

The Best of Puerto Rico

It's only the size of Connecticut, but Puerto Rico pulsates with more life than any other island in the Caribbean. Whether it's the beat of *bomba y plena*, salsa, or reggaeton, there's a party going on here 24/7.

The 4 million people who live here have perfected the art of having fun on their dazzling island, and visitors are free to join right in. Puerto Ricans love their island and take pride in showing off its charms, which makes them among the world's great hosts. Especially on weekends, there seems to be something going on just about everywhere—whether it's an art fair in Old San Juan, a pig roast in the rural mountain area outside town, or a volleyball competition or free concert on the beach in Isla Verde. More so than on any other island, visitors are more likely to rub elbows with locals in Puerto Rico because so many of them are out enjoying themselves. For island hotels and restaurants, local residents are an important and loyal part of their clientele.

There's a reason that Puerto Rico has blossomed as a tourist destination ever since Fidel Castro scared the gringos out of Havana in the early 1960s. The island is blessed with towering mountains, rainforests, white sandy beaches along Caribbean shores, and a vibrant culture forged from a mix of Caribbean, Hispanic, African, and U.S. influences. History buffs will get more ancient buildings and monuments here than anywhere else in the Caribbean, many of them dating back some 500 years to the Spanish conquistadors. Add some of the best golf and tennis in the West Indies, posh beach resorts, tranquil and offbeat (though not luxurious) government paradors (country inns or guesthouses), and lots of Las Vegas-type gambling, glitter, and extravagant shows, and you've got a formidable attraction.

Good service, notoriously lacking in Puerto Rico for so many years, is actually on the rise. Gruff (or sometimes simply completely lacking) service has not been entirely eradicated, but frankly we find the majority of hotel and restaurant employees we encounter absolutely delightful these days.

Some visitors might be put off by the fact that Puerto Rico is one crowded island. Although there are country and coastal retreats where you can escape the masses, parts of San Juan are simply overcrowded, making for clogged roadways.

Tourists are generally safe, and a crime in a tourist district is rare. But homeless drug addicts and mentally ill beggars are a common sight in San Juan. There are also unfortunate problems with littering and treatment of animals—but great strides in these areas are being made. Most of Puerto Rico's crime and social problems remain largely invisible to tourists.

A clue to the Puerto Rican soul is reflected in the national anthem, "La Borinqueña." Forget the *machismo* of most national anthems, which sing of military muscle and battlefield triumphs. "La Borinqueña" evokes a gentle, maternal image of the island. It sings of "a flowering garden of exquisite magic . . . the daughter of the sea and the sun." Get to know this garden and the people who call it home.

1 The Best Beaches

White sandy beaches put Puerto Rico and its offshore islands on tourist maps in the first place. Many other Caribbean destinations have only jagged coral outcroppings or black volcanic-sand beaches that get very hot in the noonday sun. The best beaches are labeled on the “Puerto Rico” map on p. 80.

- **Best for Singles (Straight & Gay):**

Sandwiched between the Condado and Isla Verde along San Juan’s coast, **Ocean Park** beach attracts more adults and less of the family trade. The wide beach, lined with palm and sea grape trees, fronts a residential neighborhood of beautiful homes, free of the high-rise condos that line other San Juan beaches. A favorite for swimming, paddle tennis, and kite surfing, the beach is also a favorite spot for young and beautiful *santjuaneros* to congregate, especially on weekends. Knowledgeable tourists also seek out Ocean Park, which has several guesthouses catering to young urban professionals from the East Coast, both gay and straight. So there is something of a South Beach–Río vibe here, with more than a fair share of well-stuffed bikinis and other beach outfits, but decidedly more low-key and Caribbean. It’s a good spot for tourists and locals to mix. There are a few beachfront bar-restaurants housed in the guesthouses, good for a snack or lunch or cold drink. See “Diving, Fishing, Tennis & Other Outdoor Pursuits,” in chapter 8.

- **Best Beach for Families: Luquillo Beach**, 30 miles (48km) east of San Juan, attracts both local families, mainly from San Juan, and visitors from Condado and Isla Verde beaches in San Juan. Beach buffs heading for Luquillo know they will

get better sands and clearer waters there than in San Juan. The vast sandy beach opens onto a crescent-shaped bay edged by a coconut grove. Coral reefs protect the crystal-clear lagoon from the often rough Atlantic waters that can buffet the northern coast, making Luquillo a good place for young children to swim. Much photographed because of its white sands, Luquillo also has tent sites and other facilities, including picnic areas with changing rooms, lockers, and showers. See “Luquillo Beach” in chapter 9.

- **Best for Swimming: Pine Grove Beach**, which stretches between the Ritz-Carlton and the Marriott Courtyard at the end of Isla Verde near the airport, is a crescent, white-sand beach, whose tranquil, rich blue waters are protected by an offshore reef from the often rough Atlantic current. By the Ritz-Carlton and the Casa Cuba social club to the west, the water is completely sheltered, and a long sandbar means shallow water stretches way off shore. There’s more of a surf to the east, which is a popular spot for surfing, boogie boarding, and body surfing. The waves are well formed but never too big, which makes it a perfect spot to learn to surf. Local surfers give lessons and rent boards from this beach, which is also a favorite for small sail boats and catamarans. There are no public facilities here, but it’s a short walk to restaurants in the Isla Verde district. Both hotels on the beach have restaurants, bars and restroom facilities. The beach also connects to the **Carolina Public Beach**, which has lockers, outdoor showers and restrooms, and is immediately adjacent to the east. If you are driving here, parking

at the public beach may be your best bet. It's right off Route 187 on the road to Piñones. Otherwise, enter the beach near the Ritz-Carlton or Marriott Courtyard hotel. Outside San Juan, the best beaches for swimming are probably Guánica's **Playa Santa** and **Caña Gorda** beaches in southwest Puerto Rico. The water is extremely warm and absolutely calm year round, and both spots boast wide, white-sand beaches with vistas of nothing but Caribbean Sea and hilly coastline.

- **Best for Scenery:** In the southwestern corner of Puerto Rico, **Boquerón Beach** and its neighboring area brings to mind a tropical Cape Cod. The beach town of Boquerón itself, filled with colorful scenery, stands along the coast just beside the beach running along a 3-mile (4.8km) bay, with palm-fringed white sand curving away on both sides. The water is always tranquil, making it perfect for families and swimming. There's fine snorkeling, sailing and fishing as well. The beach here is also one of the Puerto Rico's state-run public beaches, with lifeguards, lockers, bathrooms, showers, a cafeteria and sundries shop, and picnic tables and barbecue pits. The village is a ramshackle collection of open-air establishments along the coast selling seafood and drinks. Fresh oysters are shucked on the spot and doused with Tabasco. Try the fried fritters filled with freshly caught fish or Caribbean lobster. There are plenty of interesting photo ops at this beach and its adjacent town. See "The Southwest Coast" in chapter 10.
- **Best for Surfing:** The winter surf along Puerto Rico's northwest coast is the best in the region. Generally regarded as one of the best surf spots across the globe, it draws surfers from

around the world. **Rincón** is the center of the island surf scene, but it extends to neighboring **Isabela** and **Aguadilla**. Dubbed the "Caribbean Pipeline," winter waves here can approach 20 feet (6.1m) in height, equaling the force of the surf on Oahu's north shore. Rincón became a renowned surfing destination when it hosted the 1968 world surfing championships. Famed surfing beaches in town include **Puntas, Domes, Tres Palmas,** and **Steps**. In Aguadilla, surfers head to **Gas Chambers, Crash Boat,** or **Wilderness**, while in **Isabela** preferred spots include **Jobos** and **Middles**. The best time to surf is from November through April, but summer storms can also kick up the surf. In the summer season, however, when the waves diminish, these northwest beaches double as perfect spots for windsurfing and snorkeling, with calm waters filled with coral reefs and marine life. See "Rincón" in chapter 11.

- **Best for Windsurfing:** Puerto Rico is filled with places for windsurfing and, increasingly, kite surfing. San Juan itself is a windsurfer's haven, and you'll see them off the coast from **Pine Grove** beach near the airport all the way west to where **Ocean Park** runs into **Condado** at **Parque del Indio**. **Punta Las Marias**, in between Ocean Park and **Isla Verde**, is a center of activity. The **Condado Lagoon**, just behind the oceanfront strip of hotels, is also popular for windsurfing. (It's increasingly popular with kayakers too.) The northwest, from **Rincón** to **Isabela**, is another center for windsurfing, with strong winds throughout the year.
- **Best Beaches for Being Alone:** Puerto Rico is filled with isolated sandy coves and virgin white beaches accessible only by dirt roads that only

the locals seem to know about. The best, all guaranteed to delight the escapist in you, stretch between Cabo Rojo (the southwesterly tip of Puerto Rico) all the way east to Ponce. **Guánica** has several, including **Las Paldas** and **La Jungla**, which are empty except during holiday weekends. In Fajardo, a 2-mile (3.2km) hike from the **Seven Seas Public Beach** will reward you with the breathtaking **El Convento Beach**, along the miles-long undeveloped coastline stretching between Fajardo and Luquillo. Besides the governor's official beach house, a rustic wooden cottage, there is nothing but white-sand beach and pristine aquamarine waters. The area is a nesting site for endangered sea turtles, and there is excellent snorkeling just offshore, where the water is rife with unspoiled coral reefs and marine life. Environmentalists hope to turn the area into a nature reserve, but two hotel projects are also planned for the area. The government has indicated it wants to develop small-scale, low impact tourism for the area. **Vieques** and **Culebra**, the **Spanish Virgin Islands**, also have their fair share of uncrowded, out of the way beaches. Because access to many of these is limited

because of poor roads, it is necessary to bring supplies, including fresh drinking water. See the box, "Puerto Rico's Secret Beaches," in chapter 10.

- **Best for Snorkeling:** On the main island, the best spot for snorkeling is probably Fajardo's **El Convento Beach** (mentioned above). The southwest, from **Guánica** through **Boquerón**, also has excellent snorkeling with plenty of reefs and marine life right offshore. In the summer, once the big surf quiets down, several beaches in the northwest, from **Rincón** to **Isabela**, also boast good snorkeling. **Steps** is one of our favorite spots. The islands of **Vieques** and **Culebra** also have great snorkeling. On Vieques, try **Media Luna**, **Navio**, **Red**, and **Blue** beaches on the eastern side, and in the west, **Green Beach**.
- Culebra's most popular beach, **Flamenco** is picture perfect and has very good snorkeling, but a 20-minute hike from its parking leads to the **Playa Tamarindo** and **Playa Carlos Rosario**, beaches enveloped by a barrier reef. A quarter mile (.4km) to the south is a place called "**The Wall**," which has 40-foot (12m) drop-offs, rainbow-hued fish, and other delights.

2 The Best Hotel Beaches

- **El San Juan Hotel & Casino** (San Juan; ☎ 787/791-1000): This posh resort occupies the choicest beachfront real estate in San Juan at the heart of Isla Verde, a fat golden beach lined by luxury hotels and condominiums on one side and aquamarine waters on the other, evoking South Miami. The lush, multi-level pool area and outdoor restaurants form an oasis of cool right off the beach, which pulsates with beautiful crowds

and activity every day of the week. You can do it all, from parasailing to taking a catamaran trip, but sunbathing and splashing in the surf are the main attractions here. The hotel has a full array of watersports and other activities and is home to some of the city's best restaurants and nightclubs. See p. 124.

- **Copamarina Beach Resort** (Caña Gorda; ☎ 787/821-0505) lies west of Ponce, Puerto Rico's second-largest

city, in the coastal town of Guánica. A laid-back retreat, the resort is located off a breathtaking country road that winds over a mountainside and back down toward the mangrove-lined coast. It sits on one of the prettiest and least crowded beaches in southwestern Puerto Rico, beside the Guánica Dry Forest nature reserve and bird sanctuary. See p. 231.

- **The Ritz-Carlton San Juan Spa & Casino** (Isla Verde; ☎ 787/

253-1700): This elegant sandstone and azure blue resort blends effortlessly into its setting on one of San Juan's most pristine beaches at the secluded eastern end of Isla Verde. Majestic stone-lion fountains and towering rows of royal palm trees run through its pool area. A large gate opens to the white-sand beach, whose tranquil aquamarine waters are sheltered by a large coral reef offshore. See p. 126.

3 The Best Scuba Diving

With the continental shelf surrounding it on three sides, Puerto Rico has an abundance of coral reefs, caves, sea walls, and trenches for divers of all experience levels to explore. See "The Active Vacation Planner" in chapter 3.

- **Metropolitan San Juan:** This easy beach dive off the Condado district in San Juan is not as spectacular as other dives mentioned here, but it's certainly more convenient. Lava reefs sculptured with caverns, tunnels, and overhangs provide hiding areas for schools of snapper, grunts, and copper sweepers. In the active breeding grounds of the inner and outer reefs, divers of all levels can mingle with an impressive array of small tropical fish—French angels, jacks, bluehead wrasse, butterfly fish, sergeant majors, and more—along with sea horses, arrow crabs, coral shrimp, octopuses, batfish, and flying gunards. Visibility is about 10 to 20 feet (3–6m). The Condado reef is also ideal for resort courses, certification courses, and night dives. See "Diving, Fishing, Tennis & Other Outdoor Pursuits" in chapter 8.
- **Mona Island:** Mona Island, 40 miles (64km) west of the city of Mayagüez in western Puerto Rico, is the Caribbean version of the Galápagos

Islands. Renowned for its pirate tales, cave-pocked cliffs, 3-foot-long (.9m) iguanas, and other natural wonders, its waters are among the cleanest in Puerto Rico, with horizontal visibility at times exceeding 200 feet (61m). More than 270 species of fish have been found in Mona waters, including more than 60 reef-dwelling species. Larger marine animals, such as sea turtles, whales, dolphins, and marlins, visit the region during migrations. Various types of coral reefs, underwater caverns, drop-offs, and deep vertical walls ring the island. The most accessible reef dives are along the southern and western shores. There are a number of outfits operating trips from the west coast of Puerto Rico. The boat ride now takes about three hours through the often rough Mona Passage. See the box, "Mona Island: The Galápagos of Puerto Rico," in chapter 11.

- **Southern Puerto Rico:** The continental shelf drops off precipitously several miles off the southern coast, producing a dramatic wall 20 miles (32km) long and teeming with marine life. Compared favorably to the wall in the Cayman Islands, this Puerto Rican version has become the Caribbean's newest world-class dive

destination. Paralleling the coast from the seaside village of La Parguera to the city of Ponce, the wall descends in slopes and sheer drops from 60 to 120 feet (18–37m) before disappearing into 1,500 feet (457m) of sea. Scored with valleys and deep trenches, it is cloaked in immense gardens of staghorn and elkhorn coral, deep-water gorgonians, and other exquisite coral formations. Visibility can exceed 100 feet (30m). There are more than 50 dive sites around Parguera alone. See “The Southwest Coast” in chapter 10.

- **Fajardo:** This coastal town in eastern Puerto Rico offers divers the opportunity to explore reefs, caverns, mini-walls, and channels near a string of palm-tufted islets. The reefs are decked in an array of corals ranging from delicate gorgonians to immense coral heads. Visibility usually exceeds 50 feet (15m). Divers can hand-feed many of the reef fish that inhabit the corals. Sand channels and a unique double-barrier reef surround Palomino Island, where bandtailed puffers

and parrotfish harems are frequently sighted. Cayo Diablo, farther to the east, provides a treasure box of corals and marine animals, from green moray eels and barracudas to octopuses and occasional manatees. See “Fajardo” in chapter 12.

- **Humacao Region:** South of Fajardo are some 24 dive sites in a 5-mile (8km) radius off the shore. Overhangs, caves, and tunnels perch in 60 feet (18m) of water along mile-long (1.6km) Basslet Reef, where dolphins visit in spring. The Cracks, a jigsaw of caves, alleyways, and boulders, hosts an abundance of goby-cleaning stations and a number of lobsters. With visibility often exceeding 100 feet (30m), the Reserve offers a clear look at corals. At the Drift, divers float along with nurse sharks and angelfish into a valley of swim-throughs and ledges. For the experienced diver, Red Hog is the newest site in the area, with a panoramic wall that drops from 80 to 1,160 feet (24–354m). See “Palmas del Mar” in chapter 12.

4 The Best Snorkeling

Puerto Rico offers top-notch snorkeling even though freshwater run-offs from tropical outbursts feeding into the sea can momentarily cloud the ocean's waters. In most places, when conditions are right, visibility extends from 50 to 75 feet (15–23m).

One of the best ways to experience this wonderful sport, even if you are staying in San Juan, is to take one of the day trips on one of the several luxury catamarans plying the waters off the coast of Fajardo, which make for some of the finest snorkeling in the Caribbean. They usually anchor on beach of a small cay for lunch and some sunbathing and swimming. Transportation from San Juan area hotels

is often provided. It's worth the trip even if you don't want to snorkel. There are a number of reputable operators (see “Watersports” in chapter 12).

- **Mona Island:** This remote island off the west coast of Puerto Rico (see “The Best Scuba Diving,” above) also offers the best snorkeling possibilities. The reefs here, the most pristine in Puerto Rico, are home to a wide variety of rainbow-hued fish, turtles, octopuses, moray eels, rays, puffers, and clownfish: the single largest concentration of reef fish life in Puerto Rico. You must bring your snorkeling equipment to the island, however, as there are no rentals available once you

are here. See the box, “Mona Island: The Galápagos of Puerto Rico,” in chapter 11.

- **Caja de Muertos:** The best snorkeling off the coast of Ponce is on the uninhabited coast island of Caja de Muertos (“Coffin Island”). This island got its name from an 18th-century French writer who noted that the island’s shape resembled a cadaver in a coffin. Over the years there have been fanciful legends about the island, including tales of necrophilia, star-crossed lovers, and, of course, piracy. Several outfits will take you to this remote spot for a full day’s outing, with plenty of snorkeling. See “Ponce” in chapter 10.
- **La Paguera:** The reefs surrounding the offshore cays just off La Paguera in southwest Puerto Rico are another fine spot for snorkeling. Several boat

operators right in town will either rent you a boat with a guide or drop you off on one of the islands and return at a pre-arranged time. See chapter 10.

- **Fajardo:** On the eastern coast of Puerto Rico, the clear waters along the beachfront are the best on mainland Puerto Rico for snorkeling. The best beaches here for snorkeling are walking distance from the Seven Seas public beach: **Playa Escondido** and **Playa Convento**. The snorkeling at Las Cabezas de San Juan nature refuge is also spectacular. See “The Best Beaches,” earlier in this chapter and “Fajardo” in chapter 12.
- **Vieques & Culebra:** For a quick preview of the underwater possibilities, refer to “The Best Beaches,” earlier in this chapter. For more information, see chapter 13.

5 The Best Golf & Tennis

- **Río Mar Beach Resort & Spa: A Wyndham Grand Resort** (Río Grande; ☎ 787/888-6000): Two world-class golf courses are located here in the shadow of El Yunque rainforest along a dazzling stretch of coast. The entire 6,782 yards (6,201m) of Tom and George Fazio’s Ocean Course has seaside panoramas and breezes, and fat iguanas scampering through the lush grounds. The other course, a 6,945-yard (6,351m) design by golf pro Greg Norman, follows the flow of the Mameyes River through mountain and coastal vistas. The resort is a 30-minute drive from San Juan on the northeast coast. Wind is often a challenge here. See p. 203.
- **Dorado Beach Resort & Club** (Dorado; ☎ 787/796-8961 or 787/626-1006): With 72 holes, Dorado has the highest concentration of golf on the island. The legendary Dorado

Beach and Cerromar hotels run by Hyatt are now gone, but the four courses and other facilities—spectacular tennis courts, pools, and beaches—live on, and resort villa rentals are available. Of the courses, Dorado East is our favorite. Designed by Robert Trent Jones, Sr., it was the site of the Senior PGA Tournament of Champions throughout the 1990s. True tennis buffs head here, too. The Dorado courts are the best on the island.

- **El Conquistador Resort and Golden Door Spa** (Fajardo; ☎ 787/863-1000): This sprawling resort on Puerto Rico’s northeast corner is one of the island’s finest tennis retreats, with seven Har-Tru courts and a pro on hand to offer guidance and advice. If you don’t have a partner, the hotel will find one for you. There are also outstanding golf facilities as well. See p. 269.

- **Palmas del Mar Country Club** (Humacao; ☎ 787/285-2221): Lying on the east coast on the grounds of a former coconut plantation, the Palmas del Mar resort boasts the second-leading course in Puerto Rico—a par-72, 6,803-yard (6,221m) layout designed by Gary Player. Some crack golfers consider holes 11 through 15 the toughest five successive holes in the Caribbean. There's also an 18-hole championship-caliber course designed by Rees Jones. The Palmas del Mar Tennis Club meanwhile boasts the largest facilities in the Caribbean, and it has recently begun to host large-prize pro tournaments. See p. 272.
- **Trump International Golf Club** (Río Grande; ☎ 787/657-2000): Located on 1,200 acres (486 hectares) of glistening waterfront, this recently improved 36-hole golf course designed by Tom Kite allows you to play in the mountains, along the ocean, among the palms and in between the lakes. Its bunkers are carved from white silica sand. Real estate magnate Donald Trump announced plans in conjunction with local developer Empresas Díaz, Inc. to develop 500 luxury residences here. The first phase, announced in March 2008, consists of 56 villas, with starting prices of \$1.4 million, which have access to private jet, yacht, and limousine service. See p. 202.

6 The Best Hikes

Take a hike. Puerto Rico's mountainous interior offers ample opportunity for hiking and climbing, with many trails presenting spectacular panoramas at the least-expected moments. There are also awesome beachfront and coastal trails around the island. See "The Active Vacation Planner" in chapter 3 for detailed information.

- **El Yunque** (☎ 787/888-1880 for information): Containing the only rainforest on U.S. soil, the El Yunque National Forest east of San Juan offers a number of walking and hiking trails. The rugged El Toro trail passes through four different forest systems en route to the 3,523-foot (1,074m) Pico El Toro, the highest peak in the forest. The El Yunque trail leads to three of the recreation area's most panoramic lookouts, and the Big Tree Trail is an easy walk to gorgeous, refreshing La Mina Falls, the perfect picnic stop. Just off the main road is La Coca Falls, a sheet of water cascading down mossy cliffs. See "El Yunque" in chapter 9.
- **Guánica State Forest** (☎ 787/724-3724 for information): At the opposite extreme of El Yunque's lush and wet rainforest, Guánica State Forest's climate is dry and arid, the Arizona-like landscape riddled with cacti. The area, cut off from the Cordillera Central mountain range, gets little rainfall. Yet it's home to some 50% of all the island's terrestrial bird species, including the rare Puerto Rican nightjar, once thought to be extinct. The forest has 36 miles (58km) of trails through four forest types. The petrified vegetation, tangling down hillsides to the brilliant coast, looks in places like a giant bonsai forest. See p. 230.
- **Mona Island**: Off the western coast of Puerto Rico, this fascinating island noted for its scuba-diving sites provides hiking opportunities found nowhere else in the Caribbean. Called the "Galápagos of Puerto Rico" because of its unique wildlife, Mona is home to giant iguanas and three species of endangered sea turtles.

Some 20 endangered animals also have been spotted here. Eco-tourists like to hike among Mona's mangrove forests, coral reefs, cliffs, and complex honeycomb of caves, ever on the alert for the diversity of both plant and animal life, including 417 plant and tree species, some of which are unique and

78 of which are rare or endangered. More than 100 bird species (two unique) have been documented. Hikers can camp at Mona for a modest fee, but they will also have to hire transportation to and from the island. See the box, "Mona Island: The Galápagos of Puerto Rico," in chapter 11.

7 The Best Natural Wonders

- **El Yunque** (☎ 787/888-1880): Thirty minutes by road east of San Juan in the Luquillo Mountains and protected by the U.S. Forest Service, El Yunque is Puerto Rico's greatest natural attraction, the only tropical rainforest in the United States National Forest System. It sprawls across 28,000 acres (1,133 hectares) of the rugged Sierra de Luquillo mountain range, covering areas of Canóvanas, Las Piedras, Luquillo, Fajardo, Ceiba, Naguabo, and Río Grande. The area is named after the Indian spirit Yuquiye, which means "Forest of Clouds," who local Taínos thought protected the island from disaster in times of storms. Originally established in 1876 by the Spanish Crown, it's one of the oldest reserves in the region. There are some 240 species (26 endemic) of trees and plants found here and 50 bird species, including the rare Puerto Rican Parrot (scientific name: *Amazona vitatta*), which is one of the ten most endangered species of birds in the world. The foot-long parrot is bright green, with red forehead, blue primary wing feathers, and flesh-colored bill and feet. Some 100 billion gallons of rain fall annually on this home to four forest types. Visitors and families can walk one of the dozens of trails that wind past waterfalls, dwarf vegetation, and miniature flowers, while the island's colorful

parrots fly overhead. You can hear the song of Puerto Rico's *coquí*, a small tree frog, in many places. See "El Yunque" in chapter 9.

- **Río Camuy Caves** (☎ 787/898-3100): Some 2½ hours west of San Juan, visitors board a tram to descend into this forest-filled sinkhole at the mouth of the Clara Cave. They walk the footpaths of a 170-foot-high (52m) cave to a deeper sinkhole. Once they're inside, a 45-minute tour helps everyone, including kids, learn to differentiate stalactites from stalagmites. At the Pueblos sinkhole, a platform overlooks the Camuy River, passing through a network of cave tunnels. See "Arecibo & Camuy" in chapter 9.

- **Las Cabezas de San Juan Nature Reserve** (☎ 787/722-5882): This 316-acre (128-hectare) nature reserve about 45 minutes from San Juan encompasses seven different ecological systems, including forestland, mangroves, lagoons, beaches, cliffs, and offshore coral reefs. Reservations are necessary to enter, and the park is open five days a week (Wed–Sun). The park staff conducts tours in Spanish and English from 9am through 2pm. Each tour lasts 2½ hours and includes rides on trolleys and a walk along boardwalks through oceanfront mangrove forest. Tours end with a climb to the top of the still-working 19th-century lighthouse

for views over Puerto Rico's eastern coast and nearby Caribbean islands. Call to reserve space before going, as bookings are based on stringent restrictions as to the number of persons who can tour the park without damage to its landscape or ecology. One of the finest phosphorescent

bays in the world is located here, and local tour operators take you in a kayak or electronic boat to experience the animals' glow firsthand during nighttime tours. See the box, "To the Lighthouse: Exploring Las Cabezas de San Juan Nature Reserve," in chapter 12.

8 The Best Family Resorts

Puerto Rico has a bounty of attractions, natural wonders, and resorts that welcome families who choose to play together. Here are some of the best.

- **Caribe Hilton** (San Juan; ☎ 877/GO-Hilton, or 787/721-0303): The Kidz Paradise center has games, toys, beach items and sports stuff for children free of charge available 9am to 5pm through a lending desk. There's a full recreational program with indoor and outdoor activities and a free welcome gift for children 12 and under. There are a video arcade, bicycle rentals, gym, tennis courts and watersports rentals. The hotel's family policy grants free stays to children under 18 and one free babysitting service, free meals to children under 5, and free breakfast and discounts on other meals for children 5 to 12. See p. 144.
- **Marriott Courtyard Aguadilla** (Aguadilla; ☎ 787/658-8000): The whole family will love this hotel with pool, aquatics playground, and

spacious guest rooms. It's near some of the prettiest beaches on the island, and right around attractions like the Camuy Caves, Arecibo Observatory, local water park, and ice skating rink. Beautiful beaches ring the coast here from Isabela to the east and Rincón to the west. See p. 261.

- **El Conquistador Resort & Golden Door Spa** (Las Croabas; ☎ 800/468-5228 or 787/863-1000): Located 31 miles (50km) east of San Juan, this resort offers Camp Coquí on Palomino Island for children 3 to 12 years of age. The hotel's free water taxi takes kids to the island for a half- or full day of watersports and nature hikes. The Coquí Waterpark also adds to the family appeal. Boasting several pools (including its main 8,500 sq.-ft. main pool, several slides, a rope bridge and a winding river attraction), this resort has some of the best facilities and restaurants in eastern Puerto Rico and all of the Caribbean. See p. 269.

9 The Best Honeymoon Resorts

- **El San Juan Hotel & Casino** (Isla Verde; ☎ 787/791-1000): Newlyweds will find themselves at the heart of San Juan's vibrant nightlife scene, yet they will be ensconced in luxury along a beautiful stretch of beachfront. In fact, the hotel boasts probably the best nightlife and entertainment, as well as fine dining, of

any property in San Juan—and the competition is fierce. There's live music at the casino or adjacent nightclubs. Its elegant lobby, with wooden paneling and a sprawling, opulent chandelier, is a magnet for the young, beautiful, and moneyed visitors. Set on 12 lush acres (4.9 hectares) of prime beachfront, the rooms are as

light and airy as the setting. Honey-mooners might want to try an Ocean Front Lianas room or one of the resort's villas. See p. 124.

- **Hotel El Convento** (Old San Juan; ☎ 800/468-2779 or 787/723-9020): Newlyweds can sleep in and spend their afternoons wandering the Old City or lolling around the rooftop splash pool, with its sweeping vistas of San Juan Bay and the bluff overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. There are bougainvillea and tropical flowers hanging from seemingly every window and terrace, as well as colorful, restored Spanish colonial architecture everywhere you turn. You'll feel spoiled by your room's marble bathroom and elegant bed. Explore sq.-mile Old San Juan; it's chock-full of galleries and historic fortresses and churches, wonderful cafes and funky shops. The Romantic Memories of San Juan package will get you fresh flowers, champagne, and chocolates in your room, but all guests get a world-class wine and cheese tasting every early evening on one of the hotel's many spectacular terraces. There are also pre- and post-cruise packages. See p. 109.
- **Horned Dorset Primavera Hotel** (Rincón; ☎ 800/633-1857 or 787/823-4030): The most romantic place for a honeymoon on the island (unless you stay in a private villa somewhere), this small, tranquil estate lies on the

Mona Passage in western Puerto Rico, a pocket of posh where privacy is almost guaranteed. Accommodations are luxurious in the Spanish neocolonial style. The property opens onto a long, secluded beach of white sand. There are no phones, TVs, or radios in the rooms to interfere with the soft sounds of pillow talk. This is a retreat for adults only, with no facilities for children. Seven-night packages, with all meals included and round-trip transfers from the airport, are featured. See p. 253.

- **Inn on the Blue Horizon** (Vieques; ☎ 787/741-3318): Celebrate your honeymoon in tropical splendor at this property on an oceanfront bluff overlooking the idyllic south coast of Vieques and the neighboring village of Esperanza. Relax with the sea breeze in the sumptuous furnishings of the main building's open-air atrium, or watch the sunset at the circular Blue Moon Bar, which overlooks the striking coastline. The pool sprawls across the horizon with the beach and ocean beyond it, but the private rooms feel like home (somebody's extremely well-appointed home), with beautiful cotton linens, antique furniture, and art. Romantic packages suitable for honeymooners are available. Make sure to rent a jeep to explore secluded beaches or the hilly, forested interior of the island. See p. 282.

10 The Best Big Resort Hotels

- **Ritz-Carlton San Juan Spa & Casino** (San Juan; ☎ 800/241-3333 or 787/253-1700): At last Puerto Rico has a Ritz-Carlton, and this truly deluxe, oceanfront property is one of the island's most spectacular resorts. Guests are pampered in a setting of elegance and beautifully

furnished guest rooms. Hotel dining is second only to that at El San Juan, and a European-style spa features 11 treatments "for body and beauty." See p. 126.

- **Gran Meliá Puerto Rico Golf Resort and Villas** (Río Grande; ☎ 866/436-3542 or 787/809-1770): Twenty

two-story villas are spread across a gorgeously landscaped property hugging the northeast coast in the shadow of the mountainous rainforest, El Yunque. The facilities are first rate; the stately lobby is a traditional mix of Puerto Rican and Spanish influences, flanked by an African-inspired mediation pond out front and Asian inspired lagoons behind, where most of the resort's top-notch restaurants are located. The rooms are spacious and have great views of the lushly landscaped walkways or the broad beachfront that runs the length of the property. The two adjacent Trump golf courses are world class, and the pool and beach area offer all major watersports activities. There's a full range of children's activities and organized fun for adults as well, from yoga lessons to beach volleyball games. The resort spa has first-class facilities and a wide range of treatments. See p. 203.

- **Rio Mar Beach Resort & Spa: A Wyndham Grand Resort** (Rio Grande; ☎ 800/4RIOMAR [474-6627] or 787/888-6000): This \$180-million 481-acre (195-hectare) resort, 19 miles (31km) east of the San Juan airport, is one of the largest hotels in Puerto Rico, but personal service and

style are hallmarks of the property. Eleven restaurants and multiple lounges boast an array of cuisines. It has two championship golf courses, two pools, a beach and watersports, horseback riding, fine tennis facilities, a full range of children's activities, entertainment and nightlife activity, and anything else you might need for your perfect Caribbean getaway. The resort is blissfully situated between the El Yunque rainforest and a beautiful stretch of north coast beach. See p. 203.

- **El Conquistador Resort & Golden Door Spa** (Las Croabas; ☎ 800/468-5228 or 787/863-1000): The finest resort in Puerto Rico, this is a world-class destination—a sybaritic haven for golfers, honeymooners, families, and anyone else. Three intimate “villages” combine with one grand hotel, draped along 300-foot (91m) bluffs overlooking both the Atlantic and the Caribbean at Puerto Rico's northeastern tip. The 500 landscaped acres (202 hectares) include tennis courts, an 18-hole Arthur Hills–designed championship golf course, and a marina filled with yachts and charter boats. There's a water park and an island beach just off shore for guests. See p. 269.

11 The Best Moderately Priced Hotels

- **Gallery Inn at Galería San Juan** (San Juan; ☎ 787/722-1808): The most whimsically bohemian hotel in the Caribbean sits on a coastal bluff at the edge of the historic city. Once the home of an aristocratic Spanish family, it is today filled with verdant courtyards and adorned with sculptures, silk screens, and original paintings of artist Jan D'esopo, who along with husband Manuco Gandía owns the inn. Many of the rooms have

dramatic views of the coast, with two historic Spanish forts framing the view. Staying in one of the comfortable rooms here is like living in an art gallery. See p. 110.

- **At Wind Chimes Inn** (San Juan; ☎ 800/946-3244 or 787/727-4153): This renovated and restored Spanish manor house, a favorite with families, is one of the best guesthouses in the Condado district. The inn, which offers spacious rooms with kitchens,

lies only a short block from one of San Juan's best beaches. There's also a pool and a nice restaurant/bar catering exclusively to guests. The nearby sister property **Acacia Sea Side Inn** is another good option, and guests at the Acacia can use the Wind Chimes' pool and get access to its bar/restaurant. See p. 120.

- **Copamarina Beach Resort** (Caña Gorda; ☎ 787/821-0505): In an undeveloped coastal area of Guánica, at the edge of the Guánica Dry Forest, this resort was once the private vacation retreat of local cement barons—the de Castro family. Today it's been converted into one of the best beach hotels along Puerto Rico's southern shore. In fact, its beach is one of the best in the area. Set in a palm grove, the resort is handsomely decorated and comfortably furnished, with a swimming pool and two tennis courts. See p. 231.
- **Casa Isleña Inn** (Rincón; ☎ 787/823-1525): Located on a beautiful beach in the Puntas sector of this west-coast surf capital, this casually elegant inn is a great value of surprising quality. A contemporary Ibero-Caribbean theme runs throughout its

rooftop, beachfront and garden terraces, and inspires its colorfully painted architecture and the furnishing of its spacious, comfortable guest rooms. The only drawback is you might find it difficult to ever leave here, since it has one of the best pools in town in front of some of the nicest beach. But with a new tapas bar now open, you might not have to. The last time we visited was in the off season, in early summer, when the place was left blissfully to ourselves and a handful of other guests. See p. 254.

- **Crow's Nest** (Vieques; ☎ 787/741-0033 or 741-0993): Sixteen suites with kitchenettes and lounging/reading areas are spread out across this sprawling property in the lush Vieques countryside. The pool and its beautifully tiled terrace are surrounded by tropical plants and the green hillsides of this island paradise. The staff is extremely helpful, and the restaurant, Island Steakhouse, is top notch (with enough seafood and other non-steak fare to please everyone). Its country home setting off the beach is in fact a unique and charming part of the typical Vieques vacation experience. See p. 283.

12 The Best Attractions

- **The Historic District of Old San Juan:** There's nothing like it in the Caribbean. Partially enclosed by old walls dating from the 17th century, Old San Juan was designated a U.S. National Historic Zone in 1950. Some 400 massively restored buildings fill this district, which is chockablock with tree-shaded squares, monuments, and open-air cafes as well as shops, restaurants, and bars. If you're interested in history, there is no better stroll in the Caribbean. It continues to be a vibrant cultural center and enclave of the arts and

entertainment, as well as one of the region's culinary capitals. See "Seeing the Sights" in chapter 8.

- **Castillo de San Felipe del Morro** (Old San Juan): In Old San Juan and nicknamed El Morro, this fort was originally built in 1540. It guards the bay from a rocky promontory on the northwestern tip of the old city. Rich in history and legend, the site covers enough territory to accommodate a 9-hole golf course. See p. 158.
- **The Historic District of Ponce:** Second only to Old San Juan in terms of historical significance, the central

district of Ponce is a blend of Ponce Creole and Art Deco building styles, dating mainly from the 1890s to the 1930s. One street, Calle Isabel, offers an array of Ponceño architectural styles, which often incorporate neo-classical details. The city underwent a massive restoration preceding the celebration of its 300th anniversary in 1996. See “Ponce” in chapter 10.

- **Museo de Arte de Ponce** (Ponce): This museum has the finest collection of European and Latin American art in the Caribbean. Edward Durell Stone, the architect of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, designed the building. Contemporary works by Puerto Ricans are displayed, as well as works by an array of old masters, including Renaissance and baroque pieces from Italy. See p. 219.
- **Tropical Agriculture Research Station:** These tropical gardens contain one of the largest collections of tropical species intended for practical use. These include cacao, fruit trees, spices, timbers, and ornamentals. Adjacent to the Mayagüez campus of the University of Puerto Rico, the site attracts botanists from around the world. See “Mayagüez” in chapter 11.
- **The City of San Germán:** In the southwestern corner of Puerto Rico and founded in 1512, this small town is Puerto Rico’s second-oldest city. Thanks to a breadth of architectural styles, San Germán is also the second

Puerto Rican city (after San Juan) to be included in the National Register of Historic Places. Buildings, monuments, and plazas fill a 36-acre (15-hectare) historic zone. Today’s residents descend from the smugglers, poets, priests, and politicians who once lived here in “the city of hills,” so-called because of the mountainous location. See “San Germán” in chapter 10.

- **Iglesia Porta Coeli** (San Germán): The main attraction of this ancient town is the oldest church in the New World. It was originally built by Dominican friars in 1606. The church resembles a working chapel, although mass is held here only three times a year. Along the sides of the church are treasures gathered from all over the world. See “San Germán” in chapter 10.
- **Puerto Rico Museum of Art** (San Juan) features interesting traveling shows and a growing permanent collection emphasizing local artists in impressive surroundings—a restored 1920s classic in Santurce. There are beautiful botanical gardens outside, and a theater exhibits cutting-edge films and performances of all types. There are day workshops open to the public and children’s activities held here nearly every weekend, and the museum is home to one of the island’s top few restaurants, Pikayo, which takes Puerto Rican cuisine to artful new heights. See p. 162.

13 The Best Restaurants

- **Aquaviva** (San Juan; ☎ 787/722-0665): This ultra modern, sleekly tropical restaurant looks as cutting edge as its “seaside Latino cuisine.” Its buzzing, blue interior lightly evokes the shoreline and an aquarium all at once. Ceviche rules at the raw bar, and hot and cold seafood “towers”

group several of the inventive appetizers into a large portion for guests to share. The menu is expansive and full of wonders—grilled mahimahi with smoky shrimp salsa or seared halibut with crab and spinach fondue. The catch of the day is cooked with consummate skill. See p. 133.

- **Barú** (San Juan; ☎ 787/977-7107): Fashionable and popular, this Old World styled restaurant is actually a creative culinary showcase for fusion Caribbean–Mediterranean cuisine and a popular nightspot. Craftsmanship marks the menu, which specializes in inventive risottos and carpaccios. See p. 134.
- **Parrot Club** (San Juan; ☎ 787/725-7370): This place still sets the standard in style and service, and its Nuevo Latino cuisine beats any of the hotshot restaurants of its genre in New York and Miami that we’ve tried. The menu here is a thoughtful restyling of Puerto Rican and regional classics, drawing on the island’s Spanish, African, Taíno, and American influences. There’s a *criolla*-styled flank steak and a pan-seared tuna served with a dark rum-orange sauce. See p. 135.
- **Ramiro’s** (Condado; ☎ 787/721-9049): Chef Jesús Ramiro has some of the most innovative dishes in San Juan, along with the city’s best wine list. Ramiro’s “*Nuevo Criolla*” cuisine reaches way back to its Spanish roots, and is as likely to mix in European as New World flourishes. His reputation rests on such dishes as quail stuffed with lamb in a port sauce and lamb loin in a tamarind coriander sauce, both equally delectable. His dessert menu is two pages long and includes the town’s best soufflés. His death-by-chocolate mousse on a green grape leaf is equaled only by his caramelized fresh mango napoleon. See p. 144.
- **Budatai** (Condado; ☎ 787/725-6919): Roberto Trevino’s Asian–Latino cuisine has found its rightful home in this luxurious and stylish restaurant with an oceanfront view at the heart of Condado. With an emphasis on Puerto Rican herbs and seafood, the dishes rely on herbs and inspiration from the Far East without ever feeling too far away from home. There’s a full sushi bar and lots of ceviche. On our last trip, we started with pork dumplings with shaved truffle and the fried calamari and sweet onion, while main courses were steamed halibut and seasoned potatoes and Spanish sausage and filet mignon with duck-fat potatoes and Asian mushrooms. See p. 144.
- **Mark’s at the Meliá** (Ponce; ☎ 787/284-6275): Mark French has elevated Puerto Rican dishes to a new height at this endearing restaurant that also serves an impeccable international cuisine. He brought haute cuisine to the Ponce dining scene, which had been a bit of a backwater and turned the place into an enclave of refined dining with such imaginative and good-tasting dishes as rack of lamb with goat cheese crust and tenderloin medallions with sautéed shrimp in a Hollandaise sauce. See p. 227.
- **Pikayo** (at the Puerto Rico Museum of Art, San Juan; ☎ 787/259-7676): This dramatically beautiful restaurant has a menu as artful as its setting just off the main lobby over the art museum. The menu—with dishes like grilled shrimp and julienne chorizo in a soursop beurre blanc, and grilled sea bass in a pumpkin puree—fuses Caribbean, European, and Californian influences. For chef Wilo Bent, however, it’s all about making high art out of his hometown cuisine. See p. 150.
- **bbh** (Vieques; ☎ 787/741-1128): The best tapas in all of Puerto Rico are served at this restaurant at the elegant Bravo Beach Hotel. Tapas “by the sea” include everything from Jamaican jerk chicken to seared ahi tuna, grilled chorizo to marinated olives. See p. 286.

14 The Best Offbeat Travel Experiences

- **Attending a Cockfight:** Although a brutal sport that many find distasteful, cockfighting is legal in Puerto Rico and has its devotees. The most authentic cockfights are held in small central mountain towns, and it's popular along the south coast, such as in the town of Salinas. But it's not necessary to go that far to witness one of these bouts. Three fights a week are held at the **Coliseo Gallístico**, Isla Verde Avenue 6600 ☎ **787/791-6005**, in San Juan. Betting is heavy when these roosters take to the ring. See "San Juan After Dark" in chapter 8.
- **Diving off Mona Island** (Mayagüez): Surrounded by some of the most beautiful coral reefs in the Caribbean, Mona Island has the most pristine, extensive, and well-developed reefs in Puerto Rican waters. In fact, they have been nominated as a U.S. National Marine Sanctuary. The tropical marine ecosystem around Mona includes patch reefs, black coral, spore and groove systems, underwater caverns, deepwater sponges, fringing reefs, and algal reefs. The lush environment attracts octopuses, lobster, queen conch, rays, barracuda, snapper, jack, grunt, angelfish, trunkfish, filefish, butterfly fish, dolphin, parrotfish, tuna, flying fish, and more. The crystal waters afford exceptional horizontal vision from 150 to 200 feet (46–61m), as well as good views down to the shipwrecks that mark the site—including some Hispanic galleons. Five species of whales visit the island's offshore waters. See the box, "Mona Island: The Galápagos of Puerto Rico," in chapter 11.
- **Visiting Vieques & Culebra:** Puerto Rico's offshore islands—still relatively undiscovered by the modern world—remain an offbeat adventure, and they've got great beaches, too. The most developed is Vieques, which attracts visitors with its gorgeous stretches of sand with picnic facilities and shade trees. It is an ideal retreat for snorkelers and tranquillity seekers. The beaches are nearly always deserted, even though they are among the Caribbean's loveliest. Nearly three-quarters of the island is owned by the Fish & Wildlife Service. The even-less-developed Culebra has a wildlife refuge, coral reefs, and Playa Flamenco, another of the Caribbean's finest beaches. And is it ever sleepy here! See chapter 13.
- **Spending the Evening at Mosquito (Phosphorescent) Bay** (Vieques Island): At any time except when there's a full moon, you can swim in glowing waters lit by dinoflagellates called *pyrodiniums* (whirling fire). These creatures light up the waters like fireflies, and swimming among them is one of the most unusual things to do anywhere—truly a magical, almost psychedelic experience. It's estimated that a gallon of bay water might contain about three-quarters of a million of these little glowing creatures. See chapter 13.
- **Puerto Rican Road Food:** No other place offers as many road-side treats as Puerto Rico. There's something good to eat around virtually every turn in the road. Our favorites include barbecued chicken stands along Route 116 in Guánica, the pizzerias ringing northwest from Arecibo to Mayagüez, and the simple seafood restaurants fronting the quaint and picturesque harbor of Aguabo on the east coast. And you can't really forget Puerta de Tierra's oceanfront **El Hamburger**, or the taco joints along the old Caguas

highway. Also try **Piñones**, east of Isla Verde (which has probably the largest concentration of *frituras*, fried beach snacks, near San Juan). Farther east, the cluster of food stands near the **Luquillo** public beach and Highway 3 are legendary for their seafood, as well as barbecued chicken. Make sure to try an *arepa*, a light flour pastry often filled with seafood ceviche

but also made with coconut flavor and eaten plain with coffee for breakfast. For succulent roast pork, chicken, and turkey, head to a string of open air restaurants specializing in *criolla* barbecue in the mountain town of **Guavate**, about a half-hour south of San Juan. We've never eaten at a bad restaurant here in 15 years of trying.