursion.

### Cycling

Forget the notorious traffic-jams. Cycling in San Juan can actually be good fun, as long as you know where to go. In fact, it is perfectly feasible to work your way along the coast from Old San Juan out as far as Carolina and the bike paths of Piñones.

In Isla Verde, **Hot Dog Cycling** (☎ 791-0776; www.hotdogcycling.com; 5916 Av Isla Verde; ☎ 10am-5pm) rent excellent 21-speed mountain bikes from US\$25 per day. These guys are handily situated near the start of the designated Isla Verde-Piñones bike route. You can also ask about its bike tours.

## SAN JUAN FOR CHILDREN

Puerto Ricans love children – it doesn't matter who they belong to. And they love family. So traveling with youngsters is rarely a hassle, because the Puerto Ricans are doing it too.

In and around San Juan there are several attractions that children really enjoy. The **Museo del Niño** (Children's Museum; Map p330; ☎ 722-3791; 150 Calle del Cristo; adult/child US\$5/7; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Fri, 11:30-5:30pm Sat & Sun) is always a big hit, as is the **Luis A Ferré Parque de Ciencias** (Science Park; ☎ 740-6868; Hwy 167; adult/child/senior US\$5/3/3, parking US\$1; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun) in Bayamón. Isla Verde is the most child-friendly beach with safe swimming and plenty of beach toys,

## TOURS

**Legends of Puerto Rico** (☎ 605-9060; www.legendsofpr.com) The perennially popular 'Night Tales in Old San Juan' and 'Legends of San Juan' walking tours (from US\$30 to US\$35 per person) fill up fast, so book ahead. Bus trips are also available, as are special discounts for families with children and wheelchair-accessible tours (advance booking required).

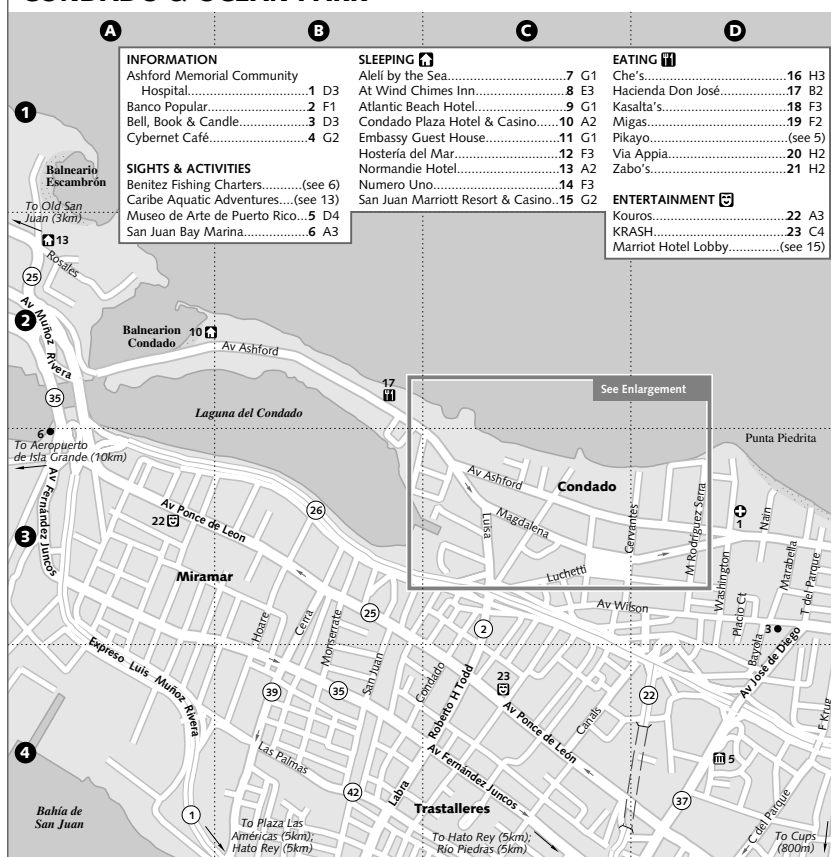
## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

**Noches de Galerías** (Gallery Nights; first Tuesday of every month: February to May; September to December) Art galleries stay open late to showcase special exhibitions and present up-and-coming talent.

**Festival San Sebastián** (Mid-January) Held in the old city's famous party street, Calle San Sebastián. For a full week in mid-January it hums with semi-religious processions, music, food stalls and larger-than-ever crowds.

**Fiesta de San Juan Bautista** (June 24) Celebration of the patron saint of San Juan and a summer solstice party Latin style in Old San Juan.

## CONDADO &amp; OCEAN PARK



**Culinary Festival** (November) SoFo's alfresco culinary festival is a moveable feast where local restaurateurs set up their tables in the street and rustle up their best dishes.

## SLEEPING

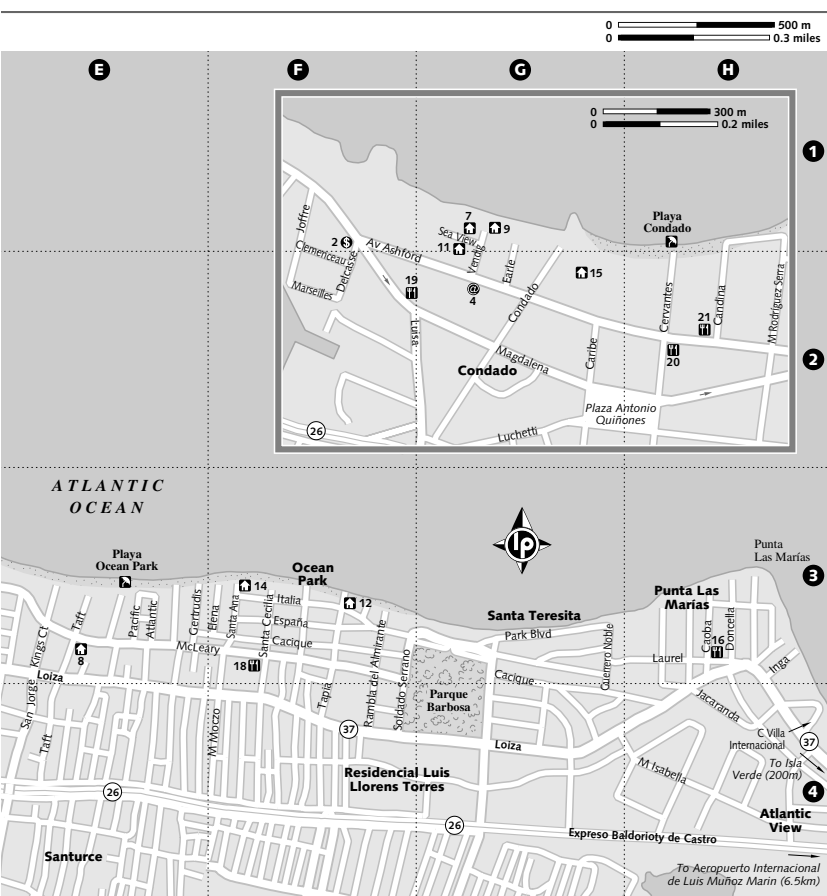
You'll find ample accommodations in San Juan for every price range except one – budget traveling. Outside of a few affordable guest houses, it's slim pickings for those watching their money. Aside from that, San Juan is wide open. Upscale, midscale, boutique or B&B: take your pick.

## Old San Juan

**Fortaleza Guest House** (Map p330; ☎ 721-7112; 361 Fortaleza; r with shared bathroom per week from US\$65; 🏠) Budget accommodation in Old San Juan is

not for the fussy. For this price you get a tiny room with air-con and not a lot else – except for perhaps a few multilegged creatures skittering by (ants, not roaches). Phone ahead, as this place books up fast.

**Da House** (Map p330; ☎ 977-1180; 312 San Francisco; r US\$80; 🏠) Make no mistake; da House is da place. Old San Juan's newest and funkier hotel is also one of its best bargains with 27 boutique-style rooms kitted out with chic furnishings and decorated with eye-catching contemporary art. For the musically inclined, one of San Juan's best salsa bars, the Nuyorican, is situated downstairs; for the less enamored (or the sleep-deprived), the reception staff will ruefully give out ear plugs.



**Hotel Plaza de Armas** (Map p330; ☎ 722-9191; [www.ihphoteles.com](http://www.ihphoteles.com); 202 Calle San Jose; r US\$90-175; 🏨)

Location, location, location – but not a lot else. The Plaza de Armas is a rather characterless hotel situated in San Juan's most character-loaded quarter. Run by the Howard Johnson chain, the lobby has some funky modern touches but upstairs the rooms are a little worn.

**Hotel Milano** (Map p330; ☎ 729-9050; [www.hotelmilanopr.com](http://www.hotelmilanopr.com); 307 Fortaleza; r incl breakfast US\$95-185; 🏨) Sandwiched into the happening hub of Fortaleza, the Milano is a safe, reliable, if slightly austere option. Rooms are clean but unexciting, there's wi-fi in the lobby and up on the roof there's an open-to-the-elements restaurant with peak-a-boo

views of the harbor. Beware of some closet-like rooms lacking windows.

**our pick Gran Hotel El Convento** (Map p330; ☎ 723-9020; [www.elconvento.com](http://www.elconvento.com); 100 Calle del Cristo; r US\$235-420; 🏨 🍷 🍷 🍷) Historic monument, tapas restaurant, meeting place, coffee bar and evocative colonial building...without a doubt El Convento is Puerto Rico's most complete, atmospheric and multifaceted hotel. Built in 1651 as the New World's first Carmelite convent, this sturdy baroque beacon oozes with priceless old world relics and subtle 'Siglo de Oro' charm. El Convento's 58 rooms and six suites are gorgeously decorated with Andalusian tiles, mahogany and thick rugs, plus the service from the bar to the front desk is impeccable. Oh – and there's no casino!

## Condado & Ocean Park

**Embassy Guest House** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 800-468-0615; 1126 Sea View; r US\$65-125; 🏠 🚗) A favorite budget spot among gay travelers – although others like it too – the Embassy is a motel-standard crash pad that has so far resisted the glitzy Condado makeover. The rooms show their age a bit, but since the oceanfront location is sublime, it's hardly worth fussing about.

**Aléfi by the Sea** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 725-5313; 1125 Sea View; r US\$65-100; 🏠) Condado on the cheap – it's still possible. Judging by the number of cranes and bulldozers that surround this diminutive hotel, though, it might not be for too much longer. If the Marriott's normally your thing, you'll undoubtedly hate this modest nine-room guesthouse positioned right on the beach. If you've just returned from a backpacking trip around Southeast Asia, the delightful surfside terrace and simple but clean rooms will seem like luxury.

**At Wind Chimes Inn** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 800-946-3244; www.atwindchimesinn.com; 53 Taft; r US\$80-155; 🏠 🚗) At Wind Chimes is modeled along the lines of a Spanish-style villa that mixes intimacy with low-key luxuries. It's a pleasant antidote to the resort feel of Condado's other luxury piles. Prices fall in the low season, making this even more of a bargain.

**Hostería del Mar** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 727-3302; hosteria@caribe.net; 1 Tapia; r US\$89-199; 🏠 🚗) If the nearby Número Uno can live up to its price-less premier tag, then the Hostería del Mar has to be a close *numero dos*. Sharing an equally desirable beachside location and greeting guests with an artsy water feature and eye-catching antiques, this whitewashed Ocean Park guesthouse is quiet, intimate and definitively Caribbean. There is no pool, but there is an excellent restaurant in an enclosed gazebo overlooking the beach. Rooms are furnished with a simple rattan-inspired elegance.

**Atlantic Beach Hotel** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 721-6900; www.atlanticbeachhotel.net; 1 Vendig; r US\$90-170; 🏠) This place is regularly held up as the nexus of the Caribbean's gay community, though in recent years many visitors have derided it for its dingy rooms and lackluster service. It all depends on your expectations. Wedged up against the beach at the end of one of Condado's tattier streets, the Atlantic certainly has a great oceanside location and, with a buzzing bar scene, rooftop Jacuzzi and famous Sunday drag shows, it's a good place to hang out and meet other gay travelers. The

sticking point for many is the rooms, which, though clean, are long past their prime – which was sometime in the early 1980s.

**Número Uno** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 726-5010; 1 Santa Ana; r US\$130-200; 🏠 🚗) Pinch yourself – you're still in the middle of San Juan, Ocean Park to be more precise, the discerning traveler's antidote to Condado and Isla Verde. Hidden behind the walls of a whitewashed 1940s beachfront house, the glowing Número Uno is one of those whispered secrets that get passed around surreptitiously by word of mouth. Surrounded by palms and topped by a luminous kidney-shaped swimming pool, the property is run by a former New Yorker whose soaring vision has inspired an inn of spiffy rooms, intimate service and one of San Juan's newest culinary legends, Número Uno? Not far off.

**Normandie Hotel** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 729-2929; www.normandiepr.com; Av Muñoz Rivera; r US\$200-325; 🏠 🚗) A classic example of late art deco-style architecture, the Normandie is characterized by its minimalist façade, which represents the curved bows of a cruise liner guarding the busy entrance to Puerta de Tierra. Once a haven for scandalous 1950s jet setters who used to cavort nude in the rear pool, the hotel's contemporary incarnation has fewer accessories but more soul than the neighboring Caribe. The centerpiece is a towering, if austere, open plan lobby where bemused cruise liner refugees have replaced the lounge lizards of lore.

**San Juan Marriott Resort & Casino** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 722 7000; www.marriotthotels.com; 1309 Av Ashford; r incl breakfast US\$265-525; 🏠 🚗) The infamous Hotel Dupont Plaza once stood on this site before an arson attack burnt it to the ground, claiming 97 lives, in 1986. Rising in its place a decade later, Marriott has turned a den of notoriety into a pretty beachfront property, with two pools and 525 units. A lot more personable than other resorts in its class, the Marriott boasts enviably modern rooms, a lavish breakfast buffet and some mean salsa entertainment where even the staff join in.

**Condado Plaza Hotel & Casino** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 721-1000; 999 Av Ashford; r US\$300-1350; 🏠 🚗) Guarding the entrance to Condado like a sparkling concrete sentinel, the Condado Plaza straddles the thin wedge of land that separates the area's eponymous *laguna* from the Atlantic Ocean. Housed in two concrete towers connected by an overhead walkway

above Ashford Ave, the hotel offers the best of both worlds with stunning views extending in both directions. A swanky lobby hints at luxury, and guests in the newly renovated oceanfront rooms generally aren't disappointed.

## Isla Verde

**El Patio Guesthouse** (☎ 726-6298; 87 Calle 3; r US\$69-90; 🚗 🚗) Your average Isla Verde visitor probably wouldn't poke a stick at this place, but in the cheaper price bracket it's not a bad bet – although gamblers will be disappointed to know that there's no casino onsite. A little villa close to the beach and other amenities, it is run by a little old lady who'll bend over backwards to make sure that your rooms are spick-and-span.

**Coquí Inn** (☎ 726-4330; 36 Mar Mediterraneo; r US\$89-119; 🚗 🚗) Bisected by a major expressway, Isla Verde has its ugly side and you'll get a face full of it here. But location aside, the Coquí Inn is quite the bargain. Expect clean, modern, but simple rooms with kitchenettes and plenty of handy extras, such as wi-fi, free coffee and pastries, morning newspapers, cable TV and maid service.

**Water & Beach Club** (☎ 728-3610; 2 Tartak; r US\$150-650; 🚗 🚗 🚗) Breaking the resort ubiquity of Isla Verde, the Water Club is one of Puerto Rico's most celebrated 'boutique' hotels. With a reception area straight out of *Architectural Digest* and elevators that sport gilded-in waterfalls, this is probably the closest San Juan comes to emulating South Beach, Florida. Rooms are minimalist, but artfully designed and benefit from spectacular beach views. There's also a chicer-than-char swimming pool on the roof.

**El San Juan Hotel & Casino** (☎ 800-468-2818; [www.elsanjuanhotel.com](http://www.elsanjuanhotel.com); 6063 Av Isla Verde; r US\$325-450; 🚗 🚗 🚗) Dimly lit, frigidly air-conditioned and decked out in throwback 1970s furnishings, the lobby of the El San Juan is redolent of a Roger Moore-era James Bond movie. You half expect to see the dapper 007 lounging around in his tux at the baccarat table. Renowned for its flashy casino and rollicking nightlife, El San Juan does its best to recreate 'tourist brochure paradise' among the Isla Verde skyscrapers. If you want decent rooms, unlimited water features, classy restaurants, Starbucks coffee and a heaving nightlife all in one big happy package, this is the place for you.

**InterContinental San Juan Resort & Casino** (☎ 800-443-2009; [www.intercontinental.com](http://www.intercontinental.com); 187 Av Isla Verde; r US\$399-539; 🚗 🚗 🚗) Probably the least interesting of Isla Verde's craning tourist piles, the InterContinental is, nonetheless, opulent with all of the usual gadgets and marketing ploys you'd expect in a well-appointed four star. An expensive refurbishment a few years back was designed to bring it onto a par with the El San Juan next door but, although the rooms and facilities are spiffy enough, the latter still wins first prize for character and panache.

## EATING

Most would agree that San Juan offers the best eating in the Caribbean. The latest craze is fusion cuisine – expect to see all sorts of creative combinations: Asian-Latino, Puerto Rican-European, Caribbean with a Middle Eastern twist. When in doubt, head to SoFo around Fortaleza in Old San Juan, the eclectic heart of San Juan's 21st-century gastronomic revolution.

## Old San Juan

**Café Cala'o** (Map p330; ☎ 724-4607; Pier 2; muffins US\$2) Smooth, earthy coffee straight from Puerto Rico's Central Mountains and staff who connect it like trained experts; this is the best coffee on the island, hands down. The muffins aren't bad either.

**La Bombonera** (Map p330; ☎ 722-0658; 259 San Francisco; mains US\$5-10; ☎ 8am-4pm) The old-fashioned coffee machine hisses like a steam engine, career waiters in black trousers appear like royal footman at your table and a long line of seen-it-all *Sanjuaneros* populate the lengthy row of bar stools catching up on the local breakfast gossip. It shouldn't take you long to work out that La Bombonera is a city institution – it's been around since 1902 and still sells some of the best cakes in town.

**St Germain Bistro & Café** (Map p330; ☎ 725-5830; 156 Sol; dishes US\$7-15; ☎ closed Mon) Kudos to the chef for transforming the main course salads – so often the dullest dish on the menu – into something fresh, tasty and filling. Then there's the aromatic Puerto Rican coffee, the delicious paninis and the homemade cakes, which can only be described as melt-in-your-mouth heavenly.

**La Fonda El Jibarito** (Map p330; ☎ 725-8375; 280 Sol; dishes US\$8-22) El Jibarito is the kind of salt-of-the-earth, unpretentious place that you

## SMALL ISLAND, WORLD-CLASS COFFEE

Erica Reyes Ocasio is the founder of Old San Juan's Café Cala'o (p337).

### What kinds of coffee are produced in Puerto Rico?

In Puerto Rico the focus is on gourmet and specialty coffees. Because we are a small island there's a tendency to go for quality rather than quantity. At certain points in our history, our economy has been dominated by coffee and the product has often been in great demand in places such as Italy and Japan. In the past, Puerto Rican coffee was even drunk in the Vatican.

### What's the concept behind Café Cala'o?

We're trying to promote specialty coffee, which is a new concept for many people in Puerto Rico. Because coffee demand exceeds supply, the island has traditionally had to import well over half its beans and quality has suffered as a result. At Café Cala'o we want to educate people about Puerto Rican coffee and combine great beans with great confection. Good beans are often ruined by people who don't know how to transfer them into the cup. All my staff members are trained; they're professionals in the coffee-making process.

### What brands do you sell?

We sell local brands made from Arábica beans that are grown in Puerto Rico's central mountains. These include Jayauya, Utuado, Adjuntas, Maricao (one of the best) and Yauco (one of the island's oldest blends, dating from 1758).

### How do Puerto Ricans traditionally take their coffee?

We drink it as a *pocillo*, that is, a small 4oz cup of coffee with milk. Coffee here is traditionally strong and because, in the past, the quality has often been poor, we usually spike it with sugar.

should reserve to sample your first *mofongo* (fried balls of mashed plantains mixed with pork rind and spices) or *arroz con habichuelas* (rice and beans). A favorite of local families, in-the-know tourists and passing *New York Times* journalists, the meals are simple but hearty with good pork and prawns, or plantains smashed, mashed and fried just about any way you want.

**Baru** (Map p330; ☎ 977-7107; 150 San Sebastián; dishes US\$13-30; ☎ 6pm-midnight) Very popular with food-lovers and martini drinkers, Baru doubles as a nightspot as well as a trendy restaurant. Dishes include 'yuccafongo' (yucca made like a *mofongo*) with shrimp, beef *carpaccio* with basil essence or the mahi-mahi topped with crispy onions.

**Tantra** (Map p330; ☎ 977-8141; 356 Fortaleza; dishes US\$18-27; ☎ noon-midnight) For purists, eating *masala dosa* in Puerto Rico is probably about as incongruous as chomping on *mofongo* in Madras, but for those willing to drop the cultural blinkers, Tantra's adventurous 'Indo-Latin fusion' cuisine is actually rather authentic. Enjoy it in Asian-inspired surroundings that host nightly belly-dancing shows.

**Parrot Club** (Map p330; ☎ 725-7370; 363 Fortaleza; dishes US\$20-32; ☎ noon-3pm, 6-11pm) The menu's in Spanglish, the decor's a lurid mix of orange, blue and yellow and the waitress could quite conceivably be sporting a pink wig.

Welcome to the Parrot Club, where Puerto Rican politicians wind down and enamored gringos live it up. SoFo's original restaurant is now well into its second decade and the menu continues to win kudos with its eclectic crab-cake *caribeños*, pan-seared tuna and vegetarian 'tortes.'

**Aqua Viva** (Map p330; ☎ 722-0665; 364 Fortaleza; dishes US\$30-40; ☎ 6-11pm Mon-Wed, 6pm-midnight Thu-Sat, 4-10pm Sun) Designed with an arty water-slash-sea-life theme and specializing in seafood, Aqua Viva is often packed to the rafters. This SoFo restaurant was invented with the word 'hip' in mind – everything from the open-view kitchen to the catwalk clientele is slavishly stylish. But the real test is the food: fresh oysters, calamari filled with shredded beef and dorado with lightly grilled bell peppers. It has been voted one of the top 75 restaurants in the world.

## Condado & Ocean Park

**Hacienda Don José** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 722-5880; 1025 Av Ashford; dishes US\$3-12; ☎ 7am-11pm) Condado on the cheap; it can still be done. Indeed, the Don José is more redolent of a Mexican beach bar than a plush tourist trap. Waves lash against the rocks within spitting distance of your pancakes and *huevos rancheros* and busy waitresses shimmy around the tiled tables and colorful murals.

**Kasalta's** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 727-7340; 1966 McLeary; dishes US\$4-10; ☎ 6am-10pm) Wake up with a jolt at Kasalta's, a popular early morning breakfast haunt and the sort of authentic Puerto Rican bakery and diner that you will find yourself crossing town to visit. Tucked into Ocean Park's residential enclave, the coffee here is as legendary as the sweets that fill a long glass display case and include everything from Danish pastries to iced buns.

**Via Appia** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 725-8711; Av Ashford; pizzas US\$7-14) The good thing about Condado is that it still retains a smattering of family-run jewels among all the Starbucks and 7-Elevens. Via Appia is one such gem, a no-nonsense Italian restaurant where the pizza is classic and the gentlemanly waiters could quite conceivably have walked off the set of *The Godfather*. Munch on garlic bread or feast on meatballs al fresco, as the multilingual mélange of Av Ashford goes strolling by.

**Zabó** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 725-9494; 14 Candina; dishes US\$12-30; ☎ 6-11pm Tue-Sat) Over in condo land, this older colonial-style villa hints at something different. The variations continue inside in an intimate restaurant-cum-bar where trendsetters sup on martinis and gastronomes tuck into creative dishes such as mango and curry rice and rosemary pork chops with garlic merlot sauce. There's music some nights, everything from Latin jazz to Flamenco.

**Migas** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 721-5991; 1400 Magdalena; dishes US\$15-35; ☎ 6-11pm Mon-Wed, 6pm-midnight Thu-Sat) A newish boutique restaurant on Magdalena, Migas is high on the list of bar-hopping *sanjuaneros*. Some come for drinks (champagne mainly) and others for the food – miso-glazed salmon, classic French steak frites, spicy duck with orange glaze. Real lounge lizards, meanwhile, arrive just to hang out amid the sleek elegance and fashionable buzz.

**Pamela's** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 726-5010; 1 Santa Ana; dishes US\$20-30; ☎ noon-10:30pm) Right on the beach and right on the money, Pamela's is encased inside the elegant Numero Uno. Diners sup wine and munch on scallops beside a teardrop-shaped swimming pool while the ocean crashes just feet away. The menu specializes in fresh ingredients plucked from the nearby sea – think jalapeño-ginger shrimp and seafood chowder – though there are surprise twists. The place is tucked away, but that hasn't prevented it from becoming an open secret. Reserve ahead.

## Santurce

**Pikayo** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 721-6194; 299 Av José de Diego; dishes US\$25-40; ☎ 6-11pm Mon & Sat, noon-3pm & 6-11pm Tue-Fri) Wilo Benet is the island's very own Gordon Ramsey (without the expletives), a celebrity chef par excellence who has uncovered the soul of Caribbean cooking by infusing colonial-era Puerto Rican cuisine with various African and Indian elements. Adding atmosphere to authenticity, Pikayo, Benet's showcase restaurant is situated inside San Juan's stunning Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico (p332), where diners can watch the action in the kitchen on closed-circuit TVs.

## Isla Verde

**Edith Café** (☎ 253-1281; Km 6.3, Av Isla Verde; dishes US\$6-15; ☎ 24hr) No frills, no formalities, just good food – and it's open 24 hours, though you'd think it wasn't operating at all looking at the heavily tinted windows. Come here for breakfast after one of those exuberant all-night parties and nip your hangover in the bud with two fried eggs, bacon and ham washed down with a strong cup of coffee.

**Che's** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 726-7202; 35 Caoba; dishes US\$12-24; ☎ lunch & dinner) Che T-shirts aren't too common in Puerto Rico, where the man who promised to 'create two, three...many Vietnams' in the Americas is regarded with a certain degree of suspicion. That said, you might see the odd red-starred beret in here tucking into *churrasco* and *parrillada* (grilled, marinated steak), or veal chops with a kind of revolutionary zeal. Che's is situated in the neighborhood of Punta Las Marías at the far western end of Av Isla Verde.

**Metropol** (☎ 791-5585; Av Isla Verde; dishes US\$12-26; ☎ dinner) You can't miss this place – it's right next to the cockfighting arena. It's a neighborhood favorite well-known for the plentiful portions and simple (but not plain) Spanish fare. Wandering tourists are sometimes lured out of their upscale resorts and into its inviting fold.

## DRINKING

There are plenty of drinking options in Old San Juan, primarily along San Sebastián and Cristo. The bohemian **El Batey** (Map p330; 101 Calle del Cristo; ☎ 3pm-late) is where you'd find Hunter S Thompson if he were still alive and living in Puerto Rico. **Wet & Liquid** (☎ 728-3666; Water & Beach Club, 2 Tartak) is a far trendier duo of bars



## GAY & LESBIAN SAN JUAN

San Juan is considered to be the most gay-friendly destination in the Caribbean. One of the oldest gay meeting spots is the bar at the Atlantic Beach Hotel (p336) in Condado. More mixed venues include Número Uno (p336) in Ocean Park and the delectable Gran Hotel El Convento (p335) in the heart of the Old City.

High energy nightspots to look out for are **KRASH** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 722-1131; 1257 Av Ponce de León; 🕒 10pm-late) for men, **Cups** (off Map pp334-5; ☎ 268-3570; 1708 San Mateo; 🕒 10pm-late) for women and **Kouros** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 977-0771; 1515 Av Ponce de León; 🕒 10pm-late Sat & Sun) for a good mix of both.

situated in Isla Verde's Water & Beach Club. Here you'll encounter the beautiful people, perched on zebra-striped stools or lounging on strategically positioned sofas, martinis in hand.

## ENTERTAINMENT

Old San Juan is the G-spot of the city's nightlife, hosting what is popularly considered to be the hottest and hippest entertainment scene in the Caribbean. For a condensed late-night scene, hit San Sebastián with its dive bars and musical clubs, or Fortaleza with its trendy yet undeniably tasty restaurants.

Isla Verde is an alternative nexus with most of the action confined to a trio of international-class hotels. Further west, resurgent Condado plays hosts to one of the Caribbean's biggest gay scenes. Down-at-heel Santurce also has a handful of late-night dance clubs that you'll need a taxi or car to get to.

**Nuyorican Café** (Map p330; ☎ 977-1276; 312 San Francisco; 🕒 7pm-late) Now this is more like it. If you came to Puerto Rico in search of authentic salsa music, you'll find the legend still lives on at the Nuyorican Café. San Juan's hottest nightspot is a congenial hub of live Latino sounds and hip-gyrating locals that easily matches its famous New York namesake. Stuffed into an alley off Fortaleza, opposite a nameless drinking hole, here you'll get everything from poetry readings to six-piece salsa bands that barely jam onto the stage. Things usually get interesting here around 11pm-ish.

**La Rumba** (Map p330; ☎ 725-4407; 152 San Sebastián; 🕒 11pm-late) This is what you came to Puerto Rico for – a club so packed with people of all races and ages that it matters not if you are an expert twirler or a rank neophyte who can't even spell syncopation. It won't get busy until after 11pm, when the live bands start warming up, but soon enough the

trickle of people through the door will turn into a torrent and you'll be caught up in a warm tropical crush of movement. Expect salsa, samba, reggaeton, rock and, of course, rumba music.

**Kudetá** (Map p330; ☎ 721-3548; 314 Fortaleza; 🕒 10pm-5am) In the snakes and ladders of San Juan nightlife, Kudetá (coup de état – geddit?) is a precocious newcomer. It is also part of an emerging new trend: a Pan-Asian restaurant that metamorphoses after hours into a hip club with a hidden upstairs lounge where diners can disappear to dance off their Indonesian barbecued baby-back ribs and Cuba Libre-cured salmon-roll salad.

**Marriot Hotel Lobby** (Map pp334-5; ☎ 722 7000; 1309 Av Ashford) Salsa springs up in the unlikelyst of places, including in the lobby of this international hotel chain. But this is no standard tourist show. Indeed the authenticity and variety of the music here is something to behold – and people dance too (including the staff). Thursday through Saturday is salsa and merengue dancing; Wednesday is Nueva Trova with a Cuban influence; and Sunday through Tuesday is a live salsa sextet.

## SHOPPING

There are several beautiful boutiques and clothing stores lining Av Ashford in Condado. For arts and crafts, the shopping is in Old San Juan. Calles San Francisco and Fortaleza are the two main arteries in and out of the old city and both are packed cheek-by-jowl with shops. Running perpendicular at the west end of the town, Calle del Cristo is home to many of the old city's most chic establishments.

If you can't live without your mall fix, head out to the **Plaza Las Américas** (🕒 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 11am-5pm Sun) in Hato Rey, the largest mall in the Caribbean with over 200 stores.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

International flights arrive at and depart from San Juan's Aeropuerto Internacional de Luis Muñoz Marín (LMM), about 8 miles (12.8km) east of the old city center. See p354 for details of flights.

Private aircraft, charter services and the bulk of the commuter flights serving the islands of Culebra and Vieques arrive at and depart from San Juan's original airport at Isla Grande, on the Bahía de San Juan in the city's Miramar district. See p355 for details.

### Público

There is no island-wide bus system. *Públicos* (taxis) form the backbone of public transportation in Puerto Rico and can provide an inexpensive link between San Juan and other points on the island, including Ponce (US\$8) and Mayagüez (US\$12). *Públicos* are generally shared taxis in the form of minivans that pick up passengers along predetermined routes.

In San Juan the major *público* centers include the LMM airport, two large *público* stations in Río Piedras (Centro de Públicos Oeste and Centro de Públicos Este) and – to a lesser extent – the Plaza de Colón in Old San Juan.

## GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

The bus is the cheapest option. Look for the 'Parada' sign outside the arrivals concourse at LMM airport. The B40 bus will get you from the airport to Isla Verde or Río Piedras. From Isla Verde you can take bus A5 Old San Juan and Condado. From Río Piedras you can take bus A9 to Santurce and Old San Juan.

There are also airport shuttle vans or limousine kiosks on the arrivals concourse. Chances are you can join some other travelers headed your way. Once the van fills, you'll pay around US\$7 to Isla Verde, US\$9 to Condado and US\$12 to Old San Juan.

Taxis to/from LMM airport to San Juan are generally fixed rate to the following destinations: Isla Verde (US\$10), Condado (US\$14) and Puerta de Tierra/Old San Juan (US\$19).

### Bus

The **Autoridad Metropolitana de Autobuses** (AMA; Metropolitan Bus Authority & Metrobus; ☎ 767-7979) has a main bus terminal (Map p330) in Old San Juan near the cruise-ship piers. These are the routes taken most often by travelers

(bus numbers are followed by associated route descriptions):

**A5** Old San Juan, Stop 18, Isla Verde.

**B21** Old San Juan, Condado, Stop 18 (Santurce), Plaza Las Américas.

**B40** LMM Airport, Isla Verde, Piñones and Río Piedras.

**C10** Hato Rey, Stop 18, Condado, Isla Grande.

**M1 & M9** Old San Juan, Río Piedras via various routes.

In Old San Juan there is a handy free trolley bus that plies a route around the old quarter (see Map p330). The trolley starts and finishes just outside the main bus terminal, but you can get on and off at any one of two dozen designated stops.

### Car

Traffic, parking, the maze of thoroughfares and the danger of being carjacked make having and using a rental car in the city a challenge. And with an excellent public transport system it is largely unnecessary. For car hire see p355.

### Ferry

A commuter ferry service called the **Acua Expreso** (Map p330; ☎ 788-1155; US\$0.50; ☎ 6am-9pm) connects the east and west sides of Bahía de San Juan, Old San Juan and Cataño every 30 minutes. In Old San Juan the ferry dock is at Pier 2, near the Sheraton Old San Juan.

### Metro

The brand new **Tren Urbano** (☎ 866-900-1284), which opened in 2005, connects Bayamón with downtown San Juan as far as Sagrado Corazón on the south side of Santurce. Efficient trains run every five minutes in either direction between 5:30am and 11:30pm. Bicycles are permitted with a special permit. The 16 super-modern stations are safe, spacious and decked out with acres of eye-catching art and polished chrome. The line, which is a mix of sky-train and underground, charges US\$1.50 one-way or US\$3 return for any journey, regardless of length.

### Taxi

Meters – when or if they do go on – charge US\$1.75 initially and US\$1.90 per mile or part thereof. You'll also pay US\$1 per piece of luggage. There's a US\$5 reservation charge; add a US\$1 surcharge after 10pm.

Taxis line up at the south end of Fortaleza in Old San Juan; or you can book at your

**TWIST MY ARM: THE PLACES THE AUTHORS WANTED TO KEEP SECRET**

Ah...serenity has arrived. Materializing like a leafy apparition out of Puerto Rico's crenellated karst country, the **Casa Grande Mountain Retreat** (☎ 888-343-2272; www.hotelcasagrande.com; Km 0.3, Hwy 612; r US\$90-135; 🏠) ought to be on the prescription list of Caribbean doctors as an antidote for stress, hypertension and rat-race burnout. Nestled in its own steep-sided valley and run efficiently by an ex-New York lawyer, the Casa is an ecologically congruous 'green' hotel that stops you in your tracks, forcing you to slow down and take it easy. While there are no TVs or phones in any of the 20 jungle-esque rooms, there are daily yoga classes, a scrumptious onsite restaurant and every available excuse to sit around all day and do – absolutely nothing. Try it, you might just get addicted.

hotel. Elsewhere, try **Metro Taxi Cabs** (☎ 787-725-2870) or **Rochdale Radio Taxi** (☎ 787-721-1900).

## AROUND SAN JUAN

In a place as small as Puerto Rico you can be three-quarters of the way across the island and still be within an hour or two's drive of San Juan (traffic permitting). Day trips from the capital can thus take you almost anywhere in the commonwealth. If you're keen to probe deeper, it's worthwhile traveling slower and making at least one overnight stop.

### BACARDI RUM FACTORY

Called the 'Cathedral of Rum' because of its six-story pink distillation tower, the **Bacardi plant** (☎ 788-8400; Hwy 888, Bayamón; admission free; 🕒 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Sat) covers 127 acres (51 hectares) and stands out like a petroleum refinery across from Old San Juan, near the entrance to the bay. The world's largest and most famous rum-producing family started their business in Cuba more than a century ago, but they began moving their operation to this site in 1936. Today the distiller produces some 100,000 gallons of rum per day and ships 21 million cases per year worldwide.

To get to the factory, take the US\$0.50 ferry from Old San Juan to Cataño followed by a US\$3 *público* from the ferry terminal along the waterfront on Palo Seco (Hwy 888).

### ARECIBO OBSERVATORY

The Puerto Ricans reverently refer to it as 'El Radar.' To everyone else it is simply the largest radio telescope in the world. Resembling an extraterrestrial spaceship grounded in the middle of karst country, the

**Arecibo Observatory** (☎ 878-2612; www.naic.edu; adult/child/senior US\$4/2/2; 🕒 noon-4pm Wed-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat, Sun & most holidays) looks like something out of a James Bond movie – probably because it is; 007 aficionados will recognize the saucer-shaped dish and craning antennae from the 1995 film *Goldeneye*.

In reality, this 20-acre 'dish' set in a sinkhole among clusters of haystack-shaped mogotes, is planet earth's ear into outer space. Involved in the SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) program, the telescope, which is supported by 50-story cables weighing more than 600 tonnes, is used by onsite scientists to prove the existence of pulsars and quasars, the so-called 'music of the stars.'

### PARQUE DE LAS CAVERNAS DEL RÍO CAMUY

This **park** (☎ 898-3100; adult/child US\$12/6; 🕒 8am-3:45pm Wed-Sun & holidays) is home to one of the largest cave systems in the world and is definitely worth a stop (but call ahead if it's been raining – too much water causes closures).

Trolleybus trips and ample walking among stalagmites and stalactites make this a fun trip for the whole family. If you come early enough you can do the caves in the morning and the observatory in the afternoon. They are a 30-minute drive apart.

## EASTERN PUERTO RICO

The East Coast is Puerto Rico shrink-wrapped; a tantalizing taste of almost everything the island has to offer squeezed into an area not much larger than Manhattan. Here in the foothills of the Sierra de Luquillo the sprawling suburbs of San Juan blend caustically with the jungle-like quietness

of El Yunque National Forest, the commonwealth's giant green lungs and biggest outdoor attraction.

Separated from mainland Puerto Rico by a 7-mile stretch of choppy ocean, the two islands of Culebra and Vieques sport unsullied beaches and unblemished countryside that glimmers invitingly with nary a resort, golf course or casino to break the natural vista.

## EL YUNQUE

Covering some 43 sq mile of land in the Luquillo mountains, this verdant, tropical rainforest is impressively healthy and bountiful and some of the island's old trees still remain (1000 years and growing!). The views of the valleys, the Atlantic, the Caribbean and the eastern islands are inspiring; the temperatures are cool; the hiking is heart-pounding; and the streams and waterfalls are rejuvenating. The first place of note that most people stop at is **El Portal Visitor's Center** (☎ 888-1880; [www.southernregion.fs.fed.us/caribbean](http://www.southernregion.fs.fed.us/caribbean); Hwy 191, adult/under 5yr/child/senior US\$3/free/1.50/1.50; ☎ 9am-5pm, closed Christmas Day). Built in 1996, El Portal is the key for visitors who want to understand more about El Yunque, and pick up details about its hikes.

**our pick Casa Cubuy Ecolodge** (☎ 874-6221; [www.casacubuy.com](http://www.casacubuy.com); Km 22 from Naguabo, Hwy 191; r US\$90-115; ☎ ☎) If listening to a frog symphony and relaxing on a shady balcony within hammock-swinging distance of a mystical tropical rainforest has you dashing for your jungle apparel, then this could be your place. Cocooned atop the winding Hwy 191 on El Yunque's wild and isolated southern slopes, Casa Cubuy Ecolodge's 10 cozy rooms offer a welcome antidote to the modern Puerto Rico of crowded beaches and spirit-crushing traffic.

You can get here from San Juan on an organized trip or by driving along Hwy 3 to the junction with Hwy 191 just past the settlement of Río Grande.

## LUQUILLO

Luquillo is synonymous with its *balneario* (public beach), the fabulous **Playa Luquillo** (admission free, parking US\$2; ☎ 8:30am-5:30pm). Set on a calm bay facing northwest and protected from the easterly trade winds, the public part of this beach makes a mile-long arc to a point

of sand shaded by evocative coconut palms. Although crowds converge here at weekends and during holidays, Luquillo has always been more about atmosphere than solitude. With its famous strip of 50-plus food kiosks congregated at its western end it's also a great place to sample the local culinary culture. There is a bathhouse, a refreshment stand, a security patrol and well-kept bathrooms.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Luquillo Sunrise Beach Inn** (☎ 889-1713; A2 Costa Azul; d US\$95-135; ☎ ☎) Filling a gap in the midrange market, the newly opened Sunrise Beach Inn is caressed by cooling Atlantic sea breezes in each of its spiffy 14 ocean-facing rooms. There's a communal patio and all upper-floor rooms have large balconies overlooking the beach. Luquillo plaza is two blocks away and the famous *balneario* and food kiosks a 30-minute stroll along the beach

**our pick Rosa's Seafood** (☎ 863-0213; 536 Tablazo; dishes US\$14-25; ☎ 11am-10pm Thu-Tue) Frustrated ferry passengers mix with loyal locals at this much vaunted seafood salon situated within anchor-dropping distance of Fajardo docks. You'll walk through a gauntlet of rusting cars and snarling canines to get here, but enter the bright yellow building at road's end and the smell of fresh fish and the sound of sizzling onions will soon have you forgetting about your ferry delays.

## Getting There & Away

*Públicos* run from San Juan (US\$4) to and from the Luquillo plaza. Aside from that, you'll need your own wheels.

## VIEQUES

pop 10,000

With a name stamped in infamy, Vieques was where Puerto Rico's most prickly political saga was played out in the public eye. For over five decades the US navy used more than two-thirds of this lusciously endowed Spanish Virgin Island for military target practice.

These days Vieques teeters precariously between undiscovered tropical nirvana and the Caribbean's next 'big thing' although, to date, a tight community of US expats have managed to jealously guard their largely untainted Viequense paradise against the braying bulldozers. Protected via a newly established wildlife refuge and receiving only 3% of Puerto

Rico's five million annual visitors, the tranquility remains – at least for the time-being

## Information

Unless otherwise noted, all of these addresses are in Isabella Segunda.

It's a good idea to carry cash on the island (but watch out for petty thieves) as the ATMs have been known to run dry.

**Banco Popular** (☎ 741-2071; Muñoz Rivera; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri) Has one of two ATMs in Isabella Segunda.

**Post office** (☎ 741-3891; Muñoz Rivera 97;

☎ 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Across from the Banco Popular, this is the island's only post office. It will take general-delivery letters.

**Puerto Rico Tourism Company (PRTC)** (☎ 741-0800; www.gotopuertorico.com; Carlos LeBrun 449; ☎ 8am-5pm)

## Sights

### ORCHID, RED, GARCIA, SECRET & BLUE BEACHES

All these south-shore beaches, which used to be on navy land, can be reached by entering the García Gate on Hwy 997.

Red Beach usually has a few *cabanas* up to shade bathers from the sun. García Beach and Secret Beach are the next coves along the road. Blue Beach, at the east end of the Camp García road, is long, open and occasionally has rough surf. Orchid Beach, at the eastern tip of the US Fish & Wildlife Reserve, is often deserted, with wide, deep blue waters (not good for children).

### BAHÍA MOSQUITO

This bioluminescent bay – a designated wildlife preserve about 2 miles east of Esperanza – has one of the highest concentrations of phosphorescent dinoflagellates in the world. Indeed, it's also known as Phosphorescent Bay – and it's magnificent.

An evening trip through the lagoon is nothing short of psychedelic, with hundreds of fish whipping up bright-green contrails below the surface as your kayak or electric boat passes by (don't ever accept a ride in a motorized boat – the engine pollution kills the organisms that create phosphorescence). But the best part is when you stop to swim: it's like bathing in the stars.

The best way to see the bay is with an organized trip. **Island Adventures** (☎ 741-0720; www.biobay.com; Km 4.5, Rte 996) offers ecofriendly 90-minute tours (US\$30) in an electric boat just about every night, except when there's a full moon.

## Activities

**Blue Caribe Kayaks** (☎ 741-2522; http://enchanted-isle.com/bluecaribe; Flamboyán, Esperanza; trips US\$23-30) rents out kayaks to individuals (US\$10/25 for one/four hours) and offers trips through the bioluminescent bay (US\$30) with a swim stop included.

**Blackbeard Sports** (☎ 741-1892; 101 Muñoz Rivera, Isabella Segunda) is the island's main dive operator and offers two-tank dives from US\$100. It also rents out North American standard bicycles from its store in Isabel Segunda for US\$25 per day including helmet. Ask about the fantastic bike tours.

Fishing is sublime in Vieques where you can access isolated stretches of coastline in the former naval zone. For a good local operator try **Caribbean Fly-fishing Company** (☎ 741-1337; www.caribbeanflyfishingco.com).

## Sleeping

### ESPERANZA

**Bananas** (☎ 741-8700; www.bananasguesthouse.com; Flamboyán; r US\$65-80; ☎) This is where it all started. Bananas is Esperanza's original cheap guesthouse/restaurant and it's a classic, in the mold of a backpacker's hostel in Thailand or a beach bar in Jamaica. Seasoned travelers will know the deal here: great prices, a lively downstairs bar, a funky and relaxed atmosphere, and basic but adequate rooms that receive the odd nightly visitor from the insect kingdom.

**Trade Winds** (☎ 741-8666; Flamboyán; r US\$70; ☎) Another vintage Vieques abode (vintage meaning since 1984). Situated on the far west end of the *malecón*, this popular guesthouse and inn has 10 rooms, most with air-con, including three terrace rooms that have a harbor view and catch the breeze. The biggest feature is probably the fabulous open-air deck where meals are served – it offers splendid views of the ocean.

### ISABELLA SEGUNDA

**Ocean View** (☎ 741-3696; 751 Plinio Peterson; r US\$75-100; ☎) Vieques' old dockside stalwart is centrally located, convenient and ...well, that's about it. Don't expect a plethora of home comforts in this faded and rather bleak town center hotel. For the unfussy, however, the Ocean View does have friendly staff, a swimming pool and – surprise, surprise – a lovely ocean view.

**Bravo Beach Hotel** (☎ 741-1128; www.bravobeachhotel.com; North Shore Rd 1, Bravos de Boston; r US\$190-300,

villa US\$550; ☎ ☑ ☒) Up above the lighthouse, in the burgeoning Bravos de Boston neighborhood, Vieques is fast creating its very own Beverly Hills. The trend is epitomized in the Bravo Beach Hotel, a former sugar merchant's hacienda whose gorgeous 'Viejo San Juan'-style exterior looks like it's been lifted straight off the front cover of *Travel & Leisure* magazine. Nine fantastical guest rooms are set in lush tropical grounds with ample verandahs and two mesmerizing swimming pools.

#### ELSEWHERE ON THE ISLAND

**La Finca Caribe** (☎ 741-0495; www.lafinca.com; Hwy 995; r from US\$85; ☎) Finca Caribe is Vieques personified. Sitting high up on a mountain-ridge seemingly a million miles from anywhere (but only actually 3 miles from either coast), it's the kind of rustic haven stressed-out city slickers probably dream about. Despite its back-to-nature facilities – outdoor communal showers, shared kitchen and hippy-ish decor – it has a religious following and has inspired gushing reviews from numerous top newspapers and magazines.

**our pick Inn on the Blue Horizon** (☎ 741-3318; www.innonthebluehorizon.com; r US\$200-400; ☎ ☑ ☒) Small is beautiful. The Inn on the Blue Horizon was surely invented with such a motto in mind. With only nine rooms harbored in separate bungalows wedged onto a stunning ocean-side bluff a few clicks west of Esperanza, the sense of elegance here – both natural and contrived – is truly breathtaking. The luxury continues inside the restaurant and cozy communal lounge, which overlook an Italianate infinity pool fit for a Roman emperor.

#### Eating

##### ESPERANZA

**Belly Button's** (Flamboyán; dishes US\$5-11; ☎ 7am-2pm Wed-Sun) Make a beeline for breakfast at Belly Button's and bring a good appetite. Your belly will be more than happy after you've heroically demolished the three Frisbee-sized pancakes that appear rather magically on your plate here.

Bananas and Trade Winds both have popular restaurants onsite.

##### ISABELLA SEGUNDA

**La Vieques Deli** (☎ 741-8213; Antonio Mellado; dishes US\$5-12; ☎ 6am-6pm Mon-Sat, 6am-2pm Sun) If it's breakfast you're after, this is the place to come for your 6am pancakes or hangover-curing

coffee. If you miss the 11am cut-off you can feast instead on decent baked goods, tortillas and sandwiches. Service is no nonsense and fast and the clientele local with a smattering of in-the-know tourists.

**Topacio** (☎ 741-1179; Carlos Lebrun; mains US\$17-24; ☎ lunch & dinner) The newly opened Topacio has already cemented a strong reputation among those with a penchant for delicious seafood served Caribbean style. On an outside patio underneath colorful lights you can sample the generous paella, fish in a Creole sauce, seafood *mofongo* and lobster cooked in garlic.

**Café Media Luna** (☎ 741-2594; 351 Antonio G Mellado; mains US\$18-30; ☎ dinner) Romance is not dead in Vieques' original 'posh' restaurant where candle-lit tables and a tiny street-side balcony add panache to any meal. And there's more. Isabel II's music scene more or less begins and ends in this attractive colonial building where smooth live jazz accompanies lamb chops, seared tuna and rather authentic pizza.

**Blue Macaw** (☎ 741-1147; Antonio Mellado; dishes US\$24-32; ☎ dinner) No birds here, but plenty of fancy metal curves and elaborate down-lighting. One of a trio of plush new eating houses that could quite easily have been plucked straight out of San Juan's SoFo neighborhood, the Blue Macaw's menu is as delicious as the decor is plush. Try the scampi, the lamb tenderloin or the tempura trout and leave room for a lavish dessert.

#### Getting There & Away

##### AIR

There are a good 10 flights a day to/from San Juan's Isla Grande and LMM airports and approximately half a dozen between Fajardo and the island with **Vieques Air Link** (☎ San Juan-Vieques flights 888-901-9247, 787-741-8331, for Fajardo-Vieques flights 741-3266). **Isla Nena Air Service** (☎ 863-4447) links Vieques with Culebra. Round-trip prices start at US\$165 (25 minutes) from LMM, US\$90 from Isla Grande and US\$45 (10 minutes) from Fajardo. Phone for more up-to-date information.

##### BOAT

Call the **Puerto Rican Port Authority** (☎ 863-0705, 800-981-2005; ☎ 8-11am & 1-3pm Mon-Fri) for vehicle reservations (required) or call the **Vieques office** (☎ 741-4761; ☎ 8-11am & 1-3pm Mon-Fri) at the ferry dock in Isabella Segunda. For ferry schedules see p355.

## Getting Around

Vieques is a small island and renting a bike (p344) is a great way to get around. *Públicos* and taxis congregate at the ferry terminal, the airport and on 'the strip' in Esperanza.

Reliable car-rental places include **Island Car Rentals** (☎ 741-1666) and **Maritza's Car Rental** (☎ 741-0078).

## CULEBRA

pop 2000

Welcome to Culebra – the island that time forgot; mainland Puerto Rico's weird, wonderful and distinctly wacky smaller cousin that lies glistening like a bejeweled Eden to the east.

Situated 17 miles to the east of mainland Puerto Rico, but inhabiting an entirely different planet culturally speaking, the island is home to an offbeat mix of rat-race drop-outs, earnest idealists, solitude seekers, myriad eccentrics and anyone else who can't quite get their heads around the manic intricacies of modern life. Long feted for its diamond dust beaches and world-class diving reefs, there's but one binding thread – the place is jaw-droppingly beautiful.

## Information

**Banco Popular** (☎ 742-3572; Pedro Márquez;

☎ 8:30am-2:30pm Mon & Wed-Fri) There's an ATM here.

**Post office** (☎ 742-3862; Pedro Márquez; ☎ 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat) Right in the center of town.

**Tourist office** (☎ 742-3116; Pedro Márquez;

☎ 8:30am-3:30pm Mon-Fri) Good islandwide information can be found at this booth outside the Alcaldía (town hall) on the main street 200 yards from the ferry terminal.

## Sights

### PLAYA FLAMENCO

Stretching for a mile around a sheltered, horseshoe-shaped bay, Playa Flamenco is not just Culebra's best beach; it is also generally regarded as the finest in Puerto Rico and quite possibly the whole Caribbean. Backed by low scrub and equipped with basic amenities, it is also the only public beach on the island and a good place to camp. To get there walk, bike or drive 2.5 miles north of the main settlement of Dewey.

### PLAYA BRAVA

The beauty of Brava lies in the fact that there is no road here; you *have* to hike – make that bushwhack – along a little-used trail

that is often overgrown with sea grape and low scrub. The rewards are immense when you finally clear the last mangrove and are confronted with an isolated but stunning swathe of sand that glimmers with a fierce but utterly enchanting beauty.

Leatherback sea turtles use isolated Brava as a nesting site from April to June. To witness this amazing sight you can volunteer for a turtle watch with the **US Fish & Wildlife Service** (☎ 742-0115; www.fws.gov; ☎ 7am-4pm Mon-Fri), which maintains an office on the island.

## ISLA CULEBRITA

If you need a reason to rent a kayak or take a boat trip, Isla Culebrita is it. This small islet just a mile east of Playa Zoni is part of the wildlife refuge. With its abandoned lighthouse, six beaches, tide pools, reefs and nesting areas for seabirds, Isla Culebrita has changed little in the past 500 years.

## Activities

Culebra retains some of Puerto Rico's most amazing dive spots, including sunken ships, coral reefs, drop offs and caves. Good snorkeling can be accessed from Playas Carlos Rosario, Tamarindo and Melones.

**Culebra Divers** (☎ 742-0803; www.culebradivers.com) across from the ferry dock rents snorkel gear for about US\$10 to US\$12 and offers one-/two-tank dive trips for US\$65/90.

**Ocean Safaris** (☎ 379-1973) offers half-day guided kayak trips to places such as Isla Culebrita or Cayo Luis Peña from US\$45.

The **Tanama Glass Bottom Boat** (☎ 501-0011; trips US\$25-40) offers some really fantastic two-hour harbor cruises in and around the various reefs and trips out to Culebrita.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Flamenco Campground** (☎ 742-0700; campsites US\$20) The only place you can legally camp in Culebra is just feet from the paradisiacal Playa Flamenco. Report to the office at the entrance and you will be assigned a spot. Six people maximum per tent. There are outdoor showers with water available between 4pm and 7pm; bathrooms are open 24/7.

**Hotel Kokomo** (☎ 742-0683; r US\$45-85; ☎) If you're anxious to dump your bags in the first visible crash pad in order to get out exploring, then Hotel Kokomo, the bright yellow building right on the ferry dock, is just the ticket. New management has given this old place

a second lease on life and rooms, while still basic, are clean and cheery enough.

**Mamacita's** (☎ 742-0090; [www.mamacitaspr.com](http://www.mamacitaspr.com); r US\$85-110; ♿) Screaming lurid pink and pastel purple, Mamacita's is the raffish Caribbean crash pit you've been dreaming about. Although the water's invariably cold and the reception staff will have probably gone home by the time your boat arrives, there's something strangely contagious about this old Culebra stalwart with its simple rooms and legendary onsite restaurant.

**Posada La Hamaca** (☎ 742-3516; [www.posada.com](http://www.posada.com); r US\$92-146) Rooms here (all with private bathrooms) are basic but comfortable and overlook the canal, while location-wise you're right in the heart of Dewey with plenty of eating options within walking distance. The front desk is a good font of local information.

**Palmetto Guesthouse** (☎ 742-0257; r US\$95-115; ♿) Set up in Barrianda Clark, this new business is a super friendly and accommodating escape run by two ex-Peace Corps volunteers from New England. Five guestrooms with private bathrooms have the run of two kitchens, a deck, a handy book exchange and a sporty magazine pile.

**Bahia Marina** (☎ 742-3112; [www.bahiamarina.net](http://www.bahiamarina.net); r US\$150-300; ♿) One of the island's newest accommodations is also one of its most luxurious – in fact, it's Buckingham Palace by Culebra standards. Abutting a 100-acre nature preserve, this condo resort has 16 well-integrated apartments with modern kitchenettes and cable TV; the resort also has a pool, restaurant-grill and live music at weekends.

**Juanita Bananas** (☎ 742-3855; Harbor Villas; dishes 12-24; 🍷 5:30-10pm Fri-Mon) Opened in 2004, this revolutionary restaurant gives new meaning to the words 'fresh' and 'sustainable.' Sporting its very own greenhouse and garden, almost all of the fruit, vegetables and herbs listed on the menu will have traveled only a few hundred yards before hitting your plate. The seafood is also local and fished using sustainable methods. Specialties include tasty soups, fruity desserts and the famous *sofrito* sauce. Reservations are necessary.

**Dinghy Dock** (☎ 742-0581; mains US\$13-28) If you can brave the gauntlet of cigarette-smoking expats that requisition the steps nightly, you'll find the DD to be something of a culinary revelation. Fish is the obvious specialty here, with fresh catches like swordfish and snapper done in Creole sauces. The busy bar is a frenzy

of expats nursing Medalla beers that acts as the unofficial island grapevine. If you haven't heard it here first, it's not worth hearing.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Culebra gets excellent air service from San Juan and Fajardo on the commuter carriers that also serve Vieques; see p345 for details.

**Isla Nena Air Service** (☎ 812-5144; [www.islanena.8m.com](http://www.islanena.8m.com)) can be chartered for flights to St Thomas and **Air St Thomas** (☎ 791-4898; [www.airstthomas.com](http://www.airstthomas.com)) does charter flights to St Croix, St Thomas and many other Caribbean islands, with stopovers at Vieques or Culebra on demand.

### BOAT

If you need to confirm the ferry schedule, call the **Fajardo Puerto Rican Port Authority office** (☎ 863-0705, car reservations 800-981-2005; 🕒 8-11am & 1-3pm Mon-Fri); Culebra office (☎ 742-3161; ferry dock, Dewey; 🕒 8-11am & 1-3pm Mon-Fri). For ferry schedules, see p355.

## Getting Around

It's not always necessary to hire a car in Culebra (there are too many cars on the island as it is). The Dewey area is all walkable, Flamenco beach is a not unpleasant 30-minute hike and everywhere else can be easily reached by *público*, bus, taxi or, if you're energetic, bicycle. **Dick & Cathy** (☎ 742-0062) rent bikes or, if you really can't be parted from your four wheels, contact **Thrifty Car Rental/JM Scooter Rentals** (☎ 742-0521).

*Público* vans run between the ferry dock and Playa Flamenco for US\$2. Some local entrepreneurs double as taxi drivers.

**Willy's** (☎ 742-3537, 396-0076) generally meets every ferry and also arrives on your door when booked. If he's busy and you're stuck for a ride, try **Romero** (☎ 378-0250).

# SOUTHERN & WESTERN PUERTO RICO

A stunning change of scenery awaits you along the southern coast – particularly west of the main city, Ponce. The central mountains tumble down to denuded plains that once were full of sparse bushes – everything was cleared away to make room for sugar plantations in the 1800s. Now there's little to



catch the eye – outside of the colonial charms of Ponce – until you arrive at Bosque Estatal de Guánica, a fabulous ‘dry forest’ that brings to mind the deserts of southern Arizona. Unbelievably, it’s little more than an hour’s drive from El Yunque’s fecund greenery.

## PONCE

pop 194,636

Given its fiercely proud, poetic history as the historic center of Puerto Rico’s south; it’s little wonder that Ponce is the subject of so many lofty declarations. From the mouths of Puerto Rican statesmen to the inscriptions on public fountains, Ponce is ‘a city of initiative, understanding and heart’ (Eugenio María de Hostos), a place that ‘does not repeat history, but improves it’ (Rafael Pon Flores) and a ‘land of Camelot: ideal, legendary, dreamlike and real’ (Antonio Gautier). The locals put it a bit more succinctly. ‘*Ponce es Ponce*,’ they proudly claim and the rest of Puerto Rico is one great big parking lot.

## Information

Banks line the perimeter of Plaza Las Delicias, so finding a cash machine is no problem.

**Post office** (Atocha; ☎ 7:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat) Three blocks north of Plaza Las Delicias, this is the most central of the city’s four post offices.

**Puerto Rico Tourism Company** (PRTC; ☎ 284-3338; www.letsgetoponce.com; Parque de Bombas, Plaza Las Delicias; ☎ 9am-5:30pm) You can’t miss the big red-and-black structure in the middle of the park, where friendly, English-speaking members of the tourist office are ready with brochures, answers and suggestions.

## Sights & Activities

### PLAZA LAS DELICIAS

The soul of Ponce is its idyllic Spanish colonial plaza, within which stands two of the city’s landmark buildings, the red-and-black striped Parque de Bombas and Catedral Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe. At any hour of the day a brief stroll around the plaza’s border will get you well acquainted with Ponce – the smell of *panderías* follows churchgoers across the square each morning; children squeal around the majestic **Fuente de Leones** (Fountain of Lions) under the heat of midday; and lovers stroll under its lights at night. Even as the kiosks of lottery tickets and trinkets, commercial banks and fast food joints encroach at the edges,

reminders of the city’s proud history dominate the plaza’s attractions, including marble statuary of local *danza* icon Juan Morel Campos and poet/politician Luis Muñoz Marín, Puerto Rico’s first governor. The **Catedral Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe** (Our Lady of Guadalupe Cathedral; ☎ 842-0134; admission free; ☎ 6am-1pm Mon-Fri, 6am-noon & 3-8pm Sat & Sun) was built in 1931 in the place where colonists erected their first chapel in the 1660s, which (along with subsequent structures) succumbed to earthquakes and fires.

Facing Plaza Las Delicias on the south side of the plaza, Ponce’s **Casa Alcaldía** (City Hall; ☎ 284-4141; admission free; ☎ 8am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) started life in the 1840s as a general assembly house and was later a jail.

### PARQUE DE BOMBAS

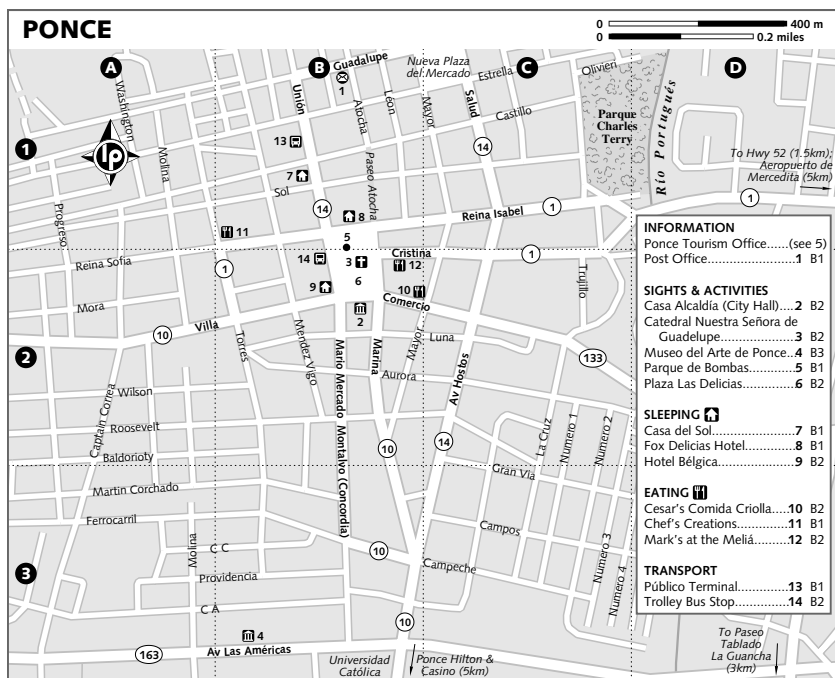
Poncenos will claim that the eye-popping **Parque de Bombas** (☎ 284-3338; admission free; ☎ 9:30am-5pm) is Puerto Rico’s most frequently photographed building – not too hard to believe while you stroll around the black-and-red-stripped Arabian-styled edifice and make countless unwitting cameos in family albums. Originally constructed in 1882 as an agricultural exhibition hall, the space later housed the city’s volunteer fire fighters, who are commemorated in a small, tidy exhibit on the open 2nd floor. Since 1990 the landmark has functioned as a tourist information center (left).

### MUSEO DEL ARTE DE PONCE

With an expertly presented collection, this commanding **art museum** (☎ 848-0505; www.museoarteponce.org; 2325 Av Las Américas; adult/child/student/senior US\$5/1/2/2; ☎ 10am-5pm) in the vibrant heart of the city’s artistic community is easily among the best fine arts centers in the Caribbean and itself worth the trip from San Juan. Set across from Universidad Católica the museum’s expertly curated collection contains some 850 paintings, 800 sculptures and 500 prints representing five centuries of Western art.

### PASEO TABLADO LA GUANCHA

Ponce built this great half-mile (0.8km) boardwalk in the mid-1990s to overlook the town’s yacht harbor and *club náutico*. Today there is a seaside concert pavilion with dozens of bars and restaurants, often great live salsa,



an obligatory observation tower and a well-maintained public beach.

## Sleeping

**Hotel Bélgica** (☎ 844-3255; 122 Villa; r US\$50-75; ♿) A travelers' favorite for years, the Bélgica is just off the southwest corner of Plaza Las Delicias, a 20-room hotel with European-style high ceilings and wrought iron balconies. Rooms near the front allow you to stare out over the plaza from a private balcony, but be prepared for noise on weekend nights.

**Casa Del Sol Guest House** (☎ 812-2995; [www.casadel-solpr.com](http://www.casadel-solpr.com); 97 Union; r incl breakfast US\$60-75; ♿) Situated just north of the plaza, this nine-room guesthouse is the city's best deal, offering pleasant rooms and a welcoming staff within steps of the plaza. Shared balconies look over the busy street and it offers free wi-fi, a basic continental breakfast and a private terrace out back that has a small hot tub.

**Fox Delicias Hotel** (☎ 290-5050; [www.foxdelicias.com](http://www.foxdelicias.com); 6963 Reina Isabel; r US\$85-250; ♿) The Fox family refitted an old building on the corner of the plaza with a modern hotel. Opened in 2005, its plaza-facing rooms are a

favorite among sophisticated *sanjuaneros*. The cocktail lounges swell at the high season and during festivals, but off-season amenities are limited and the place is pretty sleepy.

**Ponce Hilton & Casino** (☎ 259-7676; [www.hilton.com](http://www.hilton.com); 1150 Av Caribe; r US\$210-280; ♿) The most deluxe place in town, the 153-room Hilton has well-manicured grounds, on-site golf, a nightclub, restaurants and a casino. Sun-pink golfers and wealthy Americans are wont to gripe about their last round and the quality of the buffet, but the live music and ocean views give a touch of local flavor.

## Eating

**Cesar's Comida Criolla** (cnr Mayor & Cristina; dishes US\$2-14; ☺ lunch) The ultimate hole in the wall for *comida criolla* (traditional Puerto Rican cuisine), this humble joint might be rough around the edges, but the savory piles of pork, chicken and seafood (most served with rice and beans) is the city's best home cookin'.

**Chef's Creations** (☎ 848-8384; Reina 100; mains US\$6-12; ☺ lunch). On first level of a former residence, this place exudes casual elegance,

with a menu that changes every day and leans toward international fusions of local fare, like the delicious *paella con tostones*.

**Mark's at the Meliá** (☎ 842-0260; www.marksatthemelia.net; Hotel Meliá, 2 Cristina; mains US\$14-26; 🍴 dinner) Long regarded as Ponce's final word in fine dining, the cozily lit (though somewhat stuffy) restaurant within the Meliá Hotel has been lauded in every foodie magazine on the island for *comida criolla* treated to French technic.

## Getting There & Around

A nice, new *público* garage is three blocks north of the plaza near Plaza del Mercado connecting to all major towns on the island. There are plenty of long-haul vans headed to Río Piedras in San Juan (about US\$20) and Mayagüez (about US\$10), and an inexpensive café is on site.

Four miles (6.4km) east of the town center off Hwy 1 on Hwy 5506 is the Aeropuerto de Mercedita (Mercedita Airport). **Cape Air** (☎ 848-2020) has five flights a day departing for San Juan.

Ponce has trolley buses and a fake train that runs on the roads (tickets US\$2). Check with the tourism office for schedules.

Car rental agencies include **Avis** (☎ 842-6184), **Dollar** (☎ 843-6940) and **Hertz** (☎ 842-7377); and taxi companies include **Cooperativa de Taxis** (☎ 848-8248) and **Ponce Taxi** (☎ 642-3370).

## BOSQUE ESTATAL DE GUÁNICA

The immense 10,000 acres of the Guánica Biosphere Reserve is one of the island's great natural treasures and a blank slate for the outdoor enthusiast. Trails of various lengths and difficulty make loops from the visitors center, lending themselves to casual hikes, mountain biking, bird-watching and broad views of the Caribbean.

The remote desert forest is among the best examples of subtropical dry forest vegetation in the world – a fact evident in the variety of extraordinary flora and fauna that is present around every corner. Scientists estimate that only 1% of the earth's dry forest of this kind remains and the vast acreage makes this a rare sanctuary. It's crossed by 30-odd miles of trails that lead from the arid, rocky highlands, which are covered with scrubby brush, to over 10 miles of remote, wholly untouched coast. Only a two-hour drive from the humid rainforests of El Yunque, the crumbling landscape

and parched vegetation makes an unexpected, thrilling contrast.

To get to the eastern section of the reserve and the **ranger station** (☎ 821-5706; admission free; 🕒 9am-5pm), which has trail maps and brochures, follow Hwy 116 south from Hwy 2 toward Guánica town. Turn left (east) onto Hwy 334 and follow this road as it winds up a steep hill through an outlying *barrio* (suburb) of Guánica. Eventually, the road crests a hill ending at the ranger station, a picnic area and a scenic overlook of the forest and the Caribbean.

Guánica's lengthy system of hypnotic trails offer a million surprises and although none of the foliage is particularly dense and getting lost isn't easy, be safe and bring water, sunscreen and bug repellent; the sun is unrelenting any time of year and there's little shade.

## RINCÓN

pop 15,000

Shoehorned far out in the island's most psychedelic corner, Rincón is Puerto Rico at its most unguarded, a place where the sunsets shimmer scarlet and the waiters are more likely to call you 'dude' than 'sir.' For numerous California dreamers this is where the short-lived summer of love ended up. Arriving for the Surfing World Championships in 1968 many never went home. Hence Rincón became a haven for draft-dodgers, alternative lifestylers, back-to-the-landers and people more interested in catching the perfect wave than bagging US\$100,000 a year in a Chicago garden suburb.

Not surprisingly, Rincón's waves are often close to perfect. Breaking anywhere from 2ft to 25ft, the names are chillingly evocative: Domes, Indicator, Spanish Wall and Dogman's. The *crème de la crème* is Tres Palmas, a white-tipped monster that is often dubbed the 'temple' of big-wave surfing in the Caribbean.

## Activities

### DIVING & SNORKELING

Located inside the little marina on the north side of town, **Taino Divers** (☎ 823-6429; www.taino-divers.com; Black Eagle Marina; 2-tank dive US\$109, snorkeling US\$75) is probably the best outfit on the west coast. Guides are responsible, professional and very environmentally aware. It does almost daily runs to Isla Desecheo (8am to 2pm), an almost uninhabited island off the coast that

has very clear water and some of Puerto Rico's best diving. It also does shorter trips to nearby reefs (8am to noon).

### SURFING

Downtown on the Plaza de Recreo you will find the **West Coast Surf Shop** (☎ 823-3935; [www.westcoastsurf.com](http://www.westcoastsurf.com); 2E Muños Rivera). Aside from selling all the appropriate gear, the owners have great local knowledge and can organize lessons for any standard or age at short notice.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Rincón Surf & Board** (☎ 823-0610; dm US\$20, d US\$55-65, ste US\$85-95) In the Sandy Beach area north of town, this inn advertises basic apartments 'over the jungle.' It's a favorite haunt of the 'surf trolls' who show up to ride the waves all winter and the guesthouse offers 10 to 15% discounts if you stay a week or more.

**Beside the Pointe** (☎ 823-8550; [www.besidethepointe.com](http://www.besidethepointe.com); r US\$75-125; 🍷) Right on Sandy Beach, this guesthouse also has a very popular après-surf restaurant, known as Tamboo Tavern, which attracts a fun crowd. Rooms are actually like small apartments, with cooking facilities and mini-kitchens. If you just want somewhere to rest your surfboard while you hit the beach bars, this could be the place.

**our pick** **Lazy Parrot Inn** (☎ 823-5654; [www.lazyparrot.com](http://www.lazyparrot.com); Km 4.1, Hwy 413; r US\$110-155; 🍷 📺 🚿) Claiming the middle ground between high quality and high quirky, the Lazy Parrot captures the unique essence of Rincón without scrimping on the home comforts. A venerable inn crammed with all kinds of parrots, it occupies the high country above Rincón Pueblo and offers peek-a-boo glimpses of the sparkling ocean. Rooms are comfortable, but not flash, there's a sublime pool and onsite Smilin' Joe's restaurant is a culinary corker.

**Hotel Villa Cofresí** (☎ 823-2450; [www.villacofresi.com](http://www.villacofresi.com); Km 12.3, Hwy 115; r US\$115-160; 🍷 📺) Away from the plusher resorts, the Villa Cofresí is the down-to-earth place down the road that places fabulous customer service over fabulous art, and wicker furniture over wood. Standard rooms have king-sized beds and some come with kitchenettes; the property also has a pool, restaurant, bar and water-sports concession.

**Pancho Villa** (☎ 823-8226; Plaza de Recreo; dishes US\$10-12; 🕒 11am-3pm, 5-10pm Tue-Sun) If you have long grown bored of lukewarm enchiladas or unpalatable refried beans, this modest

place in Rincón's main square could quite easily reignite your taste buds for all things Mexican. Though the decor's nothing fancy and the service only so-so, the Rancho Villa delivers the goods where it matters: the food's damn tasty.

### Entertainment

**our pick** **Calypto Tropical Café** (☎ 823-4151; 🕒 noon-midnight) Wall-to-wall sunbats, svelte girls in bikini tops, bare-chested blokes nursing cold beers and syncopated reggae music drifting out beneath the sun-dappled palm trees; the Calypto is everything you'd expect a beachside surfer's bar to be – and perhaps a little more. On the leafy road to the El Faro lighthouse, Calypto hosts the oldest pub scene in Rincón and regularly books live bands to cover rock, reggae and calypto classics.

### Getting There & Around

Rincón doesn't have an airport, but there are two in the area: Mayagüez and Aguadilla.

The *público* stand is situated just off the town plaza on Nueva. Expect to pay about US\$4 if you are headed north to Aguadilla or US\$1.50 to go south to Mayagüez (you can access San Juan from either of these cities).

The easiest way to approach the town is via the valley roads of Hwy 402 and Hwy 115, both of which intersect Hwy 2 south of the Rincón peninsula.

You will pay US\$20 or more for a taxi from either the Aguadilla or Mayagüez airport and you may prefer a car to move around to the various attractions in Rincón. There are rental-car sites at both the Mayagüez and Aguadilla airports.

## DIRECTORY

### ACCOMMODATIONS

There are no hostels in Puerto Rico and very few dorm-style accommodations near local universities. Most options are guesthouses, inns, hotels and *paradores* (midrange to high-end hotels that get regular surprise visits from the tourism board). Rentals are a good idea for long-term guests or big groups. Most hotels rates are for a room where you specify what type of bed you want (double versus twin). If you have more than two to a room you'll be charged more, but solo travelers mostly aren't given any price break.

## ACTIVITIES

Puerto Rico's tropical climate and variety of land- and seascapes make the island a mecca for outdoor activities.

The semiprotected waters off the east end of Puerto Rico, which include the islands of Culebra and Vieques, provide the setting for racing and cruising aboard sailboats. You can count on the trade winds blowing 12 to 25 knots out of the east almost every day. A number of marinas meet sailors' needs in the Fajardo area. The largest is the **Puerto del Rey Marina** (☎ 860-1000), with 750 slips and room for vessels up to 200ft (79m) long.

There are plenty of good diving operators scattered around the island. In San Juan, check out Eco-Action Tours and Caribe Aquatic Adventures (p333). In Rincón, call by at Taíno Divers (p350). Out east, try Culebra Divers (p346) on the island of Culebra, and Blackbeard Sports (p344) in Isabella Segunda on Vieques.

Among both tourists and islanders, the most popular hiking area in Puerto Rico is the national rainforest at El Yunque (p343). All the commonwealth's *reservas forestales* offer good hikes, as does the dry forest in Guánica (p350).

Since the 1968 world surfing championships at Rincón, surfers the world over have known that Puerto Rico ranks with a few sites in Mexico and Costa Rica as some of the biggest and best winter surfing in all of the Americas. If you stay close to San Juan, you will find the surfers' scene at the beaches eastward from Isla Verde. But for the big stuff, you need to make a pilgrimage west to Rincón and Isabela, which host numerous important competitions each year.

Puerto Rico played host to the Ray Ban Windsurfing World Cup in 1989 and the sport has been booming here ever since. Hotdoggers head for the surfing beaches at Isla Verde or, better yet, the rough northwest coast.

## BUSINESS HOURS

The following are standard hours in Puerto Rico. Exceptions are noted in individual listings.

**Banks** ☎ 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday

**Restaurants** ☎ breakfast 7am to 10am, lunch noon to 3pm, dinner 7:30pm to 11pm

**Shops** ☎ 10am or 11am to 7pm or 8pm Monday to Friday, 11am to 8pm Saturday and Sunday

## PRACTICALITIES

- **Newspapers & Magazines** *San Juan Star* ([www.sanjuanstar.com](http://www.sanjuanstar.com)) is a bilingual daily newspaper and *Puerto Rico Breeze* is a biweekly paper on gay nightlife in San Juan. *Que Pasa!* is a bimonthly magazine published by the PR Tourism Office.
- **Radio & TV** US TV is broadcast across the island. The English-language radio station is WOSO San Juan, at 1030AM. Elsewhere, radio is mostly in Spanish.
- **Video Systems** Puerto Rico uses VHS for videos.
- **Electricity** Puerto Rico has the 110V AC system used in the USA.
- **Weights & Measures** Puerto Rico follows the US system with two exceptions: all distances you see on road signs are in kilometers and gas is pumped in liters.

## CHILDREN

Puerto Ricans love children – it doesn't matter who they belong to – and even more, they love family. So traveling with youngsters is rarely a hassle. There are some hotels that won't take children under a certain age but it's very rare. Several museums and hotels offer child rates or discounts. If renting a car, make sure that the rental agency has a car seat for you and if taking a taxi any long distance, bring one with you. Children should carry some form of ID in case of an emergency.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Although street crime is a serious issue in urban areas, visitors need not be obsessed with security. A few commonsense reminders should help keep you secure.

Always lock cars and put valuables out of sight. If your car is bumped from behind in a remote area, it's best to keep going to a well-lit area or service station. Never allow yourself to get in a conflict with another driver on Puerto Rican roads: 'road rage' is common here and more than a few antagonized drivers have been known to retaliate with gunfire.

One type of daylight mosquito carries dengue fever although the risk of contracting it is extremely low. Nonetheless, bring some repellent and use it.

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

The following official buildings are located in San Juan.

**Austria** (☎ 766-0799; Plaza Las Américas, Río Piedras)

**Canada** (☎ 790-2210; 107 Cereipo Alturas, Guaynabo)

**Mexico** (☎ 764-0258; Bankers Finance, Hato Rey)

**Netherlands** (☎ 759-9400; Mercantil Plaza, Hato Rey)

**Spain** (☎ 758-6090; Mercantil Plaza, Hato Rey)

**UK** (☎ 727-1065; 1509 Lopez Landron, Santurce)

**Venezuela** (☎ 766-4255; Mercantil Plaza, Hato Rey)

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

**Carnaval, Ponce** (February) Laid-back Ponce gets pretty wild during this week, in the six days preceding the beginning of Catholic Lent, with *vejigante* masks (colorful paper maché masks depicting often-scary characters from African and European mythology).

**Coffee Harvest Festival, Maricao** (mid-February)

A celebration of Maricao's principal product, with lots of caffeine-fueled dancing.

**Cinco Días con Nuestro Tierra** (second week in March)

Held in Mayagüez, this is one of the island's agricultural/industrial fairs, featuring local produce.

**Festival de Mavi, Juana Diaz** (April) *Mavi*, or *mabi* in Spanish, is a fermented drink invented by Taínos that uses local bark as its primary ingredient. This festival is as much about honoring Taíno heritage as it is about drinking *mavi*.

**Fiesta Nacional de la Danza, Ponce** (mid-May) This is a perfect opportunity to learn about the old-fashioned *danzas* that were practiced during colonial times.

**Festival Casals, San Juan** Internationally renowned, the Casals festival brings musicians from around the world to remember Pablo Casals, who lived most of his adult life in Puerto Rico.

**Fiesta de Santiago Apostol, Loiza Aldea** (end of July)

The place to come for an African-influenced party – parades, fabulous drum ensembles, *vejigante* masks and colorful costumes.

**Hatillo Masks Festival, Hatillo** (December 28) The island's third major festival of masks features masked devils prowling the streets.

See also p333 for festivals in San Juan.

## GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

Puerto Rico is probably the most gay-friendly island in the Caribbean. San Juan has a well-developed gay scene, especially in the Condado district, for Puerto Ricans and visitors. Other cities, such as Ponce, have gay clubs and gay-friendly accommodations as well. Vieques and Culebra have become popular destinations for an international mix of gay and lesbian expatriates and travelers.

## HOLIDAYS

**New Year's Day** January 1

**Three Kings Day (Feast of the Epiphany)** January 6

**Eugenio María de Hostos' Birthday** January 10;

honors the island educator, writer and patriot

**Martin Luther King Jr Day** Third Monday in January

**Presidents' Day** 3rd Monday in February

**Emancipation Day** March 22; island slaves were freed on this date in 1873

**Palm Sunday** Sunday before Easter

**Good Friday** Friday before Easter

**Easter** Sunday in late March/April

**Jose de Diego Day** April 18

**Memorial Day** Last Monday in May

**Independence Day/Fourth of July** July 4

**Luis Muñoz Rivera's Birthday** July 18; honors the island patriot and political leader

**Constitution Day** July 25

**Jose Celso Barbosa's Birthday** July 27

**Labor Day** First Monday in September

**Columbus Day** Second Monday in October

**Veterans' Day** November 11

**Thanksgiving Day** Fourth Thursday in November

**Christmas Day** December 25

## INTERNET ACCESS

Finding a good internet café outside of San Juan and the main resorts can be difficult, although most public libraries have computers with internet access. Free wi-fi access is increasingly available in the better hotels, although whether it is working is another matter.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

Good general websites include the following:

**El Boricua** ([www.elboricua.com](http://www.elboricua.com))

**Escape to Puerto Rico** (<http://escape.topuertorico.com>)

**Puerto Rico Tourist Company** ([www.gotopuertorico.com](http://www.gotopuertorico.com))

**Welcome to Puerto Rico** (<http://welcome.topuertorico.org>)

## LANGUAGE

Both English and Spanish are official languages in Puerto Rico, although Spanish is far more widely spoken. You'll get by OK in the major urban centers with English alone, though a smattering of Spanish will always win kudos from the locals. If you're venturing to the island's more remote corners, take a Spanish phrasebook.

## MAPS

Rand McNally publishes fold-out maps of San Juan/Puerto Rico that include a detailed

overview of the metro area. This map is widely available from most bookstores and drugstores in San Juan for about US\$5. The Puerto Rican Tourist Company gives out excellent free maps of the island (with San Juan on the reverse).

## MEDICAL SERVICES

For emergencies in Puerto Rico, call ☎ 911. Excellent medical facilities are available on the island. A number of hospitals offer emergency rooms.

Pharmacies in Puerto Rico are known as *farmacias*, and they are generally well stocked with medications up to North American standards.

## MONEY

Puerto Rico uses US currency. ATMs are called ATHs in Puerto Rico (for a *todos horas* – at all hours) and are common in most shopping areas and even in many small-town banks.

## POST

You'll find a **US post office** (☎ 800-275-8777; www.usps.gov) in almost every Puerto Rican town, providing familiar postal services such as parcel shipping and international express mail.

## TELEPHONE

The Puerto Rican area code is ☎ 787. To call from North America, dial ☎ 1-787 + the seven-digit local number. From elsewhere, dial your country's international access code followed by ☎ 787 + the local number. To call within Puerto Rico, just dial the local number. We have included only the local number for Puerto Rico listings in this chapter.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

The **Puerto Rico Tourism Company** (PRTC; www.gotopuertorico.com) is the commonwealth's official tourist bureau and maintains offices in San Juan (p329), Ponce (p348) and Vieques (p344).

## TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

Puerto Rico is surprisingly compliant with the *American Disabilities Act*. Most modern hotels have at least one room set up for special needs clients. All the ferries to Culebra and Vieques are wheelchair-accessible and

Playa Luquillo has a wheelchair-accessible stretch of sand.

## VISAS

US residents don't need visas to enter Puerto Rico; however, if they are planning to work or study they should check on the latest regulations with their embassy. Canadians don't need visas for stays of up to 180 days, as long as they aren't working or studying during that period. Citizens of most European countries, Australia and New Zealand can waive visas through the Visa Waiver program. All non-US and Canadian travelers planning to stay for longer than 90 days need a visa: contact the closest US embassy and be prepared to pay US\$100.

## WOMEN TRAVELERS

Puerto Rican women crisscross the island all the time by themselves, so you won't be the only solo woman on the ferry or public bus. But as a foreigner, you will attract a bit more attention. If you don't want the company, most men will respect a firm but polite 'no thank you.'

# TRANSPORTATION

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Entering Puerto Rico

US nationals need proof of citizenship (such as a driver's licence with photo ID) to enter Puerto Rico, but should be aware that if they're traveling to another country in the Caribbean (other than the US Virgin Islands, which, like Puerto Rico, is a US territory), they must have a valid passport in order to re-enter the US. Visitors from other countries must have a valid passport to enter Puerto Rico.

### Air

**Aeropuerto Internacional de Luis Muñoz Marín** (SJU; ☎ 749-5050; www.lmm.150m.com) – commonly shortened to LMM – in San Juan is a major Caribbean hub. Chances are that you will be arriving and departing from the airport in San Juan, but Aguadilla's **Aeropuerto Rafael Hernández** (BQN; ☎ 891-2286), at the former Base Ramey on the island's northwest tip, has some scheduled international flights. Ponce and Mayagüez each has a small air-

**EMERGENCY NUMBERS**

- **Ambulance** ☎ 911
- **Fire** ☎ 911
- **Police** ☎ 911

port for domestic flights. San Juan's original airport at Isla Grande, on the Bahía de San Juan in the Miramar district, services private aircraft and the bulk of the commuter flights to the Puerto Rican islands of Culebra and Vieques.

The following airlines fly to/from Puerto Rico:

**Air St Thomas** (☎ 800-522-3084; www.airstthomas.com)

British Virgin Islands, US Virgin Islands

**Air Sunshine** (☎ 888-879-8900; www.air sunshine.com)

St Croix, St Thomas, Tortola, Virgin Gorda

**American Airlines** (☎ 800-433-7300; www.aa.com)

Chicago, Dallas, Miami, New York

**American Eagle** (☎ 800-433-7300; www.aa.com)

Chicago, Dallas

**Cape Air** (☎ 800-352-0714; www.flycapeair.com)

St Croix, St Thomas, Tortola

**Continental Airlines** (☎ 800-525-0280; www.continental.com)

Houston, New York

**COPA** (☎ 722-6969; www.copaair.com)

Guayaquil

**Delta** (☎ 800-221-1212; www.delta.com)

Atlanta, New York

**LIAT** (☎ 800-468-0482; www.liatairline.com)

Antigua, Barbados, St Lucia, Trinidad

**Seaborne Airlines** (☎ 888-359-8687; www.seaborneairlines.com)

St Croix, St Thomas

**United Airlines** (☎ 800-538-2929; www.united.com)

Chicago

**Vieques Air Link** (☎ 888-901-9247; www.vieques-island.com/val)

St Croix, St Thomas

**Sea****CRUISE SHIP**

San Juan is the second-largest port for cruise ships in the western hemisphere (after Miami). More than 24 vessels call San Juan their home port or departure port and every year new cruise ships either originate sailings from San Juan or make San Juan a port of call. The ships dock at the piers along Calle La Marina, which are just a short walk from the cobblestone streets of Old San Juan.

**FERRY**

**Transportation Services Virgin Islands** (☎ 340-776-6282) run an irregular ferry between Puerto

Rico and the US Virgin Islands leaving Fajardo twice a month.

**Ferries Del Caribe** (☎ 787-832-4800; www.ferriesdelcaribe.com) runs the massive *M/S Caribbean Express* between Mayagüez in Puerto Rico and Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. The trip takes 12 hours and one way tickets start at US\$115.

**GETTING AROUND**  
**Air**

In an island the size of Yellowstone National Park, getting around by airplane is pretty superfluous (and not particularly environmentally friendly). The bulk of Puerto Rico's domestic air traffic links San Juan to the offshore islands of Culebra and Vieques. Fares to Vieques are one way/round-trip US\$45/90; fares to Culebra are about US\$50/90.

**Air Flamenco** (☎ 724-6464; www.airflamenco.net)

Flies from San Juan to Culebra and Vieques.

**Isla Nena Air Service** (☎ 742-0972; www.islanena

.8m.com) Flies from San Juan and Fajardo to Culebra and Vieques.

**Vieques Air Link** (☎ San Juan-Vieques 888-901-9247,

San Juan-Culebra 722-3736; www.viequesisland.com/

val) Flies from San Juan to Culebra and Vieques.

**Boat**

The **Puerto Rican Port Authority Office** (☎ 800-981-2005, 863-0705) handles the solid and safe ferry service from Fajardo to Vieques and Culebra. Reservations are required to take a car on a transport ferry (a bit of a hassle). Passenger ferries run three to four times daily. A round-trip is US\$4.50. Schedules:

**Fajardo-Culebra Passenger Ferry** (🕒 9:30am & 3pm Mon-Fri, 9am, 2:30pm & 6:30pm Sat & Sun) Schedule varies on holidays.

**Fajardo-Culebra Cargo Ferry** (🕒 3:30am, 4pm & 6pm Mon-Fri, also 10am Wed & Fri)

**Fajardo-Vieques Passenger Ferry** (🕒 9:30am, 1pm & 4:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am, 3pm & 6pm Sat & Sun & holidays)

**Fajardo-Vieques Cargo Ferry** (🕒 4am & 1:30pm & 6pm Mon-Fri)

**Car**

Car rental costs about US\$45 to US\$65 per day, depending on availability. Several good highways now link San Juan to just about every other major point with a drive of less than two hours. Scooters are available for rent on Culebra and Vieques (about US\$40 per day) – they are not safe to ride on any major roads.



If you rent a car, take all the insurance options unless you already have good coverage on your credit card. Be aware that if you rent a car and then take it on the ferry to Vieques or Culebra (not an easy feat to get a reservation, by the way) the rental agency will not cover any damage. In fact, they will tell you it's against their policy to take the cars to the islands. Nobody will stop you if you take the chance, but if you have an accident, no tow truck's coming to get you. You'll be liable for the whole auto.

#### DRIVING LICENSE

A valid driver's license issued from your country of residence is all that's needed to rent a car.

#### FUEL & SPARE PARTS

Garages and gas stations are few and far between in Puerto Rico. It's a good idea to carry

extra fuel in the trunk if you are doing heavy driving. Be aware that gas is sold in liters on the island.

#### ROAD RULES

Basically, there are none. Watch your back, don't tailgate and ignore the general craziness of local drivers. Drive on the right-hand side of the road. On major highways, using a turn signal to indicate a lane change seems to amuse drivers – if you give them advance warning of where you're going, it just makes it easier for them to cut you off.

#### Público

*Públicos* – large vans that pick up and drop off passengers with great frequency and little haste – run between a few of the major cities, but it's a very slow (although cheap) way to travel. You'd better have a lot of time if you choose this method of transportation.