

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. To the beat of bomba, there's a party going on here 24 hours a day.

The 4 million people who live here believe that having fun is one of the reasons they were born on this dazzling but troubled island. One of the most popular tourist destinations south of Florida raises the rainbow flag to a diverse heritage, beginning with the early settlers, the Taíno Indians. Their culture later gave way to African and Spanish influences.

That Puerto Rico maintains its culture or identity is just short of a miracle. Its big brother to the north—that is, the United States—dominates the island's economy but not its soul. Most Puerto Ricans maintain a love-hate relationship with the States. Although an independence-minded political party favors breaking away completely, the majority of Puerto Ricans, when faced with a decision at the voting polls, don't want to take such a drastic step into the unknown.

Even though millions have fled Puerto Rico to find work in industrial cities of the north, for many the "heart's devotion" (to steal a phrase from the song "America" in *West Side Story*) still belongs to the native island. On every plane arriving at Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport in San Juan, *Neoyorkinos* (as expats are called) burst into spontaneous applause the moment the aircraft touches their native land.

Much of the island lives in poverty, but Puerto Ricans have a lot to boast about, including 260 miles of sandy beaches; the third-largest underground cave system on earth; and the world's largest radio telescope, which sends signals into outer space 24 hours a day, hoping ET will call in for a "close encounter." And don't forget its lush Caribbean forests, including the only rainforest (El Yunque) on U.S. territory. There are an astonishing *nine* protected nature reserves on this so-called "Island of Enchantment," with species of wildlife you won't find anywhere else in the world.

Of course, everything on island is not always enchanting. The drug trade and a rising crime rate are troubling. As one gas station attendant bluntly informed us, "You Americans should not wear your expensive jewelry to Puerto Rico because we'll have to take it away from you."

The Puerto Rican writer René Marqués calls his island schizophrenic. "Puerto Rico has two languages," he claims, "and two citizenships, two basic philosophies of life, two flags, two anthems, two loyalties."

A clue to the Puerto Rican soul is reflected in the national anthem, "La Borinqueña." Most national anthems around the world sing of military muscle and a triumph over enemies. Not so "La Borinqueña." 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. 18.

- **Best for Singles (Straight & Gay):** Sandwiched between the Condado and Isla Verde beaches along San Juan’s beachfront, **Ocean Park Beach** attracts more adults and less of the family trade. Only Isla Verde beach to the east matches Ocean Park for its broad beach and good swimming. The people-watching here is nothing compared to the well-stuffed bikinis (both male and female) found on South Miami Beach or Rio de Janeiro. However, for the Caribbean, Ocean Park is as good as it gets. Because many gay boardinghouses lie in Ocean Park, a lot of the beach here is frequented by gay young men, mainly from New York. However, straight people looking to meet someone while wearing swimwear will find plenty of lookers (and perhaps takers). See “Diving, Fishing, Tennis & Other Outdoor Pursuits,” in chapter 7.
- **Best Beach for Families:** Winning without contest, **Luquillo Beach**, 30 miles (42km) 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 8.
- **Best for Swimming:** Whereas on much of the northwest coast of Puerto Rico, rough Atlantic waters often deter bathers but attract surfers (see below), the south coast waters are calmer. On the south coast, **Playa de Ponce**, outside Ponce, Puerto Rico’s second-largest city, consists of a long strip of beautiful white sand that opens onto the tranquil waters of the Caribbean. Less crowded than Condado and Luquillo, Playa de Ponce is an ideal place to swim year-round in clearer, less polluted waters than those along the more heavily populated northern coastline. See “Ponce” in chapter 9.
- **Best for Scenery:** In the southwestern corner of Puerto Rico, **Boquerón Beach** lies in a section of the island called the Cape Cod of Puerto Rico. The beach town of Boquerón itself, filled with colorful scenery, stands at the heart of a 3-mile (4.8km) bay, with palm-fringed white sand curving away on both sides. Enjoy this panoramic vista and sample vignettes of local life; fisherfolk, sailors, and scuba divers are also attracted to this beach, where fresh oysters are shucked on the spot, doused with Tabasco, and sold at various ramshackle shacks. You can see that there are plenty of interesting photo ops at this beach. While enjoying the scenery and the sands, you can take a break and order a regional ice cream at one of the stands. It’s made with sweet corn and dusted with paprika. Sound awful?

Try it: It's good. See "The Southwest Coast" in chapter 10.

- **Best for Windsurfing:** Rincón's winter surf, especially at **Playa Higüero**, puts Malibu to shame. Today surfers from all over the world are attracted to Rincón, which they have dubbed "Little Malibu." From Borinquén Point south to Rincón, nearly all the beaches along the western coast are ideal for surfing from November to April. As the windsurfing capital of the Caribbean, the Rincón area was put on the map when it was the site of the 1968 world surfing championships. Some of the 16-foot (4.9m) breakers here equal those on the north shore of Oahu. See "Rincón" in chapter 10.
- **Best Beaches for Being Alone:** The main island is filled with isolated sandy coves 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. Beginning in the west, directly east of Cabo Rojo, you'll discover **Rosado Beach**, **Santa Beach**, **Caña Gorda Beach**, and **Tamarindo Beach**. Access to many of these is limited because of poor roads, but the effort is worth it. Be sure to bring the necessary supplies. See the box, "Puerto Rico's Secret Beaches," in chapter 10.
- **Best for Snorkeling:** For snorkeling, we prefer to escape from the Puerto Rican mainland altogether, heading for the isolated beaches of the offshore

islands of **Vieques** and **Culebra**, part of the Spanish Virgin Islands. In Vieques alone there are some 40 beaches, most of them officially unnamed even though U.S. sailors once stationed on the island have nicknamed their favorites—everything from Green Beach to Orchid. The best beach for snorkeling on Vieques is **Playa Esperanza**, especially that spot in front of the Trade Winds Guesthouse. Another favorite location, which we discovered when directed there by a Navy SEAL, is across the little harbor at **Cayo de Afuera**. This site gives you the best preview of dramatic (and living) antler coral. Nurse sharks and the occasional manatee also hang out here. See "Vieques" in chapter 12.

On the neighboring island of Culebra, the beaches are less visited by snorkelers, even though they open onto coral reefs and clear waters. The snorkeling is not so hot at the island's most frequented beach, Flamenco Beach. But all you have to do is take a 15- to 20-minute hike from the parking lot at Flamenco over the hill to **Playa Carlos Rosario**, which offers some of the best snorkeling in Puerto Rico. A barrier reef virtually envelops the beach, and you can snorkel all day. For other great snorkeling, you can walk along the cliffs south of here for about a quarter-mile (.4km) to a place called "**The Wall**," which has 40-foot (12m) drop-offs, rainbow-hued fish, and other delights. See "Culebra" in chapter 12.

2 The Best Hotel Beaches

- **El San Juan Hotel & Casino** (San Juan; ☎ 787/791-1000): This posh resort occupies the choicest beachfront real estate at Isla Verde Beach, one of the finest in Puerto Rico. Ideal

for swimming, the golden sands near the airport evoke South Miami Beach. Picnic tables are found here, and the beach is also good for snorkeling. But it is mostly the sands

themselves that provide the attraction—that and all the many facilities of El San Juan resort itself. See p. 92.

- **Copamarina Beach Resort** (Caña Gorda; ☎ 787/821-0505) lies west of Ponce, Puerto Rico's second-largest city. A laid-back retreat, the resort opens onto one of the best and least

crowded beaches in southwestern Puerto Rico. This appealing beach is set a quarter-mile (.4km) south of Guánica at the edge of a government-protected marshland known for its rich bird life. Its pale beige sand fronts a backdrop of *bohios* (thatched huts), where you can retreat from the noonday sun. See p. 213.

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 2.

- **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 gunnards. 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 7.
- **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. Getting there is a pain, however. You must brave a 5-hour boat ride across the often rough Mona Passage. See the box, “Mona Island: The Galápagos of Puerto Rico,” in chapter 9.

- **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 “Las Croabas” in chapter 11.

- **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 11.

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).

- **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 9.

- **Caja de Muertos:** The best snorkeling off the coast of Ponce is on the uninhabited coast island of Caja de Muertos (“Coffin Island”). This isla 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. Island Adventures will take you to this remote spot for a full day’s outing, with plenty of snorkeling. See “Ponce” in chapter 9.
- **Fajardo’s Playa Escondido & La Cordillera:** On the eastern coast of Puerto Rico, the clear waters along the beachfront are the best on mainland

Puerto Rico for snorkeling. The best beach here for snorkeling is Playa Escondido, although the marine wildlife refuge known as La Cordillera right off the coast is even more alluring. See “Las Croabas” in chapter 11.

- Vieques & Culebra: For a quick preview of the underwater possibilities, refer to “The Best Beaches,” earlier in this chapter. For more information, see chapter 12.

5 The Best Golf & Tennis

- **Westin Rio Mar Golf Course** (Palmer; ☎ 787/888-6000): A 45-minute drive from San Juan on the northeast coast, the 6,145-yard (5,619m) Rio Mar Golf Course is shorter than those at both Palmas del Mar and Dorado East. One avid golfer recommended it to “those whose games and egos have been bruised by the other two courses.” Wind here can seriously influence the outcome of your game. The greens fees are a lot lower than those of its two major competitors. See p. 146.
- **Hyatt Resort at Dorado** (Hyatt Dorado Beach Resort & Country Club; ☎ 800/233-1234 or 787/796-1234): With 72 holes, Dorado has the highest concentration of golf on the island. Two courses—East and West—belong to the Hyatt. 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, and both hotels sponsor tennis weeks and offer special tennis

packages. The Hyatt Dorado Beach Resort & Country Club weighs in with seven Laykold courts, two of them lighted. See p. 171. **Note:** This hotel is closing as we go to print, but its golf courses and tennis courts will remain open.

- **El Conquistador Resort & Golden Door Spa** (Las Croabas; ☎ 800/468-5228 or 787/863-1000): This sprawling resort east of San Juan 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. Only guests of the hotel are allowed to play here. See p. 223.
- **Palmas del Mar Country Club** (Humacao; ☎ 787/285-2256): Lying on the southeast 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. Crack golfers consider holes 11 through 15 the toughest five successive holes in the Caribbean. See p. 226.

6 The Best Hikes

Bring your boots. Puerto Rico’s mountainous interior offers ample opportunity for hiking and climbing, with many trails presenting spectacular panoramas at the least-expected moments. See “The Active Vacation Planner” in chapter 2 for detailed information.

- **El Yunque** (☎ 787/888-1880 for information): Containing the only tropical rainforest on U.S. soil, this Caribbean 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 La Mina Falls. Just off the main road is La Coca Falls, a sheet of water cascading down mossy cliffs. See "El Yunque" in chapter 8.

- **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. We prefer the mile-long (1.6km) Cueva Trail, where hikers look for the endangered bufo lemur toad, another species once thought to be extinct but still jumping in this area. Within the forest, El Portal Tropical Forest Center offers

10,000 square feet (929 sq. m) of exhibition space and provides information. See "Ponce" in chapter 9.

- **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 \$10 per night. Contact the **Puerto Rico Department of Natural Resources** (☎ 787/721-5495) for more information. See the box, "Mona Island: The Galápagos of Puerto Rico," in chapter 9.

7 The Best Natural Wonders

- **El Yunque** (☎ 787/888-1880): Forty-five 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. Some 100 billion gallons of rain fall annually on this home to four forest types containing 240 species of tropical trees. 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 sound of Puerto Rico's mascot, the

coquí, a small frog. See "El Yunque" in chapter 8.

- **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 8.

- **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. Five days a week (Wed–Sun), the park staff conducts tours in Spanish and English, the latter at 2pm only. Each tour lasts 2½ hours and is conducted with

electric trolleys that traverse most of the park. 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. See the box, “To the Lighthouse: Exploring Las Cabezas de San Juan Nature Reserve,” in chapter 11.

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.

- **Condado Plaza Hotel & Casino** (San Juan; ☎ 800/468-8588 or 787/721-1000): This resort offers Camp Taíno, a regular program of activities and special events for children ages 5 to 12. The cost of \$25 per child includes lunch. The main pool has a kids’ water slide that starts in a Spanish castle turret, plus a toddler pool. For teenagers, the hotel has a video game room, tennis courts, and various organized activities. For the whole family, the resort offers two pools and opens onto a public beach. It also has the best collection of restaurants of any hotel on the Condado. See p. 84.
- **El San Juan Hotel & Casino** (San Juan; ☎ 787/791-1000): The

grandest hotel in Puerto Rico lies on Isla Verde, the less-famous strip of beach connected to the Condado. Its Kids Klub features trained counselors and group activities for the 5- to 12-year-old set. A daily fee of \$40 buys lunch and an array of activities. The hotel opens onto a good beachfront and has some of the best restaurants in San Juan. See p. 92.

- **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. This resort has some of the best facilities and restaurants in eastern Puerto Rico. See p. 223.

9 The Best Honeymoon Resorts

- **El San Juan Hotel & Casino** (San Juan; ☎ 787/791-1000): If you want Vegas-style shows, gambling, nightlife, great restaurants, and the most famous beach in Puerto Rico, El San Juan is at your disposal. It has the most glamorous lobby in the

Caribbean and is set on 12 acres (4.9 hectares) of Isla Verde, a strip of beach connected to the Condado. Options include a suite in the main tower with a whirlpool or your own private casita with a sunken Roman bath. The best deal is a package for 3

nights. A lot of freebies are thrown in, including champagne and tropical fruit, daily tennis, one dinner, continental breakfast, and two massages. See p. 92.

- **Ponce Hilton & Casino** (Ponce; ☎ 800/HILTONS or 787/259-7676): A first-class act at Puerto Rico's "second city" on the south coast, this sprawling resort is set in an 80-acre (32-hectare) garden. On-site amenities include a casino and disco, plus a whirlpool, tennis courts, and a fitness room. The two restaurants serve the best food on the south coast. Five suites are ideal for honeymoons. A per-night package includes a bottle of champagne, truffles, chocolates, and fresh strawberries, as well as breakfast daily, plus \$25 in casino chips. You also receive a coupon granting 50% off on your next visit. See p. 188.
- **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. 203.

- **El Conquistador Resort & Golden Door Spa** (Las Croabas; ☎ 800/468-5228 or 787/863-1000): If you're looking for good food and diversions rather than a tranquil retreat, El Conquistador is the best big-time resort on the island. Atop a 300-foot (91m) bluff in eastern Puerto Rico, it has virtually everything for outdoor play, including golf and tennis, but when you want seclusion, you can post the PRIVADO sign and the world is yours. Honeymoon packages, based on 3 nights and 4 days, include a fruit basket and champagne, one dinner in the room, two massages, and all breakfasts. See p. 223.

10 The Best Big Resort Hotels

- **Ritz-Carlton San Juan Hotel, 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. 94.
- **El San Juan Hotel & Casino** (San Juan; ☎ 787/791-1000): An opulent circular lobby sets the haute style at the Caribbean's most elegant resort.

From its location along Isla Verde Beach, it houses some of the capital's finest restaurants and is the city's major entertainment venue. Guest rooms are tropically designed and maintained in state-of-the-art condition. See p. 92.

- **Westin Rio Mar Beach Golf Resort & Spa** (Rio Grande; ☎ 800/WESTIN-1 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 three largest hotels in Puerto Rico. Despite its size, personal service and style are hallmarks of the property. Twelve

restaurants and lounges boast an array of cuisines. Along with its proximity to two golf courses, entertainment, such as an extensive program of live music, is a key ingredient in the hotel's success. See p. 176.

- **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. See p. 223.

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 in the heart 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. Staying in one of the comfortable rooms here is like living in an art gallery. See p. 82.
- **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 offers spacious rooms with kitchens, lies only a short block from Puerto Rico's most famous beach, and also features a pool. See p. 88.
- **Copamarina Beach Resort** (Caña Gorda; ☎ 787/821-0505): Near Ponce, 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. 213.

- **Lemontree Waterfront Suites** (Rincón; ☎ 787/823-6452): On a sandy beach at the windsurfing capital of the Caribbean, this colony offers large apartments with kitchenettes, ideal for families who like to prepare some of their own meals. See p. 204.
- **Hacienda Tamarindo** (Vieques; ☎ 787/741-0420): On the site of a 1990s nightclub, this expanded inn has style, flair, charm, and a desirable location—just inland from a great white sandy beach. Built around a massive 2-century-old tamarind tree and operated by a couple from Vermont, the inn has comfortable and appealing accommodations, which are often furnished with antiques. The welcome is warm. See p. 236.

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 West Indies. See "Seeing the Sights" in chapter 7.

- **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. 128.
- **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 9.
- **Museo de Arte de Ponce** (Ponce): This museum has the finest collection of European and Latin American art in the Caribbean. The building was designed by Edward Durell Stone, who also designed the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. 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. 181.
- **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 9.
- **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 9.
- **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 9.

13 The Best Restaurants

- **Aquaviva** (San Juan; ☎ 787/722-0665): Dauntingly stylish, this is one of the grand new restaurants of Puerto Rico, specializing in a Latin nouvelle cuisine with fresh seafood a specialty. You can count on the best catch of the day—the prime specimens—which are then prepared with consummate skill. See p. 105.
- **Barú** (San Juan; ☎ 787/977-7107): Fashionable and popular, this is a creative showcase for a fusion Caribbean

and Mediterranean cuisine, occupying stately looking premises in the Old Town. Sterling craftsmanship marks a menu that includes, for example, five different kinds of carpaccio. See p. 105.

- **Parrot Club** (San Juan; © 787/725-7370): This addition to the San Juan scene has already been acclaimed as one of the finest and most innovative restaurants on the island. Its chef serves a Nuevo Latino cuisine that is a happy medley of Puerto Rican delights, drawing upon the Spanish, African, and even Taíno influences of the island. Menu items are based on updated interpretations of old-fashioned regional dishes—everything from *criolla*-styled flank steak to a pan-seared tuna served with a sauce of dark rum and essence of oranges. See p. 107.
- **Ramiro's** (San Juan; © 787/721-9049): Chef Jesús Ramiro has some of the most innovative cookery along the Condado beachfront strip, along with the city's best wine list. Ramiro has made his culinary reputation with 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. 116.
- **Ajili Mójili** (San Juan; © 787/725-9195): On the Condado beachfront, Ajili Mójili provides the most refined interpretation of classic Puerto Rican cookery on the island.

Locals find it evocative of the food they enjoyed at their mother's table, one example being *mofongos*—green plantains stuffed with veal, chicken, shrimp, or pork. The chefs take that cliché dish *arroz con pollo* (stewed chicken with saffron rice) and raise it to celestial levels. The restaurant takes its name from the lemon-garlic sweet chile salsa that's traditionally served here with fish or meat. See p. 116.

- **Mark's at the Meliá** (Ponce; © 787/284-6275): Mark French has elevated Puerto Rican dishes to a new high at this endearing restaurant that also serves an impeccable international cuisine. He took over what was a backwater and turned the place into an enclave of refined dining with such imaginative and good-tasting dishes as tamarind barbecued lamb with yucca mojo. See p. 189.
- **La Cava** (in the Ponce Hilton, Ponce; © 787/259-7676): The stellar restaurant of this first-class hotel, La Cava was designed to resemble a 19th-century coffee plantation. It's the most elegant restaurant along the southern tier, and it serves delectable international cuisine. From the ever-changing menu, you are likely to be served everything from grilled lamb sausage on a bed of couscous to tuna loin seared with sesame oil. See p. 189.
- **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. See p. 241.

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 in the town of Salinas in the southeast. But it's not necessary to go that far to witness one of these bouts. Three fights a

week are held at the **Coliseo Gallisteco**, Route 37 (☎ 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 9.
- **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 12.

- **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 12.
- **Sampling the Island’s Nosh Pits:** Think of Puerto Rico as one gigantic fast-food joint, for no other island in the Caribbean offers such a delectable array of road-side eats. Snack food lies around virtually every turn in the road. As you drive throughout the island, stop and take your pick of the road-side dives. They may look junky, even trashy, but the food is often a delight—and cheap, too.

You’ll find succulent barbecued pig, *pastelillos* (pastry turnovers filled with meat, cheese, or seafood), *surulitos* (deep-fried cornmeal sticks), *alcapurrias* (a filling of fish or meat in a deep-fried casing of finely grated green plantains and taro root), *bacalaitos* (deep-fried codfish fritters), *papas rellenas* (stuffed potatoes), and *arañitas* (“little spiders”—actually, deep-fried clusters of shredded green plantains).

You don’t have to go far for barbecued pig—just head to the roadside food stands in Luquillo Beach, to the east of San Juan. It makes for a great picnic at the beach.

A truck stop, **Café Restaurant La Nueva Union**, 35 miles (56km) west of San Juan at the junction of Carretera 2 and Highway 22 between Arecibo and Hatillo, serves the most succulent traditional fare. Sample its fresh octopus salad, its meaty goat stew, and definitely its *guisados* (beef stew). Don't leave without an order of coconut flan.

If you make it all the way around the island to La Parguera, stop at **El Quenepo**, a lunch wagon parked

under a towering *quenepa* (a tropical fruit tree) on Route 116 between routes 304 and 324. You can usually spot it by a line of cars letting passengers out to sample the delights from its crowded postage-stamp kitchen. El Quenepo offers a vast array of Puerto Rican specialties, many of which you may never have sampled before: cold codfish soup, even a green-bean omelet, and *piononos* (a "mountain" composed of fried eggs, plantain strips, and seasoned meat filling).