

# North Coast



Head west out of San Juan on Hwy 2 and the suburban sprawl can seem never-ending. But it's not all drab satellite towns. Peer beyond the big box warehouses and glaring fast-food advertisements of Manatí and Barceloneta and more subtle secrets serendipitously reveal themselves. Here, the shadowy outline of a haystack-shaped hill. There, a glimpse of sun-flecked ocean sparkling like crumpled tin foil amid the ubiquitous concrete. And then, as if by magic, a side road beckons and you are drawn dreamily off the main drag and into an ethereal world of towering cliffs, hidden sinkholes and foaming Atlantic surf.

Wedged spectacularly between escarpment and sea, the north coast of Puerto Rico is known as karst country, a distinctly surreal landscape of bulbous *mogotes* (limestone hillocks) and limestone caves that resembles a giant papier-mâché experiment gone wrong. Nestled within this exotic haven of narrow valleys and dripping jungle lies a quartet of fecund state forests, all of which offer excellent DIY adventures for travelers with no fixed timetable.

Despite the challenges of the precipitous terrain, the north coast also showcases some of Puerto Rico's biggest outdoor attractions, many of which can be tackled in a day trip from San Juan. A 'grand tour' for weekend warriors includes the Río Camuy caves, the Observatorio de Arcibo (the largest radio telescope in the world) and the Parque Ceremonial Indígena Caguana – all must-sees on any itinerary and all consequently crawling with day-trippers. For an alternative escape, forge south into the mountain foothills around Río Abajo where placid lakes and out-of-the-way yoga retreats give new meaning to the word 'tranquil.'

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Destressing with an early-morning yoga session at the **Casa Grande Mountain Retreat** (p247)
- Going underground with stalagmites and stalactites in the **Parque de las Cavernas del Río Camuy** (p245)
- Searching for alien life forms at the **Observatorio de Arcibo** (p245)
- Cycling with the wind in your hair along the surf-lashed beaches on the coast west of **Isabela** (p251)
- Finding a signposted trail (at last!) in the **Bosque Estatal de Guajataca** (p249)

■ POPULATION: 1 MILLION



## History

The north coast contains one of the island's largest and oldest Native Indian ceremonial sites near Utuado, an archaeological find that provides dramatic proof that a well-organized Taíno culture thrived on the island before the arrival of the Spanish. Though Arcibo is the third-oldest city on the island, there is little of historical note remaining on the north coast outside of a couple of picturesque Spanish-colonial lighthouses. The 20th century saw a burgeoning of San Juan's suburbs westward into satellite towns such as Vega Alta and Manatí. At the same time a concerted effort has been made to protect karst country through tree-planting projects and the formation of half a dozen forest reserves in the 1940s.

## Climate

Outside of the island's rainy months (late summer to early fall), the north coast is generally sunny, although big Atlantic storms can come barreling out of nowhere to whip the waves into a white-capped frenzy. Inland, the humidity increases, but on the shore the 80°F temperatures aren't at all oppressive.

## Territorial Parks & Reserves

The north coast is dotted with small karst-country parks and reserves, although they're not nearly as well-equipped (or as well-trodden) as El Yunque. From east to west, there's the diminutive 1000-acre Bosque Estatal de Vega and the equally tiny Bosque Estatal de Cambalache. Around Arcibo the heavily populated San Juan suburbs give way to larger reserves such as the 5000-acre Bosque Estatal de Río Abajo, which has better-maintained trails and a wider range of facilities, although even this pales in comparison to the Parque de las Cavernas de Río Camuy, one of Puerto Rico's most oft-visited tourist attractions. Nestled in the northwest, the Bosque Estatal de Guajataca has caves, *mogotes* and plenty of signposted trails.

## Getting There & Around

Aguadilla has an international airport that is widely used by vacationers heading for the west-coast beaches and scientists keen to study the stars at the Observatorio de Arcibo. Públicos run between the smaller coastal towns and from San Juan out to the main population centers along Hwy 2. Renting a car is probably the most popular option of getting around. The Isabela region is good for cycling.

## DORADO

pop 13,200

For aspiring golfers, the legend of Dorado has always been more about putting greens than gold. This aptly named north coast town of just over 13,000 inhabitants boasts five championship-standard golf courses that draw Tiger Woods wannabes from as far apart as Miami and Melbourne. But, if you're the sort of person for who tee time is 'a drink with jam and bread' rather than an amble down the fairways, several stunning local beaches offer a welcome break from the clubhouse banter.

Founded in 1842, Dorado first rose to prominence as a resort town in the early 1900s when the Rockefeller family sailed in and started to construct their idyllic Caribbean Shangri-la on a golden stretch of beach. The venture went public in 1958 when Laurence Rockefeller, the well-known philanthropist and conservationist, opened up the region's first hotel, the Dorado Beach, a pioneering ecoresort where no building was taller than the surrounding palm trees. More resorts followed, including the grandiose Hyatt Regency Cerromar, with its exotic 1776ft swimming river, but by the early 2000s, with the Hyatt group struggling to maintain the hotels in tip-top shape, the town's fortunes started to slide.

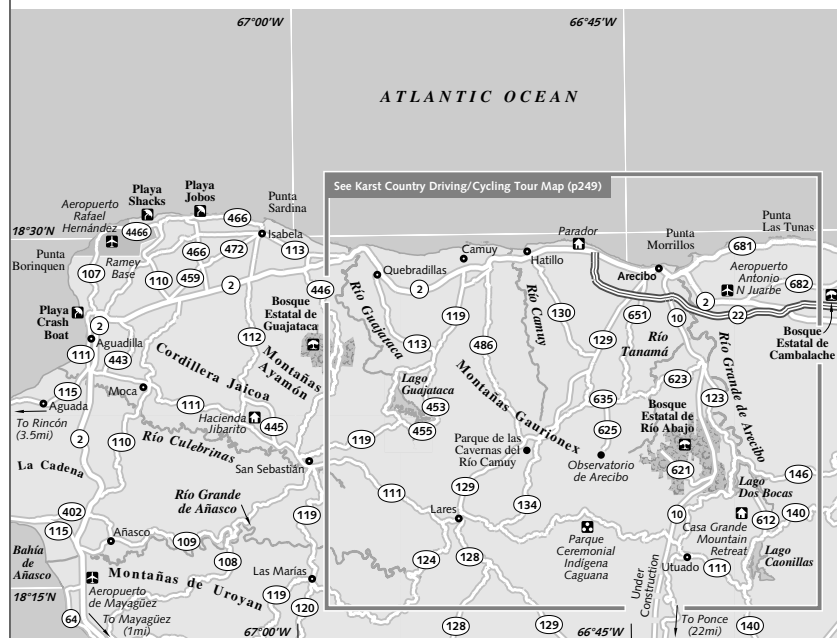
Today, with both the Dorado Beach and Cerromar operations closed and awaiting takeovers (and makeovers), the town feels as if it's slipped into temporary hibernation. Elsewhere the building frenzy has shifted to newer holiday homes in plush gated communities meaning that Dorado, while retaining its ritzy image, has lost much of its erstwhile atmosphere.

Away from the resorts, Dorado has a timeless public beach in town and an even prettier free option a few miles to the west at Cerro Gordo (p243). Back in town, the original 19th-century settlement, with its teardrop-shaped lights rimming the main plaza, is a pleasant spot to while away a lazy afternoon.

## Orientation

Rte 165 turns into Calle Méndez Vigo, the town's central road, and takes you past the shopping center. Then the road becomes Rte 693 (you'll see several nice restaurants on Vigo before it morphs into 693). Turn right at the gas station onto Rte 697 and you'll arrive at the town's closest public beach. If you

## NORTH COAST



continue straight on Rte 693, you'll hit the two Hyatts and Playa de Cerro Gordo.

## Sights &amp; Activities

## MUSEUMS

Dorado has a trio of small museums that could fill a short afternoon or a breather between golf rounds. The **Museo y Centro Cultural Casa del Rey** (☎ 787-796-5740; Calle Méndez Vigo) is an old Spanish garrison that displays antique furniture, the **Museo del Plata** (☎ 787-796-9031; Industria; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Sat) showcases local art, sculpture and paintings, and the **Museo de Arte e Historia de Dorado** (☎ 787-796-5740; cnr Calles Méndez Vigo & Juan Francisco; ☎ 8am-3:30pm Mon-Sat) gives you the rundown on local history and archaeology. Admissions are free.

## BEACHES

Although nobody is advertising it, there is, in fact, a public beach in Dorado where you can swim. **Balneario Manuel Morales** (parking \$2) is at the end of Rte 697. But it's a rather boring bit of sand surrounded by rocky outcrops and marred by litter. For a far better experience try Playa de Cerro Gordo several miles to the west (p243).

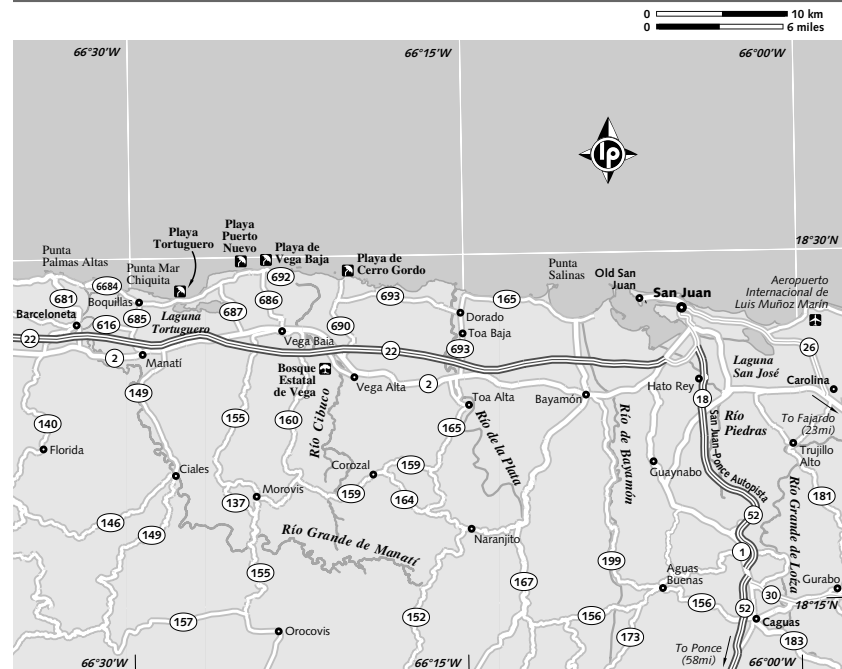
You can also get to nearby Toa Alta's beach, **Punta Salinas**, about 20 minutes east of Dorado on Rte 165. It's got food kiosks, lifeguards, restrooms and basketball courts.

## SURFING

For those not staying at a resort, try **Kalichee Surf Shop** (☎ 787-796-3852; Rte 693 No 500; ☎ 9:30am-6:30pm Mon-Sat). Inside the Grande Shopping Center, Kalichee rents all sizes of surfboards for \$25 to \$45 a day and offers advice on where to find the best surfing. A credit card is needed to rent. They can also hook you up with the many local instructors who say they can get a beginner standing up by the end of a two-hour lesson.

## GOLF

Look no further. Dorado has the best golf courses in the Caribbean, period. There are five 18-hole courses here and all remain open despite the recent closure of the adjoining Hyatts. The famed **East Course** (☎ 787-796-8961) at the former Hyatt Dorado is the green jewel – Jack Nicklaus has ranked its 540yd 4th hole as one of the best in the world. Its major-league



water hazards have helped it earn its rating as one of the planet's finest golf courses by *Golf Digest*. Next door lies the 6975yd **West Course** (☎ 787-796-8961), while across the road you'll find the **Pineapple and Sugarcane** (☎ 787-796-8915) courses at the Plantation Club. Dorado's fifth and newest course is the Chi Chi Rodríguez-designed **Dorado El Mar** (☎ 787-796-3070) at the Embassy Suites. Greens fees at these courses range from \$100 to \$150 for guests and \$130 to \$190 for nonguests depending on tee times.

## Sleeping

**Costa de Oro Guest House** (☎ 787-278-7888; B28 on Calle H, off Rte 697; r \$75-110; ☎) Just a few hundred yards from the public beach in a residential section of town, this locally run establishment is the other side of Dorado: diminutive, no-frills and fairway-free. There are 14 plain but clean rooms, a minuscule pool the size of a resort Jacuzzi tub and friendly staff.

**Embassy Suites Dorado del Mar Beach & Golf** (☎ 787-796-6125; www.embassysuitesdorado.com; 201 Dorado del Mar Blvd; r \$150-300; ☎) Dorado's newest resort has taken center stage since the

gargantuan golf hotels to the west have gone into hibernation. Situated close to town amid a phalanx of gated communities, it has its very own Chi Chi Rodríguez-designed course along with a business center, a gym, tennis courts and four specialty restaurants. The open-plan lobby is a fountain-filled state-of-the-art extravaganza where smooth-talking salespeople in Hawaiian shirts leap out from behind pillars and try to sell you timeshares. If you can survive this relatively innocuous form of initiation, you could be in for a ball.

**Hyatt Regency Hacienda del Mar** (☎ 787-796-3000; www.hyatt.com; Hwy 693 Km 12.8; r \$200-1200; ☎) Something of a ghost town since the adjacent Hyatt Dorado Beach Resort and Cerromar closed a couple of years ago, this condo timeshare is so quiet it's almost spooky. Some visitors revel in their new-found isolation, while others find the strangely abandoned million-dollar resort...well...rather eerie. Since it's a timeshare, the Hacienda del Mar only has availability when one of the unit owners is away, so you need to call first and see what's vacant. Potentially, its facilities are top class, with golf, a secluded beach and the

Lazy River, one of the world's largest (1776ft long) leisure swimming pools/water features (once shared with the now-defunct Cerromar Hotel), but with the abandonment of the adjacent facilities, some of the rooms are getting a little long in the tooth.

## Eating

**our pick** **Restaurante Rancho Mar** (☎ 787-796-3347; Calle G; dishes \$10-28) Every morning, fishermen head out to see what they can hook; every afternoon, the fruits of their labor are served at this restaurant, just across from the public beach, which has amassed quite a reputation for creating the freshest, most delectable seafood dishes in town. Menu changes daily, depending on the catch.

**Villa Dorada d'Alberto Seafood Restaurant** (☎ 787-278-1715; 99 Calle E; dishes \$12-25) This is a lively seafood restaurant on Dorado's public beach strip that is always buzzing after dark. Fresh fish is the mainstay and it's generally good enough to attract the flush vacationers out of their resort nirvanas. Afterwards you can wander next door to El Portal where romantic guitar trios play Puerto Rican and Cuban classics.

**El Ladrillo** (☎ 787-796-2120; 334 Calle Méndez Vigo; dishes \$15-35) El Ladrillo has been around for over 30 years and continues to lure guests out of the plush hotels for a night of intimacy and good food. Filled with old-world charm, the restaurant specializes in to-order steaks with plenty of back-up seafood; everything from octopus salad to lobster *asopao* (an island specialty, a delicious thick stew). It also functions as a mini art gallery, displaying a selection of local paintings.

**Zen Garden** (☎ 787-796-1173; Hwy 693 Km 12.8; dishes \$18-33) Though they shut the Hyatt Cerromar a couple of years back, the Asian/sushi restaurant has remained open and outside of the golf clubs it's pretty much the only place to eat on this slumbering megaresort. If you don't mind braving the half-empty lobby, the food is still delectable and the staff will be more than happy to see you.

## Entertainment

Your best bet for entertainment is to wander down to the public beach area where a clutch of lively seafood restaurants often host live music.

The Calypso Bar at the Embassy Suites also puts on live music at the weekends.

**La Terraza** (☎ 787-796-1242; Marginal Costa de Oro, Calle 1, off Rte 693) Yes, it serves a mean paella, but La Terraza offers entertainment for dessert on a 2nd-floor rooftop terrace with distant views of the sea. Expect occasional live salsa music – although it's usually pop rock from Hollywood soundtracks.

**Restaurante Rancho Mar** (☎ 787-796-3347; Calle G) This restaurant (left) stays open late and lets you nurse beers at the bar.

## Getting There & Away

It is easy to get a público to and from Río Piedras in San Juan (40 minutes) or the ferry terminal in Cataño (about \$3; 20 minutes).

**Taxi de Dorado** (☎ 787-796-3806) can get you around the locality or into San Juan. Alternatively, you can hire a car at **Dorado Car Rental** (☎ 787-796-2633; Hwy 693 No 26). Phone for rates.

## MANATÍ & AROUND

pop 16,000

Despite its title as the 'Athens of Puerto Rico,' you won't find anything resembling an acropolis in Manatí. In fact, the closest you're likely to get to budding Hellenic culture in this thoroughly metropolitan town is the classical 18th-century Catedral Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria and the neo-Grecian Salon de los Poetas, a posthumous nod to poets past.

Modern Manatí, which was named for the endangered manatee (sea cow) that once prospered in these waters, is an industrial hub for workers in local pharmaceutical factories and a nearby pineapple canning plant. But, body-swerve the industrial eyesores and you'll quietly uncover some little-heralded beaches along with two inland forest reserves, Bosque Estatal de Cambalache and Bosque Estatal de Vega, set among the sinkholes and limestone *mogotes* of karst country.

### TOP FIVE GREEN ESCAPES

- Bosque Estatal de Guajataca (p249)
- Laguna Tortuguero (opposite)
- Parque de las Cavernas del Río Camuy (p245)
- Bosque Estatal de Río Abajo (p246)
- Lagos Dos Bocas & Caonillas (p246)

## Orientation

Manatí sprawls between the two east–west island thoroughfares of Hwy 2 and Expressway 22 (a toll road). The beaches and Laguna Tortuguero lie on a thin coastal strip to the north, while the Bosque Estatal de Vega lies just south of the main highways approximately 6 miles to the east. The Bosque Estatal de Cambalache is situated 5 miles west of Manatí, a mile or so north of Expressway 22.

## Sights & Activities

### BEACHES

Unlike most of Puerto Rico's public beaches, **Playa Mar Chiquita** is not alongside a main thoroughfare, and therein lies its charm. There's a hardly visible sign to the beach off Hwy 685, about 2 miles north of Manatí and just beyond the entrance to the town of Boquillas. If you miss the sign, go north on Hwy 648 (about a mile east of Boquillas). This road takes you over a steep hill to the beach, which lies at the bottom of an escarpment where the plateau of the coastal plain has been hollowed out into caves.

As you continue east on the seaside road (which has now become Hwy 686), you'll pass through a coastal forest. When the road creeps back to the edge of the coast, the long strand of **Playa Tortuguero** will be on the left. A couple of miles further east is a normal balneario (public beach), **Playa Puerto Nuevo** – a narrow crescent of sand sheltered by a broad headland to the east and surrounded by clusters of beach homes.

If this place seems too tame for you, head east from here upon Hwy 692, a road that comes to a halt in a mile or so at the spot where the Río Cibuco joins the sea. The beach along this road is exposed and punctuated with reefs and rocks. To the south lie cow pastures and savannas. This beach is known variously as **Playa de Vega Baja** and **La Costa Roja**. Strong riptides make it dangerous for swimming, but the surfing can be excellent and the peace you find sitting here under a coconut palm may be as good as it gets in Puerto Rico.

After a long detour inland (to clear the swampy mouth of the Río Cibuco), the network of coastal roads takes you to one more surprising beach as you head east. **Playa de Cerro Gordo** (parking \$2) lies at the end of Hwy 690. This was once the north coast's best-kept secret, but word is definitely out; the government just pumped several million dollars into creating restrooms, showers, fire pits and

other beach necessities to put Cerro Gordo on the tourist map – and the additions have improved what was already a first-rate area. Camping is possible here (p244).

### BOSQUE ESTATAL DE VEGA

This is a small forest of approximately 1000 acres set among the *mogotes* south of the Hwy 22 expressway, just to the northwest of the town of Vega Alta. You enter off Hwy 676, where you'll see the **forest office** (☎ 787-724-3724; ☎ 9am-4pm). There are picnic shelters and a few modest hiking trails (signage isn't great), but the forest isn't very developed. Its principal function is to preserve some of the aquifer that lies beneath the sinkholes and to provide a green buffer against the outer suburbs of San Juan, which are pressing rather alarmingly on its borders. The hours here are seasonal; if you will require a ranger it's best to call ahead.

### LAGUNA TORTUGUERO

This **lagoon** (☎ 787-844-2587; ☎ 8am-4pm Wed-Fri, 6am-6pm Sat & Sun) is the only natural lake in Puerto Rico, making its protection extra precious. It is also one of the most ecologically diverse spots on the island, listing 717 species of plant and 23 different types of fish. Hiking around this pretty spot yields ocean views, and you can also fish and kayak in the lake – though you'll have to bring your own equipment. Ask the rangers on duty about the trails, though they're pretty obvious. Some locals use them for jogging. One of the lake's stranger problems is its caiman infestation. In the 1990s there was an odd craze to buy striped South American caimans. Locals bought them in their droves, only to discover they don't make good pets. Hundreds were ditched in the lagoon, with unfortunate results for the ecosystem. Rangers run an extermination program and have succeeded in getting the population under control; in theory, caimans only hunt at night, but you want to watch what you're doing at all times. To get to Tortuguero from Hwy 22, take Exit 41, take a right on Hwy 2, then left on Rte 687 until you see a big sign for the lagoon on your left.

### BOSQUE ESTATAL DE CAMBALACHE

Cambalache covers an area of just 1000 acres, making it smaller than a lot of Puerto Rican

resort hotels. The entrance to this compact but little-visited forest reserve lies west of Barceloneta, in front of – wait for it – a Job Corps facility. Despite this rather inauspicious introduction, the forest is ecologically varied and characterized by distinctive karstic formations; countless *mogotes* pop straight up from the landscape to heights of 160ft. Its many caves provide homes for fruit bats, which often swarm like bees into the evening sky.

The forest has a picnic area, 8 miles of hiking trails, two designated trails for mountain bikes (though they're often washed out) and one that is wheelchair-accessible, and two camping areas (below). Note that a permit is required for cycling (\$1). Call the Departamento de Recursos Naturales y Ambientales (DRNA; p87) in San Juan to obtain one. Basic on-the-ground information can be obtained at the **ranger station** (☎ 787-878-7279; Hwy 682 Km 6.6; ☹ 9am-4pm) to the right of the entrance gate. Since the forest only enjoys a couple of thousand visitors in any given year, the ranger should be very pleased to see you.

The forest is also home to a rather rundown looking **ornamental trees nursery** (☎ 7:30am-3pm Mon-Fri).

### Sleeping & Eating

**Bosque Estatal de Cambalache** (campsites per person \$4) To camp in karst country at this forest (p243), you need to make reservations. There are two campsites: La Boba holds four tents and La Rosa holds eight. A free permit is required; contact the DRNA in San Juan (p87).

**Playa de Cerro Gordo** (☎ 787-883-2730; campsites \$13; ☹ beach 8am-6pm) There's camping available on this popular beach west of Dorado (p243). Lifeguards are present daily, and the food kiosks sell the usual fried finger foods that you can eat at pine picnic tables. If you're looking to camp in the summer months call ahead for a reservation and don't expect too much privacy. Parking costs \$2.

**Su Casa Steak House** (☎ 787-884-0047; Hwy 670 Km 1; dishes \$12-22) Breaking the fast-food monotony, this casual place (which is on the Mesón Gastronómico hot list) serves up some of the best steaks in the area. Also on the menu are seafood, *comida criolla* (traditional Puerto Rican cuisine) and plenty of other Puerto Rican delicacies served up with an international vent.

### Getting There & Away

While you can get to and from Manatí by público (about 45 minutes from San Juan), you'll need wheels to avoid being stuck in the undesirable town with no way of getting around the sights. By car, Manatí can be reached from the east or west via Hwy 2, or by taking Hwy 149 south from Hwy 22.

### ARECIBO & AROUND

pop 49,000

Approaching Arecibo today, it's hard to imagine that this sprawling modern municipality of nearly 50,000 people is Puerto Rico's third-oldest city, after San Juan and San Germán. Founded in 1556, the original town was named after an esteemed Taíno cacique (chief) and gained notoriety in 1702 when Spanish captain Antonio Correa thwarted a full-scale British invasion off the coast. But, while little of historical note remains in the present-day city, save a restored 19th-century cathedral and the emblematic Spanish-colonial Arecibo lighthouse, veer further inland and the view gets a lot more interesting.

Indeed, today the name Arecibo is more synonymous with the world's largest radio telescope than with its historic lighthouses and erstwhile Spanish military tacticians. The Observatorio de Arecibo lies several miles to the south in the heart of karst country, a tree-studded pastiche of haystack-shaped hills and plunging depressions that flicker like folds on a badly indentured map. Harboring a fascinating museum and a view worthy of a futuristic James Bond film set, the observatory is open to public viewing and reigns as one of the island's most rewarding must-sees. Back on the coast you can pass a short afternoon at the lighthouse and its surrounding historical park or saunter off in search of ancient Taíno petroglyphs in one of the north coast's many karstic caves.

The popular Hatillo Mask Festival, held on December 28, is one of Puerto Rico's most symbolic ceremonies whose innovative masks and costumes adorn the front of numerous books, postcards and tourist literature (see p279).

### Orientation

Arecibo's city center is trapped between Hwy 2 and the Atlantic Ocean – it's a thin strip of restaurants and strip malls. The main

attractions lie about 15 to 20 minutes outside of town in karst country, just off Hwy 129.

### Sights & Activities

#### OBSERVATORIO DE ARECIBO

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** (☎ 787-878-2612; www.naic.edu; adult/child/senior \$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*).

The 20-acre dish, set in a sinkhole among clusters of haystack-shaped *mogotes*, is planet Earth's ear into outer space. The telescope, which is supported by 50-story cables weighing more than 600 tons, is involved in the SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) program and used by on-site scientists to prove the existence of pulsars and quasars, the so-called 'music of the stars.' Past work has included the observation of the planet Mercury, the first asteroid image and the discovery of the first extra-solar planets.

Top scientists from around the world perform ongoing research at Arecibo, but an informative visitors center with interpretative displays and an explanatory film provide the public with a fascinating glimpse of how the facility works. There's also a well-positioned viewing platform offering you the archetypal 007 vista.

To get to the observatory follow Hwys 635 and 625 off Hwy 129. It's only 9 miles south of the town of Arecibo as the crow flies, but the rollercoaster ride through karst country will make it seem more like 90.

#### PARQUE DE LAS CAVERNAS DEL RÍO CAMUY

For centuries now, the Río Camuy has been imposing its will on the soft karstic underground limestone to create this incredible system of caves, the world's third-largest. This **park** (☎ 787-898-3100; Hwy 129 Km 18.9; adult/child \$12/6, parking \$2; ☹ 8am-5pm Wed-Sun & holidays) spreads over an area about 10 miles long and has 17 entrances in the area between the towns of Hatillo, Camuy and Lares.

Over the years, the caves have been important shelters for indigenous people, home to millions of bats that help keep the island's insect population under control, and a source of fertilizer. But no modern explorers went to the trouble of making a thorough investigation of the caves until 1958. This was when Russell and Jeanne Gurnee and Bob and Dorothy Rebillé accompanied José Limeres (a Puerto Rican doctor) into a Río Camuy sinkhole. The upshot of this trip was a suggestion that the government purchase 300 acres of land around the Río Camuy caves as a nature preserve. Later, the Speleological Society of Puerto Rico explored and mapped the caves, eventually proposing that the government develop the Cueva Clara de Empalme (at the site of the Cavernas del Río Camuy) for tourism, and in 1986 the attraction opened.

It is a good idea to call the park for local conditions (too much rain can cause closures or abbreviated tours), and arrive before 10:30am to avoid crowds or a long wait.

Your visit begins with a film about the caves at the visitors center. Then you take a trolleybus that follows a spiraling road down through the jungle into a 200ft-deep sinkhole to **Cueva Clara de Empalme** (Clear Cave Junction), where you take a 45-minute guided walk through the cave. Here you walk past enormous stalagmites and stalactites, and into rooms littered with boulders. At one point, the ceiling of the cavern reaches a height of 170ft; at another, you can see the Río Camuy rushing through a tunnel.

After leaving the cave from a side passage, you take another tram to the **Tres Pueblos sinkhole**, which measures 650ft across and drops 400ft. Forty-two petroglyphs that you can now inspect have been found in **Cueva Catedral** (Cathedral Cave).

The last tour leaves at 2pm if you want to see all three areas, or at 3:45pm if you want to see just one sinkhole.

For information on camping in this park, see p247.

#### PARQUE CEREMONIAL INDÍGENA CAGUANA

Like the archaeological site at Tibes near Ponce, this **Taíno ceremonial site** (☎ 787-894-7325; admission free; ☹ 9am-4pm), off Hwy 111, is not dramatic in the sense of having monumental ruins. The power of the place comes from its first-rate setting in a natural botanical garden of ceiba, ausubo and tabonuco trees shading the midslopes of the Central Mountains.

There are also 10 ceremonial *bateyes* (Taíno ball courts), which date back about 800 years to the time of the original Taíno inhabitants. Stone monoliths line many of the courts; some weigh up to a ton, but most are small. One court measures 60ft by 120ft. Quite a few have petroglyphs, such as the famous *Mujer de Caguana*, who squats in the pose of the traditional 'earth mother' fertility symbol.

The discovery of this site dates from the beginning of the 20th century, when it was originally excavated by the respected archaeologist J Alden Mason. He and subsequent archaeologists have concluded from the size and number of the ball courts that Caguana was not much of a village, but rather a central ceremonial site, perhaps one of the most important Taíno sites in the Caribbean.

Caguana is a place to walk and reflect, not to be stimulated by exhibits. Nevertheless, there is a small **museum** with artifacts and skeletons on the property, and a gift shop that sells inexpensive but attractive reproductions of Taíno charms, including the statues called *cemíes*.

### LAGOS DOS BOCAS & CAONILLAS

These two lakes – each more than 2 miles long – fill a deeply cleft valley at a point where karst country gives way to the actual mountains of the Central Mountains, east of Hwy 10 and north of Utuado. The lakes are the principal reservoirs for the north-central part of the island, and for years they caused anxiety to communities downstream, who worried that the lakes could not absorb a torrential rainfall without overflowing or bursting a dam.

As it turned out, drought was the first plague to hit the lakes. At one point, the water dropped so low at Lago Caonillas that the bell tower of a 1930s-era chapel was exposed. The chapel had been built in the valley before the Aqueduct & Sewer Authority claimed the land and flooded it with a reservoir. Thousands of islanders flocked to the site, hoping for a miracle, as if the image of the bell tower rising above the water was the sign of the second coming of Jesus.

But the miracle was short-lived. When Hurricane Georges passed over Puerto Rico in 1998, more than 25in of rain fell on the Central Mountains, and a lot of that water found its way to Caonillas and Dos Bocas. The dams did not break, but the reservoirs overflowed, sending a wall of water down the Río Grande de Arecibo valley. The flood destroyed

crops, houses, possessions and even the bridge over the river's mouth in Arecibo.

In calm weather, you can ride Dos Bocas' free launch, which serves as a taxi service to the residents in the area. The boat landing is on Hwy 123, on the west side of the lake. Boats leave almost every hour. You can disembark at restaurants around the lake or just sit back and enjoy the two-hour ride. You can similarly pick up the boat launch on the other side of the lake at the end of Hwy 612, about 3 miles beyond the Casa Grande Mountain Retreat (opposite). There's a restaurant here called **Vista al Lago** (☎ 787-814-6934), perched on a steep bluff where the boat stops. It serves decent *comida criolla* and hires out kayaks for \$20 an hour. On the opposite shore nearby – easily reached by kayak – there are two more well-maintained restaurants, **Otoao** (☎ 787-312-7118) and **Rancho Marina** (☎ 787-894-8034) that do good seafood.

### BOSQUE ESTATAL DE RÍO ABAJO

This 5000-acre forest has a **visitors center** (☎ 787-880-6557; ☎ 9am-5pm) just off Hwy 621, halfway between Utuado and Arecibo, and some of the most rugged terrain on the island. Situated in the heart of karst country, the forest's altitude jumps between 700ft and 1400ft above sea level. The steep sides of the *mogotes* are overrun with vines, and the forest is a jungle of tropical hardwoods, including Honduran mahogany and Asian teaks, and huge clumps of bamboo.

A century ago this land was logged almost bare. In the mid-1930s, the US government and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) stepped in with their plan to reforest Puerto Rico. The remains of the lumber roads cut by the loggers and the CCC workers have now become trails. The two most popular and the best maintained are the **Visitors Center Trail** (a 500m-long stroll with three gazebos set up along the way) and **Las Perdices** (about 2km long). Others are often poorly maintained or affected by recent weather conditions. Enquire at the visitors center and you should be able to piece together a more substantial hike through karst country. If there are enough people around the amiable rangers will sometimes lead an ecohike. The Visitors Center Trail has water, interpretive displays and occasional wildlife lectures.

To reach Bosque Estatal de Río Abajo from San Juan, take Hwy 22 west toward Arecibo.

Turn south on Rte 10 toward Utuado. Turn west on Hwy 621 and continue to Km 4.4 and the park entrance.

The ranger station is near the entrance, where Hwy 621 snakes into the forest. At the end of this road, there is a picnic and recreation area and an aviary, where the DRNA is working to reintroduce the Puerto Rican parrot and other endangered species.

### FARO Y PARQUE HISTÓRICO DE ARECIBO

This **theme park** (☎ 787-817-1936; Rte 655; adult/child \$9/7; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun) off Hwy 2 is a bit gimmicky and overpriced, though it does offer a tantalizing glimpse of the historic Arecibo lighthouse and provides enough diversions for kids to warrant a break on the long car journey east or west. Perched on a headland on the hill at Punta Morrillos, east of Arecibo, the **Faro de los Morrillos**, dating from 1897, is an excellent example of Spanish neoclassical architecture with its whitewashed facade and gracefully refined cylindrical shape. Inside, a tiny **museum** displays artifacts salvaged from shipwrecks. There are fantastic views of the Atlantic Ocean and karst country from the roof.

Elsewhere the park boasts a reconstructed Taíno village, two pirate ships, a pirate's cave, a mini-zoo and a substantial children's playground.

### CUEVA DEL INDIO

Heading east from the Faro de los Morrillos, Hwy 681 takes you along a rugged coastline punctuated by coral outcroppings, dunes and lagoons. The countryside is largely rural, but clutches of beach houses have grown up along sections of the road. You will find the **Cueva del Indio** (Indian's Cave) near one such settlement, about 2 miles east of the lighthouse. Look out for an Esso gas station on the right. You can park here (ask permission) and follow the well-worn path across the road to the shore.

The surf crashes around the cave's entrance, which leads to a descending staircase and a substantial collection of Taíno petroglyphs on the walls. Bring a flashlight and good footwear.

### BEACHES

There are two good beaches in the area of the Faro de los Morrillos. On the cove side,

south of the point and the commercial pier, just off Hwy 681, you will see the manicured facilities of a **town beach** with broad sand and totally protected water. This is a great place for families.

If you follow the road past the lighthouse (less than a quarter of a mile), you come to the **Balneario Morrillos** (parking \$2). There is a big parking lot and all the usual facilities. The beach is about a half mile of low dunes and white sand, and it usually gets plenty of surf.

### Sleeping & Eating

**María Soto Campground** (☎ 787-817-0984, 787-880-6557; adult/child under 10 \$4/2) In Bosque Estatal de Río Abajo, this campground holds 40 people and is run by rangers. There are campfires, restrooms, gazebos and tables. Reservations are necessary.

**Cavernas del Río Camuy Camping** (☎ 787-898-3100; Hwy 129 Km 20; sites \$5) You can camp at this site 1km from the famous caves. Facilities include showers, restrooms and electricity. Reserve a good 15 days in advance. It makes a handy base for exploring the surrounding attractions.

**our pick Casa Grande Mountain Retreat** (☎ 888-343-2272; www.hotelcasagrande.com; Hwy 612 Km 0.3; r \$90-135; ♿) Serenity has arrived. Materializing like a leafy apparition out of Puerto Rico's gorgeous karst country, the Casa Grande ought to be on the prescription list of all North American doctors as an antidote for stress 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 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 on-site restaurant and every available excuse to sit around all day and do – absolutely nothing. Try it, you might just get hooked.

**Parador El Buen Café** (☎ 787-898-1000; Hwy 2 No 381 Km 84; r \$95-160; ♿) Little more than a journey-breaker on Hwy 2 between San Juan and the west coast, El Buen Café is nonetheless a clean and efficiently run parador that provides a welcome respite from the car chaos outside. The friendly staff, placid pool and adjacent cafeteria-style restaurant are the perfect antidote to any suppressed road rage. It's 5 miles west of Arecibo.

**TJ Ranch** (☎ 787-880-1217; Rte 146; cabins \$100; P) A charming stop on any karst country driving/cycling tour, TJ Ranch is a little known Eden that harbors three beautiful cabins surrounded by lush foliage next to Lago Dos Bocas. It's actually a working coffee plantation and the congenial hosts are known to be formidable cooks who will concoct all sorts of mini-feasts from the ultimate Puerto Rican cookbook.

**Hotel Rosa del Mar** (☎ 787-262-1515; Hwy 2 Km 86.6; r\$119-149; P) Right on the main drag of Hwy 2, this is another conveniently located and comfortable pit stop on the road west 6 miles out of Arecibo. It's also perfectly located for day trips to the Observatorio de Arecibo and the Río Camuy caves, as well as a drive through karst country. Redolent of a Holiday Inn Express (or some other midrange business hotel), this place has sharp and efficient service, business-like rooms and on-site convention facilities. But there's also a gym, a spa and interconnecting rooms for family-oriented travelers.

**El Buen Café** (☎ 787-898-1000; Hwy 2 No 381 Km 84; dishes \$6-15; ☎ 5:30am-10pm) A lifesaver on Hwy 2, this no-nonsense cafeteria-style restaurant is open all hours (nearly) and serves cheap but tasty *comida criolla* with plenty of options. You can grab a 5:30am coffee and pastry here or a 9pm rice and beans; food and service are consistent throughout the day and the locals love it.

**Lighthouse Bay Restaurant** (☎ 787-878-5658; dishes \$6-19; ☎ lunch & dinner) Near Arecibo's commercial

pier on the way to the lighthouse, this is a good stop for lunch or dinner when you are in the area, or if you want to go to the beach or visit the lighthouse and Cueva del Indio. It's \$18 for a large platter of *mariscos* (four types of shellfish) or you can go light with a burger for \$7.

### Entertainment

**Lighthouse Bay Restaurant** (☎ 787-878-5658) At this eatery you'll find a big crowd on the patio deck and bar every Friday and – sometimes – Saturday, when there is always live music including salsa, merengue and Latin rock.

### Getting There & Away

Arecibo is accessible from San Juan or Aguadilla by the Hwy 22 expressway, or from Ponce by Hwy 10. Catch a público just east of the plaza to San Juan (\$8, two hours) and to Aguadilla (\$6, 1½ hours).

### LAGO GUAJATACA

Beautiful and serene, Lago Guajataca has some of Puerto Rico's best fishing – on the north side of the lake are two clubs for anglers hoping to catch the tucunare fish that are stocked in this lake. Right in the middle of karst country, the easiest approach to the lake is along Hwy 2 to Rte 119, and then into the forest to the **DRNA** (☎ 787-896-7640; Rte 119 Km 22.1; ☎ 6am-6pm Tue-Sun). You'll need to get a permit here if you want to fish and you can pick up a loaner bamboo fishing pole

### KARST COUNTRY DRIVING/CYCLING TOUR

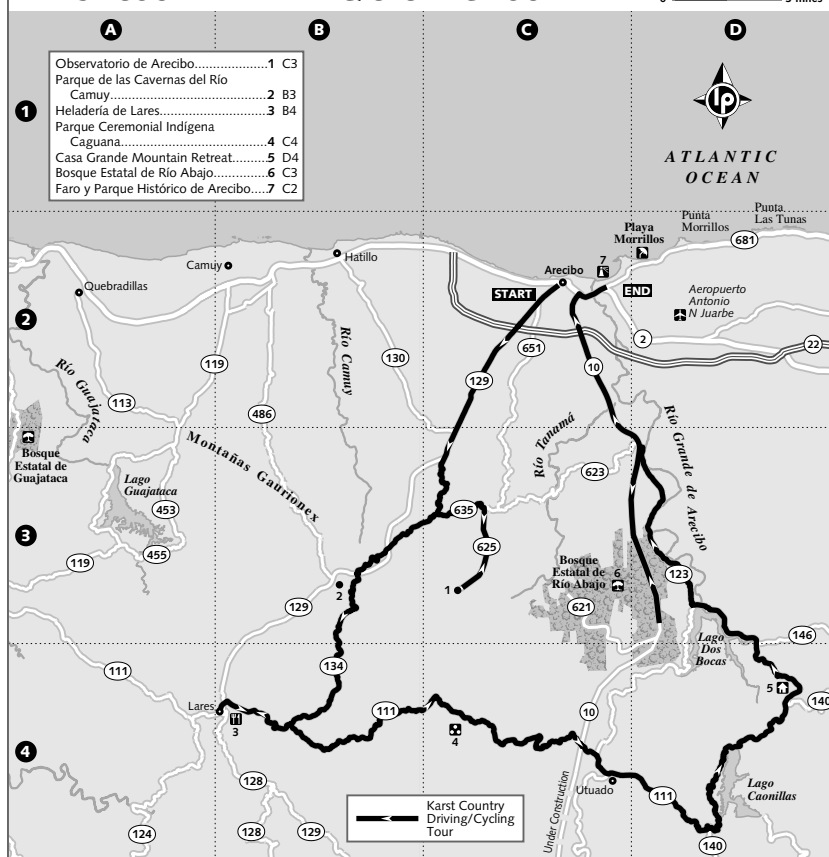
**Duration** Three to four hours without breaks (two days by bike).

**Distance** 60 miles.

**Season** Anytime it's not raining.

Start in **Arecibo** (p244) and head south toward Lares, birthplace of the *independenista* movement. Take a scenic detour along the way to the **Observatorio de Arecibo** (p245) and the **Parque de las Cavernas del Río Camuy** (p245). Homing in on Lares, you'll want to stop in the main plaza for ice-cream from the renowned **Heladería de Lares** (p250). Head east next on Hwy 111 (up and down lots of ridges) to the **Parque Ceremonial Indígena Caguana** (p245). After a quiet walk, follow signs toward Utuado, but turn off when you see signs for **Lago Dos Bocas** (p246) and **Lago Caonillas** (p246). You'll find serene accommodations and early-morning yoga nearby at the **Casa Grande Mountain Retreat** (p247). Regular boats ply the lake and ramshackle restaurants sell all the regular Puerto Rican favorites. You can walk off the deep-fried cod fritters by pausing at **Bosque Estatal de Río Abajo** (p246) up Rte 621 where former lumber roads have been converted to trails. Stay on Hwy 10 as it approaches the edge of Arecibo city and hook up with Hwy 681. That will bring you down to the **Faro y Parque Histórico de Arecibo** (p247), where a picturesque lighthouse stands guard over the Caribbean.

### KARST COUNTRY DRIVING/CYCLING TOUR



(no bait) from the office. You are also free to use the bathrooms (with showers) and picnic tables. Kayaking is allowed in the lake, but it's best to bring your own kayak. The **Guajataka Kayak Club** ([www.ninoscamping.com](http://www.ninoscamping.com)) meets at 8am on the first Saturday of every month; it's \$5 to join in. Swimming in the lake is prohibited.

If you want to stay the night shoreside, try the rustic Hotel Lago Vista (p252). It's also good for a bite to eat, as is the Cafetín Vista al Lado (p252).

### BOSQUE ESTATAL DE GUAJATACA

Despite its diminutive size (2300 acres) and proximity to the northwestern coastal towns, the Bosque Estatal de Guajataca contains

more trails (27 miles) than any other forest in Puerto Rico – including El Yunque. Set in dramatic karst country, the distinctive local terrain rises and falls between 500ft and 1000ft above sea level and is characterized by bulbous *mogotes* and rounded *sumideros* (funneled depressions). Covered by a moist subtropical forest and watered by 75 annual inches of rainfall, there are 45 species of bird to be found here along with 186 different types of tree. One of the highlights of the forest is the limestone **Cueva del Viento** (Cave of the Wind), which is rich with stalactites and stalagmites. There is also an observation tower and plantations of blue mahoe trees. The area is a favorite habitat of the endangered Puerto Rican boa.

Compared to other Puerto Rican forests and parks, the trails in Guajataca are relatively well marked, though it's wise to procure a map beforehand to see how the various paths link up. True to form, the **ranger station** (☎ 787-872-1045; Rte 446; ☞ 8am-5pm) near the trailheads, 5 miles into the forest, is not always open, and when rangers do emerge they don't always have much in the way of printed information. The moral: come prepared. The best bet is to call the Aguadilla office of the DRNA (p253) before you arrive at the forest, find things closed and feel a little lost. Be warned that 'official' maps of the area are usually hand-drawn, photocopied and not to scale.

There are no eating facilities in Guajataca forest.

### Sights & Activities

Most of the main hikes depart from, or near, the ranger station on Rte 446. The most popular is the 1.5-mile **Interpretative Trail** that passes the **observation tower** and several other points of interest (be sure to hike to the observation tower to get the best views of the surrounding countryside). It's a moderate walk that takes about two hours. **Trail Number One** breaks off from the Interpretative Trail and heads toward **Cueva del Viento**. There, wooden stairs will take you down into the depths of the dark cave (bring a flashlight). Let rangers know if you are going into the caves.

### Sleeping

**La Vereda** (campsites per person \$5) There are 10 campsites here, on Rte 446, about 5 miles

south of Hwy 2. Call the DRNA in San Juan (p87) for a permit and to make reservations, or try the Aguadilla office (p253).

**Nino's Camping & Guesthouse** (787-896-9016; Rte 119 Km 22.1; campsite/cabins \$25/50; ☎) Near Lago Guajataca, this is a nice lakeside option. The cute little cabins for four to 12 people have everything except sheets and utensils. There's a swimming pool and an activities room on-site.

### Getting There & Away

There are no buses to Guajataca. If you're driving, take the narrow Rte 446 south of Hwy 2 and follow it for 5 miles. Bike hire is available at Aquatica Dive & Surf (p254) near the Ramey Base.

### ISABELA & AROUND

pop 12,300

Isabela is more famous for its surroundings than its urban attractions. Nicknamed the 'Garden of the Northeast' for its local cheeses and elegant Paso Fino horses, the coastline here is wild and rugged, with classic surfing beaches such as Jobos and Shacks emulating anything that Rincón has to offer. While there's plenty of accommodations and eating joints scattered along Rtes 466 and 4466, the 'scene' here is less cliquey and more isolated. The vistas are spectacular too. After a heavy dose of the ghastly urban sprawl on Hwy 2, the miles of sand dunes, inlets and untrammelled beaches that lie sandwiched between the lashing Atlantic and a 200ft coastal escarpment are a sight for sore eyes.

#### DETOUR: HELADERÍA DE LARES

For unbiased visitors, sleepy Lares is famous for two reasons. First, it was the site of the short-lived Grito de Lares (p35) independence call in 1868 and, second, it sells some of the best ice-cream on the island, if not in the Caribbean.

To the chagrin of modern-day *independistas*, the bulk of the people who visit the town these days come to consume large quantities of ice-cream rather than plot surreptitious rebellion; and what better place to do it? Their fixation is the understated **Heladería de Lares** (☎ 787-897-3290; Plaza de Recreo, Lecaroz; ☞ 9am-4pm), an ice-cream store that occupies the ground floor of a three-story building in the town's pleasant main plaza. Though it may not have sparked any history-shaping insurrections since its inception four decades ago, the store's crafty concoction of over 1000 exotic ice-cream flavors, including *avocado*, *arroz con pollo* (chicken with rice) and *urghhhh* – garlic, could certainly be seen as revolutionary.

Wacky, wonderful or just plain weird, the Lares Heladería today is celebrated across the island and is well worth a mile or two's diversion from a karst country driving tour for a fleeting sample. If you prefer your garlic in a curry rather than a cone, don't worry. There are plenty of delicious traditional flavors to choose from such as chocolate, almond and vanilla.

If you stay off the main roads, Isabela is great cycling country and there's a bike rental store close by (p254). Alternatively, you can explore the web of back roads that skirt the edge of karst country around the Bosque Estatal de Guajataca (p249) and nearby Lago Guajataca (p248). The former has a handful of well-signposted hikes (unusual in Puerto Rico), while the latter offers kayaking and fishing.

### Orientation & Information

What locals refer to as Playa Jobos is actually one long coastline made up of different beaches – Jobos is the biggest one, at the intersection of Rtes 466 and 4466. That's also where you will find most of the hotels and restaurants. Bosque Estatal de Guajataca is 7 miles inland on Hwy 2. The nearest information center is at the Aguidilla airport on Ramey Base (p253).

### Sights & Activities

#### BEACHES

The wonderfully dramatic crescent of **Playa Jobos** is protected by a large headland of dead coral to the east, and the surf breaks pretty consistently off this point. The site of the 1989 World Surfing Championships, Jobos is a good place to surf or watch professional athletes doing their wave thing. There is also fine swimming off the eastern beach, where the point protects you from the surf. The bar-restaurants on the south side of the cove offer a laid-back après-surf scene, especially on weekends.

Another beach, **Playa Shacks**, lies less than a mile west of Jobos, near Ramey Base on Rte 4466. There are good submarine caves here for snorkeling.

#### SURFING

While Isabela might lack the dude appeal of Rincón, the waves here are just as legendary. **Playa Jobos** has the best breaks on the island in some books, while other favorite spots include **Surfer's Beach** (preferred location for local contests, with diverse breaks from multiple directions and strong northwestern swells), **Table Top** (named for a flat, exposed reef that looks like a table with a round barrel coming up against cliffs) and **Gas Chambers** (known as Puerto Rico's best 'right tube,' these waves head right for a sharp and unforgiving cliff). Also check out **Secret Spot**, **Sal Si Puedes**, **Shore Island** and **Las Dunas**. See pp74–5.

To get the scoop on what's breaking and where, stop by the appropriately named **Hang Loose Surf Shop** (☎ 787-872-2490; Rte 4466 Km 1.2; ☞ 11am-5pm Tue-Sat) near Playa Jobos. The shop has a complete selection of gear. Lots of overseas surfers come here to rent boards (\$30 a day) for their surfin' safari around Puerto Rico. You can get lessons, too.

#### DIVING & SNORKELING

**La Cueva Submarina Dive Shop** (☎ 787-872-1390; www.lacuevasubmarina.com; Rte 466 Km 6.3) – named after the nearby underwater caves – is situated on Rte 466 at Playa Jobos and offers a complete list of dives and dive courses, including underwater cavern dives for skilled divers (\$55), as well as guided snorkeling and scuba safaris for inexperienced divers.

#### CYCLING

Hit the ocean road on or around Rtes 466 and 4466 for some of the best bike rides on the north coast. Bike rental and route details are available from Aquatica Dive & Surf (p254) on Ramey Base.

#### HORSEBACK RIDING

A horseback ride along a nearly deserted beach is one of the joys of Isabela. You can take a ride along the fields, dunes and beaches with **Tropical Trail Rides** (☎ 787-872-9256; Rte 4466 Km 1.8; rides \$35), which works out of stables at Playa Shacks.

### Sleeping

It's not legal, but surfers and beach-lovers have been camping on Playa Jobos since the surfing championships were held here more than a decade ago.

**Happy Belly's** (☎ 787-398-9452; Rte 4466; r \$40; ☎)

A few rooms are available in this ugly green building that also houses a popular restaurant (p253), but ignore the facade and this is a good deal, especially if you're looking to rise early and hit the waves. It's perched above Playa Jobos.

**Parador Vistamar** (☎ 787-895-2065; www.paradorvistar.com; Hwy 2 Km 102; r \$75-115; ☎ ☞ ☎) A bog-standard Puerto Rican parador with 55 rooms located in two hilltop buildings overlooking the Atlantic, the Vistamar is a little close to traffic-heavy Hwy 2 for comfort. Bland rooms are fine if you're not fussy, or in dire need of a refurb if you are. Unhappy campers can console themselves with private decks,

ocean views, a fun kiddie pool, tennis courts and a passable on-site restaurant. The Vistamar is situated 5 miles east of Isabela.

**Hotel Lago Vista** (☎ 787-896-5487; Hwy 119 Km 22; r \$85-135; (P) ♻️ 🚰) Move a few miles inland and a halcyon world quickly emerges. Set on the shore of rural Lago Guajataca (p248), Lago Vista is a rustic country inn with a pool and sun deck. Simple but elegant rooms overlook the placid lake from balconies. It's peaceful and serene, and there's a restaurant serving *comida criolla*.

**Hotel Restaurante Ocean Front** (☎ 787-872-0444; www.oceanfrontpr.com; Rte 4466 Km 0.1; r \$85-150; (P) ♻️) Imagine a classic Caribbean-style beach hotel situated on a wild and tempestuous stretch of sand popularly regarded by aficionados as being surfers' heaven. That's the Ocean Front; small, compact, suitably modern but not too flash. Rooms have balconies and good views of the incoming surf and there's a popular on-site restaurant-bar (opposite) that hosts occasional live music. Room rates are lowest Monday to Friday. The hotel is situated 5 miles west of Isabela on Playa Jobos.

**Parador Villas del Mar Hau** (☎ 787-872-2045; www.paradorvillasdelmarhau.com; Rte 466 Km 8.3; cabins \$95-165; (P) ♻️ 🚰) Places like this barely exist anymore: a gorgeous clutch of brightly painted beach huts scattered like bucolic homesteads along a breathtaking beach where offshore coral islets create bathing lagoons. This rustic retreat has been continuously run by the Hau family for nearly 50 years and aside from the distant glimmer of encroaching condo towers, little has changed. The huts, nestled under wind-gnarled pine trees, have sea-facing decks and basic but comfortable fittings in keeping with the back-to-nature surroundings. Although popular during the summer, off-season this has to be one of the most tranquil places on the island. You can ride a horse, take a cycling tour, kayak, snorkel, hike the beach or sleep undisturbed under a palm tree. The villas are 4 miles west of Isabela.

**Hotel El Guajataca** (☎ 800-964-3065; www.hotelguajataca.com; Hwy 2 Km 103.8; r \$107-139; (P) ♻️ 🚰) About 5 miles east of Isabela in Quebradillas, El Guajataca is a run-of-the-mill parador – ie slightly jaded rooms, keen-to-please staff and good family facilities – notable for its stupendous north-coast setting. Perched on a grassy cliff overlooking the Atlantic, this is Puerto Rico at its wildest and most romantic, although the inn doesn't come close

to emulating the setting. There's a pool, a tennis court and a so-so restaurant, along with easy access to a great surfing (but no swimming) beach.

**Hacienda Jibarito** (☎ 787-280-4040; Rte 445 Km 6.4; r \$129-279; (P) ♻️ 🚰) Opened in 2006, this innovative new ecodge bills itself as an 'agrotourist complex,' that is, a hotel that doubles up as a hacienda (working ranch). But you don't have to be a full-blown cowboy to stay here. Although the facilities retain suitably rustic touches such as hammocks, rocking chairs and antique farming implements, this is not the complete back-to-nature experience you get in the outback. Comfortable rooms sport TVs, phones and bathtubs, and a laid-back poolside bar shakes up some refreshing piña colodas. But the hacienda's real forte lies in its beautifully landscaped grounds and positive environmental practices. The adjacent *granja* (farm) – which guests may visit – makes use of its own chicken, cows, shrimp farm and greenhouse to send produce directly to the on-site restaurant. The Hacienda is 8 miles south of Isabela heading along Hwy 112.

**ourpick Villa Montaña** (☎ 787-872-9554; www.villamontana.com; Rte 4466 Km 1.2; villas \$250-350; (P) ♻️ 🚰 🚰) At last, a large, posh resort that makes a successful effort of blending in with its natural environment. No golf courses, no casinos and no view-spoiling high-rises here; just 48 plantation-style villas in splendid isolation abutting tempestuous Playa Shacks. Even better, this place has a fine environmental record and there's an on-site organic kitchen garden that is raided daily to season the delicious restaurant food to prove it. Villas are one, two or three bedrooms and are brightly decorated in ebullient Caribbean patterns. Tucked away amid the tropical foliage, meanwhile, you'll find a tennis court, a gym, a spa and the Moroccan-themed Eclipse restaurant. Not surprisingly, accommodations get booked up fast.

## Eating

**Cafetín Vista al Lado** (☎ 787-895-6877; Hwy 453 Km 4.2; dishes \$5-10; (☺) lunch & dinner) If you are exploring karst country, stop on the east side of Lago Guajataca (p248) for some grilled chicken or pork. You can eat it at a picnic table with a view of the lake and dairy farms. There's also live music (opposite).

**Happy Belly's** (☎ 787-398-9452; Rte 4466; dishes \$5-17; (☺) lunch & dinner) When the swell is good you could almost surf right up to the verandah here and place your lunch order with the dude waiter before paddling back out to catch a last wave. Perched above magnificent Playa Jobos, Happy Belly's confronts the sea head on, offering front-row seats for one of Puerto Rico's most visually dazzling surfing 'shows.' Food is of the simple burger and fish variety, but this place is more about setting than sumptuous cuisine. Order a cold Medalla beer and grab a wooden booth among the suntanned surf groupies and boogie boarders. There are also rooms available here (p251).

**Hotel Restaurante Ocean Front** (☎ 787-872-0444; www.oceanfrontpr.com; Rte 4466 Km 0.1; dishes \$6-22; (☺) lunch & dinner) Tiny glowing lights and wavy green plants give this restaurant a relaxed, romantic atmosphere that perfectly complements the seafood dishes. The owner is famous for his secret salmon recipe. Live music nightly. Rooms available (opposite).

**Cano's Trattoria Italiana** (☎ 787-830-9154; Hwy 2 Km 108; dishes \$7-22; (☺) lunch & dinner) A new location 8 miles east of Isabela has worked wonders for Cano's and added a nice touch of Tuscany to the otherwise cultureless Hwy 2. Cano's has deep-dish lasagna, calzones, homemade pastas and great pizza.

**El Pescador** (☎ 787-872-1343; Rte 466; dishes \$8-26; (☺) lunch & dinner) This decent spot just west of Isabela does excellent seafood with a Caribbean twist. Beyond the fresh fish and loyal following of locals, there's evening karaoke mixed in with the occasional live salsa and meringue band.

## Entertainment

**Happy Belly's** (☎ 787-398-9452; Rte 4466; (☺) until midnight) Lots of gringos pass by this popular eatery (above) on Thursday nights for some ear-splitting karaoke. If you can't handle amateur demolitions of old Bruce Springsteen numbers, try the live salsa and meringue on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday nights or the DJ on Sunday.

**Mi Casita Tropical** (☎ 787-872-5510; Rte 466; (☺) 1pm-midnight) Next to Happy Belly's, Mi Casita attracts a similar crowd and the two places often swap patrons all night.

**Cafetín Vista al Lado** (☎ 787-895-6877; Hwy 453 Km 4.2) In karst country, this restaurant (opposite) on Lago Guajataca has live music Saturday and Sunday until about 1am.

## Getting There & Away

The easiest way to access the region, from San Juan or the west coast, is via the four-lane Hwy 22. But to really enjoy this area (and its lack of traffic), you need to get off the main highway and explore the back roads.

No públicos serve these back roads or beach areas such as Playa Jobos.

## AGUADILLA

pop 15,700

Central Aguadilla occupies a small sliver of land wedged between Hwy 2 and the sea. Famous for its world-class surf beaches, colorful marine life and now defunct US air-force base, it is not an ugly place, but like many Puerto Rican towns the older sections have been largely abandoned in favor of generic out-of-town shopping malls (most of which infest Hwy 2).

The early colonizers of Aguadilla (founded in 1780) were Spanish loyalists fleeing from the Haitian invasion of Spanish Hispaniola in 1822. By the late 19th century the settlement had become an important port, but in 1918 its fortunes changed for the worse when it was ravaged by the destructive San Fermin earthquake and subsequent tsunami.

Attractions in town are thin on the ground, though a recent renovation has spruced up the central Plaza Colón. Surfers head north to the unblemished beauty of Crash Boat, Shacks and Jobos beaches, while committed golfers wheel their clubs to the windy Punta Borinquen course built for President Dwight Eisenhower. If neither activity appeals to you, give Aguadilla a body-swerve and head west to Rincón.

## Orientation & Information

All of Aguadilla's accommodations are north of the city center, which is located on a tiny strip of land trapped between Hwy 2 and the coast. Rte 111 runs north-south through the city and then crosses Rte 107, which will take you to Ramey Base.

**Departamento de Recursos Naturales y Ambientales** (DRNA; Department of Natural Resources & Environment; ☎ 787-890-4050/2050)

**Puerto Rico Tourism Company** (PRTC; ☎ 787-890-3315) For more information about this region, check out this helpful office at the Aeropuerto Rafael Hernández, north of town on the old Ramey Base.



## Sights & Activities

### RAMEY BASE

Vieques, Culebra, Desecheo and Roosevelt Rds; sometimes it's hard to avoid bumping into erstwhile US military anachronisms when you're traveling through Puerto Rico. And, just when you thought you'd had your fill, here comes Ramey, near Aguadilla, a Cold War strategic command base created by the US Air Force in 1939 to serve as its Caribbean HQ. For 30 years the Americans poured money into Ramey and watched as the surrounding area burgeoned into a populous municipality of 64,000 people. And then in 1973 the base closed leaving behind a weirdly homogeneous stretch of track housing and the usual American fast-food restaurants.

Today, the former base hosts the international Aeropuerto Rafael Hernández, a university campus, a couple of hotels, a housing project and the only **ice-skating arena** (☎ 787-819-5555; admission \$10-13; ⌚ 9:30am-11pm) in the Caribbean.

If you are traveling to the base from the south, take Hwy 107 north from Hwy 2. This route brings you through what is called Gate 1. The traffic can get a little nutty on this road, so you may want to approach from the east via Hwy 110 (the route to the airport), which brings you through Gate 5. Once you're in, have fun getting lost on the maze of roads that lead you around the airfield, administration buildings and the nearly endless plots of former base housing that have been sold off or rented to Puerto Rican families.

### BEACHES

For some swimming, snorkeling and legendary surf breaks, the most popular place to go is **Playa Crash Boat**. It got its name because the air force used to keep rescue boats here to pick up crews from the Strategic Air Command's bombers that didn't make the runway. The beach lies off Hwy 107, halfway between town and the former air base. You will see a sign for Crash Boat that directs you west on the short Hwy 458.

If you are more adventurous and want to avoid the crowds, follow Hwy 107 past the Crash Boat turnoff and onto the base. Eventually, you will see the golf course on your left and a road that heads west through the golf course. Follow this road as it winds down to rough, lonely **Playa Wilderness** and the ruins of what must have been air-force

recreation clubs. Surfers like this desolate place, but also congregate up and down this coast (see p251).

### GOLF

**Punta Borinquen Golf** (☎ 787-890-2987; greens fee Mon-Fri \$18, Sat & Sun \$20) Although Aguadilla is no Dorado when it comes to golf, it does boast this 6800yd 18-hole course on the former air-force base that was designed for President Dwight D Eisenhower – no less. The course offers a cafeteria, a pro shop, a practice range and a luncheon.

### CYCLING

**Aquatica Dive & Surf** (☎ 787-890-6071; Rte 110 Km 10), just outside Gate 5 of Ramey Base, is one of Puerto Rico's best bike-rental establishments. The staff here can also help you with route planning. There are plenty of decent circuits in the Aguadilla/Isabela area that steer clear of the main roads and incorporate some magnificent rural scenery.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hacienda El Pedregal** (☎ 787-891-6068; www.elpedregal.com; Hwy 111 Km 0.1; r \$70-90; (P) (♿)) Right next to the Cielo Mar Hotel but set back a bit (thus not enjoying the same stupendous views), El Pedregal is nonetheless a decent midrange option with lush grounds (palms, gazebos and birds) and a good selection of facilities (swimming pool, basketball court, activity room and on-site laundry). Situated north of Aguadilla in a quiet leafy neighborhood, the Hacienda has 27 well-appointed rooms and a renovated restaurant serving *comida criolla*.

**Parador JB Hidden Village** (☎ 787-868-8686; Hwy 416, Aguada; r & ste \$70-125; (P) (♿)) Five miles south of Aguadilla on the way to Rincón you'll see this 33-room parador, which has marble floors, big beds, a restaurant and a pool. Some rooms have kitchenettes or you can chance your arm in the on-site Meson Las Colinas.

**Cielo Mar Hotel** (☎ 787-882-5959; www.cielomar.com; 84 Av Monemar, Hwy 111; r \$80-105; (P) (♿)) In Aguadilla's strung-out hotel strip, the Cielo Mar takes first prize for location, situated high atop the area's famous surfing breaks with spectacular views over the town, an old sugar factory, Rincón, Isla Desecheo and those blood-red west-coast sunsets. Although the building itself with its bright orange chocolate-box architecture is hardly a stunner, the rooms are adequate and the

### BIKE SHOP OWNER, JOSÉ RAFOLS SALLABERRY

**Is there a cycling culture in Puerto Rico?** There's no full-blown cycling culture, but non-competitive cycling is becoming ever more popular. Lance Armstrong made an important impression among Americans with his Tour de France wins and this effect has filtered through to Puerto Rico.

**Where can you find it?** Various cycling groups operate on different parts of the island. There's one in San Juan and another in the Cabo Rojo area. They generally meet on Sunday mornings for group rides.

**What are the classic routes?** Cabo Rojo on the southwest of the island offers some of the best on- and off-road routes. Rte 10 between Arecibo and Ponce also has some winding, precipitous terrain. Closer to home, there are some good 50km to 80km rides around the Isabela area in the northwest.

**What aggravations do you face?** Glass on the road, the occasional pothole and those famously unforgiving Puerto Rican motorists.

**What safeguards are there for cyclists?** More than you'd imagine – at least on paper. A few years ago a Puerto Rican senator got knocked off his bike and broke his leg. As a result, he suggested some important new safety legislation for bikers and his proposed bill was passed. Cyclists now have an official right to use the road and motorists must respect this. Drivers should only pass cyclists on the left, leaving at least 4ft of space, and they are not supposed to honk.

**What's your favorite ride?** Off-roading in the Cabo Rojo area. It mixes technical climbs with smooth stretches and has some pretty views.

**Can you tour the island by bicycle?** There's no reason why you shouldn't, as long as you take the normal precautions and stay off the main toll roads. An official 'Vuelta' ride takes place in late November in three stages between San Juan, Mayagüez and Guayama. There's also an organized ride that calls in at each of the island's nine historic lighthouses.

*As told to Brendan Sainsbury*

substantial swimming pool with its huge whale-shaped slide and obligatory fountain conjures up a family atmosphere. The best of the view can be enjoyed from the on-site Restaurant Terramar (p256).

**Parador La Cima** (☎ 787-890-2016; www.lacimahotel.com; Hwy 110 Km 9.2; r \$85-140; (P) (♿)) More motel than hotel, La Cima's a three-story concrete building in the no-man's-land just outside Gate 5 of Ramey Base. But what you sacrifice in location you make up for with a plethora of handy facilities. Count in an on-site gym, a swimming pool, a business center (with wi-fi access), two restaurants and a laundry room. You're also just round the corner from a rare Puerto Rican bike-rental store (opposite) giving you instant access to a whole host of other treats. The hotel also rents two-bedroom apartments from \$175 per night.

**Parador El Faro** (☎ 787-882-8000; Hwy 107 Km 2.1; r \$85-155; (P) (♿)) On a rather nondescript highway between Aguadilla and Ramey Base, El Faro hides some sweet horticultural surprises. The main attraction is the lush tropical grounds – you walk through a vine-covered canopy to get from the swimming pool to

your room – plus the ultrafriendly front-desk service and decent on-site restaurant. The 50 rooms are the simple but clean accommodations you have come to expect from an unpretentious parador, but encased in such splendidous natural surroundings they appear colored with a more luxurious tint.

**our pick** **Cocina Creativa** (☎ 787-890-1861; Hwy 110 Km 9.2; snacks \$5-7; ⌚ 9am-5pm Sun-Wed, 9am-6pm Thu-Sat; (V)) Just when you'd given up hope of ever seeing an inventive, unique, nonfranchised eating establishment again, up pops Cocina Creativa, a fresh, cozy, homegrown resting place tucked rather inconspicuously behind a gas station on one of the northwest's ubiquitous big box strips. You can realign your zen here with a kind of organic-meets-European-meets-Jamaican menu. Try the yucca and fish-cakes, the jerk chicken with mango chutney or the amazing bruschettas.

**Restaurant Garibaldi's** (☎ 787-997-4730; Rte 107 Km 2.2; dishes \$7-24) If you are really hungry, you might possibly finish one of these burritos by yourself – the Mexican dishes here are impossibly large, but very tasty. Enchiladas, tostadas, tacos and more, served daily.

### ISLA DESECHEO

The alluring hump-shaped island that appears Robinson Crusoe-like across the horizon in spectacular Rincón sunsets is Isla Desecheo, a 1-sq-mile knob of prickly cacti and bushy scrub that is situated 13 miles off Puerto Rico's northwest coast. One of four outlying islands that make up the Puerto Rican archipelago (the others are Culebra, Vieques and Mona), Desecheo was first 'discovered' by Columbus in 1493 but remained unnamed until Spanish explorer Nuñez Alvarez de Aragón passed through in 1517. Buccaneers and pirates frequented these wild shores during the 16th and 17th centuries to hoard booty and hunt feral goats that had been introduced by the Spanish, but in the years since the only permanent inhabitants have been lizards, seabirds and the odd ugly rat. From WWII to the early 1950s, Desecheo was – surprise, surprise – used as a bombing range by the US military who left behind a dangerous cache of unexploded ordnance, a fact that has meant that the island is still officially off-limits to visitors (trespassers will be arrested).

But all is not lost. Thanks to its favorable position to the west of the geologically important Puerto Rican Trench, the waters around Desecheo are free from murky river run-off from the main island. As a result the sea here is unusually clear (visibility is generally 30m to 45m), making it one of the best spots for diving in the Caribbean. Desecheo was declared a US Fish and Wildlife Refuge in 1976 and a National Wildlife Refuge in 1983.

**Restaurant Terramar** (☎ 787-882-5959; www.cielomar.com; 84 Av Monemar, Hwy 111; dishes \$13-28; 🍴 lunch & dinner) At the Cielo Mar Hotel (p254) north of Aguadilla, this restaurant takes prime spot on a pretty patio overlooking the sea. Dishes include a \$28 lobster, *mofongos* (mashed plantains) and prawns.

### Entertainment

The Cielo Mar Hotel (p254) features lightweight rock and salsa bands on weekends for dancing. For a more raucous scene, check out the many American-style bars near Ramey Base.

### Getting There & Away

Scheduled airline services to Aguadilla's Aeropuerto Rafael Hernández change seasonally. Flights come in from New York and

Newark (US) and the Dominican Republic about three times a week.

There is a público terminal in town right off the central plaza, if you really want to wait around for a ride to your next destination. Expect to pay \$18 to San Juan (about 3 hours).

If you are driving between San Juan and the west coast (and want to avoid rush-hour traffic), consider taking the back road Hwy 443, which breaks off Hwy 2 just east of town, then rejoins it to the south.

### Getting Around

If you have reached Aguadilla by público or plane, you can rent a car to explore the interesting backcountry of the surrounding area. Try **Budget** (☎ 787-890-1110) at the airport. Cycling is another feasible option; see p254.