

# Ponce & the South Coast



Ponce's fiercely proud history as the southern capital comes with lofty declarations; whether it's a place that 'does not repeat history, but improves it' (Rafael Pon Flores) or a 'land of Camelot: ideal, legendary, dreamlike, and real' (Antonio Gautier). All nice enough, but a common T-shirt captures the *ponceño* civic hubris best: it shows the entire island paved over with a crowded parking lot, except for Ponce, represented by a cluster of historic facades. The slogan reads simply: '*Ponce es Ponce.*'

Ponce owes its inimitable old-world charm to the island's topography: the craggy peaks of the Central Mountains long buffered it from the modernization that paved over San Juan. Today, a stream of traffic follows the sweeping curves of the San Juan–Ponce Autopista across the center of the island, reaching the south coast in only two hours. The completion of this highway has encouraged some unsavory hallmarks of the north: traffic and sprawl.

East and west of Ponce, along Hwys 2 and 3, the region is also rich in history and is rapidly changing. Crumbling chimneys of dead sugar mills dot the horizon of the coastal plains, neighboring their graying industrial replacements – chemical and pharmaceutical factories. History is still palpable among the colonial structures and seaside boardwalks of Arroyo, Yauco, and Guanica, but none are entirely free from the vestiges of the 21st century – American fast-food chains, coughing towers and honking motorists.

The rocky coast on the south can't compare with the postcard-perfect beaches on the Atlantic, but beyond a typical day at the beach, travelers can kayak the maze-like mangrove-lined routes of the Bahía de Jobos estuary or hike the arid hills of the Bosque Estatal de Guánica. Opportunities for game fishing and diving on the southern shores draw crowds southwest to the hard-partying La Parguera, which boasts the surreal glow of the Bahía de Fosforescente.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Standing in awe before *Flaming June* at the coolly air-conditioned **Museo de Arte de Ponce** (p188)
- Betting on little mechanical horses at a roadside stand outside of **Arroyo** (p195).
- Dancing to blasting reggaeton on Ponce's riotous **Calle Luna** (p192)
- Bombing down rocky trails out to the coast on a mountain bike at the **Bosque Estatal de Guánica** (p201)
- Staggering down the crooked streets of **La Parguera** (p205) after snorkeling off its keys.

■ POPULATION: 195,000



## History

The rolling foothills and broad coastal planes of the south coast were home to a number of indigenous tribes and were first colonized by Spaniards, who raised cattle and horses for the colonial expeditions in Mexico and South America in the 16th century. In 1630 they built a little hamlet on a good port between the mountains and the coast which would eventually become Ponce. Coamo, the third-oldest settlement on the island, is the oldest in the south.

For more than a century, goods and materials flowed through the welcoming harbors, which afforded ships shelter from the easterly trade winds and safe escape from hurricane winds. Ostensibly the port of Ponce was only open to Spanish vessels trading directly with Spain, but the watchful eyes of the island governor lay a universe away, over the mountains in San Juan, and with no one to enforce the law, free trade flourished, bringing with it goods, currencies, and people from across the New World and Africa.

During the 16th and 17th centuries freebooting traders grew rich on such commerce. When slave revolts erupted in the neighboring French-held island of Saint-Domingue in the 1790s and South America between 1810 and 1822, many wealthy refugees fled to the south coast, buying land and introducing efficient agricultural methods for coffee and sugarcane. Soon they imported former slaves from British colonies around the Caribbean to meet the ever-increasing harvesting demands of American traders, hungry for sugar, coffee and rum. Production and profits from agriculture skyrocketed throughout the 19th century, when agricultural barons built cities with elegant town squares, neoclassical architecture and imported French fountains.

The Spanish-American War put a quick end to the freebooting days, bringing instead an American military occupation, uniformly enforced trade laws and an economic freefall. This was aided by hurricanes which devastated the coffee industry, falling sugar prices, and the US government's decision to develop San Juan, not Ponce, as a strategic port. When the Great Depression hit in the 1930s, the region fell into an economic hibernation.

These days the south coast limps along littered with contradictions between the past and the future: a jumble of cranes mark Ponce's continual, if poorly planned, urbanization.

The breathtaking sunsets over the Caribbean are marred by huffing factory smoke stacks, and the smooth highways that cut through the ramshackle towns are littered with road-kill and choked by traffic, only affording occasional glimpses of the land's lush natural beauty. These paradoxes make Ponce and the surrounding south coast the place where the 18th and 21st centuries have collided, and an area of constant surprise.

## Climate

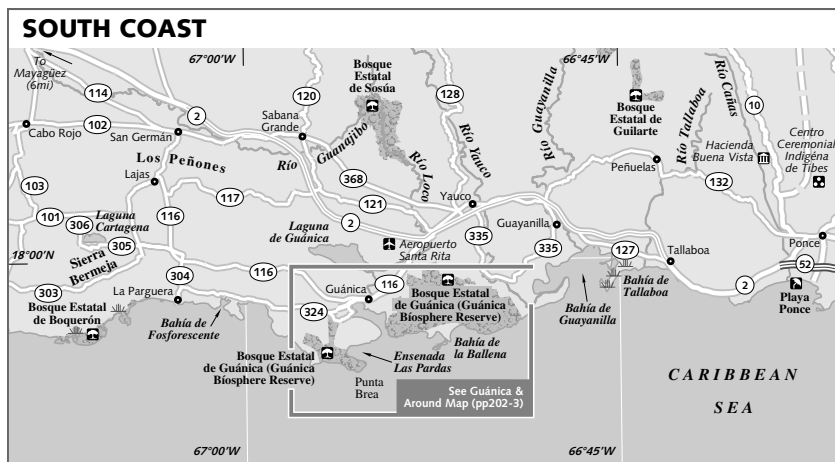
Much drier and breezier than San Juan and other parts of Puerto Rico, much of the region is in a 'rain shadow,' meaning it gets significantly less rain than the north coast because it's downwind of a mountain range. The dry, sunny air is quite pleasant in winter, but also blisteringly hot, averaging in the 80s. In summer, especially around the Bosque Estatal de Guánica, the sun beats down mercilessly and temperatures soar even higher. Regardless of the season, sun block and water are essentials.

## Getting There & Around

The south coast is reached by car from San Juan in only two hours via the Autopista Luis A Ferré (A-52), though there are coastal roads that circumnavigate the island and connect the region. The only airport with reliable commercial flights is in Ponce. For travel within the region, a car is necessary unless you have enough time to travel by the makeshift, irregularly departing público system. Terminals are in the center of all significant cities and towns, usually near the center of town. Some towns in the far corners of the south coast are serviced by public transportation with great infrequency.

## PONCE

Ponce native son and author Abelardo Díaz Alfaro famously called Ponce a *baluarte irreductible de puertorriqueñidad* – a bastion of the irreducible essence of Puerto Rico – and strolling around the quaint square and narrow streets of the city's historic center certainly evokes the stately spirit of Puerto Rico's past. Unfortunately, the neighborhoods that surround the square bear witness to a woeful characteristic of Puerto Rico's present: irreducible snarls of congested traffic. Even though the honking and ceaseless construction are signs of the city's continual



growth, the communities surrounding San Juan have grown much faster, unseating Ponce's status as Puerto Rico's second-most populated metropolis.

To understand the essence of Ponce itself, start at the city center, lined with shops, banks and surprisingly affordable hotels. The city has a more easygoing spirit than other major cities on the island, with businesses that open late and close early, couples who stroll circles around the city's fountains, and breezy evenings 2 miles south at the shore line. There, at a developed facility called Paseo Tablado La Guancha, clusters of attractive restaurants and cafés draw families for open-air dinners on the weekend. After the kids go to bed, the drinks flow and the area jumps with a booming mix of reggaeton and salsa.

## History

Unlike many destinations in the north, where history buffs have to navigate tourist attractions and do some digging, Ponce's celebrated past is a marquee feature. Present in preserved Spanish colonial buildings, statuary and more than a dozen museums, history is most readily visible at the city's historic Plaza Las Delicias. Those interested in the island's precolonial indigenous roots are only a short drive from Puerto Rico's largest and most educational archeological site, the Centro Ceremonial Indígena de Tibes.

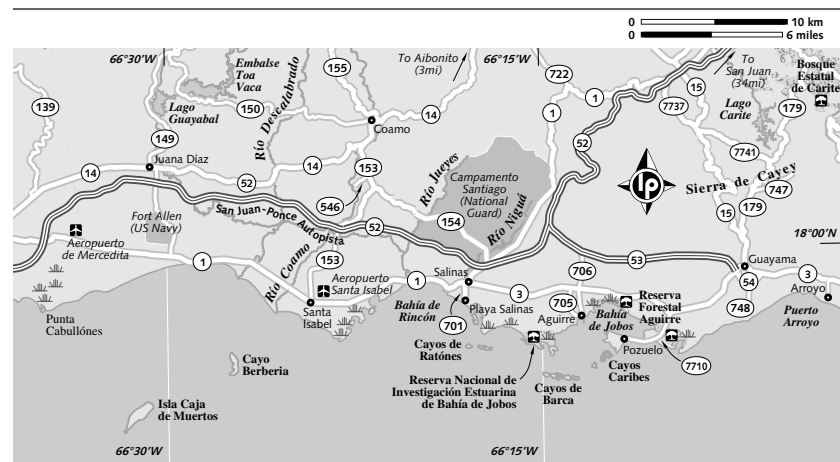
The earliest western settlement saw a number of clashes between Spanish Conquistador Ponce de León (from whom the town gets both

its name and one of its many nicknames, 'City of Lions'), and the Taino tribes, but the region was claimed for the Spanish Crown in 1511. The city was established around 1630, when the Spaniards built the first incarnation of the current cathedral and named it for the patron saint of Mexico, the Virgen de Guadalupe.

As the first port of call in the region – far from Spanish authorities in San Juan – Ponce grew fat off the rewards of smugglers who trafficked the Caribbean in the late 1600s. By the mid-1700s Ponce's bourgeois society wanted at least a patina of respectability; Spanish merchants and wealthy refugees from nearby Saint-Domingue (where slave revolts radically changed the order of things) poured resources into legitimate enterprises like tobacco, coffee and rum. Sugar, too, became an important business, and entire plains (the same denuded ones you see today) were shorn of greenery and replaced with silky, highly profitable sugarcane stalks. The added wealth and polyglot mixture of Spanish, Taino, French and black West Indian peoples helped establish Ponce as the island's earliest artistic, musical and literary center.

The parlors of the bourgeoisie echoed with postured *danza* while satirical, boisterous strains of *bomba y plana* were shared by laborers.

That golden age ended in 1898 when Spain rejected America's demand to peacefully observe Cuban independence to start the Spanish-American War. Compared to modern definitions, it wasn't much of a scuffle, lasting a scant five months, but the Americans'



strategic Operation Bootstrap had a lasting impact on Ponce by only funding ports on the north coast. Shortly thereafter, a hurricane devastated the region's coffee and sugar crop and the region slid into near ruin. The sugar industry never fully recovered, and civil unrest a few years later resulted in the Ponce Massacre (see p187), which politically alienated Ponce from the rest of the island. In the decades since, Ponce has gradually reestablished itself as a historic center for tourists – helped dramatically by a highway connecting it to San Juan – and entered the modern age with an economy based on textiles, plastics, oil and rum.

## Orientation

Cruising to Ponce from San Juan is easy on the smoothly paved A-52, a partially toll-controlled highway called the Autopista Luis A Ferré. You'll know when you get there after you come out of the mountains and drive through the towering letters by the roadside reading 'P-O-N-C-E'. The city center is about 2 miles from the south shore and 2 miles from the foothills of the Central Mountains to the north.

Once you're at the city center, park the car so you can avoid the frustrating traffic that seems to seize the streets at random. Most of the city's sights are a short walk from the city center and the grid of streets is easily navigable by foot. Should you ever get lost in Ponce, look to the skies for a sign from God: the town's two infallible landmarks

are the towering steeples of the Catedral Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, which sits regally at the center of the lovely Plaza Las Delicias, and an enormous concrete and glass cross, El Vigía, which overlooks the town to the north.

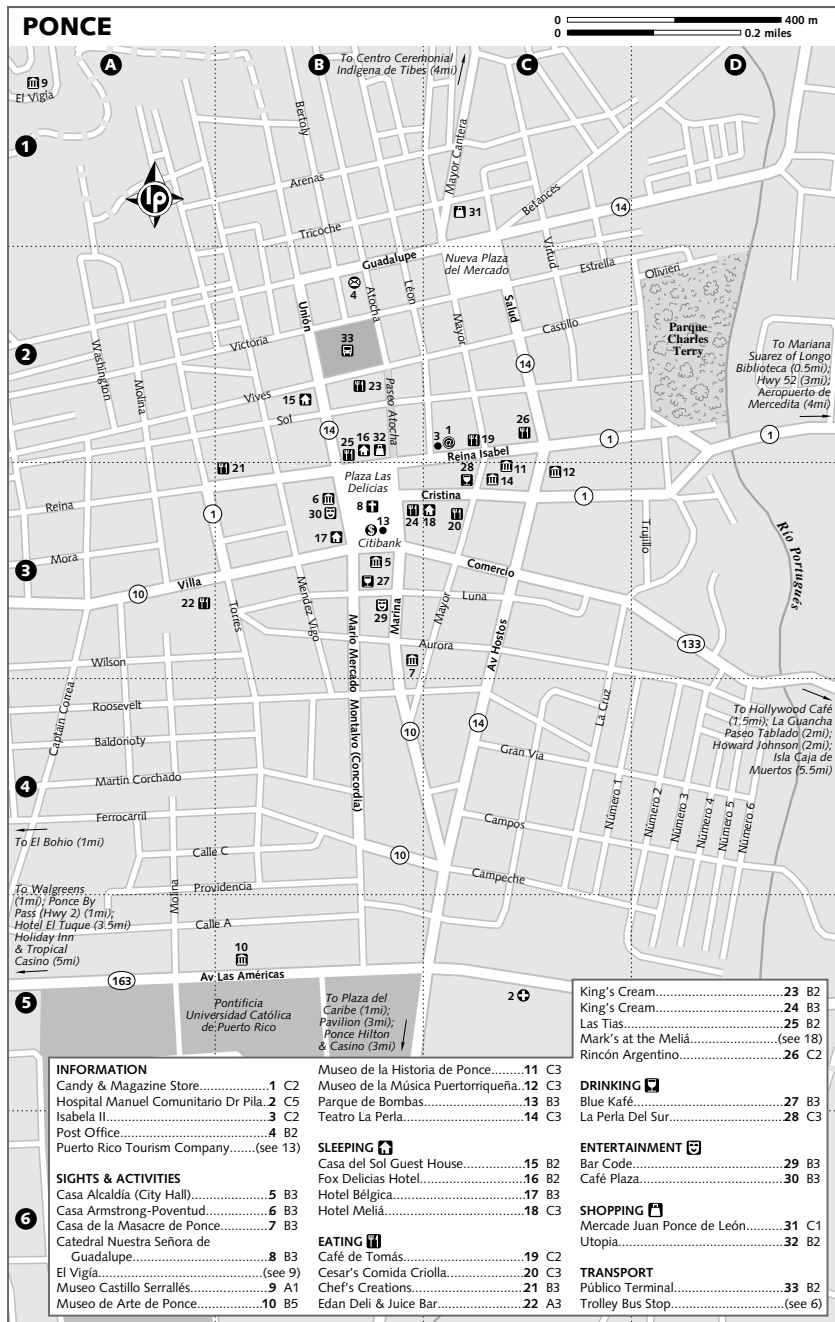
You don't have to drive through the center of town to get from one side of Ponce to the other – two bypass roads circle the city to the south. The inner road is Av Emelio Fagot/Av Las Américas (Hwy 163). The faster route is the outer road, Hwy 2, called the 'Ponce By Pass.' Here you will find the city's biggest mall and loads of American chain stores. To reach the port area, take the newly paved route just east of the square, Rte 12. It becomes a divided highway south of the Ponce By Pass. Follow the signs to La Guancha.

## Information

### BOOKSTORES

Amazingly, when American chain bookstore Borders packed up shingle and left the mall a few years ago it left Puerto Rico's historical center without a single polite bookstore. If you are hard up for something to read in English, you'll have to drive back to San Juan or Mayagüez.

**Candy & Magazine Store** (72 Reina Isabel; ☎ 7am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-6pm Sat, 8am-1pm Sun) This small shop has some dusty magazines (with an amusingly random assortment of English language titles including *Mountain Biker*) and one computer with a printer and limited internet access (about \$3 per 30 minutes). It ain't much, but it's easily found downtown.



**THE PONCE MASSACRE**

In the turbulent 1930s, Puerto Rico's troubled economy created revolutionary fervor across the island, but it was in Ponce, with its reputation for culture and sophistication attracting a lot of students, that a march for independence went terribly wrong.

Originally the marchers had a parade permit for the demonstration, which was staged in the plaza on Palm Sunday, March 21, 1937, but at the last minute the governor of Puerto Rico withdrew his permission.

Angered, the nationalists defied the prohibition and marched. Slightly fewer than 100 young men and women faced off with 150 armed police near Plaza Las Delicias. When the nationalists started singing 'La Borinqueña' – the national anthem – a shot was fired and then the entire plaza erupted in gunfire. Seventeen marchers and two police officers died. Not one civilian carried a gun, and most of the 17 died from shots in the back. While the US government chose not to investigate, the American Civil Liberties Union did, and confirmed that the catastrophe warranted its popular name, 'Masacre de Ponce' (Ponce Massacre). Now a small museum called, appropriately, the **Casa de la Masacre de Ponce** (☎ 787-844-9722; cnr Marina & Aurora; admission \$1; 🕒 9am-4pm Wed-Sun), in the building that held the offices of the Nationalist Party in 1937, keeps the memory alive.

**INTERNET**

Many hotels have internet service for guests and the Plaza Las Delicias has wireless connectivity, a terrific convenience for travelers with a laptop.

**Mariana Suarez of Longo Biblioteca** (☎ 787-284-4141; Villa; 🕒 9am-9pm Mon-Sun). A short walk from the plaza, this bright new facility is part of Archivo Municipal de Ponce and contains an impressive \$114 million digital computing and education center. Puerto Rico Telephone footed the bill and did it right, with 50 new computers, laptop stations and wireless access.

**MEDICAL SERVICES**

**Emergency** (☎ 911)  
**Hospital Manuel Comunitario Dr Pila** (☎ 787-848-5600; Av Las Américas, east of Av Hostos) 24-hour emergency room. Recommended.

**Walgreens** (☎ 787-812-5978; Rte 2 Km 225; 🕒 24hrs) The only pharmacy that can accommodate a late night need for aloe.

**MONEY**

Banks line the perimeter of Plaza Las Delicias, so finding a cash machine is no problem. Most of the banks are open from 9am to 4pm weekdays, plus Saturday mornings, though they may close a little earlier in summer.

**POST**

**Post office** (☎ 787-842-2997; 93 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.

**TOURIST INFORMATION**

**Puerto Rico Tourism Company (PRTC)** (☎ 787-284-3338; www.letsgettoponce.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**

**PLAZA LAS DELICIAS**

The soul of Ponce is its idyllic Spanish colonial plaza, within which stand two of the city's landmark buildings, Parque de Bombas and Catedral Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe. At any hour of the day a brief stroll around its border will get you well acquainted with Ponce – the smell of *panderías* (bakeries) 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 selling lottery tickets and trinkets, the commercial banks and the fast-food joints encroach at the edges (a Burger King and a Church's mar the plaza's west side), reminders of the city's prideful history dominate the plaza's attractions, including marble statuary of poet/politician Luis Muñoz Marín, Puerto Rico's first governor. The Fuente de Leones is the square's most captivating and vibrant attraction, a monument rescued from the 1939 World's Fair in New York.

### Parque de Bombas

*Ponceños* will claim that the eye-popping Parque De Bombas (☎ 787-284-3338; admission free; ☞ 9:30am-5pm) is Puerto Rico's most frequently photographed building – not too hard to believe as you stroll around the black-and-red-striped Arabian-style edifice and make countless, unwitting cameos in family photo albums. Originally constructed in 1882 as an agricultural exhibition hall, the space later housed the city's volunteer firefighters, who are commemorated in a small, tidy exhibit on the open 2nd floor. Since 1990, the landmark has had a perfect function as a tourist information center – even the most hapless tourist can't miss it – where a pleasant, bilingual staff will sell you tickets for a trolley and point you in the right direction for local attractions and amenities.

### Catedral Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe

The twin bell towers of this **cathedral** (Our Lady of Guadalupe Cathedral; ☎ 787-842-0134; admission free; ☞ 6am-1pm Mon-Fri, 6am-noon & 3-8pm Sat & Sun) cast an impression of piety over the plaza, even as young punks gather to show off skate tricks on its steps. The structure 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. Its stained glass windows and lovely interior are picturesque, but be mindful of the fact that this is a fully functioning church, with a number of daily services.

### Casa Alcaldía

Facing Plaza Las Delicias on the south side of the plaza, Ponce's current **city hall** (☎ 787-284-4141; admission free; ☞ 8am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) started life in the 1840s as a general assembly house but soon became a jail. The last public hanging on the island happened in its courtyard, where you can see galleries that were formerly cells. The building has been Ponce's civic center for most of the 20th century; its balcony has seen speeches by four US presidents – Teddy Roosevelt, Herbert Hoover, Franklin Roosevelt and George HW Bush. The waggish head of Carnaval, El Rey Momo, also makes his pronouncements from here.

### Casa Armstrong-Poventud

Like most publicly funded renovations in Ponce, the **Casa Armstrong-Poventud** (☎ 787-844-2540) has progressed slowly; its caryatid

columns have been behind a veil of scaffolding for the better part of a decade. Even though the conversion into a museum and cultural center were promised for late 2008, it's best not to hold your breath. Still, the 1900 structure is beautiful and it promises to be another jewel in Ponce's encrusted crown of cultural landmarks when it is completed.

### MUSEO DE ARTE DE PONCE (MAP)

With an expertly presented collection, this commanding **art museum** (☎ 787-848-0505; www.museoarteponce.org; 2325 Av Las Américas; adult/child/senior & student \$5/1/2; ☞ 10am-5pm) is the vibrant heart of the city's artistic community, easily among the best fine-arts centers in the Caribbean and itself worth the trip from San Juan. Set across from Universidad Católica, about 10 blocks to the south of Plaza Las Delicias, the museum's expertly curated collection – some 850 paintings, 800 sculptures and 500 prints – represents five centuries of Western art that was donated in large part by former governor Luis Ferré. While typical museum etiquette applies, the intimate spaces are loaded with works presented in a fully bilingual manner, and visitors can get up close and personal to take in every brush stroke. The building's blanched edifice, winged central stair and hexagonal galleries are the masterwork of architect Edward Durell Stone, who created Washington DC's Kennedy Center. The exceptional pre-Raphaelite and Italian baroque collections are offset by impressive installations and special exhibits (which usually cost a nominal extra fee). Lord Leighton's erotic *Flaming June* is the museum's sensual showpiece.

### MUSEO DE LA MÚSICA PUERTORRIQUEÑA

After the MAP, this spacious pink villa designed by Juan Bertoli Calderoni, father of Puerto Rico's neoclassical style, offers Ponce's best museum experience, and is a must for those interested in the sound of the island. A guided tour of the **museum** (☎ 787-848-7016; www.icp.gobierno.pr; cnr Reina Isabel & Salud; admission \$1; ☞ 8:30am-4:30pm Wed-Sun) showcases the development of Puerto Rico's music, allowing hands-on demonstrations of the island's indigenous instruments. The collection of Taíno, African and Spanish instruments – especially the handcrafted four-string guitar-like *cuatros* and three-string *trios* – and careful explanation of Puerto Rican musical traditions are highlights. The museum also hosts a three-

week seminar on drum building in July, and holds traditional concerts in its courtyard and parlor.

### MUSEO DE LA HISTORIA DE PONCE

This **history museum** (☎ 787-844-7071; 51-53 Reina Isabel; adult/child \$3/1 ☞ 9am-5pm Wed-Mon) is extensive for a city of less than 200,000, more evidence of Ponce's reverence for history. Located in the 1911 Casa Salazar, on the same block as Teatro La Perla, the museum has 10 galleries displaying centuries of the city's history in ecology, economy, education, architecture, medicine, politics and daily life. A refreshingly Ponce-centric perspective on the development of Puerto Rican culture, the building itself is an architectural treasure that blends typical *ponceño criollo* detailing with Moorish and neoclassical elements.

### TEATRO LA PERLA

After closing its doors for structural renovations in 2005, the stately, 1000-seat **Teatro La Perla** (Pearl Theater; ☎ 787-843-4322; cnr Mayor & Cristina; ☞ lobby 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) recently reopened its doors to theatrical and musical performances. The columned entrance, designed by Calderoni, the father of Puerto Rico's neoclassical style and designer of the Museo de la Música Puertorriqueña, was completed in the 1860s. It took 20 years to rebuild after the disastrous 1918 earthquake, but has since played a crucial role in the city's performing arts world, only underscored by the construction of the Instituto de Musica Juan More Campos, a music conservatory, across the street.

### EL VIGÍA

It doesn't really compare to the hilltop monument at Corcovado in Rio de Janeiro, but the 100ft reinforced-concrete **Cruceta El Vigía** (El Vigía Cross; ☎ 787-259-3816; 17 El Vigía; admission \$1; ☞ 9am-5:30pm Tue-Sun) looking over Ponce is one of the city's more reliable points of orientation. The site was first used for a similar purpose in the 19th century, when the Spanish Crown posted lookouts here to watch for smuggling along the coast. Today, the site is on shared grounds with the Museo Castillo Serrallés and a scrubby Japanese garden, but it still offers an expansive view. The \$3 elevator ride to the top is optional; the view is probably better in the open air at the base, without the hazy obstruction of grubby Plexiglas windows.

### Museo Castillo Serrallés

To cap the trip to El Vigía in style, try a tour of **Museo Castillo Serrallés** (Serrallés Castle Museum; ☎ 787-259-1770; 17 El Vigía; adult/child & senior \$6/3; ☞ 9:30am-5:30pm Tue-Sun), on the same property as the mammoth cross. Docents lead bilingual walking tours dedicated to the Serrallés, the first family of Puerto Rican rum, and their Moorish-style castle. When the somewhat exhausting hour-plus tour ends there aren't freebie sips of the king-making product, but you can order snacks and drinks at the café and relax on the terrace under the red-tiled roof, enjoying a view of the city below and the quiet burble of the garden's fountains. A combo ticket with Cruceta El Vigía costs \$9.50.

### PONTIFICIA UNIVERSIDAD CATÓLICA DE PUERTO RICO

This **Catholic university** (☎ 787-841-2000) sits behind an arch on the south side of Av Las Américas, across from the art museum. It serves about 10,000 students with programs in all major undergraduate disciplines and a law school. While this is a commuter campus (like almost all universities on the island), its students shape Ponce's nightlife. While the draw for travelers to visit here is somewhat limited, when school's in session the grounds offer a bustling scene in pleasant contrast to quiet afternoons spent in the city's museums.

### LA GUANCHA PASEO TABLADO

One of Ponce's most successful urban beautification projects of the last couple decades was this **boardwalk**, commonly known as 'La Guancha,' which lies about 3 miles south of the city center near the relatively lonely Ponce Hilton. Built in the mid-1990s, it's a haven for picnicking families and strolling couples to watch yachts slide in and out of the harbor. Its chief points of interest include a concert pavilion, a handful of open-air bars and food kiosks, a couple of fine-dining restaurants, a well-kempt public beach and a humble observation tower. Monday and Tuesday are slow, but on the weekends the place picks up with a breezy, festive atmosphere. A newly built expressway makes reaching La Guancha much easier than it's been in the past.

### ISLA CAJA DE MUERTOS

The name of **Isla Caja de Muertos** – which translates to Coffin Island – seems cribbed from the script of a swashbuckling adventure flick, but

the big lizards here run a lazy show, trotting across dusty, cacti-lined trails and over the mangrove marsh. The morbid moniker itself even has a tame origin; it's thought to have come from an 18th-century French author's observation that the island's silhouette looked like a body in a casket.

But the opportunity for a refreshing, day-long escape from the congestion of Ponce is key, starting with some of the best snorkeling around and plenty of tranquil, if somewhat rocky stretches of beach. Day hikers can wander past a bounty of endangered plants and reptiles that thrive in the climate and a regal 19th-century lighthouse, occasionally used as a station for biologists. If you need more swashbuckling action, try a low-impact tour (below) to scuba at the 40ft wall that's just offshore. No longer serviced by a municipal ferry, the only way to make the 3-mile trip aside from haranguing with fisherfolk at La Guancha is through **Island Ventures** (☎ 787-834-8546; \$30 round-trip; reservations necessary). Leave a message if there's no answer.

## Activities

### SWIMMING

The modest **beach** to the east of La Guancha was the result of a big civic project and, outside of it, Ponce doesn't have much by way of beaches. There's almost never a sizable surf and it can't compare to beaches on the Atlantic, but it's a stone's throw from La Guancha's cafés and restaurants and perfect for a few hours of lounging. It's also likely to get jammed on the weekends.

### BOATING & SNORKELING

In not so distant memory, a government boat carried swarms of people to the now-quiet **beaches** on Isla Caja de Muertos, but since the ferry was repurposed to the Fajardo-Vieques-Culebra run, the wilds have reclaimed the place. Today Island Ventures sends boats over to Caja de Muertos with chair, umbrella, lunch and refreshments for a \$17 ticket, and you can rent snorkeling gear for a nominal extra charge. It also can accommodate two-tank dives for about \$60 to the Wall off the island's shore, which is magnificent with the right conditions.

## Festivals & Events

Ponce may not have the biggest hillside cross or the biggest carnival, but in the lead-up

to Lent, Ponce's **Carnaval** is a time of seriously huge partying. Events kick off on the Wednesday before Ash Wednesday with a masked ball, followed by a series of float parades and ending with the coronation of the Carnaval queen and the child queen. For most of Sunday afternoon a huge parade fills the streets with floats, *vejigantes* and music. Monday evening entails a formal *danza* competition, Tuesday brings an end to the whole shebang with yet another last parade around the square, and the party ends with the ceremonial burial of a sardine (the traditional significance of which has been washed away by booze) and the onset of Lent. By that time, there's a lot to give up for the Catholic holiday. Each parade and all of the critical activities take place in Plaza Las Delicias in front of Casa Alcaldía. If you're planning to visit Ponce during Carnaval, make your hotel and transportation reservations at least three months in advance.

In the **Fiesta Nacional de la Danza** (☎ 878-284-4141), held in mid-May, chamber orchestras perform under the lights in Plaza Las Delicias and well-groomed couples offer postured examples of the form that is regarded as 'Puerto Rico's classical music.' It's in the right place; Ponce was home to high society and composers who made *danza* a distinctive art form at the turn of the 19th century.

Drummers and *pleneros* (*plena* singers) arrive from all over the island to join in **Fiesta de Bombay Plena**, the singing, dancing and drumming style that evolved in Ponce from citizens of African descent who came en masse to work the cane fields. Held in November.

Ponce adopted Mexico's patron saint – the Virgen de Guadalupe – as a result of the constant cultural exchange between the island and Mexico during the colonial era. In the **Fiesta Patronal de la Virgen de Guadalupe** in early December, fireworks are lit, booze is swigged and songs are sung during this week-long festival. The climax is at midnight on December 12, when Mexican mariachis called the Cantata Las Mañanitas arrive to lead a procession of citizens through the streets.

## Sleeping

If you're planning on spending any quality time in Ponce, its best to make your bed at one of the hotels surrounding the Plaza Las Delicias, instead of the chain resort complexes outside of the city center. Names like Hilton

and Holiday Inn might comfort the most cautious gringo, but the local flavor is nil and prices soar for accommodations that are only modestly more comfortable.

## BUDGET

**Hotel Bélgica** (☎ 787-844-3255; 122 Villa; r \$50-75; Ⓟ Ⓜ) A traveler 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** (☎ 787-812-2995; www.casadelosolpr.com; 97 Union; r \$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 there's free wi-fi, a basic continental breakfast and a private terrace out the back with a small hot tub. Given the number of amenities, it's a steal; there's even a complimentary drink from the bar downstairs included. If you are traveling with a large party and looking for a vacation rental in Ponce, it also may be able to accommodate you.

## MIDRANGE

**Hotel El Tuque** (☎ 787-290-0000; www.eltuque.com; Rte 2 Km 220, 3330 Ponce By Pass; r \$85-105; Ⓟ Ⓜ Ⓜ Ⓜ) Recently taken over and renovated by a franchise, this adjoins a water park (open in summer only), drawing families in the summer and when thunderous events are on at the neighboring speedway. Don't expect attentive service, especially in the slow winters, but the outdoor hammocks and small pool are soothing when unaccompanied by the roar of car engines and squealing tots.

**Fox Delicias Hotel** (☎ 787-290-5050; www.foxdelicias.com; 6963 Reina Isabel; r \$85-250; Ⓟ Ⓜ Ⓜ Ⓜ) The Fox family refitted an old building on the corner of the plaza into a modern hotel. Opened in 2005, its plaza-facing rooms are a favorite among sophisticated *sanjuaneros*. The place has two different personalities depending on the calendar: its cocktail lounges swell in the high season and during festivals, but off-season amenities are limited and the place is pretty sleepy.

**Howard Johnson** (☎ 787-841-1000; Hwy 1 Km 123.5; r \$95-110; Ⓟ Ⓜ Ⓜ Ⓜ) Of the four modern chain hotels on the periphery of town, this

is the best deal. With tidy, tiled bathrooms and the typical chain hotel comforts (smooth jazz in the lobby, cheesy art work), it doesn't have a crumb of local personality, but it's a pristinely clean option and very near the airport. The amenities include an on-site restaurant, laundry, gym, wi-fi, and a patio with a shimmering pool.

**Hotel Meliá** (☎ 787-842-0260, 800-44-UTELL; www.hotelmeliapr.com; 2 Cristina; r \$95-125; Ⓟ Ⓜ Ⓜ Ⓜ) Just east of the plaza, this place might remind you of favorite three-star hotels in Spain and Portugal. Everything is clean and functional, the building is monumental and the staff is friendly and helpful; the rooftop sun deck, continental breakfast and a beautifully renovated pool are attractive bonuses. The 80 rooms are spread over four floors and bit by bit they are being updated. The beds are big and bathrooms fully modernized. The hotel has been in the family for generations – check out the pictures on the wall for a look at Ponce in its prime – and the manager/co-owner will happily tell you its history.

**Holiday Inn & Tropical Casino** (☎ 787-844-1200; www.sixcontinentshotels.com; 3315 Ponce By Pass; r \$110-160; Ⓟ Ⓜ Ⓜ) Perched atop a hill west of town on Hwy 2, the attractions include a small casino, modern rooms and a bilingual staff. The poolside bar offers a sweeping view of the Caribbean and surrounding mountains.

## TOP END

**Ponce Hilton & Casino** (☎ 787-259-7676; www.hilton.com; 1150 Av Caribe; r \$210-280; Ⓟ Ⓜ Ⓜ Ⓜ) This 153-room Hilton stands within a gated area south of town, near La Guancha boardwalk on the Caribbean. As the most deluxe place in town, it 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

It's been a long time coming, but restaurateurs in Ponce are beginning to cater to the city's rising profile as a tourist destination with more exciting and adventuresome fine-dining offerings. La Guancha is a good bet for open-air cafés and restaurants take on a festive atmosphere at sunset. For something cheap and on-the-go, there are carts around Plaza Las Delicias where a hot dog with the

works (\$1.50) comes saddled with mustard, ketchup, onions, peppers, processed cheese, meaty chili and crispy shoestring potato chips. Perhaps by way of suggestion, many of them also sell gum and antacids.

#### BUDGET

**King's Cream** (9223 Marina; cones \$1-3; ☎ noon-9pm) On a pleasantly warm evening, lines stretch down the sidewalk at this excellent local institution, located across from Parque de Bombas. Within the smooth blended tropical licks are big chunks of pineapple, coconut, almond and passion-fruit, which come piled high for just over \$1. If the line is too long, seek out the other location a few blocks north of the plaza on Calle Vives, between Calles Union and Marina.

**Edan Deli & Juice Bar** (☎ 787-259-7074; cnr Villa & Torres; mains \$2-7; ☎ lunch; 🍴) This bright lunch counter sits in the back of an organic grocery store, offering veggie and vegan salads and sandwiches and fresh organic juices. It's only open for lunch, but the store keeps longer hours (8am to 6pm) and has the city's best supply of natural foods.

**Cesar's Comida Criolla** (cnr Mayor & Cristina; dishes \$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) are the city's best home cookin'. If you can't choose from the daily offerings scrawled on the chalkboard, ask Cesar and his wife Freda; they might even walk you back to the kitchen to glimpse in the steaming vats of bliss.

**Café de Tomás** (☎ 787-840-1965; cnr Reina Isabel & Mayor; mains \$4-20; ☎ lunch & dinner) A lunch line hovers at this down-home eatery to see what's coming out of the kitchen, usually a reliable assortment of *comida criolla*, many of which cost less than \$7. Within the heavy French doors of the adjoining Tompy's there's similarly tasty food with sit-down service, tablecloths and slightly higher prices.

**Chef's Creations** (☎ 787-848-8384; 100 Calle Reina; mains \$6-\$12; ☎ lunch) On the 1st level of a former residence, this place exudes casual elegance. The menu changes every day and leans toward international fusions of local fare, like the delicious Paella Con Tostones.

#### MIDRANGE & TOP END

A flock of fine-dining options are opening downtown, but if you're up for a drive to the port area, *ponceños* will point you to a couple of traditionally popular seafood places with white tablecloths, water goblets, an armory of silverware and waiters in vests.

**El Bohio** (☎ 787-844-7825; Av Las Américas; mains \$6-20; ☎ lunch & dinner) Delectable, inventive *comida criolla* dishes that taste like nothing you've tried before. El Bohio is a little hard to find, but worth asking around for.

**Rincón Argentino** (☎ 787-284-1762; cnr Salud & Isabel; mains \$10-22; ☎ dinner) With tinkling piano, soft lights and heavy palm fronds, this is one of the more romantic options in town, as long as mosquitoes aren't feasting on diners who choose to sit on the patio. The mains veer toward slabs of garlicky red meat in a grilled Argentine preparation, but chicken, seafood and pasta creations round out the menu. It also boasts a lengthy wine list.

**Mark's at the Meliá** (☎ 787-842-0260; www.marksatthemelia.net; Hotel Meliá, 2 Cristina; mains \$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' technique. Though more inventive newcomers threaten Chef Mark French's place at the top of Ponce's food chain, this is the place for upscale *mofongo* (mashed plantains), or try the salmon plates (\$25).

**our pick Las Tias** (☎ 787-844-3344; www.lastiaspr.com; cnr Union & Reina; mains \$15-30) This bilevel restaurant and lounge has an ideal corner spot and big balconies, making for exciting people-watching. The elegant French colonial atmosphere – wicker chairs and lazily turning fans – is backed up by a haute spin on regional dishes. The food alone makes it the best fine dining in the city center, even if the unhurried service and the atmosphere still need a little polish. The key lime cheese-cake is killer.

#### Drinking & Entertainment

Ponce is a little slow during the week, but the weekends bring college crowds to a row of clubs on Calle Luna, one block south of the plaza, to slam drinks and grind to reggaeton. The scene at La Guancha is also festive, but a bit more reserved. Both the Ponce Hilton and the Holiday Inn have modest casinos, but

there's more stylish action at the Hilton, which claims to be one of the biggest on the island.

#### PUBS

**our pick La Perla Del Sur** (cnr Christina & Mayor) This chipper little bar opposite the Teatro La Perla attracts a crowd of amiable older gents who leisurely push pool balls around the table and practice their English swear words when nothing drops. The drinks are about as cheap as they come (a Medalla will set you back \$1.50), making cheerful exchanges of rounds common. There's no phone and the hours are random, but it's usually open from about noon to dinner time.

**Blue Kafé** (☎ 787-248-3774; cnr Luna & Concordia; 5pm-late) You'd never know by strolling past, but hidden within this monocolored lounge is an expansive, open-air courtyard where young *ponceños* chat and toast the balmy weather, offering a reprieve from some of the more wild options on the block.

**Hollywood Kafé** (☎ 787-843-6703; Rte 1 Km 125.5; 6pm-late Wed-Mon) In the neighborhood near the Howard Johnson, this is off the beaten path, but a mid-20s crowd sprawls into the parking lot from Thursday to Sunday, getting rowdy with Latin rock, competitive pool and cheap swill.

#### DANCE CLUBS

**Bar Code** (☎ 787-432-3313; cnr Luna & Marina; ☎ 6pm-late Wed-Sun) Like its adjoining neighbor Ksy Ksy, this dance club is sweaty and riotous

on the weekends, bringing in Ponce's young and restless who tend to drink like fish, dance like dogs (the local term for a distinctive step) and party like every animal in between. Beware the Wasikoki, a five rum concoction that's served out of jugs. Expect a thorough security check at the door.

**Café Plaza** (☎ 787-432-3313; 3 Union; ☎ 5pm-late) After graduating from the Calle Luna party scene, a slightly classier crowd comes here to thin their blood on juice drinks and beer. The tables on the sidewalk fill quickly, especially when they host live music or DJs. When it gets late, the crowd migrates into the narrow quarters to dance.

**Pavilion** (Ponce Hilton & Casino, 1150 Av Caribe) The disco at the Hilton is one of Ponce's weekend hot spots, catering to a mostly English-speaking crowd and Ponce's young and wealthy.

#### Shopping

Paseo Atocha, just north of the plaza, is closed to traffic, serving as a busy pedestrian marketplace with food stands and cheap goods. Here and along the cross streets merchants create a street-bazaar feel with racks of clothing, leather goods and suspiciously affordable designer wear. The city's enormous mall, Plaza del Caribe, has typical American-chain clothiers and is located south of downtown at the intersection of Rte 2 and the Ponce By Pass.

#### CHARLIE APONTE & LA UNIVERSIDAD DE LA SALSA

If you'd never heard salsa before, it'd be best to start with El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico, the island's authorities on the sound. Founded by Rafael Ithier in 1962, they've existed in one form or another ever since, playing thousands of gigs across Latin America and abroad. Charlie Aponte, one of the group's vocalists, joined the so-called *La Universidad de la Salsa* (The University of Salsa) in 1973 and has toured with them since then. When asked about the continued vibrancy of Puerto Rico's legendary musical ambassadors, Aponte replies with a wry smile, 'It's in the sound. The feel of the music, and that sound, are eternal, and that is the secret to our long life.'

Aponte's seen the world with the group, performing as one of the group's three vocalists, himself being introduced to the traditional songs as a child. 'Many Puerto Ricans, many Cubans, many Dominicans, grew up with that sound in their homes, singing along,' he says. 'That's how I got started. But after hearing that rhythm your entire life, it's not just a kind of music or a kind of dance, it becomes a kind of life. The beat is the soul of the music and maybe the soul of Puerto Rico. When you hear it you feel it instantly, and it hits you and gets in your body and there's nothing like it.'

Seeing El Gran Combo on its home turf is not uncommon, though the group continues to maintain a relentless schedule of international touring. Still, Aponte says, 'there's nothing like playing at home, here, in the place where it was born.'

Charlie Aponte was interviewed by Nate Cavaliere

**Utopia** (☎ 787-845-8742; 78 Reina Isabel; 🕒 10am-6pm) Selling colorful *vejigantes* (masks), *santos* (small carved figurines representing saints) souvenirs and Puerto Rican trinkets, Utopia is the nicest souvenir shop on the square. The bonus? The little bar up front will sell six-packs of beer to go, the only such place on the plaza.

**Nueva Plaza Del Mercado** (Between Paseo Atocha and Victoria; 🕒 6am-6pm Mon-Sat) Winding through crowds of shoppers on Paseo Atocha will lead you to the city's most exciting indoor market, four blocks north of the Plaza. The selection of produce – freshly hacked off the vine – is marvelous, and can be complimented by less healthful options like cheapie sweets and fried snacks, as well as lottery tickets. Just up the block, the slightly more crowded Mercado Juan Ponce de León has stalls hocking pan-religious voodoo charms and salsa tunes on vintage vinyl platters, reconditioned boots and hand-rolled cigars.

### Getting There & Away

Four miles east of the town center off Hwy 1 on Hwy 5506, the Aeropuerto de Mercedita (Mercedita Airport) looks dressed for a party, but still waiting for the guests to arrive. **Cape Air** (☎ 787-848-2020; www.capeair.com) has five flights a day to San Juan (one-way/return \$87/105) and **jetBlue** (☎ 800-538-2583; www.jetblue.com) also services the city from a number of American cities.

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

### Getting Around

#### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Taxis in Ponce are not exactly filling the streets and tend to gravitate to the Plaza Las Delicias. Expect to pay \$15 for the 4-mile taxi trip to or from the airport (right).

#### CAR

Ponce has rental-car agencies (mostly located at the airport), including the following:

**Avis** (☎ 787-842-6184)

**Dollar** (☎ 787-843-6940)

**Hertz** (☎ 787-842-7377)

#### TAXI

A handful of cab companies operate in the city, and flagging one down at the Plaza Las Delicias is much quicker than calling for one. They charge \$1 to drop the flag and about \$1.30 per mile, but meters are used infrequently, so ask about the destination price before you get an unpleasant surprise. **Coop Taxi del Sur** (☎ 787-848-8248) and **Ponce Taxi** (☎ 787-642-3370) are reliable.

#### TROLLEY

The city tourist office operates trolley and fake train trips for visitors (\$2), which are informative and entertaining. If you're going to be in Ponce for a day or two, this makes an excellent way to get your bearings. Supposedly both trolley and train follow the same route, but the two-hour trolley ride makes stops allowing passengers to get out and snap photos, while the train makes no stops, completing its circuit in about an hour. Of the two options, the trolley is recommended. There are supposed to be regular trips between 8am and 7:30pm daily, but if demand is low the drivers will change the schedule or routes on a whim. They all leave and return to the stop in front of the Casa Armstrong-Poventud, on the west side of Plaza Las Delicias. Trolleys are supposed to appear about every 15 minutes.

### CENTRO CEREMONIAL INDÍGENA DE TIBES

Tropical storm Eloise hit Ponce in 1975, causing the Río Portugués to overflow its banks. When the floodwater retreated from local farmland, it exposed the ruins of **Tibes** (Tibes Indian Ceremonial Center; ☎ 787-840-2255; Hwy 503 Km 2.2; adult/senior & child \$2/1; 🕒 9am-4pm Tue-Sun, closed major holidays), an ancient ceremonial center. The municipal government quickly expropriated more than 30 acres, and a team of archaeologists, historians, engineers and geologists moved in. To date they have excavated slightly more than 5 acres of the property.

While Tibes lacks the dramatic scale of a place like Uxmal in Mexico, the evidence of both Igneris and other pre-Taíno cultures makes it among the most important archaeological sites in the Caribbean. The site is in the foothills just north of town and is a recommended way to spend an afternoon while visiting the Ponce area.

Current excavations have uncovered seven *bateyes* (ball courts), two ceremonial plazas,

burial grounds, around 200 skeletons, pottery, tools and charms. As you tour the manicured pastoral setting – with its *bateyes* and plaza rimmed by bordering stones (some with petroglyphs) – guides explain that the first settlers on this spot were Igneris, who probably migrated from the Orinoco Valley in Venezuela and arrived at Tibes about AD 300. They were farmers and sought out fertile river valleys like Tibes to grow their staple crop of cassava.

As part of their cassava culture, the Igneris became fine potters, making vessels for serving and storing food. Many of these bell-shaped vessels have been found buried with food, charms and seashells in more than 100 Igneri graves, where individuals were buried in the fetal position in the belief that they were bound back to the 'Earthmother' for rebirth. Many of the Igneri graves have been discovered near or under the *bateyes* and walkways constructed by the pre-Taíno, who probably came to the site around the first millennium.

In a well-developed museum on the property you can see many of the axes, dishes, *cemíes* (deities), spoons and adzes that they used. You will also see some reconstructed pre-Taíno *bohíos* (huts) amid this natural botanical garden with its fruit trees, including the popular *guanábana* (soursop). There's a cafeteria open seasonally at Tibes if you get hungry.

All visits include a tour, which takes about an hour and includes a movie and a visit to the small museum, where you can see Indian ceremonial objects, pottery and jewelry. Sometimes the tour gets sold out, so you should make reservations in advance.

Tibes lies about 2 miles north of Ponce at Km 2.2 on Hwy 503. If you're driving this route, the best way to not get lost is to follow the brown signs leading to Tibes: pick these out on Hwy 14 (Calle Fagot) on the northeast side of Ponce. It's also easy to get there on a público from Ponce (opposite), which costs about \$6, but getting back can be tricky.

### ARROYO

On the southeast corner of the island, Arroyo is a drowsy beach town with a curious history, a place which seems to have dozed off shortly after the rein of 'king sugar' and never quite woke up. It's the first town on the south coast of interest to travelers heading clockwise along the island from San Juan, and typical

of many of the seaside bergs in the area, with economies that hobble along though a trickle of tourism and small commercial fishing industries. The dusty main drag, Calle Morse, passes 19th-century structures and salt-beaten wooden homes with sagging tin roofs and shuttered windows, eventually ending at the still, blue Caribbean.

Like the regional hub of Ponce, Arroyo was a rough-and-tumble smugglers' port during the colonial days, when New England sea captains and Caribbean traders built many of the slouching wooden houses that still stand. Arroyo's early notoriety came when American Samuel Morse, inventor of the telegraph, installed communication lines here in 1848. This event put Arroyo on the map and made Morse a local hero; they named the main street after him and sing about him in the town's anthem.

Entering the village from Hwy 3 to Calle Morse, you'll notice that the upside of Arroyo's isolation is a lack of modern commercial development – there's not a Burger King in sight. Still, little effort and money is spent on preserving its inherent historical charm. The nearby Tren del Sur, which was the last working railway on the island, sits just up the road in a rusting heap, with whispers of a (unlikely) renovation floating about town.

### Orientation & Information

Hwy 3, the old southern coastal road, skirts the edge of town but Hwy 753 brings you to the center and becomes the main street, which has a number of eateries, a pharmacy and a string of cheap watering holes. If you visit during peak season in the summer, you might get lucky and find someone at the **Arroyo Tourist Office** (☎ 787-839-3500; 87 Morse) but don't count on it; the hours are erratic.

### Sights & Activities

The long, narrow strand adjoining the Centro Vacacional Punta Guilarte has a public **balneario** and is the only decent beach around, even though the waters have suffered from pollution. It's about 3 miles east of Arroyo on a property with grills and tables. Parking costs \$2.

The **Antigua Casa de Aduana** (Old Customs House; ☎ 787-839-8096; 67 Morse; 🕒 9am-4pm Wed-Sun) is housed in an elaborately carved former customs house and filled with Morse memorabilia. Be sure to call ahead, as hours are

varied and seasonal, and the building is often closed for ‘renovations.’

### Sleeping & Eating

**Centro Vacacional Punta Guilarte** (☎ 787-839-3565; Hwy 3 Km 126; campsites/cabins/villas \$10/65/109; 📍 🚰 🚿) About 2 miles east of Arroyo, this well-maintained government facility has rustic cabins and slightly more refined (read: hot water and air-con) villas, 40 basic campsites and a pool. The cabins sleep six. The place bustles during the summer months, when you should reserve a room well in advance through the San Juan office of the Compañía de Parques Nacionales (☎ 787-622-5200). In the winter, you might have it mostly to yourself.

**La Familia** (53 Morse; sandwiches \$1.25-\$5; 🍴 lunch & dinner) This popular cafeteria and bakery is next to a ramshackle old-time general store that is loaded with unlikely finds.

### Getting There & Away

Most públicos bound for Guayama will take you the few extra miles into Arroyo for a nominal charge, leaving you at the terminal near the town hall on Calle Morse. It might take a while to get a público back to Guayama (\$3), but from there you can find a connecting ride to Río Piedras in San Juan or back to Ponce.

## GUAYAMA

A few miles up the hill from the coast is Guayama, the bigger, less attractive older sister to little Arroyo. The two cities have been linked since the colonial days when the shadowy brokering of Arroyo’s ports – illegally bringing in goods from across the Americas and sending out sugarcane and rum – fattened the wallets of Guayama’s society families. In the century since, these sister towns have grown apart, with the sprawling asphalt parking lots of big box stores and commercial development offering evidence of how Guayama has left ragged little Arroyo behind.

Today, Guayama’s 45,000 residents pay the rent with jobs at pharmaceutical and light industrial factories that lie west of town, and the place once called the ‘City of Witches’ (a result of Santería worship brought here by African laborers) suffers from the typical contemporary spells of hasty development and heavy traffic. The jewel of the city is the fountain at the center of the plaza, which was imported from France in 1918.

During the first weekend of March the upscale **Feria Dulce Sueño** (The Fair of Sweet Dreams; ☎ 787-834-1988) bring thousands of equestrian zealots to town for a Paso Fino horse race.

### Sights

#### MUSEO CASA CAUTIÑO

On the north side of the plaza, this **museum** (☎ 787-864-9083; cnr Palmer & Vicente Pales; adult/child \$10/50; 🕒 9am-4pm Tue-Sun) was built as a *criollo*-style town house in 1887 to house the wealthy Cautiño family, who profited from a typical trio of cane, cattle and tobacco. Almost 100 years later, the government claimed the property for back taxes (a common event on the island, which has saved many heirlooms). Now the house has been restored to its dignified Victorian state, with Oriental carpets and period furnishings.

#### CENTRO DE BELLAS ARTES

A symbol of Guyama’s rising status, this former courthouse was made into a **fine arts center** (☎ 787-864-7765; Rte 3 Km 138; admission free) that lies just west of town. The collection focuses on emerging and established Puerto Rican artists, though the walls are occasionally hung with student works.

#### RESERVA NATURAL MARIPOSARIO LAS LIMAS

Hiding in the hills about 5 miles north of Guayama, this family-operated **butterfly sanctuary** (☎ 787-864-6037; admission \$3; 🕒 10am-3pm Thu-Sun) covers nearly 200 acres of semi-tropical land carefully watched over by a Puerto Rican couple. The 90-minute tour reveals an enormous variety of flora, fauna and wildlife and a chance to savor the fresh mountain air. Reservations are recommended. To find the sanctuary, go north on Rte 15 to Rte 179. Turn onto Rte 747 and make a right at the sign at Km 0.7.

### Sleeping & Eating

It’d be a bit harsh to call the hotel options in Guayama the choice between a rock and a hard place; it might be more accurately summed up as the choice between a largish stone and a slightly smaller one. Neither is close to the city’s charming center or within a short walk of...well, anything. If it’s late and you’re tired, consider pulling in here, but better sleeping options abound to the east. For eats, inexpensive fare comes from the cafeterias by the

central plaza, but the best food is a few miles down the road, in the fishing community of Pozuelo.

**Hotel Brandemar** (☎ 787-864-5124; end of Rte 748; r \$54-75; 📍 🚰 🚿) Following a twisting road through a residential neighborhood just outside of town, you’ll come to the Brandemar, a serviceable family-run hotel which is Guanica’s best by a nose. It’s a small compound of buildings including a hotel with inexpensive, no-frills rooms situated around a pool, buttressed by a building with well-stocked bar and restaurant with fresh fish plates.

**El Molina** (☎ 787-866-1515; Hwy 54 Km 2.1; r from \$97; 📍 🚰 🚿) Set on 9 acres of a former sugar plantation, this 20-room inn is dominated by a crumbly old sugar mill, and is a solid bet for travelers looking for a place to rest their heads and little more. Its adjoining sports bar/restaurant turns into thumping nightclub on the weekends, which can be exciting or unruly, depending on whether you want to party or sleep. The relatively big price tag reflects a sellers’ market.

**Supreme Bakery** (☎ 787-864-8175; cnr Derkes & Hostos; mains \$3-15; 🕒 6am-7pm) The lines get long at lunch and it can be hard to get a seat, but the fat pork sammys and other *comida criolla* dishes are worth it. The baked goods are also out of sight. In the summer and on weekends they offer take out until 9:30pm.

**our pick** **La Casa de Los Pasteliollos** (☎ 787-864-5171; Rte 7710 Km 4; mains \$3-30; 🕒 10:30am-6pm Mon-Wed, 10:30am-10pm Thu, 10:30-11pm Fri) After seeing the sorry excuse for what passes for *pasteliollos*

elsewhere – dry as dirt and trapped under a merciless heat lamp– you might not recognize the namesake of this seaside patio restaurant. The ambitious variations of the fried staple (shark? octopus? pizza?) are made to order, arriving as greasy, seafood-stuffed slices of heaven. More ample, healthful options are also lovingly made, based around fresh catches. Add in the view of crashing waves and dreamy hammocks tied between palms, and this is the best lunch spot on the south coast.

### Getting There & Away

To find a público, look for the parking structure two blocks southeast of the plaza. Local services to neighboring towns including Patillas and Salinas cost \$3 and longer hauls to San Juan or Ponce are about \$8. Check the decals on the windshields of the públicos to discern their destinations. Coming by car, you can’t miss the town – it’s at the junction of Hwy 3 and the Hwy 53 toll road.

## BAHÍA DE JOBOS

If you’re traveling west from Guayama and Arroyo, the only way to get a feel for the region is by skipping the smoothly paved Hwy 53 and navigating the two-lane Hwy 3. The feel in this area is not the typical fodder for postcards – a lot of one-stoplight towns, roadkill, and crumbling smokestacks from failed sugar mills but the slow route’s highlight is the sprawling Reserva Nacional de Investigación Estuarina de Bahía de Jobos, which has hiking trails, camping and a labyrinth of mangrove canals for kayaking. The marshy reserve

### DETOUR: POZUELO FISHING EXCURSION

The Puerto Rican government has put in a number of smooth, swift highways and tollways over the last few decades, making navigating the island in your sweet little rental car a speedy affair. However, a much more savory taste of the south coast can be discovered by taking the trusty old two-lanes of Hwys 2 and 3, which traverse the heart of a handful of local fishing communities’ joints for *comedia creolla* home cooking. The best of these might be Pozuelo, a little collection of buildings on the end of a peninsula just east of Arroyo, about 40 minutes from Ponce. Turning off Hwy 3 onto Rte 7710 will bring you past a handful of places where the catches are fresh, but the classiest lunch is at **La Casa de Los Pasteliollos** (above). For dinner, wander over to **Villa Pesquera Punta Pozuelo** (☎ 787-864-5522; Rte 7710 Km 6; 🕒 10:30am-6pm). Surrounded by dry-docked boats at the end of the dusty road, this restaurant serves cheap food and beers all evening and is a magnet for local fishermen, who tend to crack a few colds one early in the afternoon. They’ll rent boats and kayaks, but if you want to get into deeper water, you can hire a boat through the restaurant, or negotiate a half-day fishing charter for around \$40 from one of the locals. It’s the best way to truly dig into the fishing culture of the south coast, and probably the cheapest option for chartering a boat on the island.



borders the nearly abandoned sugar town of Aguirre, which makes a compelling detour.

### Sights & Activities

#### RESERVA NACIONAL DE INVESTIGACIÓN ESTUARINA DE BAHÍA DE JOBOS

Bursting with wildlife, the rarely traveled National Estuarine Research Reserve at Bahía de Jobos is an enormous protected mangrove bay, one of the largest and least visited patches of pristine coastal wilderness in Puerto Rico. The Bahía de Jobos covers almost 3000 acres of brackish water, including associated coastal wetlands and 15 offshore mangrove keys known as Los Cayos Caribes. West of the research reserve, the Reserva Forestal Aguirre adds even more undeveloped coastal land to this wilderness.

Get your bearings and check out the educational displays at the reserve's **lab and visitors center** (☎ 787-864-0105; Hwy 705 Km 2.3; 🕒 7:30am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 1-3pm Sat & Sun). In addition to a veritable ark of brown pelicans, great blue herons, black-crowned night herons, snowy egrets, ospreys, peregrine falcons and American oyster catchers, this is probably the best place to see manatees (sea cows) in Puerto Rico. Well over 100 feed here (best seen early in the morning) and play free, untroubled by the comings and goings of humans. There are also dolphins and hawksbill sea turtles in the area.

You can go on a superb hike along the **Jagüeyes Forest Interpretive Trail**, which twists around mangroves, wetlands and saltflats for about 30 minutes, with bilingual signs posted along the way. The path can be reached from the visitors center by driving west on Rte 3, then turning left at Km 154.6.

### AGUIRRE

Crumbling monuments to the sugar industry are evident everywhere on the southeast part of the island, but there's no more heart-breaking reminder of departed 'King Sugar' than sleepy little Aguirre, which borders the Bahía de Jobos and is so far off the beaten path that it doesn't appear on many tourist maps. The moldering sugar town was booming in the early-20th-century, complete with a mill, company stores, hospital, theater, hotel, bowling alley, social club, golf course, marina, executive homes and narrow-gauge railroad. This was the planned private community of the Central Aguirre sugar company, and at

its height (around 1960) it processed 12,500 tons of sugarcane per day. Declining prices for sugar, foreign competition and escalating production costs drove the company under in 1990 and Aguirre became a virtual ghost town. The rusting train tracks remain, as does a weedy **golf course** (☎ 787-853-4052; Rte 705 Km 1.6; tee \$12; 🕒 7am-6pm Tue-Sun).

### Sleeping & Eating

Aside from fending off mosquitoes and camping in the Bahía de Jobos reserve, there are no places to stay in Aguirre. The nearest options are Coamo, Guayama and Playa Salinas.

### Getting There & Away

The only way to visit Reserva Nacional de Investigación Estuarina de Bahía de Jobos and Aguirre is by car. Take Hwy 705 south from Hwy 3. Watch for the barely visible sign pointing to 'Historic Aguirre.'

### PLAYA SALINAS

Salinas proper, the town at the center of the south coast agricultural economy, lies about a mile north of the coast and a mile south of the highway. Even though it's the birthplace of baseball legends Roberto and Sandy Alomar and a pair of Miss Universe queens, the town itself isn't so easy on the eyes; like many other small cities in the region, it's never replaced the sugar-based economy. There is a tourist office on the central plaza, but it's open seasonally, and even then infrequently.

The coastal barrio of Playa Salinas is quite a different story. The name is a bit of a misnomer since there's no actual sand here, but the geographical features of its protected harbor make it an important port for the northern Caribbean. With deep water and a dense barrier of coastal mangroves, it's an ideal 'hurricane hole,' perfect for cruising sailors looking to hide from the tempest. Even when the seas are still, the port attracts scores of yachters, and though many of them are captained by retired Americans and Europeans, locals will be wont to gab about frequent celebrity sightings. Notables of late have included JLo and Marc Anthony.

Following Rte 701 along the coast you'll pass a cluster of candlelit surf-and-turf joints then arrive at the Marina de Salinas, a complex that includes the Posada El Náutico hotel. Travelers looking for a berth aboard a cruising sailboat headed to the Dominican Republic,

the Bahamas, the US, Cuba or Jamaica will do well to check the bar within the Marina de Salinas, especially in late March and early April. If you can't get a ride, it's still a good place to watch the boats roll in and out of the harbor.

### Sights & Activities

Even if you don't stay at the Posada El Náutico, most activities in the water are available through the front desk of the **Marina de Salinas** (☎ 787-824-3185; 8-G Playa Ward), where you can rent kayaks (\$15/40 per hr/day), water bikes (\$15/60 per hr/day) and bicycles (per half-day \$10). They'll also help you arrange day trips, deep-sea fishing expeditions and jaunts to the local cays.

With a blasting stereo and boisterous families, trips on the **La Paseadora** (☎ 787-824-2649; dock near El Balcón del Capitán; tours \$3, trips to local cays \$5) leave weekend mornings in good weather. They offer snorkeling tours and round-trips to a nearby island with a beach.

East of town on Hwy 3 is the office of the **Departamento De Recursos Naturales** (☎ 787-824-3185; 8-G Playa Ward), which can provide information and a place to pay fees for the many surrounding natural areas.

The only place to get in the water without some kind of floating vessel is at Polita's Beach (Ctra 701).

### Sleeping & Eating

**Marina de Salinas & Posada El Náutico** (☎ 787-824-3185; 8-G Playa Ward; r \$84-125; 📞 📺 📶 📺) This is the best coastal hotel east of Ponce, part of the all-in-one marina complex that has cheerful, clean rooms decorated with some tropical flair, a pool, playground, café and slightly more upscale restaurant overlooking the harbor. Find it easily by heading south on Rte 701, past the line of seafood restaurants. The snack bar near the pool is where the cruising fraternity, mostly American, comes for cheap breakfasts in the morning and cheap beers through the afternoon.

**La Playa Minimarket** (Calle A & Hwy 701; snacks up to \$5; 🕒 noon-late) Run by brothers Evan and Irving, this little place is a well-situated (though not too well-stocked) bar and grill/minimarket, though the latter is only evident from a stock of dusty cans, mosquito repellent and dish soap. The food here is certainly a family affair: homemade sandwiches *criolla* and blood sausage come steaming from the tiny small

kitchen, and the food is available to go. The beer is cheap and the locals feisty; they dance to a TV in the corner playing videos of old salsa bands. This is the ideal place to get away from the other tourists.

**Ladi's Place** (☎ 787-824-2035; Calle A 86, off Hwy 701; mains \$10-30; 🕒 lunch & dinner) Like its west-facing neighbors up and down the road, the sunset views are a nightly show from the breezy patio. Ladi's claims to have created 'Mojo Isleño,' a zesty garlicky sauce that dresses most local fish dishes. A crooner plays the keyboard in the corner and the song list calibrated to please gringo sailors, who sway along to 'Margaritaville' at least once an evening.

### Getting There & Away

You cannot miss where the públicos gather in the lot near the town plaza. You can get to Guayama for about \$2 or Ponce for \$5. To get to Playa Salinas and the marina, you have to walk about 1.5 miles or negotiate with your público driver.

From the east, Hwy 3 becomes Hwy 1 as it passes through Salinas. From Ponce, drivers should take Hwy 1 east or the Hwy 52 toll road to Hwy 1 south.

### COAMO

Ponce de León's obsessive search for the Fountain of Youth – which, according to some historians, was sought in hopes of curing sexual impotence – led not only to the discovery of North America, but perhaps also to the founding of this city, still famous for its thermal springs. There's no word if they helped solve León's problem; the miraculous waters are known by natives as a geothermic, not supernatural, phenomena. Regardless, León's lagging libido might be responsible for making Coamo the third-oldest colonial settlement on the island (after San Juan and San Germán), a place that also staged a decisive battle of the Spanish-American War years later.

Bathing conquistadors and battlefields aside, Coamo today is a major chicken-processing center with more than 30,000 residents. The main draw for travelers continues to be the *baños* (baths) south of town. Over the years they've hosted former US President Franklin Roosevelt and millions of visitors.

Coamo's more recent claim to fame is a footnote, the hilly 20km San Blas de

Illescas Marathon (actually more like a half-marathon), which happens every February.

### Sights & Activities

If you're a connoisseur of natural springs, the **Los Baños de Coamo** (Coamo's Baths; admission free; ☎ 8am-6pm) are worth a detour, though the environs are basic and swimsuits are required – bathing au naturel isn't tolerated by local families.

Taking a dip early in the morning, during a rain shower or at dinnertime might give you the place to yourself. The upper pool has thermal water at about 110°F and the lower one is cooler, and they are a good place to take in the scene as trade winds blow across the fields and down the Río Coamo on its way to the sea. This isn't a plush spa; both pools are simple structures of poured concrete but more swish thermal experiences can be had at the neighboring hotel.

To get here, take Hwy 153 from Hwy 1 or Hwy 52. Head north for about 3 miles and look for the sign that points off to the left (west) to the Parador Baños Coamo, which is Rte 546. You'll pass a number of recent condo developments and the **Coamo Springs Golf Course** (☎ 787-825-1370; Rte 546 Km 1; rounds weekday/weekend \$38/\$60), but continue down the hill a half mile to the dirt parking lot. The parador is right by the river, which flows near the right side of the fence. You'll see some ruins and two pools built high on the side of the riverbank.

There's very little public transportation to the *baños*. A público from Ponce will drop you at the intersection of Hwys 546 and 153, about 1 mile away (\$3). For more money they may go to the baths, but you'll need to arrange it in advance.

If you're interested in poking around town after a dip, check out **San Blás Catholic Church** on the plaza, which has paintings by the island masters Campeche and Oller, including a painting of one of Oller's girlfriends being tortured in Purgatory. As in Guayama, Coamo has also converted an old mansion on the plaza into a **museum**; it opens upon a request through the town hall.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Parador Baños de Coamo** (☎ 787-825-22186; www.banosdecoamo.com; end of Hwy 546; r \$85-95; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Situated around an enormous Samanea saman (rain tree), this is the most recent incarnation of hotels that have stood on this site for 150

years. The ruins of its predecessors give it a historic colonial feel, as little lizards scurry around the grounds and guests enjoy the open-air bar and thermal pools. There's an award-winning restaurant on-site and the rooms are modern, if a little worn. Nonguests can use the hotel's swimming and thermal pools between 10am and 5:30pm for \$5/3 per adult/child.

### YAUCO

Yauco's well-scrubbed public squares, friendly tourist office and pleasant shopping district stand in gleaming contrast to the ragged little bergs that dot the southwest highway. Hidden up in the hills, the city was founded in 1758 by merchants tired of pillaging pirates. Now the so-called 'City of Coffee' is a perfect stop for supplies before heading into the Guánica forest and a charming afternoon side trip in its own right, famous for bold coffee, yucca plantations and well-preserved art deco, colonial and creole architecture.

To get there, exit Hwy 2 at Km 359 and go right on Calle 25 de Julio, which runs alongside **Parque Arturo Lluberas**. You'll be in town when you reach the Yauco Garden, a large, futuristic sculpture tree that might have developed from plans drawn by Dr. Scuss. East of the plaza, in the basement of the brightly painted Alejandro Franceschi Art Museum is the **tourist office** (☎ 787-267-0350; cnr 25 de Julio & Batences; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat & Sun), with information about local indigenous and precolonial ruins and **trolley tours**, which run regularly in the summer and by appointment in the off-season.

### Sights

In sharp contrast to the modern Parque Arturo Lluberas is the city's more traditional **Plaza de Recreo**, just a few blocks up the hill upon which the massive **Iglesia Católica Nuestra Señora del Rosario** casts a long shadow over domino players and strolling lovers. The plaza hosts a small wireless café where you can sample local coffee, and sits just off a bustling stretch of shops on Calle Comercio, which has a number of jewelers who will make gold pendants with your name on them.

The **Centro de Arte Alejandro Franceschi** (☎ 787-267-0350; cnr 25 de Julio & Batence; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat & Sun) is the city's immaculate little art museum, a 1907 building chock-full of Victorian oil paintings and gilded frescos.

### Sleeping & Eating

For something inexpensive, stroll down Calle Comercio, which has good cafeterias and cafés. The same strip also has a franchise of the delightful Ponce institution, **King's Cream** (☎ 787-267-0505; 27 Comercio; ☎ 9am-8pm).

**Hotel & Restaurante El Cafetal** (☎ 787-856-0345; Rte 368 Km 10; s/d \$57/87 ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This is the only place to stay in Yauco: a multilevel maze of stairs and hallways running through this clean, inexpensive hotel, which has balconies overlooking the mountains and a retired limestone quarry. It also hosts Yauco's best restaurant, with a menu that gravitates toward fish dishes for about \$15. The elaborate, slightly bizarre facility was designed by its owner and includes an attractive pool with waterfalls. There's also an adjoining motel with hourly rates – technically for travelers who get in late – but the mirrored ceiling, hidden entrance and covered parking might give you a different impression of its purpose.

### GUÁNICA & AROUND

A plush resort east of town draws a top-flight of international travelers, but Guánica doesn't much notice the happenings of the relatively rich and famous: it exudes the feel of a simple fishing village where folks unwind after a long week of tending the lines by hitting their favorite open-air bar on the *malecón*. In many ways similar to Arroyo, Guánica has been largely passed over by the bland commercial and housing developments. After a long day in the sun at the Bosque Estatal de Guánica, this is an excellent spot to recharge with a few cold ones and a meal of the freshest seafood – some of it caught only hours earlier by the guy at the end of the bar.

### Orientation

The small fishing town of Guánica is situated around the well-protected Bahía de Guánica, just a few miles south of Hwy 2 on Rte 116. The village itself is unlikely to grace a picture postcard – it's just a scrubby town square and a row of bars and restaurants facing a large factory across the bay. However, just east of town the Bosque Estatal de Guánica is stunning, sitting in hills that ramble down into the ocean. The park is reached by turning south off Rte 116 at Rte 334. The winding Rte 333 leads out of town, past a swish hotel and beaches to the south of the reserve.

### Sights

#### BOSQUE ESTATAL DE GUÁNICA

The immense 10,000-acre expanse 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.

This 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 – present at every turn. Scientists estimate that only 1% of the earth's dry forest of this kind remains, and the vast acreage makes this a rare sanctuary, 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, this crumbling landscape and parched vegetation makes an unexpected, thrilling contrast.

There are no hotels in the forest but the nearby towns of Guánica, La Parguera and Ponce have many places to stay. Bring food and water for hikes; there are no kiosks or food stands anywhere inside the forest.

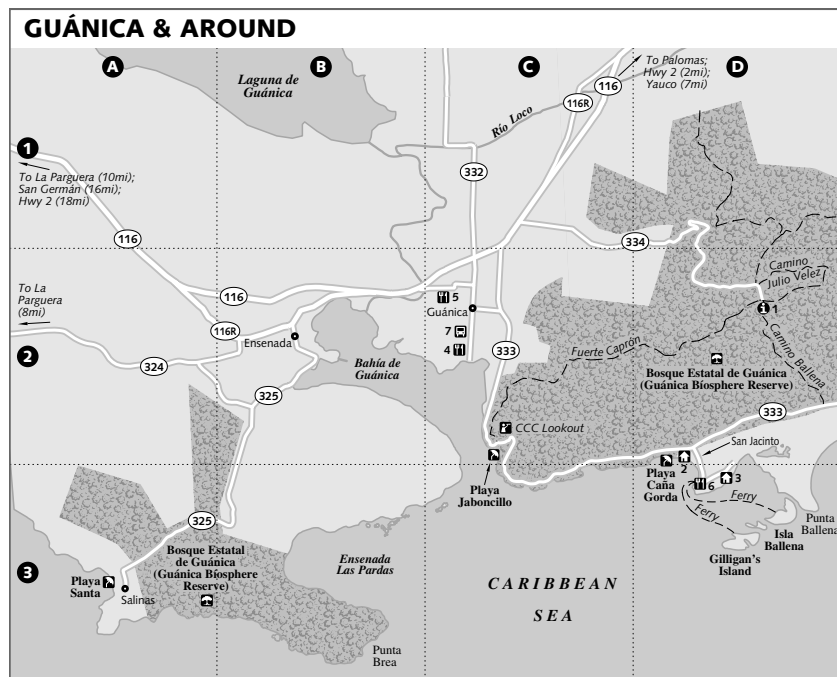
### History

The protected forest got its start in 1919 with the government acquisition of about half the current property. Over the years the government has added to the acreage and efforts to buy adjacent land continue. During the 1930s the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) cut many of the roads and built essential buildings here, and in the years since it has continued to expand under the protection of the Puerto Rico forest service.

In 1981 the UN acknowledged the value of this dry forest by designating it a Unesco 'biosphere reserve.' This accolade, Unesco says, makes it one of 529 such preserves in 105 countries around the world, where scientists and local people work with government agencies to create model land management.

### Climate

The dry forest owes its distinctive and quite unusual microclimate to the presence of the nearby Central Mountains. This mountain range creates, guides and exhausts tropical



rainstorms as the easterly trade winds drive warm, moist air over the cool peaks. As a consequence, the cordillera gets totally inundated with rain while Guánica, located to the south, gets very little – usually about 35in a year, which mostly falls from June to September.

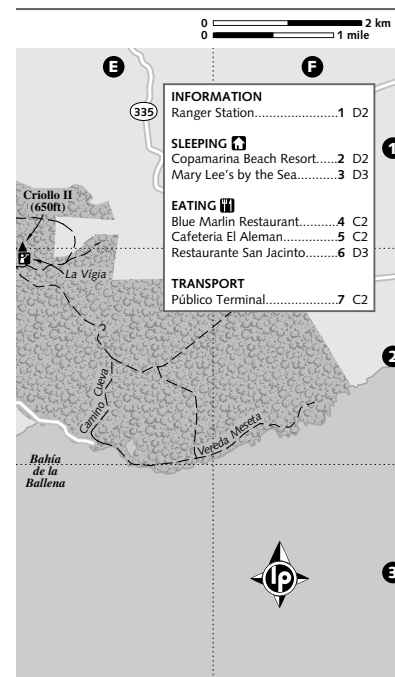
Meanwhile, December through April is so sunny, hot and dry that the deciduous trees shed all of their leaves. Temperatures fluctuate from 80° to 100°F, virtually tropical desert conditions. The flora and fauna that survive here must be hearty and attuned to the seasons.

### Wildlife

Just over half the forest, in the highest elevation, consists of deciduous trees, while near the coast there's more than 1000 acres of semi-evergreen forest and scrub forest; at the waterline are the familiar mangroves. One of the most unusual plants here is the squat melon cactus with its brilliant pink flowers that attract hummingbirds. Another plant, with the unseemly name of the Spanish dildo cactus, grows into huge treelike shapes near the coast and attracts bullfinches and bats.

The forest's uneven rainfall and drainage patterns have created an unusual array of habitats for more than 700 varieties of plants (many in danger of extinction), which attract a large number of birds. Some studies claim that almost all of the bird species found in Puerto Rico turn up in Guánica – some say the area is better for bird-watching than El Yunque. Guánica is a preferred habitat for nine of the island's 14 endemic species, including the Puerto Rican woodpecker, the Puerto Rican emerald hummingbird and – the ultimate prize for bird-watchers – the exceedingly rare 'prehistoric' Puerto Rican nightjar, of which there are estimated to be as few as 1500. Long thought extinct, the nightjar has a recent unlikely enemy that troubles ecologists: a proposed windfarm in Guayanilla. Wind turbines are thought to be responsible for as much as 5% of nightjar deaths.

Scientists also come here to see the crested toad (*Bufo lemur*), which is critically endangered and has a current population estimated to be in the hundreds; the *Amelva wetmorei* lizard, with its iridescent tail; and the purple



land crab. Green and leatherback turtles still lay their eggs here, but their hatchlings may be in a losing contest against the predation of mongooses, which have overrun the island since their introduction to control the rats in the cane fields.

### Geography

The Bahía de Guánica divides the forest into two sections. The highest elevation here is 650ft, and many of the forest's hills rise abruptly from the coast to nearly equivalent heights. The terrain is undulating, with steep slopes in the east and moderate, rolling terrain in the west. Limestone underlies most of the forest and is overlaid by several yards of calcium carbonate. Erosion by both water and sun has created sinkholes, caves and a forest floor that often looks like brittle Swiss cheese.

### Orientation & Information

To get to the eastern section of the reserve and the **ranger station** (☎ 787-821-5706; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm), which has trail maps and brochures, follow Hwy 116 southeast toward

Guánica town from Hwy 2. Turn left (east) onto Hwy 334 and follow this road as it winds up a steep hill through an outlying barrio of Guánica. Eventually, the road crests the hills, ending at the ranger station, a picnic area and a scenic overlook of the forest and the Caribbean.

The southern extent of the eastern section of the forest – including Bahía de la Ballena (Whale Bay) and the ferry to Gilligan's Island – is also accessible by Hwy 333, to the south of Guánica. Parking is free.

### Hiking

Guánica's lengthy system of hypnotic trails offers 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. Hikers should wear protective clothing against insects, thorns and the poisonous *chicharron* shrub with its reddish spiny leaves. Trails open and close seasonally to protect the wildlife and minimize human impact so it's hard to plan specifics about your hike until you get there. Parking is free.

The **Camino Ballena** 1-mile trail starts from the dusty parking lot of the ranger station, descending on a partially paved old road through some gnarled and wild scenery and eventually ending at a beautiful stretch of beach. As you leave the forest office, you'll pass a mahogany plantation and deciduous forest, passing chalky limestone scrub and cacti. A small side trail at the 1km marker will send you to the cool ravine where the 700-year old 'Centenario' Guayaacán tree lives, before you continue on an easy downhill hike past agave and twisted gumbo limbo trees and eastward along Rte 333 toward Camino Cueva. After relaxing on the shore, the most challenging part of the hike is the return.

A 2-mile circular hike, the **Camino Julio Velez/Camino Los Granados** trail leaves from the ranger station and follows a broad, well-marked path through several areas inhabited by big birds, with a short detour to La Vigía, a fabulous lookout. It takes about one hour at a leisurely pace.

Ending at an observation tower built by conservationists, **Fuerte Caprón** doesn't go through the most eye-catching vegetation, but it's an easy, meandering 2.5-mile walk with changes in gradation to get your

heart pumping. It takes about 60 minutes to get to the tower, then the trail continues for another 30 minutes before coming to a dead end.

### Activities

Route 333 encounters several decent options for swimming before ending at the best one, Bahía de la Ballena. It twists and turns right along the coast, but keep your eyes peeled for unmarked dirt paths along the way where you can fight your way through mangroves to find sparsely populated waters.

**Playa Caña Gorda** (Stout Cane Beach; ☎ 787-821-6006; Hwy 333 Km 6.2; parking \$2) is the balneario adjacent to the southern edge of the dry forest on Hwy 333 and where the locals come to grill fresh fish, play volleyball and lie around in the shade. The modern facilities are the most developed in the area, including a small shop with cold soda and sunblock.

**Gilligan's Island** and **Isla Ballena** (Whale Island) are small mangrove islands off the tip of the Caña Gorda peninsula and technically part of the dry forest reserve. Neither are too sandy, but both offer good sunbathing and passable snorkeling. The ambitious can reach these via kayak (rentals are available at Playa Caña Gorda and the Copamarina Resort) or you can catch a small **ferry** (adult/child \$4/2; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) in front of Restaurante San Jacinto every hour, barring bad weather. To get to the less-visited Ballena, you'll probably have to pony up an additional \$2.

At the very end of Rte 333 is the most secluded beach, a long crescent of mixed rocky and sandy shore bordering **Bahía de la Ballena**. The road ends at the east end of the bay, and you can park anywhere along the road to picnic and sunbathe (you can also pick up the Vereda Meseta trail here).

There's also **Playa Santa**, west of Bahía de Guánica at the very end of Hwy 325. Here you can listen to a symphonic duet of jet-ski motors and reggaeton, courtesy of the Ancala Flotante, a half-built bar at the end of the road that keeps its jukebox cranked. **Pino's Boat & Water Fun** (☎ 787-821-6864) rents kayaks and paddle boats for about \$15 an hour. You can also arrange boat tours and banana-boat thrill rides.

Part of the Copamarina resort, **Dive Copamarina** (☎ 787-821-0505, ext 729) has one- and two-tank wall dives about 30 minutes away for \$75; it's \$25 extra to rent equipment.

Weather conditions often prevent afternoon dives. It also rents snorkeling gear (\$15) and small boats.

### Sleeping

A community of vacation houses and guesthouses called San Jacinto dominates the highlands of the small Caña Gorda peninsula. If you're looking for a cheap option, drive up there and poke around, many of the houses rent out space.

**Mary Lee's by the Sea** (☎ 787-821-3600; www.maryleesbythesea.com; 25 San Jacinto; studios from \$120, apt \$250) This guesthouse run by US expat Mary Lee Alvarez is one of the best on the island, set on a steep hillside overlooking the mangrove cays. Each well-designed apartment feels like its own villa, with decks, hammocks, barbecue and sea views. One even has a bathroom that opens into a private garden shower. You can rent boats and kayaks from the dock. Be forewarned – she does not take credit cards.

**Copamarina Beach Resort** (☎ 800-468-4553; www.copamarina.com; Hwy 333 Km 6.5; r \$165-400, villas \$859; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This full-service resort is the most upscale vacation retreat on the southwest coast of Puerto Rico, just east of the balneario on a shallow bay. Relatively pricey but worth it, the immaculate grounds include a pair of beautiful pools, tennis courts, and two upscale restaurants. There's even an on-site dive shop and a 24-hour service desk. Most of the plush, elegantly outfitted rooms open to ocean breezes and swaying palms, making it idyllic for honeymooners, who drag beach chairs into the shallow waters under the shade of the palm trees. The only drawback is the resort's isolation but, for those who enjoy peace and quiet, it can also be its greatest attribute.

### Eating & Drinking

**Cafeteria El Aleman** (106 Ochoa; dishes \$1-8; ☎ lunch & dinner) If you're of the mindset that you're not truly vacationing in the Caribbean until you're sipping a high-octane rum drink out of a coconut, this tiny roadside cafeteria is the answer to your prayers. Patrons park themselves on stools at the shoulder of the road, choose their coconut (and their poison – the house recommends Cutty Shark) and order thick, homemade sandwiches and sundry *comida criollas*.

**Restaurante San Jacinto** (☎ 787-821-4941; San Jacinto Km 0.5; dishes \$2-20; ☎ lunch & dinner) At the

Gilligan's Island ferry landing, this beach bar and eatery has sandwiches, seafood and chicken, as well as outdoor tables and bench seating. It gets mobbed on weekends with day-trippers going or returning from the ferry. Order cheap to-go options outside for lunch, or head to the nautical interior for a more expensive dinner.

**Blue Marlin Restaurant** (☎ 787-821-5858; 59 Av Esperanza ldrach; mains \$8-13; ☎ dinner) Rather than breaking the bank on the fancy place at the Copamarina, try this family-run restaurant on the *malecón*. Locals consider it the best, with a large outdoor deck and economic seaside drinking (\$1.50 Medalla beers). If you ask for the freshest catch, your waiter will most likely bring you something that was in the water only a few hours earlier.

### Getting There & Away

Público vans stop on the plaza in Guánica, a few blocks west of the shore. Getting to or from Ponce or Mayagüez costs about \$7. During the summer and on sunny weekends you may be able to catch vans to the beach at Caña Gorda and Playa Santa or the ferry dock to Gilligan's Island, but don't count on it.

If you're driving to Guánica, follow Hwy 116 south from the Hwy 2 expressway.

### LA PARGUERA

La Parguera is a lazy, lovable seaside town, a somewhat disorderly magnet for vacationing Puerto Ricans and US expats who seem to spend most of the morning in bed, most of the day on the water, and most of the weekend half in the bag. During the day, the streets clear out as fishermen and divers head out to navigate the maze of mangrove canals through to open water, to land snapper and shark or dive the 40-ft wall 5 miles off shore.

When the sun goes down on the weekends and during the long summer months between Easter and September, La Parguera parties hard despite its diminutive population. The bars' jukeboxes blast salsa and reggaeton, and the streets fill with students and travelers, who traverse the crooked, disorderly sidewalks with a wobble in their step.

At the busy waterfront, boats shuttle tourists to the amazing, glowing waters of the town's big draw – Bahía de Fosforescente – simultaneously diminishing its glow with the pollution from their motors.

The ramshackle mix of new and old buildings has a chaotic charm, from the occasional house on stilts over the water to less quaint vacation condo developments that have sprouted on upland fields beneath a tall, steep hill.

### Orientation & Information

Even though many of the streets don't have signs, it doesn't take long to get acquainted with La Parguera; Rte 304, which brings you into town, takes a sharp bend at the water to become the main drag. It's lined with dive and surf shops, trinket galleries, bars and cafeterias.

The **El Muelle Shopping Center** (Ave los Pescadores, one block off Rte 304) has a book exchange, a well-stocked, brightly lit grocery store, and a contract post office.

### Sights

#### BAHÍA DE FOSFORESCENTE

These glittering waters are La Parguera's biggest tourist draw, though it's actually not one bay but two: Bahía Monsio José and Bahía La Parguera. Both lie east of town and are nearly encircled by mangroves. You reach them via narrow canals through the mangrove forest and, if you come here at night, bioluminescent micro-organisms in the water put on a surreal light show (see p67).

But the light show at La Parguera, while the most famous, can no longer claim to be the best – you have to go to Vieques for that; see p171. Pollution from illegal building, boating and sewage has diluted the concentration of the little lights. Nevertheless, the \$7 you pay **Cancel Boats** (☎ 787-899-5891) at the town docks, for a ride to the Bahía de Fosforescente aboard the *Fondo Cristal II* (Glass Bottom II) is the least expensive way to witness this phenomenon in Puerto Rico. If you want to be ecologically minded, however, eschew this bahía for a place where nonpolluting kayaks or electric boats are used – and tell motorized-boat operators why you're saying no.

#### ISLAS MATA LA GATA & CARACOLES

These two mangrove keys lie less than a half mile offshore. The sandy strands on the seaside are really the only places in La Parguera to spend a traditional day at the beach, and both are overused and the sand is not spectacular. You can come here in your own rental boat or kayak, but the boat operators at the town docks will also take you for a \$7 round-trip.

**ISLA DE MAGUEYES & ISLA DE MONOS**

Magueyes Island lies about 200yd south of the boat docks and is used as a marine science station for the Universidad de Puerto Rico. The island was formerly a zoo, though now it's overrun by some frighteningly large iguanas, many of which were originally brought from Cuba. They occasionally make their way to the mainland. Monkeys held for research on Isla de Monos (Monkey Island), about a mile to the west, have also escaped and are breeding ashore – pests to local farmers, but amusement for children and local wags.

**Activities****DIVING & SNORKELING**

It's possible to travel offshore to Cayo Enrique or Cayo Laurel with **Paradise Scuba Center** (☎ 787-899-7611; paradisescubapuertorico@hotmail.com). A four-hour snorkeling excursion costs \$35, and the fee includes drinks and snacks, homemade by the wife of owner Luis. For \$50, you can take a sunset snorkeling trip that includes swimming after dark in the bioluminescent waters of Bahía de Fosforescente. Many scuba fanatics use this operator to dive places like the Wall and Trench Alley. A two-tank dive at the Wall is \$80; a night dive runs at \$50. Travelers can rent snorkeling gear for \$12 per day.

More recently, **West Divers** (☎ 787-899-3223; Rte 304 next to police station) has beefed up their operation in the area. They offer three-hour snorkeling trips (\$35) and two-tank trips to

the Wall (\$80). If you're in a party smaller than three call ahead to inquire about joining with another group.

**WINDSURFING**

La Parguera's sheltered waters and reliable breezes make it a prime destination during the peak of the windsurfing season. See Eddie 'Gordo' Rodriguez at **Ventolera** (☎ 787-808-0396), a water-sports shop in the Muelle plaza.

**BOATING**

Travelers have a number of vendors to choose from in this town. **Cancel Boats** (☎ 787-899-5891; boats per hr \$15), at the town docks, has a lot of loyal customers renting its 15ft whaler-type boats with 10HP engines. Competitor **Torres Boat Service** nearby has similar prices.

Across the street from the El Muelle shopping center is **Aleli Kayak Rental** (☎ 787-899-6086; 1/2-person kayaks per hr \$10/15, half-day \$30/40, full day \$50/60), which is the most ecologically responsible way to see the magical waters. It also offers a chartered catamaran tour (\$700 per day) and ecotours through the mangrove channels. For any rentals, call ahead, as opening hours are variable.

**FISHING**

You can fish the reefs for grouper, snapper and mackerel, or head into deeper water for blue marlin, tuna and dorado. **Parguera Fishing Charters** (☎ 787-382-4698) runs half- and full-day trips (from \$175) on its 31ft Bertram out of a well-marked dock at the west end of town.

**THE WALL**

Although landlubbers can have plenty of fun in Parguera, divers know the real draw – the underwater treasure hidden 6 miles offshore.

The Wall (advanced dive, 50ft to 125ft) features a 'swim through' at the base of an immense reef that has a sheer 60ft drop. Plenty of good diving takes place above that mark, but the real treat is wiggling in and out of the 'swim through' hole and checking out the impressive reef structure at 80ft and below. Divers have reported seeing manatees, dolphins, manta rays and much, much more.

Here are some other diving highlights near La Parguera:

**The Motor** (novice, 55ft to 75ft) An unclaimed airplane motor adds mystery to a reef.

**Barracuda City** (novice, 60ft to 70ft) You'll get the hairy eyeball from big silver predators.

**Super Bowl** (intermediate, 55ft to 75ft) Swim-throughs and overhangs.

**The Chimney** (intermediate, 55ft to 75ft) A north-facing ledge honeycombed with holes.

**Black Wall** (intermediate, 60ft to 130ft) A smaller version of the big coral wall.

**Two For You** (advanced, 55ft to 120ft) This reef looks like an underwater flower shop.

**Fallen Rock** (advanced, 65ft to 120ft) A magnet for abundant coral and bright blue fish – you can even get a little 'nitrogen narcosis' intoxication if you go real deep.

**Festivals & Events**

La Parguera takes its name from the abundant pargo fish and in the middle of June hosts the **Fiesta de San Pedro** to honor the patron saint of fishermen. The party closes the main street where there's live music, food kiosks, children's activities and vendors who pour untold gallons of Medalla.

**Sleeping**

There are plenty of sleeping options within walking distance of La Parguera, so unless it is the peak of the summer season or during the annual San Pedro festival, it won't be hard to find a clean, comfortable place to sleep for well under \$100. There are guesthouses and a pair of larger, slightly more polished hotels all within walking distance of the dock.

**Glady's Guest House** (☎ 787-899-4678; 42 Calle 2; r \$60-74 (P) ☎) This great guesthouse option sits across the street from Lucerna's bakery. The tidy grounds are a few steps from the center of the action, but just far enough away to allow a good night's sleep.

**our pick** **La Parguera Guest House** (☎ 787-899-3993; www.pargueraguesthouse.com; Rte 304 Km 4; r \$65 (P) ☎) This cheerfully painted guesthouse might be the best deal in town, right on the strip with 18 clean, small rooms all with a small refrigerator and cable. There are also two apartments; one sleeps six and goes for \$120, another sleeps eight and can be had for around \$150. During peak season prices go up a little.

**Nautilus Hotel** (☎ 787-899-4004; nautilus@caribe.net; 238 Rte 304; r Mon-Fri \$65, Sat & Sun \$80-90; ☎) This hotel sits behind its own small parking lot and faces a mangrove lagoon, just east of the center of town. The Nautilus is a well-appointed modern place with 18 rooms, a pool and Jacuzzi.

**Parador Villa del Mar Hotel** (☎ 787-899-4265; www.picolada.net/villadelmar; 3 Av Albizu Campos; r \$80-90; ☎) This place is outside of town at the top of a hill with a view of the Bahía de Fosforescente. There 25 rooms here feature the usual modern conveniences, and there's also a swimming pool.

**Parador Villa Parguera** (☎ 787-899-7777; www.villa.parguera.net; Hwy 304 Km 3.6; r \$107-187; ☎) On the main street across from the church, this two-story hotel with 63 units is a long-time favorite of travelers, and the closest to luxury that you're going to find in town. There is a gourmet restaurant and nightclub on-site.

**Eating**

It's easy to follow your nose here; there are plenty of bars and food kiosks at the waterfront by the docks. All of the fancy paradores have at least one high-end restaurant on-site offering creative takes on *comida criolla* and traditional seafood dishes.

**Doña Luisa** (Rte 304, near La Parguera Guest House; empanadas \$1-2; ☎ lunch until late) The best place for cheap empanadas in town, nothing costs over two bucks. In terms of atmosphere, this beat-up cafeteria doesn't have much polish, but it more than makes up for it in character. The empanadas with *pulpo* (octopus) are the best.

**La Lucerna Bakery** (☎ 787-899-9637; Hwy 304 Km 3; dishes \$1.50-5; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is Carlos José Ramos' gem, with a friendly staff, careful cooking and low prices. Pancakes cost under \$2. The bakery's sandwiches, such as a *medianoche* (midnight) run less than \$3.

**El Manglar** (☎ 787-899-4742; next to El Muelle Shopping Center; mains \$6-18; ☎ 9:30am-midnight) International with a Middle-Eastern flair, the menu has hummus and babaganooosh, salads, burgers, pizza and Puerto Rican food, all served in a relaxed atmosphere. It transforms from one of the city's best restaurants to one of its most festive nightspots, featuring a live combo of some sort, playing Latin rock or jazz, folk or occasionally traditional music on a breezy outdoor patio.

**our pick** **Aguzal Tamara Zoe** (☎ 787-899-8014; Rte 304 near Hotel Nautilus; mains \$10-22; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, lunch Sun) The focus on fresh local, organic ingredients and a menu of homemade raviolis, *churrasco* (grilled meat) and creole fish dishes with a haute presentation leaves Zoe with few peers. Finish with a plate of fresh local cheese and it's the best fine dining in La Parguera.

**Entertainment**

Nightlife in La Parguera is an outdoor affair: people drink, eat and stroll from one end of the waterfront road to the other.

**Mar y Tierra** (☎ 787-899-4627; Rte 304; ☎ 4pm-midnight, later on weekends) This stands out among the cluster of places packed together between the main street and the docks. It is more of a pavilion with indoor and patio seating than a traditional bar, and it pumps out live Latin rock and salsa on the weekends. Right in the center of town, it's impossible to miss.

**El Karacol** (Rte 304, at the docks; ☎ 4pm-midnight, later on weekends) This brightly lit bar/diner has the ambience of a fluorescent-lit fast-food

chain, making a bizarre partner to the dark and noisy adjoining game room. The ‘sangria coño’ is their famous drink, which tastes like rum-spiked wine.

**Parador Villa Parguera** (☎ 787-899-7777; Hwy 304 Km 3.6; admission from \$20) The Parador Villa Parguera (p207) draws an older crowd, including many couples. There’s always dancing and a show on Saturday night, which usually features performances by well-known island singers and comedians.

### Getting There & Away

Públicos come and go irregularly from a stop near the small waterfront park and boat piers in the center of the village. Service is basically local and travels to nearby towns such as Lajas (\$1), where you can move on to bigger and better van stands in bigger and better municipalities.

The fastest way here is on Hwy 116, off Hwy 2, from Guánica or San Germán. Follow the signs for the last couple of miles on Hwy 304.