

Central Mountains



Exotic birds swoop majestically over mist-enveloped peaks, vivid red flamboyán trees punctuate lush valleys covered in a velvety green foliage, and a rustically clad *jibaro* stops by the roadside to adjust his wide-brimmed straw sombrero. Welcome to Puerto Rico's central mountains, a verdant pastiche of small-scale coffee plantations and half-forgotten towns that still reverberates with the echoes of island's earliest inhabitants. Colored by rich Taino legends and immortalized by poets in popular folklore, the island's traditions remain strong up here in a world so detached from the coast it's almost eerie. Throw away your maps, prize yourself away from the baccarat table, and get ready to find out why Puerto Rico really isn't that 'American' after all.

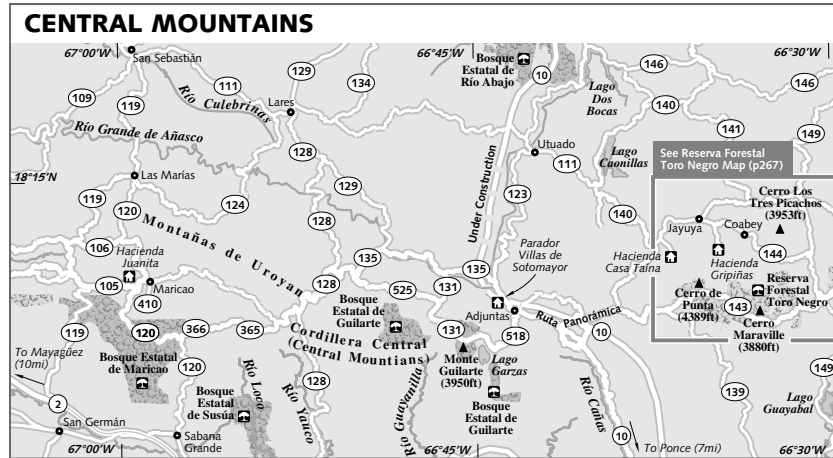
Crossing the magic line that separates the sierra from the shoreline is relatively easy. You can penetrate the island's mountainous backbone from either coast and lose yourself in a world of narrow roads and hidden viewpoints seemingly within minutes. The ultimate thrill is to tackle the crenellated peaks east to west via the Ruta Panorámica, a narrow, winding road laid down in the 1950s that dips like a primordial roller coaster from valley to ridge and back down to valley. Along the way you'll spy homey *colmados* (small grocery stores), isolated farms, and a way of life that has all but disappeared from the modern dog-eat-dog cities. For outsiders, this is Puerto Rico from another era, a deliciously tranquil rural haven that is often more redolent of Cuba or the Dominican Republic than of the Caribbean's US-sponsored economic powerhouse.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Lining up with the locals at the *lechonerías* in **Guavate** (p261)
- Whiffing the aroma of homegrown Puerto Rican coffee in **Hacienda San Pedro** (p269)
- Bushwhacking your way up an overgrown trail in the **Reserva Forestal Toro Negro** (p265)
- Jumping on and off the rural roller coaster that is the **Ruta Panorámica** (p269)
- Uncovering a lost world on the **Cañón de San Cristóbal** (p262) hike



■ POPULATION: 350,000



History

Thanks to their impregnable terrain, the central mountains have long acted as a haven for the rebellious and the repressed. Legend has it, native Taíno survived here until the mid-19th century and, even today, Indian traditions run strong in the festivals and artisan workshops scattered along the Ruta Panorámica. In more recent times, notoriety has struck these mountains twice. In 1950, an abortive uprising in Jayuya marked the death knell of the Puerto Rican independence movement as an effective political force. A further scandal erupted in 1978 when two young independence supporters were shot by policeman posing as revolutionaries on Cerro Maravilla in an incident that uncovered corruption, ballot-box fraud and an alleged FBI cover-up.

Climate

The climate in the mountains is wetter, cloudier and cooler than down on the coast. Cerro Maravilla in the Toro Negro forest records average high/lows a good 10°F to 15°F lower than in San Juan. Expect highs of 68°F and lows of 56°F in January. Rainfall is higher in the Cordillera Central. The Ruta Panorámica is often blanketed in mist on its loftier sections.

Getting There & Around

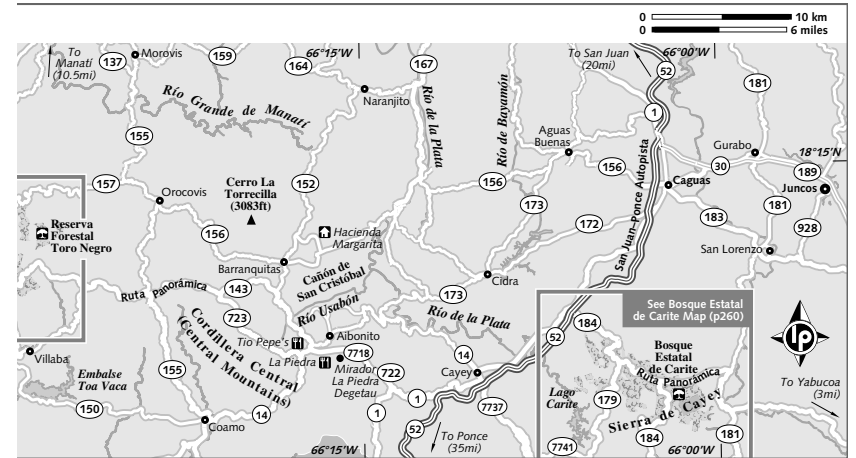
The Ruta Panorámica (p269), a chain of 40 mountain roads, travels 165 miles across the roof of Puerto Rico, from Yabucoa in the east to Mayagüez in the west. This chapter takes

you along this route from east to west. It is generally well marked with distinctive brown road signs and highlighted on almost all commercial maps of the island. If you're driving, proceed carefully and never drive after dark.

The major towns in the central region such as Aibonito, Barranquitas and Adjuntas are easily accessed by público from either coast. Some of the more remote places, however, are a little more difficult to reach and, if you're without your own car, you may require lifts, taxis or plenty of forward planning. Bikes can be precarious on the Ruta Panorámica where drivers are famously erratic. Riders should stick to the wider link roads such as Rte 15 between Cayey and Guayama and listen to local advice.

BOSQUE ESTATAL DE CARITE

Less than an hour south of San Juan, the **Bosque Estatal de Carite** (Carite Forest Reserve; ☎ 787-747-4545; Rte 184 Km 27.5; 🚗 7am-3:30pm Mon-Fri) was created in 1935 to protect the watersheds of various local rivers from the forces of erosion. Measuring 6000 acres in area, the mountain reserve is easily accessed from the San Juan metro area, and it can get crowded on weekends and during the summer when *sanjuaneros* come here to enjoy the 72°F temperatures, green shade, and dozens of *lechonerías* (restaurants specializing in suckling pig) that line Hwy 184 as it approaches the northern forest entrance (see box, p261). The forest is one of the first points of interest you will hit if you are traversing the Ruta Panorámica east to west.



As with most Puerto Rican forest reserves, facilities are spartan and ranger stations are often unmanned.

If you are intending to stay in the reserve, bring water, insect repellent and food; no supplies are sold inside.

Orientation

The only way to enter the forest is by car. From the north, take Hwy 52 to the Cayey Este exit to Hwy 184. From the south, take the Ruta Panorámica from Yabucoa. You can also reach the forest from Patillas on the south coast via Hwy 184.

Sights & Activities

Carite, like many of Puerto Rico's forest reserves, is a great place for hiking, camping, fishing, toe-dipping (in pools and streams) and bird-watching, as long as you're up for a bit of DIY adventure. There are 49 species of bird here – including the endangered native *falcón de sierra* (mountain hawk) – and numerous species of tree. If you are passing through the forest on the Ruta Panorámica, you can stop for a picnic at the **Área Recreativa Charco Azul** (🚗 9am-6pm), a recreation/camping area near the southeastern entrance on Hwy 184, and take a short walk to the Charco Azul natural pool (see Charco Azul Trail, right). You can also stop off at **Área Recreativa Guavate** (🚗 9am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-5pm Sat & Sun) at the northern end for a spot of sunbathing and bird-watching (see Charles Rivera

Rodríguez Trail, p260) or some local food tasting at the nearby *lechonerías* (see box, p261). The third potential stopping place is the **Área Recreativa Real Patillas** (🚗 9am-6pm) on Hwy 184 to the south, at the start of the El Seis trail.

HIKING

Hurricanes have wreaked havoc on Carite's trails in the past and paths are constantly being cleared and restored. Of the trails below, Charco Azul, El Radar and Charles Rivera Rodríguez are the most reliable. It's best to phone ahead to check current conditions if you're a serious hiker.

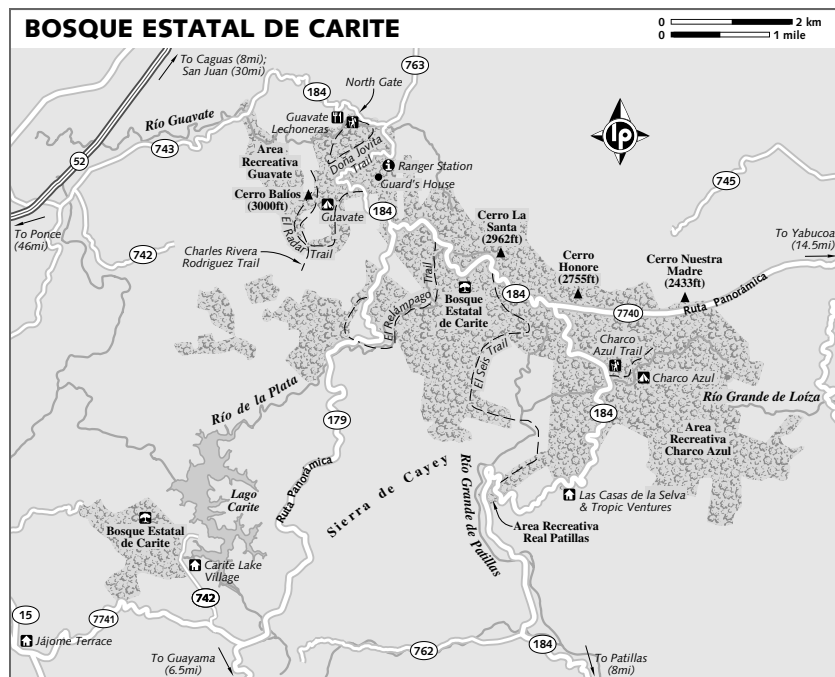
At Las Casas de la Selva (p260), managers can provide information and guides for long hikes through Carite, including the six-hour trek through Hero Valley which is for experienced hikers only.

Charco Azul Trail

The most popular trail in the reserve and the most easily accessible is Charco Azul, which takes you to the swimming hole and camping/picnic area of the same name. It is an easy half-mile walk from Hwy 184, near the southeast corner of the forest. Beyond here a sketchy trail leads to the top of Cerro La Santa (2730 feet), Carite's highest point.

El Radar Trail

El Radar trailhead departs to the south, off Hwy 184 near the northwest corner of the



forest, and makes a steep, one-mile climb to the peak of Cerro Balíos. There is a Doppler radar weather station here, plus vistas of the north and south coasts, as well as toward El Yunque.

Charles Rivera Rodriguez Trail

Starting at Guavate Recreation Area, this path goes up a steep and somewhat muddy trail. It takes about 35 minutes to ascend and offers some good bird-watching.

El Seis Trail

This steep three-mile jaunt starts at the Real Patillas recreation area on Hwy 184 a few miles south of Charco Azul. Unless you have a car to meet you at the other end, you'll have to do it as a six-mile out-and-back hike.

El Relámpago Trail

This path veers south off Hwy 184 a mile or so before the junction with Hwy 179. It follows the Río La Plata before winding round to cross Hwy 179 and veering north on the other side. It's about four miles one way and is fairly challenging.

Sleeping & Eating

The forest has two **camping areas** (campsites per person \$4, children under 10 free). At the northwest corner of the reserve is Guavate, with room for six tents and 30 people. Charco Azul, the more attractive choice, is the pondside camping area at the southeast end of the reserve. It can accommodate 10 tents and 50 people. Both areas have toilet and bathing facilities. Reserve 15 days in advance with the Departamento de Recursos Naturales y Ambientales (DRNA; p87).

Las Casas de la Selva & Tropic Ventures (☎ 787-839-7381; Hwy 184 Km 16.1; campsites \$10, cabin \$50) This reserve is on the south slope of the Sierra de Cayey in the Río Grande de Patillas watershed. There was once a coffee plantation here, but 20 years ago it was turned into a sustainable-growth tree farm and a model for rainforest protection. The 1000-acre reserve has scientific relationships with local schools, colleges and Earth Watch expeditions. Students of a variety of ages come to work, learn about rainforest ecology and explore (see Volunteering, p285). Tourists can come here for a rustic vacation experience, sleeping in the heart

of the forest. To find Las Casas de la Selva, follow Hwy 184 southeast toward Patillas through the Bosque Estatal de Carite to Km 16.1, where you will see a sign for the reserve. Note: the gate will be locked unless you make a reservation. If you want to stay here, there are tent sites, rent-a-tents (\$35 for two people) and one rustic cabin with bathroom.

Carite Lake Village (☎ 787-763-4003; Rte 742 Km 2; r \$75-90) Lots of peach-colored villas around the lake don't exactly make a village, but this place comes close. There are basketball courts, a boat ramp, a playground and an on-site restaurant. This is not exactly a place that's in tune with nature, but it's fun.

Jájome Terrace (☎ 787-738-4016; Rte 15 Km 4.6; r \$107-124) Rich in both history and setting, the lush Jájome, which sits 2800ft up in the mountains of the Cordillera Central with satellite map views over towards Ponce, has been in business since the 1930s. In its early years, national icon Luis Muñoz Marín was a regular visitor. Almost wiped out by Hurricane George in 1998, the wooden Jájome was revamped in sturdy brick in 2002 and reopened with its 10 fully renovated rooms and popular open-terrace restaurant fresh with nouveau rustic charm. With no TVs or phones and no cell

phone reception, the Jájome can sometimes feel like it's miles from anywhere, particularly from Mondays to Fridays when the restaurant is closed and there may be no other guests. Their loss could be your gain.

Getting There & Around

While a few públicos pass this way, they can be infrequent. Getting to the insanely popular restaurant strip of Guavate may be your best bet – the forest's northern gate (plus trails and camping access) is less than half a mile from here. The most popular way of seeing the mountains in their entirety is still a rental car.

AIBONITO & AROUND

pop 9200

Once the de facto capital of Puerto Rico, after the Spanish Governor Romualdo Palacios González established residence here in 1887, Aibonito has long been a retreat for the island's political leaders, its devout people, and the most wealthy. The town has a number of other claims to fame that include being the island's highest town (at about 2000ft), the site of the island's lowest recorded temperature (40°F in 1911) and the home of an

DETOUR: GUAVATE

Puerto Ricans invariably speak of Guavate in reverential tones. It's almost as if they know something you don't, an in-joke perhaps or a modus operandi that isn't written in the standard tourist textbook. During the week, this unkempt strip of scruffy, shack-like restaurants that abuts the Carite Forest is, well...just that. But come here at weekends and you'll witness a heady transformation – a country with its guard down, a nation with its mask off, a free-spirited populace united in its taste for good food, spontaneous dancing and plenty of boisterous revelry.

Considered the font of traditional Puerto Rican cooking, Guavate is the spiritual home of the island's ultimate culinary 'delicacy,' *lechon asado*, or whole roast pig, a locally reared hog turned on a spit about five meters from where you're sitting. But first impressions can be deceiving. Although the myriad *lechoneras* that pepper the roadside might look a little rough around the edges (cardboard plates, plastic forks, Formica tables), the assembled crowds tell another story. Everyone from millionaire businessmen to cigar-puffing *jibaros* flock to this no-holds-barred food fest to sample the best in authentic Puerto Rican cuisine and culture. If it's the island's uninhibited 'soul' you're after, look no further.

The best action takes place on weekend afternoons between 2pm and 9pm, when old-fashioned troubadours entertain the crowds and live salsa, meringue and reggaeton music gets diners out of their chairs and onto any available floor space for libidinous dancing. With over a dozen restaurants and stalls all offering similar canteen-style food and service, your best bet is to follow the crowds and sample anything that gets put in front you. More daring creations include *arroz con grandules* (rice and pigeon peas), *pasteles* (mashed plantain and pork) and – brave, this one – *morcillas* (rice and pigs blood).

To get to Guavate from San Juan, follow expressway 52 to exit 31, halfway between Caguas and Cayey. Turn onto Hwy 184 and let your adventure begin.

impressive flower festival. For all these reasons, and because it's on the Ruta Panorámica, Aibonito is the most visited mountain town in Puerto Rico.

The town has a euphonious name that suggests a Spanish exclamation meaning 'Wow, how beautiful,' but the name is probably derived from a Taíno word that the first Spanish settlers heard when they arrived here in the 1630s. Today, travelers should associate Aibonito with beauty only in very specific ways. The town itself, which shelters a little less than half of the municipality's 25,000 residents, is something of a mixed bag. It sprawls across a high plateau in a slight rift between surrounding peaks. There are traffic jams every day on the narrow roads at the center of town, as rural families gravitate here for shopping, banking and – naturally – a visit to the drive-thru McDonald's. Thriving flower-growing, poultry-raising and poultry-processing industries have brought prosperity to the region, with little thought to urban planning and only belated attention to the area's natural gifts.

Yet there are two extraordinary natural treasures here. One, Mirador La Piedra Degetau, is a cluster of boulders on a peak bordering the Ruta Panorámica; there are great views from this place. Even more spectacular is the Cañón de San Cristóbal (St Christopher Canyon), which lies north of town in a deep volcanic rift cut into the rolling fields between Aibonito and the neighboring town of Barranquitas.

Aibonito-lovers claim that the weather in their town is perpetually spring-like. They are not exaggerating: the average temperature is 72°F. Gentle showers are common.

Most drivers approach Aibonito via the Ruta Panorámica. A less-traveled and more dramatic route (if you like hairpin turns) is to take Hwy 173 and Hwy 14 south from Cidra.

Sights

CAÑÓN DE SAN CRISTÓBAL

The canyon is so unexpected in both its location and appearance that it may take your breath away. The deep green chasm with its rocky crags and veil of falling water lies less than 5 miles north of Aibonito. The canyon is a fissure that cuts more than 500ft down through the Central Mountains. But you probably will not see it even as you approach its edge, because the rift is so deep and narrow

that the fields and hills of the surrounding high-mountain plateau disguise it.

The highest waterfall on the island is here, where the Río Usabón plummets at least 500ft down a sheer cliff into a gorge that is deeper, in many places, than it is wide. For fit mountaineering enthusiasts, the descent into the canyon is a first-class thrill whether you take steep trails or make it a technical descent. Not so long ago, San Cristóbal was a garbage dump, but the Conservation Trust of Puerto Rico saved the canyon by buying up most of it for preservation.

You can catch a glimpse of the canyon from a distance by looking east from the intersection of Hwy 725 and Hwy 162. But to get close, you have to take one of the side roads off Hwy 725 or Hwy 7725, and then cross private land to approach the rim of the canyon. Do not try this: you will be trespassing unless you actually get permission to cross private property, and you could easily put yourself at risk if you do not know the terrain. Cañón de San Cristóbal has sheer cliffs that are prone to erosion and landslides, and the trails into the canyon are so steep as to be an invitation for suicide when they get wet (and it rains a lot around here).

The best way to visit the canyon is to plan ahead, make reservations and join an organized trek with **San Cristóbal Hiking Tour** (☎ 787-857-2094; www.viajes.barranquitaspr.com) run by local historian and geographer Samuel Oliveras Ortiz. Trips run on weekends and holidays and vary from a three- to four-hour basic tour (\$60) to a five- to six-hour adrenalin-junkie fest with rock climbing and rappelling (\$85). Wear secure shoes and appropriate clothing that you can take off at the canyon floor, where temperatures can be more than 10°F warmer than up on the brink. Of course, you will need water and maybe some energy bars to get you back up the canyon wall.

MIRADOR LA PIEDRA DEGETAU

This nest of boulders lies on a hilltop alongside the Ruta Panorámica (Hwy 7718 here) at Km 0.7, just south of Aibonito. Once the 'thinking place' of Ponce-born writer Federico Degetau y González, who became the island's first resident commissioner in Washington DC, from 1900 to 1904, this must have been a truly sublime place in its day, with views of the mountains, the Atlantic and the Caribbean. On a clear evening, you can actually see cruise ships leaving San Juan more than 20 miles to

the north and the lights of Ponce beginning to glow to the south.

Sadly, the natural beauty of the site has been marred by an architecturally horrific park and lookout tower that dwarf the actual rocks, which huddle like small pebbles to the side. Myriad picnic shelters, a playground and a paved parking lot further hinder the lyrical ruminations of potential poets. It's still an awe-inspiring view but one can't help feeling that the erstwhile Degetau must be turning in his grave.

LA CASILLA

This yellow 1880s lodge on the edge of town now serves as the **Centro Cultural Angel R Ortiz** (☎ 787-735-6093; Hwy 14 Km 51.8; admission free), a small museum maintained by the Puerto Rican Institute of Culture. The building was once part of a network of 27 such huts that housed so-called 'road keepers' (in this case, convicts). The lodge stands on the old 'pick and shovel' road built by slaves of Spanish landowners and later maintained by black convicts over the centuries. In the last years of Spanish colonization, decadent *criollo* landowners of Aibonito used to boast that the government had killed all of the town's people of African descent by forcing them to build the road. Phone ahead for reservations.

Festivals & Events

The **Festival de Flores** (Flower Festival) at Aibonito has grown into a major rite of summer during the last 30 years. Today it draws hundreds of commercial growers and amateur horticulturists and tens of thousands of flower lovers to see the town and the surrounding countryside ablaze with roses, carnations, lilies and begonias. Of course, along with the flowers there are food and craft stalls as well as the ubiquitous Puerto Rican beauty pageant. This event takes place at the end of June and often runs into the July 4 holiday (US Independence Day), so you had better plan to get here before the crowds or expect to spend your holiday in a traffic jam.

Sleeping & Eating

El Coquí Posada Familiar (☎ 787-735-3150; Rte 722 Km 7.3; r \$80-90) Not the first place in the world you'd expect to find an American-style motel but, there it is, perched over one of those ubiquitous Puerto Rican fast-food joints in the improbable mountain town of

Aibonito. The thing is, El Coquí is actually rather good, with amiable service, well-equipped rooms (fridges, microwaves and cable TV), huge beds, and facilities so clean you could safely perform brain surgery in the bathroom. Get a takeout from the adjacent mall and nestle down in bed with the Food channel on the tube. It's a good idea to call ahead to let them know you are coming. El Coquí can be hard to find and the reception is not always staffed.

La Piedra (☎ 787-735-1034; Hwy 7718 Km 0.7; dishes \$10-25; ☎ 11am-7pm Wed & Thu, 11am-10pm Fri-Sun) Cough too loudly here and you could end up on the local radio. La Piedra, situated next to the Piedra Degetau Park is a long-time mountain institution that also accommodates the recording studios of Radio Cumbre. Yes, that guy on the next table behind the thick pane of reinforced glass isn't a waiter wearing ear muffs; he's a DJ reaching out over the airwaves on 1470AM. Broadcasting credentials aside, La Piedra serves up some rather decent food to accompany its regular diet of music and topical chat – chicken in a tamarind sauce and chicken broth and *mofongo* (mashed plantains) are popular local favorites. Thanks to its prime Ruta Panorámica location it also acts as a nexus point to chicane weary motorists, Federico Degetau pilgrims (and poets), and local walking groups setting off into the Cañón de San Cristóbal.

our pick Tio Pepe's (☎ 787-735-9615; Hwy 723 Km 0.3; dishes \$12-25) Good old Uncle Joe's (*Tio* means 'uncle' and *Pepe* is a standard Spanish nickname for José) is a traditional Aibonito favorite stuck a few miles to the west of the town on a wooded knoll surrounded by trees and flowers. There's a well-placed sundeck, function room and regular musical entertainment from passing troubadours and trios. The decor is easygoing but elegant and you'll be served up good old home-style mountain cooking. Pass the *mofongo*.

TOP FIVE MOUNTAIN HIDEAWAYS

- Hacienda Gripiñas (p269)
- Jájome Terrace (p261)
- Hacienda Casa Taína (p269)
- Hacienda Margarita (p264)
- Hacienda Juanita (p272)

Getting There & Away

Públicos will take you to Aibonito from Cayey or Caguas for about \$3. These cities have connections to the Río Piedras district of San Juan for another \$3.

BARRANQUITAS

One of the most quintessential of Puerto Rico's lofty mountain towns, Barranquitas is a diminutive but picturesque settlement that clings like a toy village to the muddy slopes of the rain-lashed Cordillera Central. Lying on the north side of the Cañón de San Cristóbal, about a 20-minute drive out of Aibonito on Hwy 162 (or an even shorter detour off of the Ruta Panorámica via Hwy 143), the town is known locally as the Cuna de Próceres (Cradle of Great People) for its historical propensity to produce poets, politicians and governors of national (and international) distinction. Most notable in this list is the legendary Muñoz clan (see box opposite), Puerto Rico's substitute 'royal' family whose evocative mausoleum has assured Barranquitas' place as a pilgrimage site for both local patriots and curious visitors for a long time to come.

This is not, however, a fairy-tale village of architectural heirlooms. Hurricanes and fires have ravaged Barranquitas several times (the name translates to 'Place of Little Mud Slides'), and the oldest structures, such as the church, date only from the early 20th century. Barranquitas' charm lies in its narrow streets, tightly packed with shops and houses, which fall away into deep valleys on three sides of the plaza. Indeed, the view from the mountain road descending into town, when the afternoon sun sets the church tower ablaze above the shadowy and thickly settled central neighborhoods, is truly memorable.

Orientation

Streets are poorly marked and the general populace only uses descriptive addresses, but navigating Barranquitas is pretty easy. Rte 162 becomes Calle Rivera, the main street, and then after passing the plaza it becomes Rte 156 headed east (incidentally, downhill is always east).

Sights & Activities

CASA MUSEO LUIS MUÑOZ RIVERA

This house (☎ 787-857-0230; cnr Calles Muñoz Rivera & Padre Berrios; admission \$1; 🕒 8:30am-4:20pm Wed-Sun) honors the so-called grandfather of Puerto

Rico's autonomy movement and the 20th-century architect of the Puerto Rican commonwealth. This is where Luis Muñoz Rivera was born in 1859, and it contains a collection of furniture, letters, photographs and other memorabilia.

MAUSOLEO FAMILIA MUÑOZ RIVERA

Just south of the plaza is a **family tomb** (7 Calle Padre Berrios; admission free; 🕒 8:30am-4:20pm Tue-Sun) that holds the remains of Muñoz Rivera, his famous son Luis Muñoz Marín and their wives. Photographic displays at the tomb evoke the funeral of Luis Muñoz Marín.

MUSEO DE ARTE Y ANTROPOLOGÍA

Just to the north of the mausoleum, you'll find this small **museum** (☎ 787-857-2065; admission free), which displays the painting and sculpture of local artists. It's open by appointment and for exhibitions.

PLAZA DE RECREO DE BARRANQUITAS

Barranquitas' charming central plaza is overlooked by the **Parroquia de San Antonio de Padua**, a small church that was first constructed in 1804 but subsequently destroyed by two catastrophic hurricanes (the first of which wiped out the whole town). Rebuilt in 1933 in a quaint postcolonial style, the church was recently renovated and gleams amid the surrounding mountain greenery. The centerpiece of the plaza is a decorative wrought-iron gazebo/bandstand adorned with distinctive art nouveau flourishes and surrounded by four individual classical fountains. The 19th-century **alcaldía** (town hall) was undergoing renovation at the time of writing.

Sleeping & Eating

Hacienda Margarita (☎ 787-854-0414; Barrio Quebrada Grande, Sector Tres Caminos; r/ste \$75/100; 🍷 🍷) Destroyed in a 1998 hurricane, Hacienda Margarita has risen from the ruins with a modern two-story building housing 27 units, a pool, a restaurant and a bar (live local music Saturday nights). Rooms feature patios/balconies with views of the surrounding mountains. Some have rock walls and one has a Jacuzzi. Call the owners for directions, as you have to wind your way through a housing subdivision to find the hotel.

Heladería Los Próceres (☎ 787-857-4909; 21 Calle Muños Rivera; 🕒 9am-9pm) Situated a block from the plaza, this is a classic Puerto Rican

THE MUÑOZ CLAN

While America spawned the legendary Roosevelt dynasty, Puerto Rico has produced its very own influential establishment family, the iconic Muñoz clan, two generations of charismatic politicians who changed the course of the island's postcolonial history and set the commonwealth on the road to dazzling modernity.

Born in the mountain town of Barranquitas in 1859, Luis Muñoz Rivera was the son of a former town mayor and the grandson of an enterprising Spanish sea captain. With politics planted firmly in his DNA, he formed the Autonomist Party in 1887, an organization that called for Puerto Rican autonomy within the confines of the Spanish colonial system. Three years later he upped the ante further by founding a newspaper, *La Democracia*, to act as a journalistic mouthpiece for his cause.

With the Spanish driven out by a US military government in 1898, Muñoz Rivera switched his focus to the United States. Initially an advocate of outright independence, he dropped his claims in the early 1900s to ensure the replacement of the one-sided Foraker Act by the 1917 Jones Act and a more equitable relationship with the United States. Although Muñoz Rivera died a year before its implementation, he was considered instrumental in drafting the new laws (that granted US citizenship to Puerto Rican nationals) and is still revered as one of Puerto Rico's most important homegrown personalities. His mausoleum in Barranquitas remains an important and oft-visited historical monument.

A chip off his father's block, Rivera's son, Luis Muñoz Marín, was a prodigious poet and journalist who studied law in the United States. Returning to Puerto Rico in 1916, the younger Muñoz joined the socialist party and became a leading advocate for Puerto Rican independence. But, just like his father before him, Luis retracted on his initial promises during a spell as President of the Puerto Rican Senate in the mid-1940s in order to enlist US economic backing for an ambitious industrialization campaign codenamed 'Operation Bootstrap.'

In 1949, Muñoz Marín became Puerto Rico's first democratically elected governor, a position he held for an unprecedented four terms (until 1965). During his time in office, he orchestrated Puerto Rico's economic 'miracle,' transforming the island from a poverty-stricken agrarian society into a thriving economic powerhouse based on tourism, manufacturing and pharmaceuticals. Often touted as the 'Father of modern Puerto Rico,' Muñoz commanded huge popularity at home for his efforts in tackling poverty while, at the same time, extracting greater freedoms from the United States. Other more nationalistic voices depict him as a turncoat who was coerced out of his independence ideals by a belligerent US military establishment.

Today, the Muñoz legacy is still evident all over Puerto Rico, from the mausoleum and museums of Barranquitas to the island's Aeropuerto Internacional de Luis Muñoz Murín (LMM international airport), named in honor of its most celebrated native son.

ice-cream joint. Milkshakes and 100% natural ice creams are concocted from strawberry, papaya, tamarind and *bizcocho* (sweet pastry). They also serve nachos, tostados and coffee.

Entertainment

You can check out the upcoming program in the small theater at the **Centro Cultural Luis Muñoz Rivera** (☎ 787-857-0520; Plaza de Recreo) in the main square. The activity heats up here during the Feria Nacional de Artesanías (Artisan's Festival) in mid-July.

Getting There & Away

Públicos to and from surrounding towns stop on Calle Padre Berrios, three blocks

south of the plaza past the Mausoleo Familia Muñoz Rivera. You'll pay \$1 to go to Aibonito, or \$8 for the long (plan on four hours) roller-coaster ride to/from San Juan (Río Piedras terminal).

RESERVA FORESTAL TORO NEGRO

Covering 7000 acres and protecting some of Puerto Rico's highest peaks, the Toro Negro Reserve provides a quieter, less developed alternative to El Yunque. Bisected by some of the steepest and windiest sections of the Ruta Panorámica (Hwy 143 in this section), the area is often shrouded in mist and blanketed by a dense jungle foliage of primordial proportions. This is where

you come to truly escape the tourist throngs that frequent the coast. But don't expect El Yunque-style signage here. Toro Negro's facilities – which comprise a campground, a few trails and a recreation area – are spartan and often poorly staffed. Rather than just turning up, it's far better to plan ahead and enquire about current conditions at the DRNA in San Juan (p87), as mudslides are common. Properly prepared and with a decent topo map, you should be able to carve out some memorable DIY adventures in the mountains. Alternatively you can get up close and personal with the wilderness via an organized trip (p268).

The highlight of Toro Negro – in more ways than one – is Cerro de Punta which, at 4389ft, is Puerto Rico's highest peak. You can drive most of the way to the top on the Ruta Panorámica or, alternatively, attempt to bushwhack your way up from Jayuya on an infuriatingly unkempt (and vague) trail. Other notable peaks include Monte Jayuya and Cerro Maravilla, scene of a notorious 1978 murder case when two pro-independence activists were shot by Puerto Rican police.

Orientation & Information

The Ruta Panorámica (Hwy 143) is your artery to and from the forest, and it is none too wide. Honk your horn when approaching blind curves.

All of the forest's public facilities lie at the east end of the reserve in the Area Recreativa Doña Juana, clustered in the vicinity of the ranger station at Km 32.4 on Hwy 143.

The **ranger station** (☎ 787-867-3040; Hwy 143 Km 32.5; ☞ 8am-noon summer, irregular hrs winter) has blurry photocopies of park literature, and some of this material is extremely misleading. The trail map lacks a compass rose and has been rotated so north it is not at the top of the page.

You're not likely to get anything better in San Juan from the DRNA, nor is it easy to get USGS maps on the island without ordering through a bookstore. You can get a USGS map from your favorite map supplier in the USA or mail-order one on the island. Otherwise, the map in this book is the best you will find.

Barranquitas is an hour away, so you'd better come prepared. Bring plenty of food, water and some insect repellent.

Activities

AREA RECREATIVA DOÑA JUANA

This is the area of about 3 sq miles at the eastern end of the park surrounding the ranger station. You will find picnic sites, toilets, showers, the camping area and a half-dozen short trails branching off Hwy 143. Come here in the winter and the place will probably look empty and abandoned. One trail leads to the **swimming pool**, open in summer only. Three others lead to the observation tower, less than a half-mile south of the highway.

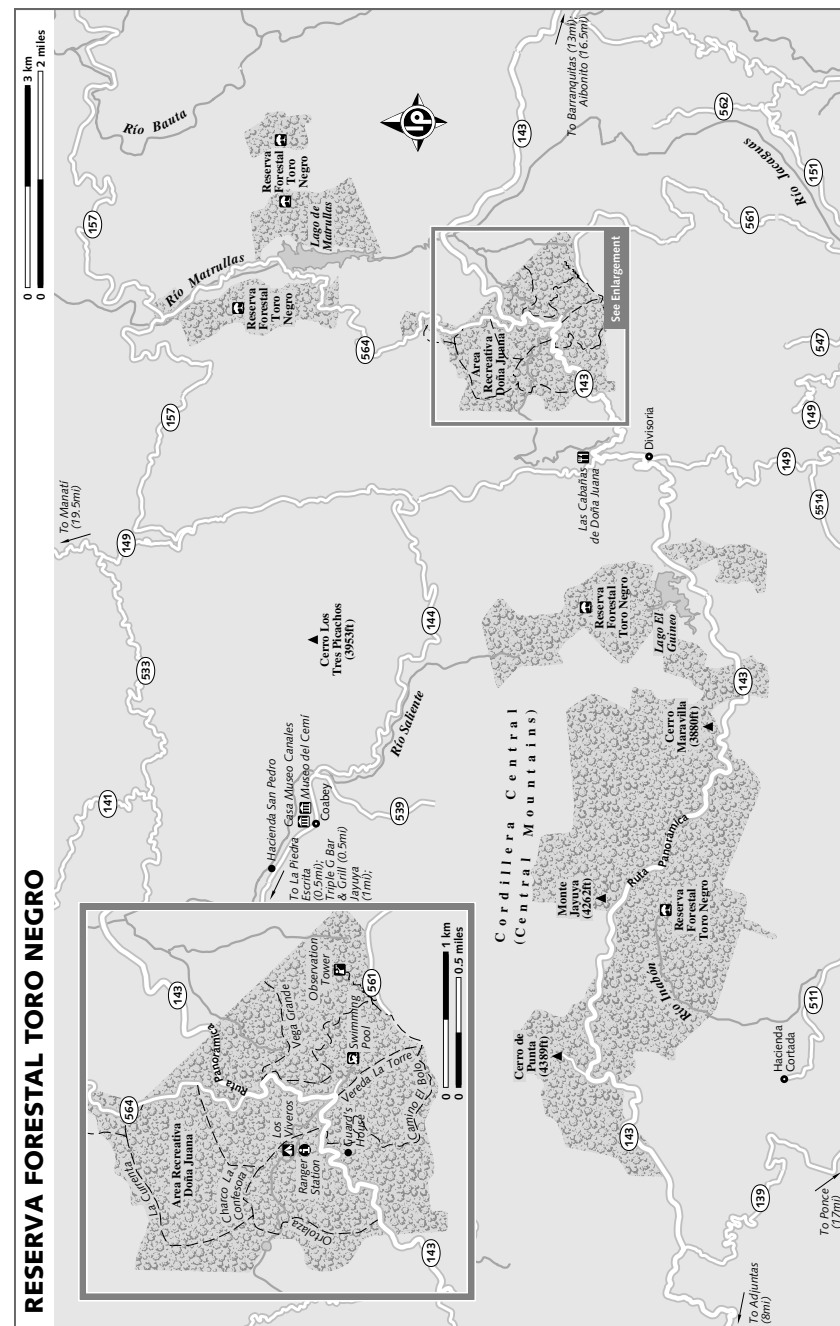
CERRO DE PUNTA

In an island where the car rules, it's hardly surprising to find that there's a road to the top of the commonwealth's highest peak. Rising to 4389ft, the summit of **Cerro de Punta** lies in the Toro Negro Forest Reserve just off Hwy 143 (the Ruta Panorámica). Although there's a narrow unmarked cement road to the peak itself, it is actually better to stop in a parking lot on the northern side of Hwy 143 and walk the last 1.5 miles. Not surprisingly, the spur road can be treacherous in bad weather, plus going by foot will enable you to soak up the sights and sounds of the surrounding jungle. The summit is dominated by communication towers, though the view north is stupendous – cloud permitting. Cerro de Punta lies in the west of the reserve, almost 10 miles of tortured driving from the Area Recreativa Doña Juana.

Perplexingly, hiking Cerro de Punta is a difficult and little-attempted feat. Technically, a trail leaves from behind the Hacienda Gripiñas (p269), close to the town of Jayuya. The problem is a) finding it, b) following it (it is badly signposted and in a poor state of repair), and c) getting a local to admit it is open (routinely they'll tell you it's closed or – even better – deny all knowledge of it). If you're determined to give it a shot, ask around at the Hacienda Gripiñas and be persistent. The trail is a steep two- to three-hour alpine grunt.

HIKING

There are approximately 11 miles of trails around Doña Juana, but mostly they are short walks to the swimming pool. Longer hikes are listed below, but always consult with the ranger station. Two other popular trails are Vega Grande and La Currenta.



Camino El Bolo

Across from the visitor's center, through the parking lot, you'll spot a narrow trail heading uphill. That's El Bolo, a 2.5-mile jaunt that takes you up to a mountain ridge and great southern views, and then crosses Vereda La Torre to take you even higher. Come down on the same path; circling around can get you lost real fast.

Vereda La Torre

A very popular path that starts in the Area Recreativa Doña Juana, La Torre goes up to an observation tower with some great views. The 2-mile trail starts at the picnic tables and slowly gets more hilly and rough as you ascend. You'll see a tiny road feed into Vereda after about 20 minutes of walking – that's Camino El Bolo. Continue ahead to the observation tower.

Charco La Confesora/Ortolaza

Leaving directly from the Los Viveros camping area, Charco La Confesora is a half-mile trek to a little bridge. You can keep going on the muddy trail next to it, which is Ortolaza, until you reach a grove of orange trees and Hwy 143, which will bring you back to Los Viveros. If you don't want to walk on the road, double back on the same path.

Tours

Acampa Nature Adventure Tours (Map pp86-7; ☎ 787-706-0695; www.acampapr.com; 1221 Av Jesús T Piñero, San Juan) offer one day hiking/adventure tours to the Toro Negro rainforest. The excursion involves hiking/scrambling along the Quebrada Rosa River, rappelling off a 60ft cliff and zip-lining 200ft across the treetops. Prices start at \$149 per person and include transportation from San Juan, equipment and lunch.

Sleeping & Eating

Los Viveros (Hwy 143 at Km 32.5; campsites per person \$4) This is the designated camping area, and it is in the forest just north of the ranger station in the Area Recreativa Doña Juana. There is space for 14 tents (pretty close together), and part of the area is often reserved for larger groups such as the Boy Scouts. You need a permit from the DRNA in San Juan (p87). Apply 15 days in advance. If you're lingering in this area of the Central Mountains, bring charcoal and lighter fluid so you can cook your food over one of the open-air picnic grills

at the Area Recreativa Doña Juana near the east end of Reserva Forestal Toro Negro.

Las Cabañas de Doña Juana (☎ 787-897-3981; Hwy 143 Km 30.5) This place is actually a rib joint of sorts on the main Ruta Panorámica. It serves all types of grilled meats for under \$10 in little open-air shacks by the roadside. Opening times are sporadic.

JAYUYA

Puerto Rico's unheralded mountain 'capital' lies a few kilometers north of the Ruta Panorámica in an isolated steep-sided valley overlooked by three of the island's highest peaks – Cerro de Punta, Cerro Tres Picachos, and Cerro Maravilla. Fiercely traditional and verdantly beautiful, the precipitous geography in this region has created a lost world where many of the island's old traditions live on. If you're on a 'mission impossible' to find Puerto Rico's last authentic *jibaro*, this is a good place to start.

Steeped in Taíno legend, the original settlement of Jayuya had little contact with the rest of the island until 1911, when it was declared a municipality. In 1950, the fledgling town gained notoriety when local nationalist leader Blanca Canales led a revolt against US occupation known as the 'Jayuya Uprising.' Rebels stormed the police station, burned down the post office and audaciously declared a Puerto Rican Republic from the town square. The rebellion lasted just three days before US planes bombed the town, causing widespread destruction, but Jayuya's independent spirit lived on. Either by coincidence or conscious municipal planning Jayuya remains one of the island's most un-Americanized towns.

The town attempts to keep Taíno Indian culture alive with a festival that includes music, food, games and a Miss Taíno pageant (see p279).

Sights

Located in a small park in the barrio of Coabey, the **Casa Museo Canales** (☎ 787-828-4094; Rte 144 Km 9.3; ☎ noon-4pm Sat & Sun) is a reconstructed 19th-century coffee *finca* (rural smallholding) with quintessential *criollo* features that once belonged to Jayuya's first major, Rosario Canales. Rosario spawned two famous offspring. His son, Nemesio, is recognized as a great Puerto Rican poet, playwright and political activist, while his daughter, Blanca Canales Torresola, became a

TACKLING THE RUTA PANARÓMICA

If there was a mantle for the world's windiest road, Puerto Rico's Ruta Panarómica would surely be in the reckoning. Running the length of the island from Yabucoa in the east to Mayagüez in the west, this narrow but spectacular scenic highway has more twists and turns than a cagey Puerto Rican boxing champ, and is almost as dangerous.

Hit the mountain foothills somewhere east of Maricao and distances suddenly become mysteriously elongated as the island appears to double in size. Drives that would normally take 20 minutes on the coast quickly turn into two- to three-hour road trips with only a few brief glimpses of the faraway ocean reminding you that you haven't actually disappeared into the Amazonian jungle. But, first timers beware. Driving in these parts is no Sunday afternoon dawdle. Maneuvering deftly through dense rainforest and sleepy mountain villages, the Ruta's roadsides are populated by innumerable posses of stray dogs, escaped chickens, straw-hatted *jibaros* and – more disturbingly – the burnt-out wrecks of several hundred abandoned cars. The latter sight should be enough to remind wannabe speed-freaks to steer carefully at all times (at no more than 25mph). Unfortunately, the locals aren't always so fastidious, often taking the precarious hills and tricky chicanes at 35mph or more. Drive defensively and be on your guard.

Motoring logistics aside, the Ruta's premier draw card is its bucolic authenticity and soothing sense of isolation. In marked contrast to the car chaos that plagues the coast, the central mountains exist in a different world. You can get lost here for days and never set eyes on a golf course or a fast-food joint. For an unhurried trip, reserve a minimum of three days and be prepared for plenty of stop-offs. See also Itineraries, p27.

notorious figure in the Puerto Rican nationalist movement when she led an independence revolt against the American-backed authorities in Jayuya in 1950. The house displays traditional antiques and has a pleasant aspect in the shadow of the surrounding mountains.

Across the park, the **Museo del Cemí** (☎ 787-828-1241; Rte 144 Km 9.2; ☎ 9am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) is housed in what is perhaps the oddest building on the island. Designed by Río Piedras architect, Efrén Badia Cabrera, the weird fish-like structure is supposed to represent a gigantic *Cemí* or native talisman. The exhibits inside are made up mostly of Taíno artifacts and photos of local petroglyphs.

La Piedra Escrita (Rte 144 Km 7.3) is supposedly one of the island's best preserved native petroglyphs carved on a large rock in the middle of the Río Saliente. Forming a natural bathing pool, it has become a popular stopping-off point for curious (and hot) travelers. There's a small car park and restaurant nearby (p270).

Hacienda San Pedro (☎ 787-615-3083; Rte 144 Km 8.4; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun) is a small, working coffee farm with an attached museum and tasting room where you can get an intimate tour of the whole coffee-making process from green bean to dark-roast espresso. The gourmet blends served here are some of the best brews you'll taste anywhere.

Rustically packaged beans are sold on-site and there's a small museum.

Sleeping & Eating

Posada Jayuya (☎ 787-828-7250; 49 Guillermo Esteves; s/d incl breakfast \$69/79; ☎ ☎) This solid place in the town center is a good journeyman sleeper with 27 rooms that include TVs and refrigerators, and there's a pancake breakfast. The air-con unit might sound like the inside of a 1956 Buick, but at least it'll work, and the passable downstairs restaurant sometimes hosts live music.

Hacienda Casa Taína (☎ 787-828-2270; www.hacienda casataina.com; Hwy 528 Km 1.8; s/d \$80/150; ☎ ☎) Not two hours out of San Juan, but you could quite conceivably be in a different world. Isolated Casa Taína revitalizes Jayuya's independent spirit with its unique architecture and price-less tranquility. No global conglomerate has colonized this small corner of the island yet – and hopefully never will. Instead, here amid the exotic statues, trickling fountains and mountain greenery you can find the sweet serendipity which other places so often lack, with nary a phone, TV or slot machine to bother you. The on-site restaurant's a classic.

our pick **Hacienda Gripiñas** (☎ 787-828-1717; www.haciendagripinas.com; Hwy 527 Km 2.5; s/d \$90/155; ☎ ☎) In-the-know back-road travelers face off against jaded big resort escapes at Hacienda

Gripiñas, another beautifully restored coffee hacienda dating from 1858 that is nestled picturesquely in the shadow of Cerro de Punta in the bucolic Jayuya valley. Among the strangely-shaped antiques and framed coffee posters lie more than a few nods to modern taste – a couple of swimming pools, for instance. But don't expect coastal-style luxury. This place is over 150 years old and remains true to its historical ethos. Bring a good book, throw away your alarm clock and fall asleep to a fine chorus of croaking frogs.

Triple G Bar & Grill (☎ 787-828-9999; Hwy 144 Km 7.3) A small thatched-roof restaurant in the parking lot at La Piedra Escrita (p269), this place serves up the best *comida criolla* in the valley.

ADJUNTAS

pop 20,000

Adjuntas goes by many exotic pseudonyms. Some call it the 'Switzerland of Puerto Rico'; others, the 'town of the sleeping giant' (due to the silhouettes of surrounding mountains); more still, the island's juicy 'citron capital.' But while it's certainly no Geneva in terms of fancy architecture and lavish rock-star appeal, this small mountainside town of 20,000 wedged into the Cordillera Central has quietly earned its environmental credentials. After the discovery of copper in the area in the 1960s, local community groups fought successfully to prevent their cool subtropical jungle haven from being turned into a huge open-cast mining pit. Instead, Adjuntas today has become something of an environmental steward whose livelihood remains rooted in bananas, coffee and citrus fruits.

Marking the spot where one of the island's major north-south arteries (Hwys 123 and 10) crests the Central Mountains, Adjuntas is a traffic bottleneck in the summer months. If you venture into town at this time, beware of the complicated one-way system and allow plenty of time for delays.

One of the main attractions in this area is the Bosque Estatal de Guilarte, with the seventh-highest peak on the island and a lake and cabins for rusticators.

Sights

You can visit the locally organized environmental group **Casa Pueblo** (☎ 787-829-4842; www.casapueblo.org; 30 Rodolfo Gonzáles; donation \$2; ☎ 8am-4pm) in their pastel-pink Adjuntas HQ. Visits

include a talk on the body's development and environmental achievements, along with a tour of the library, photo exhibition, artisan's shop, butterfly garden and alternative energy schemes. Phone ahead to let them know you're coming.

Sleeping

Monte Río Hotel (☎ 787-829-3705; 18 Calle Cesar Gonzales; r \$60-90; ☎) This no-frills town-center hotel stands about a mile from the Ruta Panorámica, one block south of the plaza of Adjuntas. There are 26 rooms with fresh air, mountain views and an Olympic pool. The restaurant and bar on the 1st floor are as good as they come in this town, with *comida criolla* dishes starting at less than \$10.

Parador Villas de Sotomayor (☎ 787-829-1717; www.welcome.to/villas; Hwy 123/10 Km 36.3; r \$65-\$130; ☎) You're not exactly spoilt for choice in the Adjuntas area when it comes to finding accommodation, but the Sotomayor will satisfy most overnighters with its 26 solid but slightly run-down villas arranged around a central swimming pool, basketball courts, cooking grills, and horseback riding. While, it is extremely popular with island families throughout the summer, don't be fooled by the Parador's accompanying literature which claims that it's the 'premier eco-tourism hotel in the Caribbean.' An overstatement, to say the least.

BOSQUE ESTATAL DE GUILARTE

This forest, west of Adjuntas, actually consists of a number of parcels of land totaling about 3600 acres. Most of it is rainforest dominated by sierra palms. Coming from the east, you first see Lago Garzas, a popular fishing site. West of the lake, the road rises toward the park's ranger station, near the intersection of Hwy 518 and Hwy 131. Here you will find a picnic area with shelters, cooking grills and toilets. There is also a trail that leads to the top of Monte Guilarte (3950ft) and five cabins you can rent for overnight stays.

The **DRNA** (☎ 787-829-5767, 787-724-3647; cabins \$20) maintains the basic cabins, toilets and shower facilities (no camping is allowed in the Bosque). Each cabin sleeps up to six; cooking facilities are outdoors and there's no electricity. You must bring all of your own gear, including bedding. Make your reservations 15 days in advance with the DRNA at its offices in San Juan (p87). You can make an open

reservation, which allows you flexibility with dates. Camping is not permitted in Guilarte.

MARICAO

pop 6200

With a population of fewer than 7000 citizens, Maricao is the smallest municipality on the main island of Puerto Rico, and a gem of a mountain retreat near the western end of the Ruta Panorámica. This is a town of little commerce, with rushing streams, gorges, bridges, terraced houses, switchback roads, and weather so cool and damp that some houses have stone fireplaces to take the nip out of the air. Outside the town, you will find dramatic vistas, coffee plantations and the largest state forest in Puerto Rico, the Bosque Estatal de Maricao.

With its peaks, dark forests and fog, Maricao is just the kind of place in which legends take root.

Admirers of Maricao claim that it was the strong coffee grown here that woke up the devil on the island. Another story claims that 2000 Taíno survived here into the 19th century, centuries after the last native Puerto Ricans were thought to have disappeared.

Yet another myth tells how the town takes its name from the demise of a local Taíno princess, María. According to legend, María was in love with a Spanish conquistador, and she told her beloved of Taíno plans to attack the local Spanish encampment. When the Taíno discovered her treachery, the princess was tortured to death. The Spanish honored her by naming the town after a fusion of María's name and the suffix 'cao' (from *sacrificio*) to signify her sacrifice for love. Less romantic scholars say the town's name comes from the Taíno name for a local tree.

Stopping here for a day or two is probably as close as a traveler can come to experiencing the charms of the legendary *jibaro*'s existence.

Maricao hosts a popular coffee harvest festival in mid-February, with crafts and traditional coffee-making demonstrations.

Orientation

In addition to approaching Maricao from the east or west on the Ruta Panorámica, you can get here by heading south on Hwy 119 from San Sebastián (then going east on the Ruta Panorámica to Maricao; about two hours' drive) or driving north from Sabana Grande

on Hwy 120 (about one hour's drive). Both routes involve a spectacular climb into the mountains on twisting roads.

Sights & Activities

BOSQUE ESTATAL DE MARICAO

This forest of more than 10,000 acres lies along the Ruta Panorámica south of Maricao, and the drive is spectacular, with sharp curves snaking over ridges as the mountainsides fall away into steep valleys. As you make this drive, you will see places to pull your car off the road at trailheads that lead into the woods or traverse down steep inclines.

Curiously, few of the trails are maintained or mapped by the DRNA. In fact, guides to Bosque Estatal de Maricao are difficult to come by, both at the department's office in San Juan and in Maricao. So if you are coming here to hike, get yourself a topo map of the area from a map supplier in the USA, or ask an island bookstore to order one from the USGS.

While the landscape is generally categorized as high-mountain rainforest, scientists note that the 845 species of plant here are less 'exuberant' than they are in a tropical rainforest such as El Yunque. Birds are the most studied fauna here, with 44 identified species. Tanagers, cuckoos and warblers are some of the remarkable types spotted in the forest.

LOS VIVEROS

Follow the signs south out of the center of Maricao to **Los Viveros** (Fish Hatcheries; ☎ 787-838-3710; Hwy 410; admission free; ☎ 8:30-11:30am & 1-3:30pm Thu-Sun). Or take the short trail off Hwy 120 if you want to see the buildings and streamside reservoirs where the commonwealth raises the tilapia and bass that stock the island's freshwater lakes. To say the least, this place is a quiet attraction. There is little to see here other than thousands of small fish, little to hear besides the sounds of the surrounding woods, birdsong and the rush of running water. But all this is totally in keeping with the ambience of Maricao. Call if you want a tour.

Sleeping & Eating

Parque Ecológico Monte de Estado en Maricao (☎ 787-873-5632, reservations 787-622-5200; Hwy 120 Km 13.1; cabins \$60; ☎) East of Maricao, this well-positioned campground has 24 remodeled cabins to rent in the state forest. Cabin sizes vary from three-person (\$15) to six-person

(\$30) to 12-person (\$55) and most have refrigerators, fireplaces and hot water. The area also has a swimming pool, basketball courts, restrooms, showers and an observation tower. Make reservations as far in advance as possible by calling the Compañía de Parques Nacionales (opposite) in San Juan.

our pick **Hacienda Juanita** (☎ 787-838-2550; www.haciendajuanita.com; Hwy 105 Km 23.5; s/d \$100/130; 📍) Ah...history and the natural world coexisting in perfect harmony. Add a pinch of exotic evening entertainment and stir in some aromatic Arábica coffee and you've got an almost perfect brew. If you really want a taste of authentic *jibaro* lifestyle, come to the Hacienda Juanita, about 2 miles west of Maricao. Dating

from 1834, this working coffee plantation with 21 units was also one of Puerto Rico's earliest *paradores* (established in 1976). There's a lovely pool here, a tennis court, short trails through foliage-rich grounds and a Mesón Gastronómico restaurant that hosts weekly music shows. The defining factor, however, is the setting which, like the hacienda itself, is rustic and unmolested by the passage of time.

Getting There & Away

Público vans leave the town's plaza on the Maricao–Mayagüez run and charge \$4. As is usually the case, the vans leave when they are full or on the driver's whim.