

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.

Puerto Rico 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 country inns or guesthouses, and a great nightlife, and you've got a formidable attraction.

Here are our picks for the best Puerto Rico has to offer.

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. 9.

- **Best Beach for Singles:** Sandwiched between the Condado and Isla Verde along San Juan's coast, **Ocean Park** beach offers a more laid-back experience and attracts a younger, more progressive crowd. 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 sanjuaneros to congregate, especially on weekends. Area guesthouses cater 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 it's decidedly more low-key and Caribbean. It's a good spot for tourists and locals to mix.

- **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.
- **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 offshore. There's more of a surf to the east, which is a popular spot for surfing, boogie boarding, and bodysurfing. The waves are well formed but never too big, which makes it a perfect spot to learn to surf.

2 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 length (6,782 yards/6,201m) of Tom and George Fazio's Ocean Course has seaside panoramas, 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. 124.
- **Dorado Beach Resort & Club** (Dorado; ☎ 787/796-8961 or 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. 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.

- **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, that have access to private jet, yacht, and limousine service. See p. 122.

3 THE BEST NATURAL WONDERS

- **El Yunque** (☎ 787/888-1880): A half-hour east of San Juan in the Luquillo Mountains, 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 10 most endangered species of birds in the world. Some 100 billion gallons of rain fall annually on this home to four forest types. Visitors can explore dozens of trails that wind past waterfalls, dwarf vegetation, and miniature flowers, while the island's colorful parrots fly overhead. See "El Yunque" in chapter 7.
- **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 7.
- **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. It also has one of the finest phosphorescent bays in the world. See the box, “To the Lighthouse: Exploring Las Cabezas de San Juan Nature Reserve,” in chapter 10.

4 THE BEST FAMILY RESORT

- **El Conquistador Resort & Golden Door Spa** (Las Croabas; ☎ 866/317-8932 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. 183.

5 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. Honeymooners might want to try an Ocean Front Lanias room or one of the resort’s villas. See p. 58.
- **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 Old San Juan; it's chock-full of galleries, 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. 44.

- **Horned Dorset Primavera** (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. 166.

6 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. 58.
- **El Conquistador Resort & Golden Door Spa** (Las Croabas; ☎ 866/317-8932 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 offshore for guests. See p. 183.

7 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 Gandia 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. 45.
- **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 pool at the Wind Chimes and get access to its bar/restaurant. See p. 53.

8 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 6.
- **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. 89.

- **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 p. 136.