# History

Puerto Rico occupies a crux position in the history of the American continent. Colonized by Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de León in 1508, the island contains the oldest European-founded settlement under US jurisdiction. Long before Sir Walter Raleigh and the Pilgrim Fathers had tested the waters of the tempestuous Atlantic, the first granite ramparts of El Morro fort in Old San Juan had been chiseled deftly into place. Nearly 500 years later, they're still there.

As countless historical writers have noted, Puerto Rico is flavored with contrast and contradiction, a blending of cultures and nations that is highly eclectic and not easy to pigeonhole. While technically a US commonwealth, some natives still feel that the island should be a full-blown American state, others an independent nation, and still more, a compromise solution that is neither of the above. Then there is the exotic cultural breakdown: the caustic blending of ancient Taíno with brutally exploited Africans into a historical melting pot that contained Spanish, French, Cuban, Dominican and even Lebanese elements. What you're left with is the essence of modern Puerto Rico, a proud Caribbean nation with a distinctly Latin temperament that also happens to be good friends with the USA.

Read a quick but refreshingly succinct overview of Puerto Rican history in five easy-to-decipher chapters on www.solboricua.com.

## TAÍNO CULTURE

The Taíno were an Arawakan Indian group who inhabited Puerto Rico and the other Greater Antilles (Cuba, Hispaniola and Jamaica) at the time of Columbus' arrival in 1493. Arawaks had first started settling on the island around AD 700, following a gradual migration north from the Orinoco River delta in present-day Venezuela, and by the year 1000 a distinctive Taíno culture had begun to emerge based on agriculture, fishing, hunting and the production of cassava bread. Taíno believed in a complex religious cosmology and lived in small, round wooden huts called *bohios* where they smoked *cohibas* (cigars) and slept in *hamacas* (hammocks). They called their newly adopted island Borinquen (Land of the Noble Lord) and practiced basic crafts such as pottery, basket weaving and wood carving. The native society was relatively democratic and organized around a system of *caciques* (chiefs). Below the *caciques* was a rank of medicine men, subchiefs and, below them, the workers. At the time of Ponce de León's arrival in 1508, the chief of all chiefs was a *cacique* called Agüeybana who presided over Borinquen's largest settlement sited on the Guayanilla River near present-day Guánica.

*The Taínos: The Rise and Decline of the People Who Greeted Columbus,* by Irving Rouse, offers a whole book's worth of information on a topic that usually only gets a couple of paragraphs.

For leisure, the Taíno built several ceremonial ball parks where they played a soccer-like game with a rubber ball between opposing teams of 10 to 30 players. Winning was supposed to ensure good health and a favorable

*Juan Ponce de Leon and the Spanish Discovery of Puerto Rico and Florida,* by Robert H Fuson, sheds some light on the man who founded modern Puerto Rico.

### TIMELINE

**2000 BC**

Punto Ferro Man, a native from the Ortoiroid culture that had migrated north from the Orinoco basin in present-day Venezuela, lives on the island of Vieques.

**430–250 BC**

The Ortoiroids are gradually displaced by the Saladoids, a horticultural people skilled in the art of pottery. Saladoids spoke an Awarak Indian language and laid the early building blocks for a singular Caribbean culture.

**1000**

The Taíno – who arrived in a second migratory wave from the Orinoco River basin – emerge as the island's dominant culture; they name the island Boriken, meaning 'the Great Land of the Valiant and Noble Lord'.

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**JUAN PONCE DE LEÓN**

Soldier, sailor, governor, dreamer and politician, the life story of Juan Ponce de León reads like a *Who's Who* of late-15th- and early-16th-century maritime exploration. Aside from founding the Spanish colony of Puerto Rico in 1508, this daring, yet often short-sighted, Spanish adventurer partook in Columbus' second trans-Atlantic voyage, charted large tracts of the Bahamas, discovered the existence of the Gulf Stream, and was the first recorded European to set foot in what is now known as Florida.

Born in Valladolid, Spain, in 1460, de León served his military apprenticeship fighting against the Moors during the Christian reconquest of Granada in 1492. The following year he arrived in the New World on Columbus' second expedition and settled on the island of Hispaniola where he was proclaimed deputy governor of the province of Higüey after ruthlessly suppressing a native revolt. Following Columbus' death in 1506, the Spanish crown asked de León to lead the colonization of Borinquen, an island first explored by Columbus in 1493. De León landed on the south coast in 1508 with five ships and 200 people and established the first settlement in Caparra, a few miles inland from present-day San Juan.

Despite initially currying favor with the native Taíno Indians, the Spaniard's relationship with his new neighbors quickly deteriorated. After being made governor of Puerto Rico in 1509, de León ruthlessly exploited the Taíno in his avaricious search for gold, and his position and reputation gradually suffered as a result. Finally in 1512, after much legal wrangling, the explorer was removed from his governor's post in favor of Columbus' son, Diego, before being given title to explore the lands north of Cuba.

De León set sail with three ships in 1513, and tracked north in search of the legendary healing waters of the fountain of youth. According to the natives of Borinquen, the waters were hidden in a place known as Bimini (in the Bahamas), but de León, after circumnavigating the archipelago, elected to divert northwest and, in the process, inadvertently 'discovered' Florida.

After several forays along Florida's coast (which de León thought was an island), the explorer returned to Puerto Rico via Cuba and Guadalupe in 1515 and stayed there for the next six years. In 1521 de León organized another trip to Florida with two ships and 200 people. This time they landed on the west coast of Florida near the Caloosahatchee River but were quickly beaten back by Calusa Indians. Wounded in the thigh by a poisoned arrow, de León was shipped back to Havana where he died in July 1521. His remains were returned to Puerto Rico where they are interred in the Catedral de San Juan (p94).

harvest. At Tibes near Ponce in the south, and at Caguana near Utuadu in the north, archaeologists have discovered and preserved these impressive courts that were marked by rows of massive stone blocks. Here, native rituals were practiced – tribal events that brought the communities together and kept the collective spiritual and social memory alive. Drums made from hollow trunks, as well as maracas and *güiros,* provided the percussive accompaniment – instruments that still fill the sounds of Puerto Rican traditional and popular music today.

Approximately 100 years before the arrival of the Spanish, Taíno culture was challenged by the Caribs, a fierce and warlike tribe from South America who raided Taíno villages in search of slaves and fodder for their cannibalistic rites. The simmering tensions that developed between the Taíno and Caribs were still very much in evidence when Ponce de León took possession of the island in 1508 and was probably misinterpreted by the Spanish as Taíno aggression. In reality the Taíno were a friendly, sedentary people who put up little initial resistance to the new colonizers and ultimately paid a huge price.

Testimonies vary as to how many Taíno inhabited Borinquen at the time of the Spanish invasion, though most anthropologists place the number between 20,000 and 50,000. In 1515 – after nearly a decade of maltreatment, a failed rebellion, disease and virtual slavery – only about 4000 remained. Thirty years later, a Spanish bishop put the number at 60. Some historians have claimed that a small group of Taíno escaped the 16th-century genocide and hid in Puerto Rico's central mountains where they survived until the early 19th century, but the claims have no proof and are impossible to substantiate.

While Taíno blood may have all but disappeared in modern Puerto Rico, the native traditions live on. Puerto Rican Spanish is dotted with traditional native words such as yucca (a root vegetable), iguana, *manatí* (manatee – a sea mammal), maracas and *Ceiba* (Puerto Rico's national tree); and some terms have even found their way into modern English: think *huracan* for hurricane and *hamaca* for hammock. Musically, the Taíno contributed the maracas and the *güiro* to modern percussion, while gastronomically their heavy use of root vegetables has found its way into traditional *comida criolla* (Puerto Rican cuisine).

Get the lowdown on San Juan's historic forts on the US National Park Service official website at www.nps.gov/saju.

## THE INVADERS

In the golden age of piracy, Puerto Rico was revered by booty-seeking buccaneers like no other Spanish port. Everyone from daring British dandy Francis Drake to common cutthroats such as Blackbeard tried their luck against San Juan's formidable defenses. Few were successful.

Alexander O'Reilly was an Irish-born Spanish Field Marshal who became known as the 'Father of the Puerto Rican Militia' for his military training methods and crucial work to strengthen San Juan's beleaguered forts in the 1760s.

One of the colony's earliest invaders, Francis Drake first arrived in Puerto Rico in 1595 in pursuit of a stricken Spanish galleon – holding two million gold ducats – that had taken shelter in San Juan harbor. While the plucky Brit may have singed the king of Spain's beard in Cádiz a decade earlier, the Spaniards quickly got their own back in Puerto Rico when they fired a cannonball into Drake's cabin, killing two of his men, and – allegedly – shooting the great explorer's stool from underneath him. Drake, who had initiated his attack by burning a dozen Spanish frigates in the harbor, was forced to make a hasty retreat and left the island empty-handed. He died the following year of dysentery in Panama.

The first black person to arrive in Puerto Rico was Juan Garrido, a conquistador allied to Juan Ponce de León. He first set foot on the island in 1509.

On a stinging revenge mission, San Juan was attacked by the British navy again three years later under the command of the third earl of Cumberland.

**1493**

On November 19, during his second voyage to the New World, Christopher Columbus lands in Puerto Rico somewhere on the west coast. He christens the island *San Juan Bautista* in honor of St John the Baptist.

**1508**

Juan Ponce de León leads Spanish colonists to Puerto Rico in search of gold. He establishes the island's first colony – Caparra – in the north on swampy land close to San Juan harbor.

**1509**

Ponce de León is named the first governor of San Juan Bautista (Puerto Rico) after the Spanish authorities refuse to grant Columbus' son, Diego, rights to the lands discovered by his (recently deceased) father.

**1511**

Subjected to brutal exploitation by the Spanish, the Taíno stage their first unsuccessful revolt against their new overlords. Ponce de León is subsequently replaced as governor in favor of Diego Columbus.

**1513**

Following the decimation of the local Indian population through disease and outright slaughter, the first West African slaves arrive on the island to work in the new economy.

**1521**

The city of San Juan is founded in its present site and the island changes its name from San Juan Bautista to Puerto Rico.

Learning from Drake's mistakes, Cumberland's 1700-strong army landed in what is now Condado and advanced upon the city from the east, crossing into San Juan via the San Antonio Bridge. After a short battle with Spanish forces, the city surrendered and the British occupied it for the next 10 weeks, before a dysentery epidemic hit and forced an ignominious withdrawal.

In response to frequent British incursions, San Juan's defensive walls were repeatedly strengthened in the early 17th century, a measure that allowed the Spanish to successfully repel an ambitious attack by the Netherlands in 1625. Acting under the command of Captain Boudewijn Hendricksz, the Dutch fired over 4000 cannonballs into the city walls before landing 2000 men at La Puntilla. Although the invaders managed to occupy the city temporarily and even break into the Fortaleza palace, the Spanish continued to hold El Morro fort and, after less than a month, with Puerto Rican reinforcements arriving, Hendricksz beat a hasty retreat, razing the city as he went.

San Juan's second great fort, San Cristóbal, was inaugurated in the 1630s and the city saw no more major attacks for almost two centuries. It wasn't until 1797 that the British, at war again with the Spanish, tried their luck one last time. The armada, which consisted of over 60 ships and 10,000 men, was one of the largest invasion forces ever to take on the Spanish in the American territories, but after two weeks of often vicious fighting, the British commander Sir Ralph Abercromby withdrew in exasperation. Noble in defeat, Abercromby reported that San Juan could have resisted an attack force 10 times greater than the British had used.

*Puerto Rico: The Four Storeyed Country and Other Essays,* by José Luis González (translated by Gerald Guinness), is a compelling treatise on the importance of African and mestizo peoples in the development of Puerto Rican culture.

*Mi Puerto Rico,* directed by Sharon Simon, contains revelatory stories by poets, abolitionists, revolutionaries and politicians in a fabulous documentary touching on the island's African, Taíno and European ancestry.

*The History of Puerto Rico: From the Spanish Discovery to the American Occupation,* by RA Van Middeldyk, is one of the newest and most comprehensive looks at the island's colonial past.

## AFRICAN CULTURE

As it was throughout the Caribbean, slavery was employed to develop the Puerto Rican economy, primarily in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The two types of slaves that were brought to the island – *ladinos,* born and acculturated in Spain, and *bozales* and Yoruba people, brought from Africa – were first used to mine the limited gold and silver deposits. Once these deposits were depleted, the slaves were used primarily in the sugarcane industry and other areas of agriculture, predominantly in the coastal areas of the island. While the rest of the population experienced normal growth due to reproduction and voluntary migration, the slave population rose much faster throughout the late 18th century, with census figures in 1765 showing the slave population was 5400. By 1830 the slave population had increased to more than 31,000, mainly due to the introduction of new slaves directly from Africa and other parts of the Caribbean. However, despite these increases, by 1795 the majority (more than 60%) of black and mulatto people living in Puerto Rico were free. This trend, unusual for the Caribbean at the time, is often attributed to the island's asylum policy, which granted freedom to fugitive slaves from throughout the region.



There is considerable historic debate as to how slaves were actually treated on the large sugarcane estates. Some accounts claim conditions were better in Puerto Rico than in other colonies due to Spain's relatively strict slave code, which provided more protections and benefits than elsewhere. Other studies discount this argument, pointing to evidence of runaway slaves who preferred living as fugitives to living on a plantation. Regardless, by the late 1830s, as it became increasingly apparent that slavery was not going to be justifiable for much longer, plantation owners began enacting measures guaranteeing cheap access to other laborers – *jornaleros.* The landed sugar elite utilized both low-wage *jornaleros* and slaves to generate wealth for themselves and grow the island's economy. In both cases, the exploitation by European whites of African- and island-born blacks and mulattos led to the perpetuation of racial myths that allowed for the continuation of social inequities and racism.

Many slave uprisings occurred on the island, some larger than others. Later this resistance by the black population ran parallel with a political movement for emancipation led by Julio Vizcarrondo, a Puerto Rican abolitionist living in Spain, as well as island-based political leaders such as Segundo Ruiz Belvis, Roman Baldorioty de Castro and Ramón Emeterio Betances. After years of struggle, the Spanish National Assembly abolished slavery on March 22, 1873.

Today the African presence in Puerto Rican culture is striking, described by the late Puerto Rican cultural and social writer Jose Luis González as *el primer piso,* or 'the first floor' of Puerto Rican culture. In its music, art and religious icons, African traditions are powerfully felt. And despite the racial stereotypes and inequalities that continue to exist on the island and within the Puerto Rican diaspora, Puerto Rico will always be considered an Afro-Indigenous-Caribbean experience.

In 1816 the great South American liberator, Simón Bolívar, stopped briefly in Vieques for an unplanned visit while fleeing defeat in Venezuela. It was the only time he would set foot on Puerto Rican soil.

The father of the Puerto Rican Independence movement, Ramón Emeterio Betances was also a successful surgeon and ophthalmologist who stamped out a critical cholera epidemic that broke out in Mayagüez in 1856.

## FROM SPANISH COLONY TO AMERICAN COMMONWEALTH

As two Greater Antilles islands ruled by Spain for nearly four centuries, Cuba and Puerto Rico share a remarkably similar history. Both were colonized in the early 1500s, both retain vestiges of their indigenous Taíno culture, both were heavily influenced by the African slave trade (a cultural stimulant that contributed to their unique hybrid music and distinct Afro-Christian religious beliefs) and both remained Spanish colonies a good 80 years after the rest of Latin America had declared independence. The irony, of course, lies in their different paths post 1898 and the fact that today, Puerto Rico remains a staunch US ally, whereas Cuba is 'public enemy number one', a former Soviet satellite state that has been ostracized with the most draconian (and longest) trade embargo in modern history. So what happened?

The total number of American soldiers killed in Puerto Rico during the Spanish-American War of 1898 was four.

**1528**

The French sack and burn the new west coast settlement of San Germán, ushering in over two and a half centuries of piracy and foreign competition.

**1595**

British privateer Sir Francis Drake attempts to attack and loot San Juan with 26 ships but is repelled by the city's formidable defenses.

**1598**

On a revenge mission, George Clifford, earl of Cumberland, lands in Santurce and attacks San Juan by land. He occupies the city for several months before abandoning it due to an outbreak of dysentery.

**1625**

The Dutch navy besieges the city of San Juan and burns it to the ground, but they are prevented from taking total control by Spanish forces manning the fortifications in El Morro.

**1797**

A third and final attempt by the British to take San Juan is led by General Abercromby during the Seven Years War, but the Spanish once again stand firm.

**1825**

Spanish authorities hire the American schooner *Grampus* to capture 'El Pirata Cofresí', Puerto Rico's nautical Robin Hood, who robbed rich foreign ships to feed the poor of Cabo Rojo; he is executed in El Morro fort.

## Two Wings of the Same Dove

While the bulk of Spain's American colonies rose up under the leadership of Simón Bolívar in the 1820s, Puerto Rico and Cuba's conservative Creole landowners, rich on sugar and spice and all things nice, elected to stay put – at least for the time being. But, as economic conditions worsened and slavery came to be seen as an ailing colonial anachronism, the mood started to change.

Former leader of the Puerto Rican Nationalist party, Pedro Albizu Campos was of African, Taíno and Basque descent. He graduated from Harvard University with a law degree in 1921 and was fluent in eight languages.

During the 1860s, links were formed between nationalists and revolutionaries on both islands, united by the same language and inspired by a common Spanish foe. The cultural interchange worked both ways. Great thinkers such as Cuban national hero José Martí drew a lot of his early inspiration from Puerto Rican surgeon and nationalist Ramón Emeterio Betances, while Mayagüez-born general Juan Rius Rivera later went on to command the Cuban Liberation Army in the 1895–98 war against the Spanish.

Ironically it was the Puerto Rican nationalists who acted first, proclaiming the abortive Grito de Lares (see opposite) in 1868. Following their lead two weeks later, Cuba's machete-wielding *mambises* (19th-century Cuban independence fighters) unleashed their own independence cry and, with wider grassroots support and better leadership, were able to wage a brutal, though ultimately unsuccessful, 10-year war against the Spanish.

While the rapid defeat in Puerto Rico was a major political setback for the nationalist movement, all was not yet lost. Igniting a second Cuban-Spanish Independence War in 1895, José Martí proclaimed that Cuba and Puerto Rico still stood shoulder to shoulder as 'two wings of the same dove' and, had it not been for the timely intervention of the Americans in 1898 when the Spanish were almost defeated, history could have been very different.

Cuba and Puerto Rico's political divergence began in 1900 when the US Congress passed the Foraker Act (1900), making Puerto Rico the first unincorporated territory of the US. Cuba meanwhile, thanks to the so-called Teller Amendment (passed through Congress before the Spanish-American War had started), gained nominal independence with some strings attached in 1902.

Ronald Fernandez' *The Disenchanted Island: Puerto Rico and the United States in the 20th Century* explores the complicated relationship between the island and the US.

Resistance to the new arrangement in Puerto Rico was spearheaded by the Partido Unión de Puerto Rico (Union Party), which for years had been calling for a resolution to their lack of fundamental democratic rights. The Union Party was led by Luis Muñoz Rivera, one of the most important political figures in the history of Puerto Rico. But unlike his more radical Cuban contemporaries, such as José Martí and – later on – Fidel Castro, Muñoz Rivera was a diplomat who was willing to compromise with the US on key issues. Under pressure from President Woodrow Wilson he ultimately ceded on his demand for outright independence in favor of greater autonomy via an amendment to the Foraker Act.



### GRITO DE LARES

As well as boasting the world's largest radio telescope and its youngest ever boxing champion, Puerto Rico also holds the dubious distinction of having created history's shortest-lived republic. The independent republic of Puerto Rico, proclaimed during the abortive Grito de Lares (Cry of Lares) in 1868, lasted slightly less than 24 hours.

Worn down by slavery, high taxes and the asphyxiating grip of Spain's militaristic rulers, independence advocates in the Caribbean colonies of Puerto Rico and Cuba were in the ascendancy throughout the 1850s and '60s. Ironically, it was the Puerto Ricans who acted first. Under the auspices of exiled intellectual and physician Dr Ramón Emeterio Betances, an insurrection was planned in the western town of Lares for September 29, 1868. A ship carrying armed reinforcements from the Dominican Republic was supposed to act as backup but, due to an anonymous betrayal a few weeks beforehand, it was apprehended by the Spanish authorities along with various key rebel leaders. Flailing from the setback, the remaining rebels elected to bring their planned revolt forward six days to September 23, a move that would ultimately cost them dearly.

Meeting at a farm, codenamed Centro Bravo, owned by Venezuelan-born rebel Manuel Rojas on the evening of September 23, over 600 men and women marched defiantly on the small town of Lares near Mayagüez, where they were met with minimal Spanish resistance. Declaring a Puerto Rican republic from the main square, the rebels placed a red, white and blue flag – designed by Betances – on the high altar of the main church and named Francisco Ramírez Medina head of a new provisional government. Fatefully, the glory wasn't to last. Electing next to march on the nearby town of San Sebastián, the poorly armed liberation army walked into a classic Spanish military trap and were quickly seen off by superior firepower. A handful of the militia were killed by Spanish bullets while hundreds more – including Rojas and Medina – were taken prisoner.

While the Grito de Lares was decapitated swiftly and never won widespread grassroots support on the island, the action did lead to some long-term political concessions. In the years that followed, the colonial authorities passed liberal electoral reforms, granted Puerto Rico provincial status and offered Spanish citizenship to all *criollos* (island-born people of European descent). The biggest victory, however, came in 1873 with the abolition of slavery and granting of freedom to over 30,000 previously incarcerated slaves.

In 1917, just months after Muñoz Rivera's death, President Woodrow Wilson signed the Jones Act. It granted US citizenship to all Puerto Ricans and established a bicameral legislature whose decisions could be vetoed by the US president. No Puerto Ricans were involved in the debate over citizenship.

## A Question of Status

Questioned by many before the ink had even dried, the Jones Act failed to provide any long-term solutions. On the contrary, the debate over the future of Puerto Rico's relationship with the US continued to intensify and helped define the political careers of two major figures who would emerge in the late 1920s and early '30s on the island: Pedro Albizu Campos, leader

**1850–67**

The Puerto Rican liberation movement gathers strength under the inspirational leadership of Ramón Emeterio Betances, a poet, politician, diplomat and eminent surgeon.

**1868**

Revolutionaries inspired by Betances take the town of Lares and declare a Puerto Rican republic, but the uprising is repelled within hours by Spanish forces sent from nearby San Sebastián.

**1873**

In the wake of the Grito de Lares, the Spanish authorities institute various political and social reforms in Puerto Rico, including the abolition of slavery.

**1897**

The Carta Autonómica is instituted by Spain, chartering Puerto Rico as an autonomous state under a Spanish governor with representation in the Spanish Cortés (Parliament).

**1898**

US forces blockade San Juan and land a 16,000-strong force unopposed at Guánica on the south coast, ending the Spanish-American War; Spain cedes Puerto Rico to the USA.

**1900**

The US Congress passes the Foraker Act, granting a US-run civil government to Puerto Rico; American Charles Allen is installed as the island's first governor and is aided by an 11-man executive council that includes five Puerto Ricans.

of the pro-independence Partido Nacionalista (Nationalist Party); and Luis Muñoz Marín, who established the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD; Popular Democratic Party) in 1938.

As son of the widely respected Muñoz Rivera, Luis Muñoz Marín avoided the radical politics of Albizu, and took a more conciliatory approach to challenging the colonial situation of Puerto Rico. While the US Congress sidestepped the status question, Muñoz Marín's PPD pressed for a plebiscite that would allow Puerto Ricans to choose between statehood and independence as their final options. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the majority of the PPD favored independence. However, neither President Franklin D Roosevelt nor the Congress seriously considered it as an option, and laws were enacted to criminalize independence activities such as those waged by the Nationalists.

Blanca Canales, leader of the abortive Jayuya Uprising in 1950, is popularly considered to have been the first woman to have led an armed revolt against the US government.

Rather than take to the mountains to fight – as Fidel Castro later would do – Muñoz Marín decided to adopt a strategy that incorporated the status question with other issues affecting the Puerto Rican people, such as the dire economic and social effects of the Great Depression. His crux moment came in 1946 when he rejected independence as an option and threw his political weight behind a new status granted by Congress in 1948, referred to today as Estado Libre Associado, or ELA, the Free Associated State. This approach was meant to give the island more political autonomy, yet maintain and even embrace the very close relationship between the US and Puerto Rico.

It was technically illegal to fly the Puerto Rican flag on the island until the adoption of the commonwealth's new constitution in 1952.

In 1952 this status description was approved by a referendum held on the island. The voters also approved a Constitution that for the first time in Puerto Rico's history was written by islanders. Muñoz Marín became the first governor of Puerto Rico to be elected by Puerto Ricans. Nevertheless, despite claims by the new governor and his supporters that the status question was finally resolved with ELA, for all intents and purposes, nothing changed: the Congress still had plenary powers over Puerto Rico. Although islanders were now exempt from paying federal income taxes, they still had no representation in Congress (apart from a nonvoting delegate), could not vote in US national elections, and were still being drafted into the US Armed Forces to fight alongside young Americans in foreign wars.

A special cask of high-grade rum was set aside by a brewer in 1942 with orders that it be opened only when Puerto Rico becomes an independent nation. When (or if) that happens, free drinks for everyone!

Over the years a number of referenda and plebiscites have been held, ostensibly to allow the Puerto Rican people to decide the future of the island's status. Two official plebiscites, in 1967 and 1993, resulted in victories for 'commonwealth' status, that is, the ELA. Other votes have been held, with the status options, as well as the approach to self-determination, defined in different ways. All of these popular votes have been shaped by the ruling party at the time of the vote, either the pro-ELA PPD, or the pro-statehood Partido Nuevo Progresista (PNP; New Progressive Party). None of the plebiscites held over the years have been binding for the US Congress.

In 1998, as the island was getting ready to mark the 100th anniversary of US control, another attempt to address the issue came in the form of a bill introduced by Alaskan Republican Don Young. For the first time, Congress acknowledged that the current status was no longer viable. The Young Bill called for a plebiscite on the island where Puerto Ricans would vote on only two status options: either statehood or independence. It did not provide ELA or



**SHALL WE KILL THE PRESIDENT?**

Deep in the forgotten archives of history lays an event that came to within a gunshot of altering the nature of Puerto Rican–American relations forever.

On November 1, 1950 two Puerto Rican nationalists, Oscar Collazo and Griselio Torresola, attempted to assassinate American President Harry S Truman as he lay taking a nap in his underwear in the Blair House (the presidential residence while the White House was being renovated) in Washington, DC. The act occurred at a particularly volatile moment in Puerto Rican history. The 1940s had seen a rise of political nationalism on the island in the wake of the 1937 Ponce massacre (see p187) the subsequent imprisonment of Nationalist Party leader Pedro Albizu Campos. Released in 1947, Campos quickly began plotting afresh and on October 30, 1950, after a police raid on his San Juan home, he gave a nationalistic call to arms.

First to answer his plea was Blanca Canales, a passionate female independence advocate from the small town of Jayuya in the central mountains. Arming a small group of fellow *independistas* from a cache of hidden weapons, Canales led a fiery uprising in her home town (in what became known as the Jayuya Uprising), burning a post office, cutting telephone lines and declaring a Puerto Rican republic from the town square. But cocooned in the mountains with little outside support, the revolt lasted just three days before it was stamped out by a superior US Air Force that bombed Jayuya and forced the rebels to surrender.

Meanwhile in Washington, DC, news of the Jayuya bombings triggered US-based Puerto Rican nationalists Collazo and Torresola to make the quick but fatal decision to assassinate the US president. The shooting drama was short but incisive. Converging on the Blair House from opposite directions, the two Puerto Ricans opened fire almost simultaneously on security staff guarding the building's entrance. It was Torresola who acted first, firing four shots at White House policeman Leslie Coffelt at close range before wounding another officer as he ran to escape. The assassin then stopped to reload as President Truman rushed to the window to see what all the commotion was about. It was at this point that the mortally wounded Coffelt struggled to his feet and shot Torresola from 30yd, killing him instantly. Stunned by the effort, Coffelt quickly fell to the ground and was rushed to hospital where he died four hours later, his place in history assured as the man who potentially saved the life of an American president.

Collazo, meanwhile, had been incapacitated by a shot in the chest and was promptly arrested. After a much publicized trial he was sentenced to death by electrocution, but his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment by President Truman in 1952. Collazo served 25 years of his sentence before he was released in 1979 after being pardoned by President Carter. Back in Puerto Rico he was received as a homecoming hero in some quarters and as a common terrorist in others. In a grating show of solidarity, Cuban leader Fidel Castro honored him with a hero's medal a few months later. Collazo died aged 80 in 1994.

**1917**
The Jones Act makes Puerto Rico a territory of the US and unilaterally grants islanders US citizenship and a bill of rights; English becomes the official language.

**1937**
Student *independentistas* (independence advocates) clash with police on Palm Sunday; 20 people die and over 100 are injured in what becomes known as the 'Masacre de Ponce'.

**1948**
With US Congressional approval, Puerto Ricans craft their own constitution and elect their first governor, Luis Muñoz Marín, former president of the Senate, who holds the post for 16 years.

**1950**
A nationalist revolt in the mountain town of Jayuya is quickly suppressed by the US Air Force; in response two nationalists in Washington DC try unsuccessfully to assassinate the US president, Harry Truman.

**1952**
The Constitution of Puerto Rico is approved by referendum and the island becomes an Estado Libre Associado (a US commonwealth); the Puerto Rican flag is flown – legally – for the first time.

**1954**
Four Puerto Rican nationalists open fire inside the US House of Representatives in Washington, DC, wounding five US congressmen; they all receive long prison terms.

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any other form of 'enhanced commonwealth' as an option, angering members of the PPD. Ultimately, the Young Bill went nowhere. While it was approved in the House by a narrow margin, the Senate never seriously considered it.

## CURRENT POLITICS

Puerto Rico's status remains a major point of contention for its political leaders and often overshadows discussions about how to resolve other issues affecting the island, such as economic development, unemployment, education and crime. In the 1990s politics were dominated by pro-statehood Governor Pedro Roselló who, when reelected to a second term in 1996, received more votes than any other governor before him. However, his obsession with the status issue and his almost fanatical desire to convince Washington to make Puerto Rico a state overwhelmed his administration, especially in his second term, when he campaigned tirelessly for the Young Bill and other status-related measures.

A 1991 law which made Spanish the official language in Puerto Rico was revoked just two years later to reinstate both Spanish and English as joint commonwealth languages.

In the end, charges of corruption in his administration left him somewhat discredited as he left office in 2001, turning over the reigns of the governor's mansion to the first woman ever elected into the office, Sila Maria Calderón, the standard-bearer of the PPD.

*Military Power and Popular Protest: The US Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico,* by Katherine T McCaffrey, provides every detail of the civil disobedience that drove the navy off Vieques.

Calderón was committed to bringing back integrity to the governorship, and, not surprisingly, pushed the status issue off the agenda during her four years in office. She took a very vocal position against the US Navy and lobbied regularly to make certain that Washington would stick to its commitment to close down the Vieques bombing range and remove its forces from the island, despite opposition from certain elements within the Pentagon and more hawkish members of the US Congress. However, she did not run for reelection, instead passing the baton to Aníbal Acevedo Vilá, the young former resident commissioner for Puerto Rico (nonvoting delegate to the Congress).

In 2006 the US Navy estimated that it would take three years and $76 million to remove remaining ordnance and toxins from Vieques.

Ironically, Acevedo's primary opponent in the November 2004 election was Pedro Roselló. Once again, the voters were split almost precisely down the middle, with Acevedo narrowly beating the former governor by 3566 votes, a result that was immediately challenged by Roselló. In the latest example of the contradictions in Puerto Rican politics and its relations with federal authorities, the ultimate winner was not officially declared until the first US Circuit Court of Appeals in Boston ruled in late December that a federal court in Puerto Rico did not have jurisdiction in the recount dispute involving the November 2 gubernatorial election. Once again, a non-Puerto Rican entity, in this case a US court, had the final word in determining who was to be governor of the island.

In January 2005 Acevedo was sworn in as the island's eighth democratically elected governor but he soon faced a hostile legislature dominated by the opposing PNP. Blankly refusing to accept Acevedo's budget-balancing proposals, the legislature came up with its own plan which the new governor promptly vetoed. A stalemate ensued, a situation which ultimately led to a massive budgetary crisis that wracked Puerto Rico in May 2006, when the government was forced to literally 'shut down' after it ran out of funds to pay over 100,000 public sector employees. The crisis lasted two weeks before a grudging compromise was reached, but it made a laughing stock out of the Puerto Rican government and drew intense criticism from business leaders, Puerto Rican celebrities and the general public.

In March 2008 Acevedo was indicted by the US on corruption charges after a two-year grand jury investigation. He has denied any wrongdoing and faces up to 20 years in prison if convicted.

### THE GREAT MIGRATION

Long attracted by the lure of the American Dream, the Puerto Ricans rank alongside the Irish in their long-standing tendency to migrate to the United States – in particular to New York City. Indeed, by the late 1990s, the Puerto Rican diaspora in the US was as large as the island's total home-based population, with close to 3.8 million expats living stateside. Puerto Rican émigrés have even fermented their own US-based culture, creating such hybrid musical genres as salsa and reggaeton, and spawning a plethora of foreign-based – but proudly Puerto Rican – superstars such as Ricky Martin, Jennifer Lopez and Mark Anthony.

Although migration to the US has been common since the early 1800s, the largest exodus didn't occur until the mid-20th century, when the granting of US citizenship to all Puerto Ricans, coupled with the lack of economic opportunities on the island, led to tens of thousands of people flocking north. The process snowballed in the late 1940s when a new air link to New York sent another wave of homecoming GIs and dispossessed agricultural workers to the Big Apple where they settled in East Harlem, a quarter that was promptly rechristened 'Spanish Harlem' or – in Latin lingo – El Barrio. In the year 1953 alone an estimated 75,000 Puerto Ricans arrived in New York City and by 1960, over half a million called the Big Apple home.

In the early years, the migrant experience wasn't always a harmonious one, with Puerto Ricans invariably gravitating towards New York's poorest neighborhoods, where they faced economic hardship and discrimination. The situation wasn't aided by a failed assassination attempt on President Truman in 1950 and an abortive shooting on Capitol Hill four years later, both acts perpetuated by Puerto Rican nationalists. Subsequently islanders came to be seen as unpatriotic and were often viewed with distrust and suspicion. As a defensive mechanism many Puerto Ricans banded together in groups and began to re-assert their cultural identity. This led, in part, to the birth of the art-house Nuyorican movement in the 1960s and '70s. Centered at the Nuyorican Poet's Café on New York's Lower East Side, this progressive artistic movement helped to promote salsa music and showcase classic Puerto Rican–inspired movies such as *Carlito's Way*.

With economic conditions improving since the 1980s, many Puerto Ricans have worked their way up the career ladder and moved towards more white-collar jobs. As a result, sizable Puerto Rican enclaves now exist in the affluent suburbs of cities such as Miami and Chicago, and a number of US-born Puerto Ricans have moved back to the old country where they have invested in second homes.

**1967**

Puerto Rico holds its first plebiscite on the issue of Puerto Rico becoming a US state, but votes overwhelmingly to remain a commonwealth; the independence parties gain only 1% of the votes

**1978**

Two independence supporters are gunned down by police posing as revolutionary sympathizers on Cerro Maravilla in the Central Mountains in an incident that exposes deep political fissures and government corruption.

**1999**

Major protests break out on the island of Vieques against the US Navy, following the killing of islander David Sane Rodríguez during military target practice.

**2000**

Puerto Ricans elect ex San Juan mayor Sila Maria Calderón of the Popular Democratic Party as the first woman governor of the commonwealth.

**2003**

After four years of protests and worldwide publicity, the US Navy pulls out of Vieques after 60 years of occupation; the former military land is promptly designated a US Fish and Wildlife Refuge.

**2006**

An acute budgetary crisis forces the shutdown of schools and government offices across the island for two weeks as legislative officials try to address a $740-million deficit in public funds.

# The Culture

## REGIONAL IDENTITY

Think of Puerto Rico as a kaleidoscope with four distinct but intermingling elements: Taíno Indian, Spanish, African and North American. The first group comprises the island's earliest inhabitants (the Taíno), the second arrived with European colonization in the early 16th century, the third is a legacy of over 300 years of slavery, and the last group is a result of Puerto Rico's ongoing relationship as a commonwealth dependency of the United States.

The end product is a dynamic population of rare eclecticism whose diverse personality is often incredibly hard to classify. You won't know you're outside America as you see Puerto Ricans driving into Burger King in ridiculously large American cars; the next moment you're sure you're in Latin America as a local gesticulates passionately; later you wonder if you've somehow taken a wrong turn and landed in Africa, as the people around you gyrate their hips to exotic, rhythmic music in a club.

Informative website Boricua.com bills itself as the website for Puerto Ricans by Puerto Ricans, but anyone with more than a passing interest in the island and its worldwide diaspora will find plenty of hidden nuggets here.

Modern practicalities have meant that, for three or four generations now, many Puerto Ricans have grown up bouncing back and forth between mainland US cities and their beloved island. Even those who elect to stay put assimilate a great deal by proxy. The full scope of their bilingual and multicultural existence can take a long time for outsiders to comprehend. Lots of Puerto Ricans are perfectly comfortable striding down Manhattan's Fifth Ave during the week for a little shopping, then passing the weekend eating with family at *friquitines* (street vendors) along Playa Luquillo.

From Rincón to Vieques, Puerto Ricans are incredibly friendly and open; they like nothing better than to show off their beloved Boriken (the island's Taíno name). You'll note that, despite their obsession with American cars, Puerto Ricans are much more into experiences than material things. A favorite island pastime is to wade into warm beach waters just before sunset – beer in hand and more in the cooler – to shoot the breeze with whoever else is out enjoying the glorious changing skies. Bank executive, schoolteacher, fisherman – it doesn't matter who you are, as long as you share an appreciation for how good life is in Puerto Rico.

Although Puerto Rico shares many characteristics with other Caribbean nations in its food, ethnicity and general laid-back ambience, Spanish colonial and more recent American influences have lent the island certain distinct traits. Despite its close historical and cultural ties to Cuba and the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico has easily outpaced its former colonial cousins economically, thanks to over a century of US aid. As a result, the island has become the most modern in the Caribbean with high-rises, heavy traffic and a high percentage of American tourists.

## LIFESTYLE

According to the recent World Values Survey, Puerto Ricans are the happiest people on the planet, with a 'happiness rating' of 4.67 out of five. The United States came 15th with a rating of 3.47.

About 60% of the island still lives in what the US defines as poverty, but the remaining 40% is doing quite well – they are the managers of the ever-present pharmaceutical factories, the beneficiaries of the burgeoning tourism business or bankers or business owners in Hato Rey. San Juan is the only city that has much of a middle class – people who do administrative and clerical work in restaurants, hotels, tourism businesses and so on. Many were born in Puerto Rico and raised in the US then returned to the island after college to find work. This return migration is a boon for the island businesses, which need skilled workers, but has made it harder for Puerto Ricans with high-school diplomas to fill those spots.



### LIVING WITH UNCLE SAM

Puerto Rico's political status inspires a curious mix of guarded ambivalence and grudging acceptance. For many, the idea of living with Uncle Sam has become more a habit than a passion. Suspended constitutionally between full-blown US state and sovereign independent nation, the island's population remains in a curious state of limbo. It seems as if the people can't decide what they want their country to be. Last put to the vote in 1998, the advocates of statehood were pipped at the post by supporters of the existing status quo, ie a commonwealth or unincorporated dependent territory of the United States. The various independence parties, meanwhile, continue to come in a distant third.

Triggered historically by the Grito de Lares in 1868 and reignited briefly in the 1950s, the independence issue has long been a perennial damp squib. Compromise is invariably touted as a more desirable modern option. Cemented in the 1952 Constitution Act, the current relationship between Puerto Rico and the US was largely the work of iconic national governor Luís Muñoz Marín. A prophetic democrat, Muñoz believed that to push for political independence from the Americans was a folly akin to economic suicide. In order to liberate the masses from the crippling poverty of the inter-war years, the island needed to maintain an arm's-length relationship with the US while at the same time retaining its distinct Latin legacy. Steering a fine line between free-thinking commonwealth and obedient colonial lapdog during the '50s and '60s, Muñoz successfully lifted the island out of its economic coma. He also professed to have safeguarded Puerto Rico's cultural identity and political 'freedom' for future generations.

It's a sentiment with which many would concur. While few Puerto Ricans play the out-and-out nationalist card these days, most continue to uphold an unspoken cultural resistance toward their venerable American neighbors in the north. Ubiquitous shopping malls and Burger Kings aside, the proud *boricuas* have consistently resisted swallowing the American Dream hook, line and sinker. Distinctive cultural manifestations pulsate everywhere. From the Spanish language, to the hip-gyrating music, to the way they over-enthusiastically drive their cars – patriotic islanders have always been Puerto Rican first and American a distant second. It's a cultural paradigm that looks set to continue for some time yet.

With an unemployment rate of 12% and average salaries around $15,000, many Puerto Ricans can't afford to pay the real-estate taxes the government has been levying of late, and consequently are losing their traditional homes – old farms that have been handed down for generations. Those who left Puerto Rico in their youth and return to live off an American pension find that their dollars don't stretch quite as far as they used to.

Still, this is the strongest economy in the Caribbean, and you'll see that almost every household owns at least one car. Puerto Rico hasn't quite got to the point of having 'two countries' living on the island, but the economic disparities are growing more apparent. Tons of fast-food outlets and strip malls cater to the working-class families, while trendy eateries doing fancy *comida criolla* (traditional cooking) pull in not just tourists but also a newly created yuppie class of American-educated 30-somethings enjoying their relative prosperity.

## ECONOMY

While the wealth of Puerto Rico may pale in comparison to most US states, it actually boasts one of the most dynamic economies in the Caribbean. If you've just come here from Jamaica or the Dominican Republic the differences will be palpable. Rather than trying to judge the island alongside New York or California, outsiders need to view Puerto Rico in a relative context. With huge historical and political differences still existing between the island and the US, the economic strides achieved in the commonwealth since the dark days of the 1930s and '40s have been truly remarkable.

Dreamt up in the 1950s and '60s, Operation Bootstrap succeeded in converting Puerto Rico from a poor agricultural society into a modern industrial powerhouse. Tax incentives first introduced by prophetic island governor Luis Muñoz Marín have led to long-term US investment on the island and a growth in both the pharmaceutical and tourism industries. That said, Puerto Rico's per capita GDP is still marginally lower than the US's poorest state (Mississippi) while its unemployment rate (12%) is a good 7% above the US average.

## POPULATION

Puerto Rico – with nearly four million inhabitants – is one of the most densely populated islands in the world. According to US census figures there are about 1000 people per sq mile, a ratio higher than that of many American states. But the figures are misleading: approximately one-third of the population is concentrated in the San Juan–Carolina–Bayamón metropolitan area. Other large cities, such as Caguas, Hatillo, Arecibo and Adjuntas, are attracting new residents every day, with manufacturing and agro-businesses providing jobs. In comparison, the coastal sections along the west and south coast, and much of the lush interior mountain territory, are practically desolate. You can drive for miles and see absolutely nothing but a few slow-moving iguanas and maybe a wild horse or two. Avoid the *tapones* (traffic jams) that blight the major highways and you'll simply have no idea that you are close to any urban sprawl.

Annually, five million visitors to Puerto Rico supply the economy with approximately $1.8 billion a year. More than one third of these tourists are made up of cruise-ship passengers.

## SPORTS

If Puerto Rico has an official sport, *béisbol* is probably it. The Caribbean boasts a Puerto Rican Winter League, Dominican Winter League and Panamanian Winter League, and in the off-season Major Leaguers from the US come down to test their mettle against these up-and-comers. Major League teams also hold spring training camps in Puerto Rico and regularly use the island's league as a farm team. Early-season exhibition games are held every spring, and you can see teams like the Montreal Expos work out the winter kinks at bargain prices.

*Peleas de gallos* (cockfights) have long been a popular pastime in Puerto Rico and the rest of Latin America. The 'sport' of placing specially bred and trained *gallos de pelea* (fighting cocks) in a pit to battle each other for the delight of humans goes back thousands of years to ancient Persia, Greece and Rome.

Roberto Clemente is probably the most famous Puerto Rican baseball star of all time, with a career batting average of .317. He was posthumously inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1973 after his death in a plane crash.

Cockfighting was outlawed when the US occupation of the island began in 1898. After almost four decades underground, cockfighting was once again legalized on the island in the 1930s.

During the 20-minute fight the cocks try to peck and slash each other to pieces with sharpened natural spurs, or with steel or plastic spurs taped or tied to their feet, causing feathers to fly and blood to splatter. The fight usually ends with one bird mortally wounded or dead. Then the aficionados collect their winnings or plunk down more money – to get even – on the next fight. Betting usually starts at $100 and goes well into the thousands.

## MULTICULTURALISM

Like most Caribbean cultures, Puerto Ricans are an ethnic mix of Native American, European and African genes. About 80% of the island classifies itself as white (meaning of Spanish origin, primarily), 8% as black, 10% as mixed or 'other', and 4% as Taíno Indian. Along the coast of Loíza Aldea, where the African heritage is most prominent, distinct features from the Yoruba people abound, while, in the mountains, a handful of people still claim distant Taíno bloodlines.



### SMALL COUNTRY, BIG PUNCH

For a country the size of Connecticut, Puerto Rico has spawned enough fighters to fill its own boxing Hall of Fame, a list that includes the youngest world champion in boxing history (at any weight) and one of the sport's greatest-ever knockout specialists.

The standard was set in the 1930s by wily bantamweight Sixto Escobar, who became the first Puerto Rican to capture a world championship belt when he knocked out Mexican Baby Casanova in Montreal in 1936 for the world bantamweight title. In his homeland, Escobar – who hailed from Barceloneta on the north coast – became an overnight hero and it was 30 years before another Puerto Rican was able to emulate his achievements.

The 1970s brought the two Wilfredos – Benitez and Gómez – to the fore. The former, nicknamed 'The Radar,' was a Puerto Rican childhood boxing sensation, raised in New York City, who became the youngest-ever world champion when he defeated Columbian Antonio Cervantes in a World Junior Welterweight championship bout in San Juan in 1976. The victory shocked the boxing world and the prodigious Benitez, who was only 17 at the time, went on to defend his title three times before losing to Sugar Ray Leonard in 1979. Gómez, known affectionately as Bazooka, was a punching phenomenon from San Juan who still retains one of the highest knockout ratios in professional boxing with 42 KOs in 46 fights. Rated at No 13 in *Ring* magazine's list of all-time best punchers, Gómez was the subject of a 2003 documentary shot in New York City entitled *Bazooka: The Battles of Wilfredo Gómez*.

As much a showman as a fighter, Hector 'Macho' Camacho was Puerto Rico's most flamboyant star. Born in Bayamón near San Juan but raised in New York, Camacho aped the style of Muhammad Ali by leaping into the ring dressed as Captain America before a fight. In a career that spanned two decades he fought everyone from Roberto Duran to Julio César Chávez and tested loyalties in his homeland during an all–Puerto Rican world-title fight against fellow countryman Felix Trinidad.

Trinidad, from Cupey Alto, is another modern boxing legend who won world titles at three different weights, including a 1999 victory over Californian 'Golden Boy,' Oscar de la Hoya, after which he received a hero's welcome at Luís Muñoz Marín international airport. He recently passed his mantle over to current superstar Miguel Cotto, part of a famous boxing family dynasty and a product of the famous Bairoa gym in Caguas. As of early 2008, Cotto remains unbeaten with a record of 31 wins, 25 of them by knockout.

Puerto Ricans will tell you that ethnic discrimination doesn't exist on their island, but politically correct Spanish speakers may be aghast at some of the names Puerto Ricans use to refer to each other – words like *trigueño* (wheat-colored) and *jabao* (not quite white). It may sound derogatory (and sometimes it is), but it can also simply be a less-than-thoughtful way of identifying someone by a visible physical characteristic, a habit found in much of Latin America. You'll also hear terms like *la blanquita*, for a lighter-skinned woman, or *el gordo* to describe a robust man.

Identifying which terms are racial slurs, rather than descriptive facts, will be a hard distinction for non-islanders to make, and it's wisest to steer clear of all such vernacular. Compared with much of the Caribbean, Puerto Rico is remarkably integrated and even-keeled about ethnicity.

The island's most important challenge is to correct the historical fact that the poorest islanders – those descended from the slaves and laborers who were kept from owning land until the early 20th century – have been short-changed when it comes to higher education. As in the United States, the issue of racial and economic inequality in Puerto Rico – while still visible – has improved immeasurably in the last 40 years. While urban deprivation and a lack of provision of housing are ongoing issues, the relative economic conditions in modern Puerto Rico are significantly better than in most other countries in the Caribbean.

Escape to Puerto Rico http://escape.topuertorico.com is a good starting point for up-to-date information on hotel prices, car rental and flights to the island.

## WOMEN IN PUERTO RICO

Puerto Rican culture is often stigmatized as a 'macho' world where women bear children, cook meals and care for the home. That is superficially true: women generally do all those things and more. Stereotypes paint men as possessive, jealous and prone to wild acts of desperation when in love, and that's also superficially true. Both sexes seem to enjoy the drama that comes along with these intertwined roles – pay close attention to couples twirling on the dance floor to a salsa song or, better yet, a steamy bolero, and you'll see clearly what game they are both happily playing.

None of that has prevented Puerto Rican women from excelling at business, trade and, most importantly, politics. San Juan elected a female mayor decades before a woman won a comparable office in the US, and, in 2000, a woman called Sila Maria Calderón was elected governor of Puerto Rico. She ran on a campaign that promised to end government corruption, and clean house she did.

Rita Moreno, who was born in Humacao in 1931, is the first and only Puerto Rican actress to have won an Academy Award, a Grammy, a Tony and an Emmy.

Abortion is legal in Puerto Rico (although the rest of the Caribbean, outside of Cuba, is completely antichoice) and politicians remain acutely aware of the effects of a high birthrate on family living and quality of life. The facts of life are taught early in the home, but it's worth noting that high-school-aged Puerto Rican girls wait longer to have sex, are better informed about sex, and use condoms more responsibly when they do have sex than their American counterparts – and that's according to the US government's own figures. Puerto Rican culture still has plenty of macho myths that pose a challenge to full empowerment of women, but no more so than any other Western culture.

## MEDIA

Puerto Rico's largest newspaper in terms of circulation is *El Nuevo Día,* a Spanish language periodical founded in the southern city of Ponce in 1909 that currently shifts in the vicinity of 155,000 copies daily. Its largest competitor is *El Vocero,* a tabloid-style newspaper that focuses less on politics and more on sensationalist news, although its tone has become more serious in recent years. The island's primary English-language newspaper is the *San Juan Star* (now also available in Spanish). Founded in 1959, the *Star* won a Pulitzer Prize for its journalistic writing a year after its inception and was famously fictionalized as the *Daily News* in Hunter S Thompson's seminal Puerto Rican novel *The Rum Diary* (p97). While none of the commonwealth's newspapers can be considered radical in their stance on the status issue, it is the Spanish-speaking media that is generally more attuned to the Puerto Rican viewpoint. The *Star* invariably takes a right-of-center stance and employs many 'gringo' writers.

*El Boricua* is an online monthly bilingual cultural magazine for Puerto Ricans worldwide. It can be found at www.elboricua.com.

Although Puerto Rican TV is saturated with US shows and channels, home-grown sitcoms and Spanish-language soap operas and chat shows are also perennially popular.

## RELIGION

Protestantism and Roman Catholicism are the two most widely (or openly) practiced religions on the island – 40% each – but followers of both have been widely influenced by centuries of indigenous and African folkloric traditions. Slaves brought from West Africa between the 16th and 19th centuries carried with them a system of animistic beliefs that they passed on through generations of their descendants.

You can hear it in the cadences of the African drums in traditional music like *bomba* and, more recently, in salsa. You also hear Africa in dance names like rumba and in variations on 'Changó,' the name of the Yoruba god of fire and war, like *machango, changuero, changuería* and *changuear* (all are island words that relate people, things and behavior to Changó).

The little wooden *santos* figurines that have been staple products of Puerto Rican artists for centuries descend to some degree from Santería beliefs in the powers of the saints (although many Puerto Ricans may not be aware of the sources of this worship). Many Puerto Ricans keep a collection of their favorite *santos* enshrined in a place of honor in their homes, similar to shrines West Africa's Yoruba people keep for their *orishas* (spirits) like Yemanjá, the goddess of the sea.

Belief in the magical properties of small carved gods also recalls the island's early inhabitants, the Taíno, who worshipped little stone *cemíes* (figurines) and believed in *jupías,* spirits of the dead who roam the island at night to cause mischief.

Tens of thousands of islanders consult with *curanderos* (healers) when it comes to problems of love, health, employment, finance and revenge. Islanders also spend significant amounts of money in *botánicas*: shops that sell herbs, plants, charms, holy water and books on performing spirit rituals.

Practice your Spanish by reading *El Nuevo Día,* Puerto Rico's biggest selling daily newspaper online at www.elnuevodia.com.

## ARTS

Abundant creative energy hangs in the air all over Puerto Rico (maybe it has something to do with the Bermuda Triangle), and its effects can be seen in the island's tremendous output of artistic achievement. Puerto Rico has produced renowned poets, novelists, playwrights, orators, historians, journalists, painters, composers and sculptors. While it's known for world-class art in many mediums, music and dance are especially synonymous with the island.

### Literature

The island began inspiring writers in the earliest years of the Spanish colonial period. In 1535, Spanish friar Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo wrote the *Historia general y natural de las Indias* (General and Natural History of the Indies), in which he painted a lush portrait of the island Ponce de León and his company found.

About 100 years later, two thorough accounts of colonial life on the island came from the pen of the Bishop of Puerto Rico, Fray Damián López de Haro, and that of Diego Torres Vargas.

Puerto Rico was without a printing press until 1807, and Spain's restrictive administrative practices inhibited education and kept literacy rates extremely low on the island during almost 400 years of colonial rule. But an indigenous literature developed nonetheless, particularly in the realms of poetry (which was memorized and declaimed) and drama. The 19th century saw the rise of a number of important writers in these fields. Considered the father of Puerto Rican literature, Alejandro Tapia y Rivera (1826–82) distinguished himself as the author of poems, short stories, essays, novels and plays. His long, allegorical poem, the *Sataniada,* raised islanders' eyebrows with its subtitle, 'A Grandiose Epic Dedicated to the Prince of Darkness.' Tapia y Rivera's play *La cuarterona* (The Quadroon) depicted the struggles of a biracial woman in San Juan.

Welcome to Puerto Rico http://welcome.topuertorico.org is a website set up by a Puerto Rican currently based in Georgia, USA. It provides an excellent in-depth look at the island's culture, history, geography and ecology.

In 1849, Manuel Alonso wrote *El Gíbaro,* a classic collection of prose and poetry vignettes that delineate the cockfights, dancing, weddings, politics, race relations and belief in *espiritismo* (spiritualism) that characterize the island *jíbaro* – an archetypal witty peasant who lives in the mountains. When the US claimed the island as a territory in 1898, scores of island writers responded with protest literature. Out of that activity emerged Julia de Burgos (1914–53), one of the island's major female poets. Her work came to embody

two intertwining elements of Boricua national identity – an intense, lyrical connection to nature and an equally passionate commitment to politics.

In the 1930s, Puerto Rico's first important novelist, Dr Enrique Laguerre, published *La llamarada* (Blaze of Fire), which takes place on a sugarcane plantation, where a young intellectual wrestles with the destitution of his island in the wake of US corporate exploitation. During this epoch of intellectual foment, the architect of the modern Puerto Rican Commonwealth, Luis Muñoz Marín, was composing poetry and sowing the seeds of his Partido Popular Democrático.

Better known by the nickname Diplo, Ramón Rivero was the king of Puerto Rican comedy who kept islanders laughing through times of intense economic hardship in the 1940s and '50s. He also starred in one of Puerto Rico's finest films, *Los peloteros* (The Baseball Players).

As more islanders migrated to the US in the 1950s, the Puerto Rican 'exiles,' known as Nuyoricans, became grist for fiction writers. One of the most successful authors to take on this subject is Pedro Juan Soto, whose 1956 short-story collection *Spiks* (a racial slur aimed at Nuyoricans) depicts life in the New York barrios with the biting realism that the musical *West Side Story* could only hint at. Luis Piñero, Miguel Algarin and Pedro Pietri started a Latino beatnik movement on Manhattan's Lower East Side, creating the first Nuyorican Café and holding poetry slams long before such things were considered cool. All three became major poets – honored by both English and Spanish readers – although only Algarin is still living today.

More recently, Esmeralda Santiago's 1986 memoir, *Cuando era puertorriqueña* (When I Was Puerto Rican), has become a standard text in many US schools.

## Cinema & TV

Movie and TV producers have always known that Puerto Rico's weather, geography, historic architecture and modern infrastructure make it a great place to shoot background scenes. But a homegrown movie industry only started to flourish in the late 1980s, thanks largely to one director: Jacobo Morales. He wrote, directed and starred in *Dios la cría* (God Created Them). He was no stranger to the big screen at that point, having appeared in Woody Allen films in 1971 and 1972, but *Dios la cría* was his first turn behind the camera, shooting in his native land. The movie, which offers a critical look at Puerto Rican society, was lauded by both critics and fans. His next movie, *Lo que le pasó a Santiago* (What Happened to Santiago?) won him an Academy Award nomination in 1990 for best foreign film. *Linda Sara* (Pretty Sara), his follow-up film in 1994, earned him a second Oscar nomination for best foreign film.

Famous Hollywood movies filmed in Puerto Rico include Woody Allen's *Bananas,* Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* and the James Bond movie *Goldeneye*.

Marcos Zurinaga also made a name for himself in the 1980s, first with *La gran fiesta* (The Big Party) in 1986, which focuses on the last days of San Juan's biggest casino, where all the hotshots met, and then *Tango Bar* (1988) and the acclaimed *Disappearance of Garcia Lorca* (1997). The most widely distributed and financially successful Puerto Rican film is probably Luis Molina's 1993 tragic comedy, *La guagua aérea* (The Arial Bus), which explores the reasons behind Puerto Ricans' push to emigrate in the 1960s.

Nowadays, Puerto Ricans are making splashes on the big and small screens – Rita Moreno, one of the first Puerto Rican actresses to star on Broadway and in a major American film, is considered a cultural icon, and Jimmy Smits, a popular TV actor, is also a proud Boricua.

Of course, for sheer glitz and glamour, nobody can compete with power couple Jennifer Lopez and Marc Anthony, both Nuyoricans with close island ties. Oscar winners Raul Julia – who died in 1994 – and smoldering Benicio del Toro are considered two of the best actors to come out of Puerto Rico.

## Folk Art

Four forms of folk art have held a prominent place in the island's artistic tradition since the early days of the colony. Some of the island's folk art draws upon the artistic traditions of the Taíno, like their 1ft- to 2ft-high statues of minor gods, called *cemíes*. Crafted from stone, wood or even gold, the idols were prized for the power they were believed to bestow on their owners. Visitors can see collections of the simple, primitive-looking *cemíes* at a number of museums on the island.

Shortly after the arrival of the Spaniards in 1508, the Taíno and their civilization were assimilated. But the islanders' affection for magical statuary did not vanish. Instead, the Taíno and their immediate descendants – who were quickly converted to Christianity – found a new outlet for their plastic arts in the colonial Spaniards' attachment to small religious statues called *santos* (saints). Like the *cemíes, santos* represent religious figures and are enshrined in homes to bring spiritual blessings to their keepers. Importing the *santos* from Spain was both difficult and expensive, so islanders quickly began making their own.

The first nondocumentary film shot in Puerto Rico was *Un drama en Puerto Rico* by Rafael Colorado D'Assoy, made in 1912. D'Assoy went on to form the Film Industrial Society of Puerto Rico but his groundbreaking first movie has since been lost.

Puerto Rico is also famous for its *mundillo,* a type of lace made only in Spain and on the island. The tradition came to the island with the early nuns, who practiced the art in order to finance schools and orphanages. Over the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, the nuns perfected the art in their schools and convents, but the intricate process was almost lost in the face of mass-produced textiles during the 20th century. Renewed interest in island folk arts, generated by the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, has revived the process.

*Máscaras* (masks), the frightening and beautiful headpieces traditionally worn at island fiestas, have become popular pieces of decorative folk art in recent years. The tradition of masked processions goes back to the days of the Spanish Inquisition and perhaps earlier, when masqueraders known as *vejigantes* brandished balloonlike objects (called *vejigas*) made of dried, inflated cow bladder, and roamed the streets of Spanish towns as 'devils' bent on terrifying sinners into returning to the fold of the church.

Spaniards brought their tradition to Puerto Rico, where it merged with masking traditions of the African slaves. Red-and-yellow papier-mâché masks with a multitude of long horns, bulging eyes and menacing teeth are typical of the headpieces created for festivals in Ponce, Loíza and Hatillo.

## Architecture

The most dramatic architectural achievements of Old San Juan are the fortresses of El Morro (p88) and San Cristóbal (p89), the stone ramparts surrounding the city and the mammoth seaside entry gate – all built from sandstone gathered from the shore and built in the 16th century. But visitors shouldn't underestimate the rest of the Old City, which exhibits a veritable treasure trove of eclectic architecture from decorative baroque to streamlined art deco.

A visit to Puerto Rico's important southern city of Ponce brings visitors to an equally large cache of historical architecture, particularly Plaza Las Delicias (p187), which holds a 16th-century church and several colonial houses from the 18th century.

## Visual Arts

San Juan's Museo de San Juan (p93) is a perfect symbol of Puerto Rico's dedication to the visual arts, which can be traced back to the very early days of Spanish colonization. The first great local artist to emerge was self-taught painter José Campeche (1752–1809), who burst onto the scene. Masterpieces

such as *Lady on Horseback* and *Governor Ustauriz* demonstrate Campeche's mastery of the genres of landscape and portraiture, as well as his most frequent subject – the story of Jesus.

Francisco Oller (1833–1917), the next big thing to come out of Puerto Rico, did not gain recognition until the second half of the 19th century. Oller was a very different artist from Campeche; he studied in France under Gustave Courbet and felt the influence of acquaintances such as Paul Cézanne. Like his mentor Courbet, Oller dedicated a large body of his work to the portrayal of scenes from humble, everyday island life. Bayamón, Oller's birthplace, maintains a museum (p129) dedicated to its native son, and many of his works are in San Juan's Museo de Arte (p100). Both Oller and Campeche are honored for starting an art movement that drew inspiration from Puerto Rican nature and life, and helped formulate the idea of a distinct cultural and artistic identity for the island.

When the US gained control of the island, Puerto Rico's artists began to obsess over political declarations of national identity. During this period, the island government funded extensive printmaking, commissioning artists to illustrate pre-existing literary texts. Poems, lines of prose, memorable quotations and political declarations all inspired poster art. Among the best of these practitioners have been Mari Carmen Ramírez and Lorenzo Homar. In Homar's masterworks, such as *Unicornio en la isla* (Unicorn on the Island), a poster becomes a work of art, as it has in the hands of some of his students, including Antonio Martorell and José Rosas.

The film *Angel,* written and directed by Jacobo Morales, follows the story of a corrupt police captain and the man he wrongly imprisoned. It narrowly missed out on a 2008 Academy Award nomination.

In the midst of the storm of poster art that covered the island in visual and verbal images during the 1950s and '60s, serious painters such as Julio Rosado de Valle, Francisco Rodón and Myrna Báez – as well as Homar himself – evolved a new aesthetic in Puerto Rican art, one in which the image rebels against the tyranny of political and jingoistic slogans and reigns by itself. Myrna Báez is one of a new generation of female artists, building on Puerto Rico's strong visual traditions to create new and exciting installation art. Her work is exhibited in many San Juan galleries.

Today, one of the island's most famous artists is actually a Nuyorican – Rafael Tufiño, who was born in Brooklyn to Puerto Rican parents. Using vivid colors and big canvases, Turfiño paints scenes of poverty: one of his most well-known works is *La Perla,* named after the picturesque slum that sits right under the nose of El Morro in San Juan. Another celebrated living artist is Tómas Batista, who does 3-D art made from wood. Trained in New York and Spain, Batista settled in Luquillo some years ago and has made numerous pieces of public art for the island. Look for Batista statues in plazas in Río Piedras, Luquillo and Ponce.

## Theater & Dance

Theater is considerably popular in Puerto Rico, particularly in San Juan. The Santurce-based Luis A Ferré Center for the Performing Arts (p121) and the wonderfully gilded Teatro Tapia (p121) act as the main nexus points, staging regular performances from touring companies. Shows include top class ballet, plays, opera and comedy.

You don't have to be in Puerto Rico long to realize that the locals love to dance – and, with their natural rhythm and refreshing lack of North American 'reserve,' they're extremely good at it.

Stylistically speaking, Puerto Rican dance is closely intertwined with the island's distinctive music. Over time, many classifiable musical forms – such as *bomba,* salsa, *plena* and *danza* – have evolved complimentary dances that work off their syncopated rhythms and melodies. Early examples can be seen in formal styles such as *danza*, an elegant ballroom dance



that was imported from Cuba in the 1840s and later largely redefined by Puerto Rican composers such as Manuel Tavarez.

*Bomba* is another colorful import, with influences brought via slaves from Africa. Non-contact but boisterously energetic, *bomba* has spawned a plethora of subgenres such as *sica, yuba* and *holandes,* and is both spontaneous and exciting to watch.

More recognizable to modern dancers is salsa, Puerto Rico's signature dance that has spawned imitators worldwide and can be learnt and enjoyed everywhere from Barcelona to Vancouver. Salsa is a libidinous and red-blooded dance that is relatively easy to learn, although, with its sensuous moves and strong African beat, it was seemingly invented with Puerto Rican bodies in mind. Dancing as close-knit couples and making light work of the four beat quick-quick-slow steps, the loose-limbed locals make it look as simple as walking.

The 1993 movie *Carlito's Way,* starring Al Pacino and Sean Penn, follows the exploits of Carlito Brigante, a Puerto Rican drug dealer in New York who struggles to go straight after his release from prison.

To become involved in Puerto Rican dance head to one of San Juan's numerous bars or nightclubs, where shaking a leg on a Friday night is as common as ordering a mojito. La Rumba (p120) and Nuyorican Café (p119) in Old San Juan are two notable highlights.

The **Le Lo Lai Festival** (☎ 787-721-2400 ext 3901) is an ongoing cultural and entertainment program run by the Puerto Rican Tourist Company. It puts on a traditional music and dance show at a series of revolving venues (often hotels) around the island. You can get more information on when and where they'll be performing by calling the number listed above.

# Music

The music of Puerto Rico is a sonic reflection of the destination itself, a sound shaped by a proud and dynamic history of revolution, colonialism, and the cultural cross-currents that waft between the island, New York City, Spain and Africa. Even compared with other destinations in the Caribbean, Puerto Rico is something of an island unto its own.

José Feliciano, a six-time Grammy award winner, taught himself to play guitar despite being born blind.

The sound synonymous with Puerto Rico is certainly salsa, but that which pounds from the open doorways of most of the island's nightspots these days is just as often reggaeton, a blazing blend of hip-hop, Caribbean syncopations and molar-rattling thud of dancehall.

The dominance of reggaeton has almost run the hallmark genre of salsa out of island nightclubs entirely, and travelers to the island who imagine themselves sashaying to the gate of a brassy salsa combo every night should be advised: it probably ain't happenin'. Aside from some packed spots in San Juan, scattered destinations around the island and weekly residences at upscale resorts (which don't exactly ooze authenticity), catching traditional music in Puerto Rico is a surprisingly difficult task, especially considering its role in the birth of the art form. The island's sonic movements beyond salsa – heavily rhythmic styles like *bomba y plena, danza,* merengue and cha-cha-cha – are even more obscure, with performances mostly relegated to museum demonstrations and holiday festivals.

Menudo was one of the original boy bands conceived by producer Edgardo Diaz in 1977. It went on to record phenomenal worldwide success with a light brand of teen pop music and celebrated former members such as Ricky Martin.

## POPULAR MUSIC

For a history lesson on Puerto Rican music in under four minutes, cue up 'Tradicional A Lo Bravo,' a hugely popular single from current Puerto Rican reggaeton hitmaker Tego Calderon. Calderon's rapid-fire lyrical delivery and the pounding syncopated bass line is emblematic of the reggaeton movement, but the song also borrows a little something from the important musical traditions of the island. The brassy horns pay homage to salsa bands from the 1960s. The nylon string guitar nods to the colonial traditions and rural *jíbaro* music. The loping syncopation of the hand drums reference African-rooted Puerto Rican *bomba*. Somewhere, hidden amongst Calderon's macho swagger, you'll even hear the grinding scrape of a *güiro,* a percussion instrument made from a notched, hollowed gourd which was a part of the musical battery of indigenous Taíno tribes.

The Puerto Rican Cuatro Project (www.cuatro-pr.org) is a nonprofit organization that has adopted the island's national instrument as a means of keeping its cultural memories alive. Its website has priceless information on the island's traditional instruments and music.

From the precolonial folk music to the macho rapid-fire of reggaeton, Puerto Rican music has always been an evolving part of, not a departure from, past traditions. Then and now, these traditions often place as much importance on dance-floor expressions as the sound itself.

### Bomba y Plena

The bewildering conflux of traditions that collide in Puerto Rican music can be seen in the earliest popular music on the island, *bomba y plena,* two distinct yet often associated types of folk music. With origins in European, African and native Caribbean cultures, this is the basis for many of the sounds still associated with Puerto Rico and, like salsa, a musical form inexorably tied with dance.

The most directly African in origin is the *bomba,* a music developed by West and Central African slaves who worked on sugar plantations. A typical *bomba* ensemble included drums made from rum barrels and goat skin, *palitos* or *cuás* (wooden sticks that are hit together or on other wooden surfaces), maracas and sometimes a *güiro*. In the oldest forms (documented as early as the 1680s), dancers led the band, furiously competing with each other and the percussionists in an increasingly frenzied physical and rhythmic display. The tunes ended when either dancer or drummer became too exhausted to continue. Loíza Aldea, on the northeast coast, claims *bomba* as its invention, and the streets rumble with it throughout the summer, particularly during the festival for St James the Moor Slayer, which begins during the last week of July and lasts for nine days. Partiers don bright *vejigante* masks and take to the streets, celebrating all night.

*Plena,* which originated in Ponce, is also drum-based but with lighter textures. Introduced by *cocolocos,* slaves who migrated north from islands south of Puerto Rico, *plena* uses an assortment of hand-held percussion instruments. Locals once referred to the form as *el periodico cantado* (the sung newspaper), because the songs typically recounted, and often satirized, current events. *Plena* often uses *panderos,* which resemble Irish and Brazilian frame drums, but according to musicologists, *panderos* were introduced to the island by Spaniards, who had lifted them from their Moorish neighbors. The *plena* beat has strong African roots and is a close cousin to calypso, *soca* and dancehall music from Trinidad and Jamaica.

One of the definitive articles on the origin of the name 'salsa' can be found on www.salsaroots.com.

*Bomba y plena* developed side-by-side on the coastal lowlands, and inventive musicians eventually realized the call-and-response of *bomba* would work well with *plena*'s satirical lyrical nature, which is why the forms are often played back-to-back by bands. If you catch *bomba y plena* today, a historical performance will be rare; in the 1950s a modernization of the sound paved the way for salsa by adding horns, pan-Caribbean rhythmic elements and the clatter of Cuban percussion.

### Salsa

For most gringos, salsa's definition as a catch-all term for the interconnected jumble of Latin and Afro-Caribbean dances and sounds isn't easy to get a handle on, but for those who live in its areas of origin – Puerto Rico, Cuba and New York City – it's as much a lifestyle as a genre, with cultural complexities that go well beyond the 'spicy' jargon that's often bandied about. For the essence of salsa, read between the lines of Yuri Buenaventura's neotraditional anthem, 'Salsa,' where it's called 'the rhythm that gives life.' Better yet, don't read anything – just get out there and dance.

Pondering salsa's definition will quickly lead you to the question of where it comes from, and the debate about its Cuban or Puerto Rican origins is as unanswerable as the chicken and the egg. Debating this topic is likely to raise the blood pressure of any proud *puertorriqueño,* but most will agree that salsa was born in the nightclubs of New York City in the 1960s and has deep roots in both Puerto Rico and Cuba.

*Music & Dance in Puerto Rico from the Age of Columbus to Modern Times* by Donald and Annie Thompson is a simple timeline of music and dance in Puerto Rico that has great information on the origins of mambo, son, salsa and more.

#### ORIGINS & VARIATIONS OF SALSA

In addition to the mishmash of African traditions that spread through the islands via the slave trade, Cuba's *son* – a traditional style that was widely reintroduced to global audiences in the '90s though *Buena Vista Social Club* – is a crucial ingredient in salsa. Originating in eastern Cuba, *son* first became popular in the 1850s, mixing guitar-based Spanish *cancións* and Afro-Cuban percussion, a basic formula that still makes the foundation of many salsa songs. Variations of *son* spread through the islands and became internationally popular throughout the early 20th century, with variations including the rumba, mambo and cha-cha-cha.

Another element of salsa is meringue, which takes root in Puerto Rico's neighboring island, the Dominican Republic, where it is the national dance. With its even-paced steps and a signature roll of the hips, it's probably the easiest Latin dance for beginners.

Of all the variations that helped bring salsa into being, none is more important than the mambo – a flamboyant style of music and dance that marries elements of swinging American jazz with *son*. Again, the musical dialogue of the Caribbean islands is evident right down to the style's name; mambo is a Haitian word for a voodoo priestess.

Unlike the blurry origins of other traditions, historians credit its creation to brothers Cachao and Orestes López, who wrote a tune called 'Mambo' in 1938, and Cuban bandleader Pérez Prado, who introduced the complicated dance steps to Havana's La Tropicana nightclub in 1943. What they started in Cuba, Tito Puente (below), Tito Rodriguez, Machito and Xavier Cugat carried to the US, where it was eagerly embraced by Latino and North American audiences.

Music of Puerto Rico (www.musicofpuertorico.com) gives an excellent rundown on the complex musical genres of the island including audio clips and printed song lyrics.

### THE BIRTH & NEAR-DEATH OF SALSA

So, even if we know that most elements of salsa – which literally translates to 'sauce' – were imported to Puerto Rico, how can it remain as one of the country's most prideful exports? Much of that has to do with two artists in New York: Puerto Rican percussionist Tito Puente and Cuban vocalist Celia Cruz. By the time these two became household names in the 1960s, the Latin/Caribbean-influenced style of big band music, which used congas, bass, cowbells (a Puerto Rican addition), bongos, maracas, a horn section, bass and multiple singers, had come to dominate American social dancing.

In 1963, Johnny Pacheco, a visionary producer, created Fania Records, a record label that began to snap up talented Nuyorican musicians like Willie Colon, whose hip-popping music drew rave reviews from critics and brought crowds to the clubs. The only thing the craze lacked was a name. As the story goes, a 1962 record by Joe Cuba made the first mention of 'salsa' music, and the rest was magic. It wasn't long before Charlie Palmieri, another Nuyorican, released 'Salsa Na' Mas.' Scores of Puerto Rican, Cuban and Nuyorican singers became household names in the '60s, and when Carlos Santana's now-ubiquitous rock song 'Oye Como Va' hit the music stores in 1969, it may have marked the crest of the Latin wave.

### THE 'BRIDGE' OF TITO PUENTE

Puerto Ricans and Cubans jovially argue over who invented salsa, but the truth is neither island can claim to be the commercial center of salsa success. That honor belongs to the offshore colony known as El Barrio: the Latin Quarter, Spanish Harlem, New York City. In the euphoria following the end of WWII, New York's nightclub scene bloomed as dancers came in droves to the Palladium on 52nd St to bump and grind to the sound of the mambo bands they heard, or dreamed of hearing, in the casinos of Havana, Cuba. At the time, the music carried a basic Latin syncopated beat, punctuated by horn sections that were typical of the great swing bands of Stan Kenton and Count Basie.

Then young Puerto Rican drummer Tito Puente came into the picture. After serving three years in the US Navy and attending New York's Juilliard School of Music, Puente began playing and composing for Cuban bands in New York City. He gained notoriety for spicing up the music with a host of rhythms with roots in Puerto Rican *bomba*. Soon Puente had formed his own band, the Latin Jazz Ensemble, which was playing way beyond the old Cuban templates.

When Fania Records came around, Puente was already a star. Celia Cruz, the late Héctor Lavoe, Eddy Palmieri, Gilberto Santa Rosa, El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico and plenty of other *salseros* have made their mark on the world, but none can claim quite the same place as Tito Puente, who became the face of the salsa boom and bridged cultural divides with his music decades before multiculturalism was even considered a real word. Shortly after the legendary *salsero's* death in 2000, at the age of 77, a stretch of road in Harlem – East 112th Street at Lexington Ave – was renamed Tito Puente Way.



### PUERTO RICO PLAYLIST

It's nearly a crime to distil three generations of Puerto Rico's vibrant club music into an iPod playlist, but the following romp includes singles spanning half a century, from classic salsa to contemporary reggaeton.

- Tito Puente: 'Ran Kan Kan,' from 1951's *Babarabatiri*
- Cortijo Y Su Combo: 'El Bombon De Elena,' from 1957's *…Invites You To Dance*
- Celia Cruz: 'Chango Ta Vani,' from 1958's *La Incomparable*
- Willie Colón: 'Te Conozco,' from 1969's *Cosa Nuestra*
- El Gran Combo De Puerto Rico: 'No Hay Cama Pa' Tanta Gente,' from 1971's *Nuestra Musica*
- Ismael Marinda: 'Se Casa La Rumba,' from 1972's *Abran Paso!*
- Eddie Palmieri: 'Nunca Contigo,' from 1973's *The Sun Of Latin Music*
- Fania All-Stars: 'Ella Fue (She Was The One),' from 1977's *Rhythm Machine*
- Frankie Ruiz: 'Me Dejo,' from 1989's *Mas Grande Que Nunca*
- Marvin Santiago: 'Fuego A La Jicotea,' from 1991's *Fuego A La Jicotea*
- Vico C: 'Calla,' from 1998's *Aquel Que Había Muetro*
- Yuri Buenaventura: 'Salsa,' from 2000's *Yo Soy*
- Tego Calderon: 'Guasa, Guasa,' from 2003's *Abayarde*
- Daddy Yankee: 'Gasolina,' from 2004's Barrio Fino
- Ivy Queen: 'Quiero Bailar,' from 2004's *Diva*
- N.O.R.E.: 'Oye Mi Canto,' from 2006's *N.O.R.E. y la Familia…Ya Tú Sabe*
- Tito el ambino: 'El Tra,' from 2007's *It's My Time*
- Don Chezina: 'Songorocosongo,' from 2008's *Tributo Urbano A Hector Lavoe*

Though the craze left a mark on American pop and jazz traditions, the crowds dwindled in subsequent decades as musical tastes shifted radically in the 1970s. While Puerto Rican youth turned to rock-and-roll imports from the US through the '80s, traditionalists celebrated the sappy *salsa romantica* typified by crooners like José Alberto.

### SALSA TODAY

It wasn't until the 1990s that a modern Nuyorican – salsa crooner Marc Anthony, aka Mr JLo – brought salsa back from the brink of obscurity, braiding its traditional elements with those of sleek modern pop. Long before his wife even conceived of her breakout Latina-influenced 1999 pop album *On the 6*, Marc's music packed New York's Madison Square Garden several times over with delirious crowds (the DVD of these performances are required viewing in many a Puerto Rican watering hole to this day). Although Lopez and Anthony remain salsa's premiere couple, American audiences have also had fleeting infatuations with Ricky Martin (Mr La Vida Loca) and hunky Spaniard Enrique Iglesias.

Among Tito Puente's many honors are five Grammys, a Presidential Commendation medal (for service in WWII) and having a special session of the Puerto Rican Senate dedicated to him.

## Reggaeton

The raucous bastard-child of reggae, salsa and hip-hop is reggaeton, a rough-and-tumble urban sound that took over the unpaved streets of Loíza Aldea, proudly popping its blue collar as the Caribbean's answer to the ethos of American thug life. Recently it's made a wholesale takeover of most dance clubs in the Caribbean and rattles roofs in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles.

**PUERTO RICAN MUSIC: ALIVE AND KICKING**

Through slush and snow, you've been daydreaming all winter about that idyllic Puerto Rican night on the town, when rum flows like water, the band is hot as a tin roof and the likelihood of dislocating something on the dance floor is high. Catching live traditional music isn't as easy as you might hope, but the following nightspots are the cream of the crop.

- Nuyorican Café (p119) – San Juan's coziest dance floor host live combos playing traditional favorites
- La Rumba (p120) – tight bands and hip patrons groove long into the morning
- Café Hijos de Borinquen (p120) – throaty folk ballads and pounding DJ sets make the soundtrack to this quaint boho dive
- Museo de la Música Puertorriqueña (p188) – Ponce's home of traditional music performances, in a museum setting
- Ponce Hilton (p191) – touristy and a bit tacky, but also the most reliable place for traditional music in the south

As the name suggests, it draws heavily on reggae, though the simplest reduction of its sound is a Spanish-language hip-hop driven by the crushing bass of Jamaican raga, a bossy, electro-infused spin on reggae. The earliest forms are traced to Panama, thanks to Jamaican laborers who helped build the Panama Canal, but a more aggressive strain of reggaeton developed in urban areas of Puerto Rico in the 1980s, circulated underground on self-released mix tapes. In the 1990s it incorporated thunderous elements of Jamaican raga and came unto its own. Toss in the thud of a drum-machine and some X-rated lyrics and you have yourself a bona fide musical revolution.

Unlike most traditionally postured Puerto Rican music/dance combos, reggaeton dance floors feature a deliriously oversexed free-for-all, with its most popular move known as *perreo,* or dog dance – which leaves little to the imagination. Reggaeton stars like Tego Calderon, Daddy Yankee, Don Omar and Ivy Queen have played to crowds of thousands in the US and are gradually sneaking on to mainstream urban radio.

Ricky Martin released *Life,* his first English-language album in five years, in 2005. It debuted at number six on the Billboard Top 200 Albums Chart.

## FOLK

The earliest folk music on the island started with the percussion and wind instruments of the Taíno, and grew to incorporate elements as disparate as the island's ethnic composition: Spanish guitars, European parlor music and drums and rhythms from West Africa. All are in the DNA of the island's contemporary music, but the long, varied identity of Puerto Rican music incorporates a number of curious indigenous styles and instruments, notably including at least half a dozen guitar-like string instruments that are native to the island, such as the aptly named four-string guitar-like *cuatro*.

Perhaps the most structurally complex of the island's folk music, *danza* is considered Puerto Rico's classical music. *Danza's* exact lineage is unknown, but it's generally considered to be modeled after *contradanza,* a social music and dance from Europe. *Danza* popularity blossomed in 1840 when it incorporated new music and dance steps called *habaneras* (another export of Cuba), which freed the style of movements. Its expressive nature was wildly popular with youth but quite taboo with parents, and so it was banned for a period. Composer Juan Morel Campos is the national hero of the form; he wrote more than 300 expressive *danzas* before he died at 38. The Puerto Rico national anthem, 'La Borinqueña,' is based on a *danza*.



Probably the most appealing colonial-era music found on the island is the *décima* – the vehicle through which the *jíbaros* (rural mountain residents) express joy and sorrow.

A *décima* is based on a 10-line poem and requires multiple instruments – the three-, four- and six-stringed guitars known appropriately enough as the *tres, cuatro* and *seis* and a rhythm section usually comprised of *güiro* and drums. Like other music of the island, a degree of wit and improvisation is expected of the singers. Often a band will have two lead singers who alternate stanzas and try to outdo each other with sizzling rhymes and acrid political statements.

Today, many Puerto Ricans associate *jíbaro* music with Christmas because of *parrandas,* a tradition in which groups of friends stroll from house to house singing joyful *aguinaldos* (Christmas songs set to mountain music) and begging for treats.

Puerto Rico's national anthem *La Borinqueña* is actually a *danza* that was later subtly altered in order to make it sound more grandiose and anthem-like.

## CLASSICAL

Puerto Rico's offerings for typical classical fare are limited mostly to the San Juan area, where the Orquesta Sinfónica de Puerto Rico presents standard orchestral rep and hosts visiting luminaries. The symphony shares a space with a distinguished national opera company at Centro de Bellas Artes (p121) whose guests have included renowned Puerto Rican bassist Justino Diaz.

To see the best classical music the island has to offer you can do no better than visit during the Festival Casals (p108), held for two weeks every year.

The festival is named for cellist Pablo Casals, who despite being born in Barcelona, is considered Puerto Rico's most distinguished son (his mother was from Mayagüez). In the years before WWI, he earned a reputation as the pre-eminent cellist of his era. Avidly political, he left Spain in 1936 to protest the Franco regime and eventually settled in Puerto Rico, where he lived out the rest of his days. In 1957 he founded the Festival Casals, which is attended by music fans from around the world, and went on to form the Puerto Rico Symphony Orchestra and the Puerto Rico Conservatory of Music.

By the time he died in 1973 at the age of 97, he considered himself – and was considered by his compatriots – to be Puerto Rico's greatest champion of classical music.

# Food & Drink

Thanks to a full-on culinary revolution, Puerto Rico now offers the best selection of food choices in the Caribbean, and restaurants in cities such as San Juan could confidently compete with their stateside counterparts in New York or San Francisco. However, though many of the island's menus popularly describe their food as 'fusion' or 'eclectic,' most owe more than a passing nod to Puerto Rico's real deal – *comida criolla* or *cocina criolla*. The irony, for food lovers, is that *comida criolla* is itself a fusion of numerous international influences, from the indigenous natives to the colonizing Spanish. The mélange can be traced back to the pre-Columbian Taíno who survived on a diet of root vegetables, fish and tropical fruits. With the arrival of the Spanish came an infusion of more European flavors such as olive oil, rice, peppers, beef, pork, and spices like cilantro and cumin. Slavery brought African influences to Puerto Rico including yams, plantains and coffee, and a style of cooking that favored deep-fried food and stews. The US influence in Puerto Rican food is reflected more in the fast food boom than in *comida criolla* per se, though the Americans did introduce corn oil (for cooking), sausages, and various fruits such as papaya, tomatoes and avocados.

Learn about Puerto Rican food, ingredients, recipes and cooking methods on Caribbean Choice (www.caribbeanchoice.com).

A typical *comida criolla* dish today can consist of many different ingredients, though roast pork, rice, beans, deep fried plantains and yucca are all popular staples.

## STAPLES & SPECIALTIES

### Soups & Stews

Soups and stews are staples in *comida criolla,* and in these brews you can taste a fusion of Taíno, European and African recipes and ingredients. Many soups use unique island vegetables to add texture, taste and vitamins. Some of these vegetables, such as yautia (tanier), *batata* (sweet potato), yucca, chayote (squash), *berzas* (collard greens) and *grelos* (turnip greens) might seem odd to North Americans and Europeans. But you'll learn to love these sprouts and tubers when the greens are simmering in a *caldero* (iron/aluminum kettle) with a peculiar mix of *criollo* spices. *Sancocho* (Caribbean soup) is a blend of many of the vegetables mentioned earlier, along with plantains – peeled and diced – and coarsely chopped tomatoes, green pepper, chili pepper, cilantro leaves, onion and corn kernels. To this mix, the cook adds water, tomato sauce, chopped beef and a few pork ribs for flavoring before cooking it over low heat.

Plantains are in such demand on the island they must be imported from the Dominican Republic.

Perhaps the best-known island concoction to come from a simmering *caldero* is *asopao de pollo*. This is a rich and spicy chicken stew that is fragrant with the ever-present and distinctive seasoning called adobo (garlic, oregano, paprika, peppercorns, salt, olive, lime juice and vinegar crushed into a paste for seasoning meat). Adobo comes from Spain and exists in many Spanish-inspired cuisines, including Filipino, with which it's most often associated.

In addition to adobo, another seasoning that infuses the taste of many criollo dishes is *sofrito*. You can now buy this seasoning on the spice shelves of pueblo supermarkets, but discerning diners say there is nothing like the taste of *sofrito* made from scratch. Certainly the smells that waft from the mix of garlic, onion and pepper browned in olive oil and capped with *achiote* (annato seeds) are enough to make the effort worth it to many cooks.

### Meat

Puerto Ricans claim that the modern barbecue descends from the pork roast that the Taíno called *barbicoa*. In this vein, *lechón asado* (roast suckling pig), cooked on a spit over a charcoal fire, is the centerpiece of fiestas and family banquets, particularly at holiday gatherings. Of course, this barbecued pig has been liberally seasoned with adobo, and cooks baste it with *achiote* and the juice from *naranjas* (the island's sour oranges). When cooked to crispness, the meat is served with *ajili-mójili* (a tangy garlic sauce).

The website www.ricanrecipes.com specializes in recipes from the Enchanted Island, with a comprehensive list that includes everything from *brazo gitano* to *pollo en fricasé.*

For less festive occasions, Puerto Rican dinners will almost always include the staples of *arroz con habichuelas* (rice and beans) and *tostones,* which are fried green plantains, or *panapen* (breadfruit). To these staples, the cook almost always adds a meat dish such as roasted *cabro* (kid goat), *ternera* (veal), *pollo* (chicken) or *carne mechada* (roast beef) – all seasoned with adobo.

### Seafood

Surprisingly, Puerto Ricans do not eat a lot of fish, but one of the most popular ways to prepare a variety of fish – from *pulpo* (octopus) to *mero* (sea bass) – is *en escabeche*. This technique yields a fried then chilled seafood pickled in vinegar, oil, peppercorns, salt, onions, bay leaves and lime juice. Fried fish generally comes with a topping of *mojo isleño* (a piquant sauce of vinegar, tomato sauce, olive oil, onions, capers, pimentos, olives, bay leaves and garlic). Land crabs – *jueyes* – have long been a staple of islanders who can simply gather the critters off the beaches. An easy way to enjoy the taste is to eat *empanadillas de jueyes,* in which the succulent crab meat has been picked from the shells, highly seasoned and baked into a wrap made of *casabe* paste, a flour made from yucca. Of course, grilled or boiled *langosta* (local tropical lobsters without claws) is a pricey delicacy for both islanders and travelers alike. If you like shellfish, try the *ostiones* (miniature oysters). Fish lovers should also try a bowl of *sopón de pescado* (fish soup), with its scent of onions and garlic and subtle taste of sherry.

### Fruits

Puerto Rico grows and exports bananas, papayas, fresh and processed pineapples, as well as a bewildering variety of exotic tropical fruits such as guavas, *tamarindos* (tamarinds), *parchas* (passion fruit) and *guanábanas* (soursops). It's also the third-largest producer of citron – behind Italy and Greece – and you'll see a long swath of fields around Adjuntas dedicated to this fruit.

Featuring renowned island chefs, *Puerto Rico: Grand Cuisine of the Caribbean* by José Luis Diaz de Villegas is an excellent exploration of the ways in which *comida criolla* is infusing and being infused with other culinary cultures.

## DRINKS

### Nonalcoholic Drinks

Fruit juices, like *guanábana* juice, are locally made and popular with Puerto Ricans (there are carbonated and noncarbonated versions). Other local favorites are carbonated and noncarbonated cans of piña colada (the creamy mix of pineapple juice and coconut cream that can form the basis for a rum drink). *Mavi* is something like root beer, made from the bark of the ironwood tree. As in much of the tropics, beach and street vendors sell chilled green coconuts – *cocos fríos* – to the thirsty.

Coffee, grown in Adjuntas and many of the mountain regions, is a staple at all hours and hardly a meal ends without a cup of steaming java.

### Alcoholic Drinks

Because Puerto Rico is a major producer of alcoholic beverages – and since the government has not levied outlandish taxes on alcohol – Puerto Rico is clearly one of the cheapest places to drink in the Caribbean, and perhaps the world. The importance of rum to Puerto Rico can hardly be exaggerated.

**PUERTO RICO'S TOP CHOICES**

- Mamacitas (p164) – the culinary capital of Culebra
- Smilin' Joe's (p233) – surf talk over scrumptious suppers
- Belly Button's (p178) – best (and biggest) breakfasts in Vieques, nay Puerto Rico
- Café Cala'o (p113) – best coffee on the island, hands down
- La Bombonera (p113) – simple food in an authentic Old Town setting
- Restaurant Vinny (p149) – plastic forks and delicious *empanadillas* on scruffy Playa Húcares
- Casa Grande Mountain Retreat (p247) – cordon bleu cuisine produced out of nowhere
- Kasalta's (p117) – mind-bogglingly diverse Ocean Park bakery
- Parrot Club (p115) – SoFo classic; the original and best
- La Casa de los Pasteliollos (p197) – fresh octopus and *pastelillos* to die for

Simply put, *ron* (rum) is the national drink. Puerto Rico is the largest producer of rum in the world, and the distilleries bring hundreds of millions of dollars into the island economy. The headquarters for the famous Bacardi Rum Factory is in Cataño (p127), but most Puerto Ricans drink the locally made Don Q, Ronrico, Castillo and Captain Morgan (spiced rum).

There are two island-brewed beers that generally cost no more than $2 in local bars. The India brand has been around for years; Medalla is a popular light pilsner that quite a few islanders drink like water.

## CELEBRATIONS

*Recipes from La Isla* by Robert and Judith Rosado features an extensive listing of recipes, using traditional cooking methods and ingredients (but sometimes with healthier substitutions), and describes the authentic tools and techniques originally used.

Food is an intrinsic part of Puerto Rican culture, so it's no wonder festivals celebrating regional specialties take place practically year-round. The southern region of Salinas, known for seafood, is host to the Salinas Carnival in April. Shrimp lovers should consider visiting the western town of Moca in May for the Festival del Camarón de Río (River Shrimp Festival), where local restaurants and kiosks hold tastings and showcase local recipes. In Lares, located in the mountains, one can sample at least 12 varieties of bananas at the Banana Festival. Those with a sweet tooth should visit the island during the last weekend of August for the Puff Pastry Festival in the western town of Añasco.

In October, the northern town of Corozal hosts the National Plantain Festival. The coastal town of Arecibo, where the sardine is considered a delicacy, holds the annual Cetí (a miniature relative of the sardine) Festival. These are just a few of the culinary celebrations that visitors traveling to Puerto Rico might stumble across at any time of year.

## WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

There's room for all price ranges in Puerto Rico. Budget-minded diners can easily eat for under $12, while a midrange meal will set you back between $13 and $29. Top end ($30 plus) can go as high as you want it – but you'll get your money's worth.

Usually eaten between about 7am and 9am, typical Puerto Rican breakfasts are light and simple, except on weekends and holidays, when people have more time to cook egg dishes such as *tortilla española* (Spanish omelette) or French toast. You can get American breakfasts at chains like Denny's…and many Puerto Ricans do. More traditional islanders stop at a *repostelría* (bakery) for a long, sweet cup of *café con leche* (a blend of coffee and steamed milk) and a couple of slices of *pan criollo* (a bit like French bread) with butter or *queso de papa* (a mild island cheese). Folks with more of an appetite may get a sandwich. Those with a sweet tooth favor *la mallorca* (a type of sweet pastry that is covered with powdered sugar).

Lunch is available between 11:30am and 2pm. Puerto Ricans usually go cheap on this event, flocking to fast-food outlets for burgers and the like, or gathering around *friquitines* (street vendors) selling a variety of fried finger foods. To a large degree, islanders avoid leisurely luncheon meals in upscale restaurants, and you will find the noon meal the best time of day to sample good Puerto Rican cooking. The restaurants are not crowded and you can often find fixed-price specials for as little as $6.

In 2003, Aquaviva (p116) in Old San Juan was listed as one of the top 75 restaurants in the world in a survey by *Condé Nast Traveler*.

Dinners, served between about 6pm and 10pm, are more expensive, and a legion of prosperous islanders have developed a tradition of going out to restaurants – especially on Thursday, Friday and Saturday – as a prelude to a long 'night on the town.' Be prepared to wait for a table if you do not call ahead for reservations at popular spots (some of the better restaurants require reservations). The same is true for the big Sunday afternoon *cena* (lunch) at resort destinations near the beach, in the mountains or at a parador.

Dinner specials may also be available, but they are usually quite a bit more expensive than virtually the same lunch specials.

Travelers who want to take some of the risk out of sampling island cuisine can take advantage of the Mesónes Gastronómicos program, sponsored by the **Puerto Rico Tourism Company** (PRTC; www.gotopuertorico.com). This program has identified a collection of restaurants around the island that feature Puerto Rican cuisine, and has screened those restaurants according to the highest standards of quality. The PRTC publishes a list of these restaurants in its bimonthly magazine, *Qué Pasa*.

## VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

There is a growing number of vegetarian restaurants in Puerto Rico, particularly in Old San Juan and San Juan, but even regular restaurants often carry vegetarian dishes nowadays. It's noted in this book when a restaurant specifically does vegetarian/vegan food, but chefs in many restaurants are very often willing to prepare vegetarian dishes upon request.

Vegans should be very careful, as butter or meat renderings often find their way into beans and rice, and many other dishes that can be listed as 'vegetarian' by people who don't fully understand that an absence of actual meat doesn't automatically make a meal vegan.

**A MOVEABLE FEAST**

Cheap, cheerful and indisputably Puerto Rican, kiosks, or small food stands, offer some of the island's best snacks for prices listed in cents rather than dollars. Running the gamut from smoky holes-in-the-wall to tiny mobile cooking units that materialize seemingly out of nowhere, kiosks offer fast food without the franchise names, meaning the snacks they display are invariably homemade, locally sourced and surprisingly tasty.

The island's most famous cluster of permanent kiosks (over 50 in all) lines the palm-shaded beachfront at Luquillo (p140). Other more moveable feasts operate at weekends in places such as Piñones near San Juan or Boquerón on the west coast, although you can bump into a spontaneous kiosk-gathering in the most unlikely places.

Tasty treats to look out for are *surullitos* (fried cornmeal and cheese sticks), *empanadillas* (meat or fish turnovers), *alcapurrias* (fritters made with mashed plantains and ground meat) and *bacalaitos* (salt-cod fritters seasoned with oregano, garlic and sweet chili peppers). The sellers with the most brightly-colored carts are the *piragüeros,* vendors who sell syrupy *piraguas,* cones of shaved ice covered in sweet fruity sauces such as raspberry, guava, tamarind or coconut.

## EATING WITH KIDS

Children are welcome everywhere in Puerto Rico, but it would be a faux pas to bring extremely young children to some of the sleeker restaurants in San Juan. Generally most restaurants are happy to do things like heat up a baby bottle for you, but know that microwaves aren't employed widely outside of San Juan. Baby chairs are often available (this is especially the case in fast-food restaurants) and you will see entire families dining out at a wide range of restaurants; you needn't worry that you'll be the only one with kids.

The traditional recipes are good in *A Taste of Puerto Rico* by Yvonne Ortiz, but more intriguing are the descriptions of some of the more modern dishes appearing on the island, especially the new emphasis on healthy seafood.

## HABITS & CUSTOMS

There are very few tricks to dining out easily in Puerto Rico – you can eat with your left or right hand, hold your utensils American or British style, follow basic table manners and get along fine.

Breakfast and lunch tend to be quick, unless you're having a business meal (these can drag on forever). Dinner in restaurants is always a social and festive affair, so solitary diners will stick out a bit. Lunch is much easier to navigate solo. Smoking and belching are best done outside, but otherwise there's little you can do that will upset easygoing Puerto Ricans (aside from criticizing their cooking, that is).

If invited to someone's house, a gift bottle of rum, beer or wine will be well received (more so than flowers). Don't argue when the hosts serve you a gargantuan portion; it's probably more than they would eat in a week, but as their guest, you get special treatment.

## EAT YOUR WORDS

### Useful Phrases

See the Language chapter (p300) for other useful Spanish words and phrases, and pronunciation guidelines.

**Table for…, please.**
*Una mesa para…, por favor.* — oo·na me·sa pa·ra… por fa·vor

**Can I see the menu please?**
*¿Puedo ver el menú, por favor?* — pwe·do ver el me·noo por fa·vor

**How late are you open?**
*¿El restoran está abierto hasta cuándo?* — el re·sto·ran e·sta a·byer·to ha·sta kwan·do

**Is this the smoking section?**
*¿Aquí se puede fumar?* — a·kee se pwe·de foo·mar

**Is there a table with a view available?**
*¿Hay una mesa con vista?* — ai oo·na me·sa con vis·ta

**I'm a vegetarian.**
*Soy vegetariana/o.* — soy veg·khe·ta·rya·na/o

**What's in this dish?**
*¿Qué ingredientes tiene este plato?* — ke een·gre·dyen·tes tye·ne es·te pla·to

**What is today's special?**
*¿Cuál es el plato del día?* — kwal es el pla·to del dee·a

**I'll try what she/he's having.**
*Probaré lo que ella/él está comiendo.* — pro·ba·ray lo ke e·lya/el es·ta ko·myen·do

**Can I have a (beer) please?**
*Una (cerveza), por favor.* — oo·na (ser·ve·sa) por fa·vor

**Thank you, that was delicious.**
*Muchas gracias, estaba buenísimo.* — moo·chas gra·syas es·ta·ba bwe·nee·see·mo

**The check/bill, please.**
*La cuenta, por favor.* — la kwen·ta por fa·vor

If you've got a hankering to try your hand at *aranitas, maduritos* or seafood *asopao,* grab *Puerto Rican Cuisine in America: Nuyorican and Bodega Recipes* by Oswald Rivera. It's a truly mouthwatering book.



### Food Glossary

Following is a handy list of common Puerto Rican menu items.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *aguacate* | a·gwa·*ka*·te | avocado |
| *ajo* | *a*·kho | garlic |
| *alcapurrias* | al·ka·*pu*·ree·as | fish, pork or crab fried in a batter of ground plaintains |
| *amarillos en dulce* | a·ma·*ree*·lyos en *dul*·se | ripe plaintains fried in sugar, red wine and cinnamon |
| *almejas frescas* | al·*me*·khas *fres*·kas | cherrystone clams |
| *al ajillo* | al a·*khee*·lyo | with garlic or cooked in garlic |
| *a la parilla* | a la pa·*ree*·lya | grilled |
| *al horno* | al *or*·no | oven-baked |
| *asado* | a·*sa*·do | roasted and seasoned with sofrito |
| *asopao* | a·sa·*pa*·o | an island specialty, a delicious thick stew often with seafood |
| *arroz* | a·*roz* | rice |
| *bacalaítos* | ba·ka·la·*ee*·tos | fried codfish fritters |
| *bien-me-sabe* | byen·me·*sa*·be | a coconut sauce over sponge cake |
| *bistec pizzaola* | bi·*stek* pit·za·*o*·la | breaded beef cutlets |
| *caldo de gallina* or *sopa de pollo criollo* | *kal*·do de ga·*lyee*·na *so*·pa de *po*·lyo kree·*o*·lyo | creole chicken soup |
| *camarones* | ka·ma·*ro*·nes | shrimp |
| *carrucho* | ka·*roo*·cho | conch |
| *cebolla* | se·*bo*·lya | onion |
| *chicharrones de pollo* | chee·cha·*ro*·nes·de *po*·lyo | chicken crisps |
| *chicharrón* | chee·cha·*ron* | crisp pork rind |
| *chillo* | *chee*·lyo | snapper |
| *chuletas* | choo·*le*·tas | pork chops |
| *churrasco* | choo·*ra*·sko | charcoal-broiled Argentinean steak |
| *cocina del kiosko* | ko·*see*·na del·*kyo*·sko | food-stand offerings |
| *dulce de leche* | *dul*·se de *le*·che | candied milk |
| *empanadilla* | em·pa·na·*dee*·lya | plantain or yucca dough stuffed with meat or fish and fried |
| *ensalada mixta* | en·sa·*la*·da *mik*·sta | mixed salad |
| *ensalada verde* | en·sa·*la*·da *vair*·de | green salad |
| *flan* | flan | custard |
| *filete a la criolla* | fi·*le*·te a la kree·*o*·la | creole steak |
| *filete a la parrilla* | fi·*le*·te a la pa·*ree*·lya | broiled steak |
| *frito* | *free*·to | fried |
| *guineas al vino* | gee·*nay*·as al *vee*·no | guinea hen in wine |
| *guisado* | gee·*sa*·do | stewed |
| *habichuelas* | ha·bee·*chwe*·las | beans |
| *langosta* | lan·*gos*·ta | lobster |
| *lechón asado* | le·*chon* a·*sa*·do | roast pig |
| *maní* | ma·*nee* | peanuts |
| *mariscos* | ma·*ris*·kos | shellfish |
| *medallon de filete* | me·da·*lyon* de fi·*le*·te | beef medallions |
| *mero* | *me*·ro | sea bass |
| *mofongo* | mo·*fong*·go | balls of mashed plaintains mixed with pork rind and spices and fried; sometimes stuffed with crab or lobster |
| *parrillada* | pa·ree·*lya*·da | spicy grilled steak |
| *natilla* | na·*tee*·lya | ice cream |
| *pastelillos de chapin* | pa·ste·*lee*·los de cha·*pin* | fried dumplings of trunk fish |

The somewhat boringly named *Puerto Rican Cookery* by Carmen Aboy Valldejuli is considered to be the definitive text on *comida criolla* recipes. As if to prove the point, it is now in its 15th printing.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *pescado* | pe·*ska*·do | fish |
| *pionono* | pyo·*no*·no | cone of mashed plantains stuffed with seasoned ground meat, deep-fried in batter |
| *piragua* | pee·*ra*·gwa | cup of shaved ice covered with a fruity syrup in the tradition of a US snow cone |
| *pulpo* | *pul*·po | octopus |
| *sopa* | *so*·pa | soup |
| *tembleque* | tem·*ble*·ke | pudding made from coconut |
| *tostones* | tos·*to*·nes | twice-fried plantains, sometimes coated with honey |
| *vegetales* | ve·khe·*ta*·les | vegetables |

# Environment

## THE LAND

Cartographers group Puerto Rico with the Caribbean's three largest islands – Cuba, Jamaica and Hispaniola – in the so-called Greater Antilles. But at 100 miles long and 35 miles across, Puerto Rico is quite clearly the little sister, stuck off to the east of Hispaniola at about 18° north latitude, 66° west longitude. With its four principal satellite islands – Mona and Desecheo to the west, Culebra and Vieques to the east – and a host of cays hugging its shores, Puerto Rico claims approximately 3500 sq miles of land, making the commonwealth slightly larger than the Mediterranean island of Corsica.

Like almost all the islands ringing the Caribbean Basin, Puerto Rico owes its existence to a series of volcanic events. These eruptions built up layers of lava and igneous rock and created an island with four distinct geographical zones: the central mountains, karst country, the coastal plain and the coastal dry forest. At the heart of the island, running east to west, stands a spine of steep, wooded mountains called the Cordillera Central. The lower slopes of the cordillera give way to foothills, comprising a region on the island's north coast known as 'karst country.' In this part of the island, erosion has worn away the limestone, leaving a karstic terrain of dramatic sinkholes, hillocks and caves.

The San Fermin earthquake that hit western Puerto Rico in October 1918 measured 7.6 on the Richter scale and triggered a 20ft tsunami. The event caused over $4 million of damage to the cities of Mayagüez and Aguadilla and killed 116 people.

Forty-five non-navigable rivers and streams rush from the mountains and through the foothills to carve the coastal valleys, particularly on the east and west ends of Puerto Rico, where sugarcane, coconuts and a variety of fruits are cultivated. The island's longest river is the Río Grande de Loíza, which flows north to the coast. Other substantial rivers include the Río Grande de Añasco, the Río Grande de Arecibo and the Río de la Plata.

Little of the island's virgin forest remains, but second- and third-growth forests totaling 140 sq miles now comprise significant woodland reserves, mostly in the center of the island.

## WILDLIFE

### Animals

Very few of the land mammals that make their home in Puerto Rico are native to the island; most mammal species – from cows to rats – have been either accidentally or intentionally introduced to the island over the centuries. Among the most distinctive of these is the Paso Fino horse, which is a small-boned, easy-gaited variety. The Paso Finos have been raised in Puerto Rico since the time of the Spanish conquest, when they were introduced to the New World to supply the conquistadores on their expeditions throughout Mexico and the rest of the Americas. They now number 8000 and are unique to Puerto Rico. The horses are most dramatic on the island of Vieques, where they roam in semiwild herds on vast tracts of ex-military land.

Above and below ground, and under water, *Puerto Rico and Virgin Islands Wildlife Viewing* by David W Nellis gives you all the facts on the flora and fauna of Puerto Rico.

Not far from Vieques lies the 39-acre Cayo Santiago, where a small colony of rhesus monkeys, introduced for scientific study in 1938, has burgeoned into a community of more than 700 primates.

Bats are the only native terrestrial mammals in Puerto Rico. Notable marine mammals include humpback whales, which breed in the island's warm waters in the winter. They are best spotted off the coast of Rincón in early December (see p229). Another aquatic resident is the endangered Antillean manatee (the town of Manatí, on the north coast, is named after the mammal) that inhabit shallow coastal areas where they forage on sea

grasses and plants. Manatee numbers have dropped in recent decades due to habitat loss, poaching and entanglement with fishing nets.

Puerto Rico is home to 25 species of amphibian and 61 reptiles. The most famous amphibian is the tiny but highly vocal *coquí* frog (its distinctive nighttime croak has been measured at 10 decibels), which has been adopted as a national symbol.

Learn all about the *coquí* frog and other animals that inhabit Puerto Rico in *Natural Puerto Rico* by Alfonso Silva Lee, an exhaustive but entertaining book on island wildlife.

Iguanas are often kept as semiwild pets and pose unlikely obstacles on numerous Puerto Rican golf courses. The most notable wild species is the Mona ground iguana, which still survives in large numbers on the western island of Mona – often dubbed the 'Galápagos of the Caribbean' because of its unique biological diversity.

Despite rampant coastal development (see p68), a handful of the island's beaches are still nesting sites for hawksbill and leatherback sea turtles. An excellent place to view the nesting process (and help out as a volunteer) is on the isolated northern beaches of the island of Culebra (see p158).

Puerto Rico boasts 11 varieties of snake, none of which is poisonous. The most impressive is the endemic special boa, which can grow to a length of more than 12ft.

Though not native to the island, spectacled caimans have become something of a pest in the areas around Lake Tortuguero on the north coast. Introduced as a macho pet in the 1990s, many of these minicrocs were abandoned by their owners and dumped in the vicinity of Puerto Rico's only freshwater lake where they have played havoc with the fragile ecosystem. Local rangers are currently trying to bring their numbers under control.

All you need to know about the insects, reptiles, four-legged mammals and greenery that they inhabit is in *The Nature of the Islands: Plants and Animals of the Eastern Caribbean* by Virginia Barlow. Very helpful for campers.

The island also has a supply of unusual flying and crawling insects, including a large tropical relative of the firefly called the *cucubano,* and a centipede measuring more than 6in in length with a sting that can kill. Much to the chagrin of generations of foreign visitors there are zillions of blood-hungry mosquitoes.

With more than 250 species spread over 3500 sq miles, Puerto Rico is an excellent place to dust off your binoculars and engage in a bit of tropical bird-watching. The commonwealth's most famous bird is also its rarest: the Puerto Rican parrot. Numbers of the bird were down in the mid teens during the 1970s, but thanks to concerted conservation efforts the population has recovered to a precarious 35 to 40. The parrots still exist in the wild in the El Yunque and Río Abajo forest reserves, although seeing one is akin to winning a lottery ticket.

Another endemic bird is the Puerto Rican tody, a small green, yellow and red creature that frequents the moist mountains of the Cordillera Central and the dense thickets of the south coast where it feeds on insects. If you're lucky you'll also encounter various South American families such as tyrant flycatchers, bananaquits and tanagers.

The Puerto Rican parrot is one of the 10 most endangered species in the world, with only an estimated 35 to 40 birds still existing in the wild.

The coastal dry forest of Guánica features more than 130 bird species, comprising largely songbirds. Some of these are migratory fowl, such as the prairie warbler and the northern parula. Many are nonmigratory species, including the lizard cuckoo and the endangered Puerto Rican nightjar. One of the joys of winter beachcombing is watching the aerial acrobatics of brown pelicans as they hunt for fish.

For more information on birding activities see p82.

### Plants

Mangrove swamps and coconut groves dominate the north coast, while El Yunque's rainforest, at the east end of the island, supports mahogany trees and more than 50 varieties of wild orchid. Giant ferns thrive in the rainforest as well as in the foothills of karst country, while cacti, mesquite forest and bunchgrass reign on the dry southwest tip of the island, which has the look of the African savanna.

Exotic shade trees have long been valued in this sunny climate, and most of the island's municipal plazas spread beneath canopies of magnificent ceibas or kapoks (silk-cotton tree), the *flamboyán* (poinciana), with its flaming red blossoms, and the African tulip tree.

Islanders often adorn their dwellings with a profusion of flowers such as orchids, bougainvillea and poinsettias, and tend lovingly to fruit trees that bear papaya, *uva caleta* (sea grape), *carambola* (star fruit), *panapen* (breadfruit) and *plátano* (plantain). Of course, sugarcane dominates the plantations of the coastal lowlands, while farmers raise coffee on the steep slopes of the Cordillera Central.

For birders heading to Puerto Rico or the Caribbean, *A Guide to the Birds of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands* by Herbert Raffaele is a must-have. It will help you spy lots of hard-to-find birds in the dense forests of nature reserves.

## TERRITORIAL PARKS & RESERVES

Puerto Rico has more than a dozen well-developed and protected wilderness areas, which offer an array of exploration and a few camping opportunities. Most of these protected areas are considered *reservas forestales* (forest reserves) or *bosques estatales* (state forests), although these identifiers are often treated interchangeably in government-issued literature and maps.

Bosque Estatal de Carite (p258), Bosque Estatal de Guilarte (p270) and Bosque Estatal de Maricao (p271) are all on the slopes of the cordillera and accessible via the Ruta Panorámica.

The Bosque Estatal de Río Abajo (p246) covers 5000 acres in karst country near the Observatorio de Arecibo. Bosque Estatal de Guajataca (p249) is a smaller preserve near the northwest corner of the island, while the immense 10,000-acre Bosque Estatal de Guánica (p201), on the southwest coast, is home to a tropical dry-forest ecosystem and a Unesco biosphere forest.

Check out the website www.elyunque.com. Aside from excellent information on the island's national forest, this site lists many other activities on the island and is regularly updated with topical environmental news.

Another notable coastal preserve is the 316-acre Las Cabezas de San Juan Reserva Natural 'El Faro' (p142), at the northeast corner of Puerto Rico, where El Faro (The Lighthouse) stands guard over the offshore cays. Meanwhile, glimmering to the east lay the Spanish Virgin Islands of Culebra and Vieques, both of which have designated large tracts of land as National Wildlife Refuges under the control of the US Fish & Wildlife Service. With 18,000 acres, Vieques National Wildlife Refuge (p169) is the largest protected natural reserve in Puerto Rico.

Some 300 acres of wilderness make up the Parque de las Cavernas del Río Camuy (p245), near Lares, in karst country; the park marks the entrance to one of the largest known cave systems in the world and is also the site of one of the world's largest underground rivers.

The most isolated of Puerto Rico's nature sanctuaries, Isla Mona (p234) lies about 50 miles east of Mayagüez, across the often-turbulent waters of Pasaje de la Mona.

This tabletop island is sometimes called Puerto Rico's 'Galápagos' or 'Jurassic Park' – because of the island's isolation. It's a tag made all the more eerie by its 200ft limestone cliffs, honeycomb caves and giant iguanas.

Commonwealth or US federal agencies administer most of the natural reserves on the island, and you will find that admission to these areas is generally free.

Private conservation groups own and operate a few of the nature preserves, including Las Cabezas de San Juan Reserva Natural 'El Faro'; visitors to these places should expect to pay an entrance fee (which is usually under $5). The best time to visit nearly all of the parks is from November to March; however, Bosque Estatal de Guánica is an inviting destination year-round.

In April 2007, an executive order signed by US President George W Bush rechristened the Caribbean National Forest as El Yunque National Forest to blend in more with Puerto Rico's cultural inheritance.

**TERRITORIAL PARKS & RESERVES**

| Name | Features | Activities | Page |
|---|---|---|---|
| Bosque Estatal de Carite | easy hikes through pristine forest | hiking, kayaking, camping | p258 |
| Bosque Estatal de Guajataca | pretty artificial lakes in natural settings | hiking | p249 |
| Bosque Estatal de Guánica | arid scenery, beautiful birds | hiking, swimming, biking, birding | p201 |
| Bosque Estatal de Río Abajo | karst country formations, aviary | hiking | p246 |
| Culebra National Wildlife Refuge | wild turtles, sleepy iguanas, rolling hills | hiking, cycling, diving, sailing, swimming | p201 |
| El Yunque (El Yunque National Forest) | lush forests, sun-splashed peaks | hiking, mountain biking | p132 |
| Isla Mona | limestone cliffs, giant iguanas | hiking, caving | p234 |
| Las Cabezas de San Juan Reserva Natural 'El Faro' | coastal views, mangroves | hiking, kayaking | p142 |
| Parque de las Cavernas del Río Camuy | caves, sinkholes, petroglyphs | hiking,caving | p245 |
| Reserva Forestal Toro Negro | misty mountain tops | hiking | p265 |
| Vieques National Wildlife Refuge | wild turtles, sleepy iguanas, rolling hills | hiking, cycling, snorkeling, sailing, swimming | p169 |

## Organizations

The **National Park Service** (NPS; www.nps.gov), part of the US Department of the Interior, oversees San Juan's El Morro (p88) and San Cristóbal (p89) forts which together are classified as the San Juan National Historic Site.

The **Departamento de Recursos Naturales y Ambientales** (DRNA; Department of Natural Resources) administers all of the island's *bosques estatales* and *reservas forestales*, and issues camping permits. Their main office is in San Juan (p87).

The **US Forest Service** (USFS; ☎ campground & reservation info 800-280-2267; www.fs.fed.us) is a part of the Department of Agriculture and manages the use of forests such as El Yunque. National forests are less protected than parks, allowing commercial exploitation in some areas (usually logging or privately owned recreational facilities). Current information about national forests can be obtained from ranger stations (contact information is given in the individual forest sections of this book).

The National Astronomy & Ionosphere Center runs www.naic.edu, a site about the Observatorio de Arecibo that has information for the general public as well as academic types.

Puerto Rico maintains regional **US Fish & Wildlife Service** (FWS; www.fws.gov) offices that can provide information about viewing local wildlife. Their phone numbers appear in the white pages of the local telephone directory under 'US Government, Interior Department,' or you can call the **Federal Information Center** ( ☎ 800-688-9889; www.pueblo.gsa.gov).

# ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Puerto Rico has long suffered from a number of serious environmental problems, including population growth and rapid urbanization, deforestation, erosion of soil, water pollution and mangrove destruction. While Puerto Ricans still have a long way to go toward undoing generations of environmental damage and preserving their natural resources, the past few decades have seen a gradual increase in the level of awareness, resources and action dedicated to conservation efforts.

Without a doubt, population growth and rapid urbanization have long posed the greatest threat to the island's environment. Shortsighted solutions, including locking out blacks and the poor or – later in the 19th century – knocking down the fortress wall marking the eastern edge of Old San Juan, have been among the island's ways of coping with its booming population.



The most recent attempts to isolate elements of the citizenry as a means of reducing population density have included large, low-income federal housing projects called *caserios*. As recently as 15 years ago, sociologists identified the *caserios* as a nightmare vision of the island's future.

They saw Puerto Rico's population density approaching that of Singapore and projected that the expansion of metropolitan San Juan would envelop virtually all land within a 20-mile radius of the old city.

All this has come to pass, but the birthrate on the island has fallen from almost four children per mother to two.

The current birthrate puts the island on track for zero population growth by the end of the decade.

## Deforestation & Soil Erosion

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, massive logging operations denuded much of the island. Consequently, untold acres of rich mountain topsoil have eroded away to clog the mouths of rivers and streams. But in the 1920s and '30s, thoughtful islanders and forward-looking conservationists in the island's US colonial government began to set aside and reforest an extensive network of wilderness reserves, mostly in karst country and the Cordillera Central.

Today these reserves are mature forests, and nearly the entire central part of the island – about one-third of Puerto Rico's landmass – is sheltered by a canopy of trees.

While the creation of wilderness reserves and reforestation have retarded Puerto Rico's erosion problems, much damage has been done by clearing hillside land for housing subdivisions in places such as Guaynabo and

**BRIGHT LIGHTS, BLACK WATER**

There are seven known regions worldwide that are phosphorescent – meaning they glow in the dark thanks to little microorganisms, known as dynoflagellates, in the water – but the ones in Puerto Rico are considered to be the brightest and the best.

There are three places on the island where you can view this psychedelic phenomenon: Bahía Mosquito (p171) in Vieques, Bahía de Fosforescente (p205) at La Parguera, and Laguna Grande (p142) north of Fajardo. The most abundant of the many organisms in Puerto Rico's 'phosphorous' bays is *Pirodinium bahamense*. The term 'Pirodinium' comes from 'pyro,' meaning fire, and 'dirium,' meaning rotate.

When any movement disturbs these creatures, a chemical reaction takes place in their little bodies that makes the flash. Scientists speculate about the purpose of the flash, though many think that the dynoflagellates have developed this ability to give off a sudden green light as a defense mechanism to ward off predators.

You can see these microorganisms flashing like tiny stars in Atlantic waters as far north as New England in the summer, but never in the brilliant concentrations appearing in Puerto Rico. Enclosed mangrove bays, where narrow canals limit the exchange of water with the open sea, are the places that let the dynoflagellates breed and concentrate. In a sense, the bay is a big trap, and vitamins produced along the shore provide food for the corralled microorganisms.

Not surprisingly, bioluminescent bays support precarious ecosystems. To avoid damaging them, only book tours with operators who use kayaks or electric motors. Island Adventures (p174) is on Vieques, which has the best bay of the three.

Yokahú Kayaks (p145) covers the Fajardo bay, which is the second-best option.

Sadly, in La Parguera (p205), home to the third bay, most tour operators use only motorized engines. The bioluminescence has been greatly reduced as a consequence. If you're offered a ride, check that it will be in a boat that's safe for the environment. If not, turn the operator down and make sure to tell them why you are saying no.

### CONSTRUCTION VERSUS CONSERVATION

Unchecked development has long been Puerto Rico's biggest environmental threat. On a small island where space is limited and tourists mean money, the territory's sultry Caribbean beauty has often been its undoing. Big developers and hotel companies regularly eye the country's lush coastline and pristine beaches in search of the next high-rise condo tower or 18-hole golf course. But, as economically beneficial as tourism might be, its continued expansion could ultimately lead to a law of diminishing returns. If the famed Isla del Encanto (Enchanted Isle) suffers many more reconfigured coastlines or bulldozed palm groves, it will no longer be worthy of its illustrious nickname.

Many argue that development – particularly in the tourist sector – has already gone too far. Puerto Rico currently has a higher population density than any of the 50 US states, with an average 1000 people per sq mile. It also supports one of the highest concentrations of roads in the world. Outside of the central mountains, it is rare to drive for more than a mile or two without being engulfed by a housing complex, a shopping mall or a fast-food restaurant, and the island's peripheral coast road is often more redolent of a giant parking lot than a well-ordered highway.

One perennial worry for environmentalists is the flouting of property laws, a factor that regularly sees buildings going up on protected land. Side-stepping protection laws, large hotel properties often merely act as a cover for future subdivisions and within a couple of years you'll often find a comparatively new resort shuttered up to make way for a new housing estate.

The good news is that grassroots pressure has already begun to yield results against some of the more politically aligned property developers. In 2007, a proposed condo development known as Costa Serena was indefinitely blocked by community groups in Loiza, near San Juan. If realized, this project would have erected an 880-unit gated community, along with 1350 parking spaces, a casino, tennis courts and a beach club at Piñones on what is currently one of Puerto Rico's most authentic and undeveloped beaches.

Seen by many as a refreshing antidote to the resort strip of Isla Verde, Piñones is home to Puerto Rico's largest mangrove habitat and acts as a natural protective barrier against coastal flooding in the area.

Another weighty tourist project was similarly stalled a couple of months later in Luquillo, when the Puerto Rican government signed a protection order on a 270-acre parcel of land that had been earmarked by two major hotel chains for a luxury resort. According to the Sierra Club's recently inaugurated Puerto Rican Chapter, this project would have severely jeopardized an important nesting beach for leatherback turtles and endangered numerous other species in the so-called northeast ecological corridor.

But, as important as these hard-won victories may be, they are merely small, prickly skirmishes in an ongoing war. With the government pledging increased tourist numbers throughout 2008, the battle against the bulldozers looks set to continue.

Trujillo Alto, both suburbs of San Juan. Consequently, when heavy rains and hurricanes strike, mudslides and hillside streets that turn into rivers threaten life and property.

## Water Pollution

Reforestation, the creation of wilderness reserves to preserve mountain watersheds, and generally thoughtful creation of mountain reservoirs have gone a long way toward assuring that the island's freshwater resources remain pollution-free. Nevertheless streams, rivers and estuaries on the coastal plain have long been polluted by agricultural runoff, industry and inadequate sewer and septic systems. And while a number of environmental groups lobby for the cleanup of these cesspools, little has been accomplished. Visitors should not be tempted to swim in rivers, streams or estuaries near the coast (including Bahía de San Juan) – nor should



they eat fish or shellfish from these waters – because of the risk of disease and chemical pollutants.

## Mangrove Destruction

As with the island's other environmental problems, mangrove destruction was at its worst decades ago when Operation Bootstrap and the rush to develop business and housing lots saw the devastation of vast mangrove swamps, particularly along the island's north shore in the vicinity of Bahía de San Juan. Small bays such as Laguna Condado, now lined with hotels, homes and businesses, were rich mangrove estuaries just 60 years ago.

Environmentalists began fighting to preserve the island's remaining mangrove estuaries in the mid-1970s, and the late 1990s brought a number of significant victories in this arena.

Environmentalists won a court battle in 1998 to preserve as wilderness most of the land at the western end of Laguna de Piñones, long slated for development as resort property. Environmentalists have won a similar battle to protect the mangroves around La Parguera, on the island's southwest shore.

In 2005, the well-known American environmental organization Sierra Club (www.sierraclub.org) welcomed a group of members from Puerto Rico as its 64th chapter.

The creation of the huge 2883-acre Reserva Nacional de Investigación Estuarina de Bahía de Jobos (p198) assures the preservation of the island's largest mangrove estuary, although one power plant stands on the fringe and a second may be coming.

## Heavy-Metal Pollution

Nobody knows for sure what cumulative damage has been done to the land and sea life around Vieques during the years of persistent naval bombardment. When the US Army pulled out of Culebra decades ago, it left an underwater legacy of unexploded ordnance that divers and boaters still have to be wary of.

The environmental movement has come a long way since then, and when the US Navy announced its departure from Vieques in 2003, locals immediately began asking who was going to be responsible for the cleanup and who would be paying for any latent health issues that might appear in the future.

Studies done as far back as the 1980s show that the soil of the eastern end of the island is laced with heavy-metal pollution, and quite a few residents of Vieques have been tested and found to have dangerous levels of heavy metals in their bodies. The navy has promised to continue regular testing of residents.

The US government deemed Vieques a Superfund site shortly after the pullout, which made its cleanup a federal responsibility organized and implemented by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Environmental assessors and navy contractors did visual inspections of Red Beach and Blue Beach, and deemed them safe for public use.

The Live Impact Area, which encompassed 900 acres on the tip of the eastern end, was designated a Wilderness Area and closed to public access by an Act of Congress in 2003.

Many other areas of the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge are closed to the public until heavy metals, unexploded ordnance and leftover fuels and chemicals can be taken care of. According to the US Fish & Wildlife Service, the cleanup will take quite a few years but it will include underwater sites as well. Progress may be hampered, though, by recent revelations from the US government that the Superfund itself – which raised money through a small tax on the chemical and oil industry – is now bankrupt.

## Recycling

Although Puerto Rico has a government recycling campaign, there are very few receptacles in public places for the recycling of aluminum cans or other materials, and recycling has yet to become an ingrained habit. The Solid Waste Management Authority collects cans, glass, paper and plastic on the second Saturday of every month, as if recycling day is simply another religious feast day to observe and forget.

## Conservation Groups

To combat the mounting destruction of the island's environment, citizens in many municipalities have formed local environmental action groups. Contact one of these organizations listed if you see or hear of a problem or – even better – want to collaborate with professionals and volunteers to help save the island:

**Caribbean Environmental Information** ( ☎ 787-751-0239)
**Conservation Trust of Puerto Rico** ( ☎ 787-722-5834)
**Natural History Society of Puerto Rico** ( ☎ 787-726-5488; www.naturalhistorypr.org)
**Puerto Rican Association of Water Resources** ( ☎ 787-977-5870)
**Puerto Rican Conservation Foundation** ( ☎ 787-763-9875)

# Puerto Rico Outdoors

Few people travel to the Caribbean islands to sit around indoors playing tiddlywinks (except perhaps during a hurricane) and Puerto Rico is no exception. With its diverse forests, exotic birdlife, balmy beaches and crinkled karst formations, this is a place to get out and discover the great outdoors, both sensuously and adventurously, whether by foot, kayak, bicycle, surfboard or boat.

Lapped on four sides by warm ocean, Puerto Rico is famous for its water sports, particularly surfing, though within the diving community it has secured an equally favorable reputation for its clear waters and pristine coral. Several upscale marinas plus the commonwealth's proximity to the US Virgin Islands have also meant that sailing and deep-sea fishing remain popular. On land, a century of American influence has ensured that Puerto Rico is now considered to be the golf capital of the Caribbean with nearly two dozen courses.

The highly rated World's Best 10k Race (WB10k) is considered to be one of the most competitive road running races in the world. In 2003, British Olympian Paula Radcliffe completed the course in a world record time of 30 minutes 21 seconds.

## WATER ACTIVITIES

### SWIMMING

Finding safe swimming in Puerto Rico is easy thanks to an island-wide system of balnearios (public beaches). Scattered liberally around the coastline, balnearios feature lockers, showers and parking at nominal rates. Many of them also employ lifeguards and a flag system that indicates how good conditions are for swimming. On most balnearios you will find a roped-off rectangle of ocean close to the shore, inside which it is safe to swim. These beaches are closed on Monday, Election Day (usually in early November) and Good Friday. Hours are 9am to 5pm in summer, 8am to 5pm in winter. For a complete list, contact the **Departamento de Recreación y Deportes** (Department of Recreation & Sports; ☎ 787-722-5668).

All the balnearios are in lovely settings offering shade and calm waters, though travelers should beware of theft (never leave belongings unattended) and heavy crowds in the summer months. Camping is available in

**ALTERNATIVE ADVENTURES**

- Hit the Reserva Forestal Toro Negro with San Juan–based adventure company Acampa Nature Adventure Tours (p268) and you could find yourself **rappelling** off 60ft cliffs and zip-lining above the tree line.
- **Kitesurfing** is the latest craze on Playa Isla Verde in San Juan. Get kitted out at the locally based Kitesurfpr (p104).
- Rincón is the best place to go for **whale-watching**, where humpbacks appear in the Pasaje de la Mona around December. You can organize a boat trip (p229) or sometimes catch a glimpse from outside the Punta Higüero lighthouse.
- Of the various **yoga retreats** on the island, the most transcendental in both mood and setting has to be the early-morning classes at the Casa Grande Mountain Retreat (p247).
- Test your mettle in one of Puerto Rico's famous **running road races**. Events include the World's Best 10k Race (WB10K), the Rincón Triathlon (p229) and the San Blás de Illescas Marathon in Coamo (p199).

some balnearios, though it is not always 100% safe off-season. Two excellent beaches for safe camping are Playa Seven Seas (p143) in Las Croabas and Playa Flamenco (p163) on the island of Culebra. Puerto Rico's two most idyllic – and hence most popular – balnearios are Luquillo (p138) in the northeast and Boquerón (p213) in the southwest. Other decent options include Escambrón (p103) and Carolina (p103) in San Juan, Sun Bay (p172) in Esperanza, Vieques, and Cerro Gordo (p243), near Dorado.

San Juan boasts some of the best municipal beaches in the Caribbean in an unbroken strip that runs from Condado, through Ocean Park and Isla Verde, all the way to Piñones. The safest swimming can be found at Playa Isla Verde (p103).

Should you wish to escape the beach madness for a little more privacy, almost all of Puerto Rico's resorts and its two dozen or more paradores have swimming pools.

Compact and easily carried, *Snorkeling Guide to Marine Life* by Paul Humann is an excellent guide that lists all the fish, corals, invertebrates and plants found in less than 15ft of water. Great photographs, too.

## DIVING & SNORKELING

Most Caribbean islands boast a formidable diving scene and Puerto Rico can compete with the best of them with an exciting selection of walls, drop-offs, reefs and underwater caves. Two specific dive areas on the island can be described as world-class: the massive drop-off near La Parguera in the south, popularly known as the Parguera Wall (p206), and the undisturbed crystal-clear waters that surround the outlying island of Desecheo (p256), 12 miles northwest of Aguadilla. The former constitutes an underwater wall that falls from 60ft to over 1500ft due to a huge drop in the continental shelf below the sea bed. With more than 25 named dive sites, the area is awash with trenches, valleys, coral gardens and colorful fish. Desecheo, meanwhile, has an similar number of dive sites and visibility that reaches over 100ft in places. Real adventurers head out to Isla Mona (p237), where unblemished waters are frequented by turtles and seals.

### RESPONSIBLE DIVING & SNORKELING

Please consider the following tips when diving and snorkeling and help preserve the ecology and beauty of reefs:

- Never use anchors on the reef and take care not to ground boats on coral.
- Avoid touching or standing on living marine organisms or dragging equipment across the reef. Polyps can be damaged by even the gentlest contact. If you must hold on to the reef, only touch exposed rock or dead coral.
- Be conscious of your fins. Even without contact, the surge from fin strokes near the reef can damage delicate organisms. Take care not to kick up clouds of sand, which can smother organisms.
- Practice and maintain proper buoyancy control. Major damage can be done by divers descending too fast and colliding with the reef.
- Take great care in underwater caves. Spend as little time within them as possible as your air bubbles may be caught within the roof and thereby leave organisms high and dry. Take turns to inspect the interior of a small cave.
- Resist the temptation to collect or buy corals or shells or to loot marine archaeological sites (mainly shipwrecks).
- Ensure that you take home all your rubbish and any litter you may find as well. Plastics in particular are a serious threat to marine life.
- Do not feed fish.
- Minimize your disturbance of marine animals. *Never* ride on the backs of turtles.



The best snorkeling can be found off the sheltered islands of Vieques (p174) and Culebra (p161) or around the small cays east of Fajardo, such as Palominos (p145) and Icacos (p145). The south coast with its clear Caribbean waters and low river run-off is another exciting option. Try Isla Caja de Muertos (p190) near Ponce or the warm waters around La Parguera (p206). On Culebra and Vieques you can snorkel directly from the beach. The former offers Playa Melones or the wonderfully isolated Carlos Rosario, the latter boasts Green Beach or the handily located municipal beach in the main southern settlement of Esperanza. Generally speaking, the waters off the north and west coasts of Puerto Rico are rough and better suited to surfing. You may, however, get some luck on calm days snorkeling the fringe reefs off Condado (p103) and Playa Isla Verde (p103) in San Juan or at either Playa Shacks or Playa Steps in Rincón.

For constantly updated information and insider tips on the best diving spots around Puerto Rico, see www.prdiving.com.

Dive operators run day trips out of the major ports and resort hotels around the island (see the regional chapters for more details). If you are in the San Juan area, consider a dive trip to the caves and overhangs at Horseshoe Reef, Figure Eight or the Molar. There's decent diving along the chain of islands called 'La Cordillera,' east of Las Cabezas de San Juan (in the Fajardo area), with about 60ft to 70ft visibility. Catch the Drift or the Canyon off Humacao.

Colleen Ryan and Brian Savage's *The Complete Diving Guide: The Caribbean (Volume 2)* has instructions, directions, depths and visibility for just about every dive in the Caribbean.

Top dive operators include Aquatica Dive & Surf (p254) near Aguadilla for Isla Desecheo trips, West Divers (p206) near the eponymous fishing village for the famous wall, and Sea Ventures Pro Dive Center (p145) in Fajardo for the northeastern cordillera. Centrally based San Juan operators (p104) can take you almost anywhere.

For information on diving safety, see p77.

## KAYAKING

Kayaking can be either blissfully relaxing or ruggedly adventurous in Puerto Rico with various freshwater and open-sea options offering brand-new perspectives on strangely familiar sights. One of the highlights is the unique opportunity to dip your paddle in one of the island's three bioluminescent bays (p67), a gentle but wonderfully psychedelic kayak through water that glimmers purple with every touch of the oar. Another restful daytime option is the Laguna de Piñones (p125) in the eponymous barrio just east of Isla Verde with easy boat hire at the nearby Centro Cultural Ecoturístico de Piñones.

One of the island's best ecosensitive kayak companies is **Las Tortugas Adventures** (☎ 787-809-0253), based in Canovanas in the east, which runs off-the-beaten-track kayak excursions on Puerto Rico's only navigable waterway, the Río Espiritu Santo near Río Grande. Freshwater kayaking is also possible on some of the island's artificial but ecologically diverse lakes, including Lago Dos Bocas (p246) and Lago Guajataca (p248).

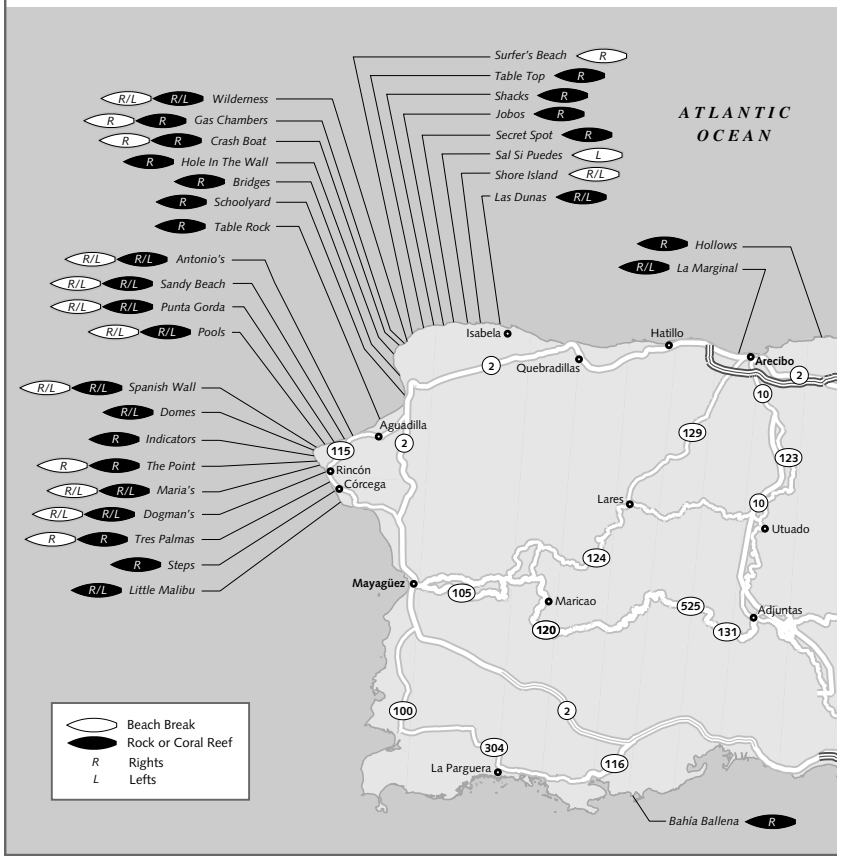
In general, beaches that are good for surfing aren't so good for kayaking and vice versa. The best sea-kayaking options are often in the south and east of the main island or around the two eastern islands of Culebra and Vieques.

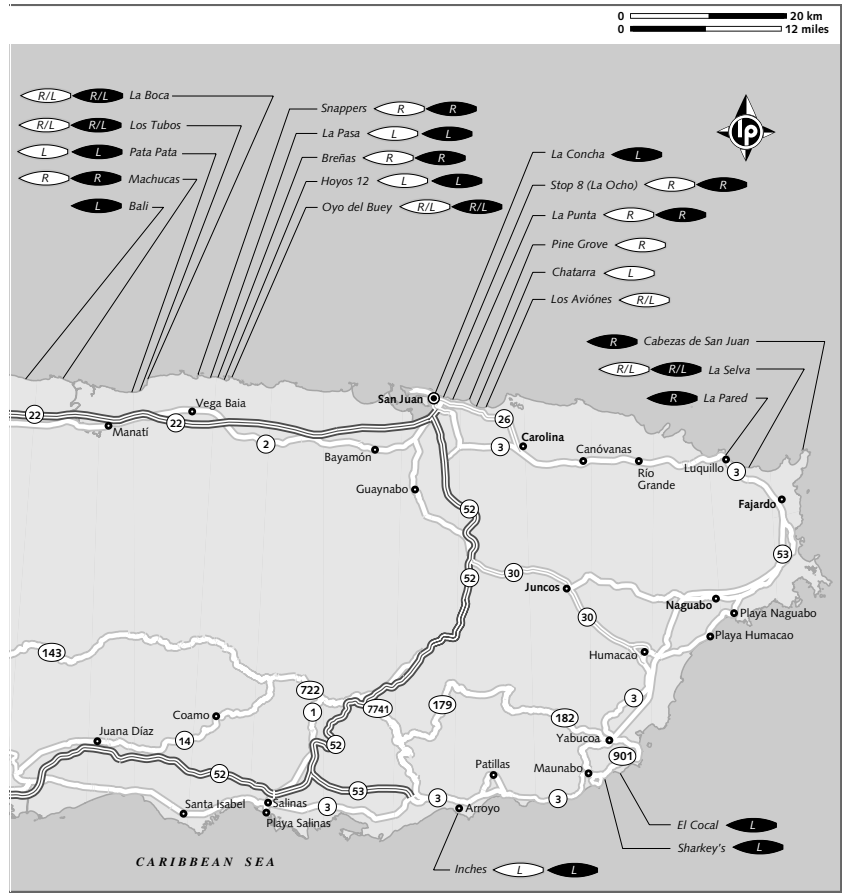
## SAILING

The semiprotected waters off the east end of Puerto Rico, which include the islands of Culebra and Vieques, provide the setting for racing and cruising aboard sailboats. You can count on the trade winds blowing 12 to 25 knots out of the east almost every day. A number of marinas meet sailors' needs in the Fajardo area. The largest is the Puerto del Rey Marina (p144), with 750 slips and room for vessels up to 200ft long. A number of yachts carry passengers on picnic/snorkeling/sailing day charters out of Puerto del Rey and the four other marinas in the area (see p145). These trips cost about $55 per person for a six-hour sail and offer good value if you want to enjoy a day of the cruisers' life.

One of Puerto Rico's biggest sailing events is the Copa Velasco Regatta for ocean racing that takes place at the Palmas del Mar Resort on the East Coast.

## SURFING MAP




## SURFING

Thanks to legendary surf breaks such as Tres Palmas, Crash Boat and Jobos, Puerto Rico has developed its own ingrained surfing culture based around some of the best waves in the Americas. In 1968 the World Surfing Championships were held at Rincón, and the island hasn't looked back since. Surfers from around the world come here for an annual season that runs from October through April and is centered on the northwest coastal regions of Rincón (p228), Aguadilla (p254) and Isabela (p251). Surfing facilities in these enclaves are comprehensive but suitably laid-back, and first-timers should have few problems integrating with the experts.

In 2007, Rincón played host to the ISA World Masters surfing tournament. Local surfer Juan Ashton posted first in the Master's Division.

Should you feel the waves are too big or the dudes too cool out west, then there are a number of lesser-known options for surfers further afield. Along the north coast there are decent breaks around Manatí (p243) and Dorado (p240), while in the far east you can get to grips with the curls and barrels at La Pared (p139) in Luquillo or the newly inaugurated wildlife reserve at La Selva (p139). There's even reasonable surfing to be had in the capital, San Juan (p104). Diehards practice off Playa Escambrón in Puerta de Tierra while the best stuff can be found over in Piñones at Los Aviónes.

There are numerous surf shops spread around the island's hot spots. Try WoW Surfing School (p104) in San Juan, the West Coast Surf Shop (p228) in Rincón or Aquatica Dive & Surf (p254) in Aguadilla. Aside from renting equipment, these establishments also offer lessons and can impart information about local conditions and weather. Board rentals start at approximately $25 per day. Lessons go from anywhere between $65 and $95 per session.

## WINDSURFING

Puerto Rico played host to the Ray Ban Windsurfing World Cup in 1989 and the sport has been booming here ever since. Hotdoggers head for the surfing beaches at Isla Verde (p104) or – better yet – the rough northwest coast. Some of the favorite sites include Playas Crash Boat and Wilderness (p254) in Aguadilla and Playas Shacks and Jobos (p251) near Isabela.

If you are just getting started, try the Laguna del Condado in San Juan (p104) or Ensenada Honda at Culebra (p161), where there are windsurfing

schools, constant wind and no waves. The protected waters off Wyndham El Conquistador Resort & Golden Door Spa (p146) and the Palmas del Mar Resort (p148) on the east coast are great for novices, as are the bays at La Parguera (p206) and Boquerón (p213). All the shoreside resort hotels have board rentals and instruction.

### FISHING

Although not as legendary as in Cuba or the Bahamas, big-game fishing in Puerto Rico is still a Blue Riband sport and, for aspiring Hemingways, worth a trip in its own right. Attracting heavyweight competition, the island hosts many deep-sea fishing tournaments, including the prestigious International Billfishing Tournament in August/September, which is the longest-held billfish tournament in the world. You can fish for tuna all year long. Marlin is a spring/summer fish, sailfish and wahoo run in the fall, and dorado show up in the winter.

With the island surrounded by deep water, Puerto Rico's best fishing is often situated within 30 minutes of the shore. Decent fishing is possible all around the island although the north coast, with its abundance of migratory fish, is probably the most reliable and exciting spot to set a line. So abundant are the waters here that they are often referred to as 'Blue Marlin Alley.' Fish charters are based in most of the bigger ports and marinas, including San Juan (p104), Fajardo (p145), Palmas de Mar (p148), La Parguera (p206) and Puerto Real (p216).

Most boats can be chartered for either half- or full-day excursions for between four and six people and are staffed by knowledgeable and competent captains. Some captains, such as San Juan–based Mike Benitez, have even entertained ex-US presidents. If you haven't got enough people for your own group or are traveling alone, you can often tag along with another party. Check ahead.

The Puerto Rico Trench that surrounds the north coast is the deepest point in the Atlantic – approximately 27,880ft.

If you bring your own equipment and acquire a permit, you can fish for large-mouth bass, sunfish, catfish and tilapia in the island's numerous artificial lakes. Lakes Carite (p258), Dos Bocas (p246), Guajataca (p248) and Guayabal, on the south coast, are all popular. For more information, contact the Departamento de Recursos Naturales y Ambientales (DRNA; p87).

## LAND ACTIVITIES

### HIKING

Hiking in Puerto Rico has plenty of potential. But what you actually get out of it depends largely on your individual expectations and how willing you are to strike out on your own (often without a decent map). It would be wrong to paint a picture of the island as some kind of hiker's nirvana. Although the scenery is invariably lush and the coastline wonderfully idyllic, a lack of well-kept paths and a dearth of accurate printed information have thwarted many a spontaneous hiker. Added to this is the commonwealth's compact size; the whole island is only marginally bigger than Yellowstone National Park in the US and supports a population of nearly 4 million, meaning true backcountry adventures are understandably limited.

The most popular hikes by far are in the emblematic El Yunque National Forest (p133), where a 23-mile network of largely paved trails has opened up the area to mass tourism. Hikes here are usually short and easily accessible, and there are plenty of ecominded tour operators happy



**LET'S BE CAREFUL OUT THERE**

**Safety Guidelines for Diving**

Before embarking on a scuba-diving, skin-diving or snorkeling trip, carefully consider the following points to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience:

- Possess a current diving certification card from a recognized scuba-diving instructional agency (if scuba diving).
- Be sure you are healthy and feel comfortable diving.
- Obtain reliable information about physical and environmental conditions at the dive site (eg from a reputable local dive operation).
- Be aware of local laws, regulations and etiquette about marine life and the environment.
- Dive only at sites within your realm of experience; if available, engage the services of a competent, professionally trained dive instructor or dive master.
- Be aware that underwater conditions vary significantly from one region, or even one site, to another. Seasonal changes can significantly alter any site and dive conditions. These differences influence the way divers dress for a dive and what diving techniques they use.
- Ask about the environmental characteristics that can affect your diving and how trained local divers deal with these considerations.

**Safety Guidelines for Hiking**

Before embarking on a hiking trip, consider the following points to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience:

- Pay any fees and obtain any permits required by local authorities.
- Be sure you are healthy and feel comfortable walking for a sustained period.
- Obtain reliable information about physical and environmental conditions along your intended route (eg from park authorities).
- Be aware of local laws, regulations and etiquette about wildlife and the environment.
- Walk only in regions, and on trails, within your realm of experience.
- Be aware that weather conditions and terrain vary significantly from one region, or even from one trail, to another. Seasonal changes can significantly alter any trail. These differences influence the way walkers dress and the equipment they carry.
- Ask before you set out about the environmental characteristics that can affect your walk and how experienced local walkers deal with these considerations.

to guide you through the main sights. The forest also contains Puerto Rico's only true backcountry adventure, the seven-hour trek to the top of El Toro (3522ft) and back.

Two other forest reserves with relatively well-marked paths and available maps are the dry forest in Bosque Estatal de Guánica (p201) and Bosque Estatal de Guajataca (p249), south of Isabela. The latter's 27-mile network of rough trails, including a side trip to the spooky Cueva del Viento, is one of the commonwealth's most extensive.

For more dramatic and isolated hikes you have to head toward the center of the island and the Reserva Forestal Toro Negro (p265) on Puerto Rico's misty rooftop. Be prepared to get your shoes dirty here as clouds often shroud the peaks and the trails are invariably damp and muddy. Typical of the numerous forest reserves scattered along the Ruta Panorámica – others include Maricao, Carite and Guilarte – Toro Negro is rarely staffed off-season and you'll be lucky to spot more than a handful of fellow hikers enjoying the views.

**TRAIL DILEMMAS**

With its lush mountains, numerous protected parks and highly developed infrastructure, Puerto Rico ought to be a country perfectly suited to hiking. Yet in reality, decent well-signposted trails are few and far between, and many of the commonwealth's carefully protected forest reserves are rarely utilized.

This paucity of backcountry information can be something of a shock to aspiring wilderness hikers fresh from bushwhacking their way through the Sierra Nevada or dragging their crampons across the European Alps. But, contrary to what the gushing tourist brochures would have you believe, Puerto Rico is no Yosemite. Nor are the Puerto Ricans – with some obvious exceptions – a nation of hikers. Instead, most islanders would much rather drive their cars to the top of the nearest mountain than get their shoes dirty hiking up on a trail. Indeed, Punta de Cerro, the commonwealth's highest peak, has a paved road to within a mile of its summit while the poorly maintained hiking path that originates in Jayuya is barely used – except by the odd adventurous visitor.

The key, for confused hikers, is to manage your expectations and do some homework before setting out. In Puerto Rico finding the trailhead can often be more difficult than completing the trail itself.

Outside of El Yunque National Forest (p132), the island's two dozen or so forest reserves are invariably poorly staffed and lacking in any accurate trail maps. But, plan ahead and a little-used Eden is yours for the taking. Persistence is important. Try the Departamento de Recursos Naturales y Ambientales (DRNA; p87) in San Juan, ask around at the various adventure tour agencies and – best of all – question the more outdoor-minded locals. You'll be surprised by what you can find.

Several companies in San Juan can organize group trips to Toro Negro that incorporate hiking with various other activities. Acampa Nature Adventure Tours (p268) do a day trip that mixes hiking with zip-lining and climbing with a harness up a waterfall.

To make an organized trek in the company of serious Puerto Rican hikers, take a weekend hike through the Cañón de San Cristóbal (p262) near Barranquitas, where steep cliffs and spectacular waterfalls contribute to some of the island's most serendipitous scenery.

Some of the commonwealth's best DIY hiking exists on the eastern islands of Culebra (p161) and Vieques (p169).

The former has some excellent bushy scrambles to several isolated beaches while the latter has recently turned over extensive tracts of former military land to a wildlife refuge where barely touched trails are still being forged and discovered.

Getting to the island of Mona is an adventure in itself, and one that requires plenty of planning and organization. But once there you'll feel like you're hiking in another world. For more details on organized Mona trips, see p237.

**Fondo de Mejoramiento** (☎ 787-759-8366) runs day hikes covering the entire length of the island from east to west along the Cordillera Central (Central Mountains). The idea is to cover the whole Ruta Panorámica in different weekend segments over a period of three months (February to April). The 'Ruta' was actually designed by Luis Muñoz Marín in the 1950s primarily as a hiking route.

During specialized Fondo walks – all of which are confined to the paved road – a police escort is provided to ward off the famously zippy Puerto Rican traffic.

For information on hiking safety, see p77.



## CYCLING & MOUNTAIN BIKING

On an island infested with cars, cycling is still in its infancy. But as the traffic gridlock proliferates, it can only be a matter of time before both locals and visitors rediscover the time-saving and health-extolling benefits of two-wheeled transportation.

The key to problem-free cycling adventures is to stay off the main roads. Toll roads such as Expressways 22, 52 and 53 are a definite no-no, as are the two main highways that constitute the island's peripheral ring road, Hwys 2 and 3. The Ruta Panorámica is another potential obstacle course that all but the most experienced cyclists would do well to avoid. While the steep twists and turns might look inviting to visiting Lance Armstrong wannabes, the endless blind corners and speeding Puerto Rican drivers with little or no cycling awareness add too much risk to an already dangerous route.

Puerto Rico's main island (population 3.9 million) is roughly the same size as Yellowstone National Park in the US, which has a human population of approximately 300.

What you're left with are secondary roads, off-road trails and various designated cycling routes.

The best area for cycle touring is along the secondary roads on the southwest coast of the island, through the gently rolling hills of the coastal plain around Guánica, Cabo Rojo and Sabana Grande. There are enough roads and tracks here to schedule a two- or three-day trip, including roughshod trails around the Cabo Rojo lighthouse and in the Cabo Rojo Wildlife Refuge. This is the site of the International Cycling Competition held each May, and every Sunday morning local cycling club Las Piratas de Boquerón forms a colorful peloton when they hit the road for popular group rides. Reliable bike rental can be procured at the Wheel Shop (p212) in Cabo Rojo (El Pueblo).

Other excellent areas for cycling that have nearby rental facilities include the Isabela coast (p251), the island of Culebra (p161) and the specially designated bike trail in Piñones (p125) that bisects mangroves, beaches and coastal forest over a collection of paths and raised boardwalks. The jewel in the crown, however, has to be pristine Vieques, undoubtedly the best place in Puerto Rico to organize a creative cycling tour; see p175.

If you've got your own bike and transportation you can try out shorter trails in Bosque Estatal de Guánica (p201), Laguna Tortuguero (p243) and Bosque Estatal de Cambalache (p243). The Hacienda Carabali (p139) also rents bikes to tackle its narrow trails on the edge of the El Yunque rainforest.

For more general information, contact the **Puerto Rican Cycling Federation** (☎ 787-721-7185) or Hot Dog Cycling (p105) in Isla Verde. These bodies know the touring and trail-riding scenes on the island and they can point you to an expanding network of safe bike routes.

For articles, reviews and good general information about golf on the island, type 'Puerto Rico' into the search engine of www.worldgolf.com.

For a varied ride around some of Puerto Rico's safest and most cycle-friendly terrain see p28.

## GOLF

Many travelers come to Puerto Rico and never get past the golf links. There's plenty to keep them busy, with 23 expansive courses (eight of them championship) caressed by warm ocean breezes and framed by stunning ocean vistas. Everyone from President Dwight Eisenhower to Laurence Rockefeller have converged here to swing their nine irons in what golfing fanatics have come to call the 'Scotland of the Caribbean.'

Dorado, on the north coast, is the operations center for aficionados (see p240). It has five courses in as many miles, including the top links on the island, the so-called 'East Course' designed by Robert Trent Jones at the now fallow Hyatt Dorado Beach Resort. This 18-hole golfing extravaganza features breathtaking sea views and some of the most challenging drives in the Caribbean, including the legendary 4th hole deemed by Jack Nicklaus to be one of the 10 toughest in the world.

**RESPONSIBLE HIKING**

To help preserve the ecology and beauty of Puerto Rico, consider the following tips when hiking.

### Rubbish

- Carry out *all* your rubbish. Don't overlook easily forgotten items, such as tin foil, orange peel, cigarette butts and plastic wrappers. Empty packaging should be stored in a dedicated rubbish bag. Make an effort to carry out rubbish left by others.
- Never bury your rubbish: digging disturbs soil and ground cover and encourages erosion. Buried rubbish will likely be dug up by animals, who may be injured or poisoned by it. It may also take years to decompose.
- Minimize waste by taking minimal packaging and no more food than you will need. Take reusable containers or stuff sacks.
- Sanitary napkins, tampons, condoms and toilet paper should be carried out despite the inconvenience. They burn and decompose poorly.

### Human Waste Disposal

- Contamination of water sources by human faeces can lead to the transmission of all sorts of nasties. Where there is a toilet, please use it. Where there is none, bury your waste. Dig a small hole that's 6in deep and at least 320ft from any watercourse. Cover the waste with soil and a rock. In snow, dig down to the soil.
- Ensure that these guidelines are applied to a portable toilet tent if one is being used by a large hiking party. Encourage all party members, including porters, to use the site.

### Washing

- Don't use detergents or toothpaste in or near watercourses, even if they are biodegradable.
- For personal washing, use biodegradable soap and a water container (or even a lightweight, portable basin) at least 160ft away from the watercourse. Disperse the waste water widely to allow the soil to filter it fully.
- Wash cooking utensils 160ft from watercourses using a scourer, sand or snow instead of detergent.

### Erosion

- Hillsides and mountain slopes, especially at high altitudes, are prone to erosion. Stick to existing trails and avoid short cuts.
- If a well-used trail passes through a mud patch, walk through the mud so as not to increase the size of the patch.
- Avoid removing the plant life that keeps topsoils in place.

### Fires & Low-Impact Cooking

- Don't depend on open fires for cooking. The cutting of wood for fires in popular hiking areas can cause rapid deforestation. Cook on a lightweight kerosene, alcohol or Shellite (white gas) stove and avoid those powered by disposable butane gas canisters.
- If you patronize local accommodations, select those places that do not use wood fires to heat water or cook food.
- Fires may be acceptable below the tree line in areas that get very few visitors. If you light a fire, use an existing fireplace. Don't surround fires with rocks. Use only dead, fallen wood. Remember the adage 'the bigger the fool, the bigger the fire.' Use minimal wood, just what you need for cooking. In huts, leave wood for the next person.
- Ensure that you fully extinguish a fire after use. Spread the embers and flood them with water.

### Wildlife Conservation

- Do not engage in or encourage hunting. It is illegal in all parks and reserves. On an island where the only indigenous land mammals are bats you're better off leaving your hunting ambitions at home.
- Don't buy items made from endangered species.
- Don't attempt to exterminate animals in huts. In wild places, they are likely to be protected native animals.
- Discourage the presence of wildlife by not leaving food scraps behind you. Place gear out of reach and tie packs to rafters or trees.
- Do not feed the wildlife as this can lead to animals becoming dependent on hand-outs, to unbalanced populations and to diseases.

### Camping & Walking on Private Property

- Always seek permission to camp from landowners.
- Public access to private property without permission is acceptable where public land is otherwise inaccessible, so long as safety and conservation regulations are observed.

Gary Player designed the 18-hole course at the exclusive Palmas del Mar Resort (p148), on the east end of the island, where holes 11 to 15 have been called the 'toughest five successive holes in the Caribbean.' Also on the east end of the island, the precipitous Arthur Hill–designed course at El Conquistador Resort & Golden Door Spa (p146) logs over 200ft in elevation changes and sits perched atop a 300ft cliff overlooking the Atlantic.

Nearby, the two courses at the Río Mar Beach Resort & Country Club (p140), designed by Greg Norman and Tom and George Fazio, sport bunkers and water features plus the occasional iguana.

Golf courses thin out as you head south and west, though there are a couple of secluded links for serious addicts. The Club Deportivo de Oeste (p214) at Cabo Rojo (El Pueblo) is a Jack Bender–designed course that opened as a nine-hole in 1965, but was expanded to an 18-hole in 2003. More charming is the Punta Borinquen course (p254) near the former Ramey base close to Aguadilla, which was once a favorite stomping ground of US president Dwight Eisenhower.

## HORSEBACK RIDING

In days of yore, horses were the primary means of transportation in mountainous Puerto Rico and every self-respecting *jíbaro* had a decent mount on which to travel from village to village. But, with the advent of the motorcar and the transformation of *jíbaros* into upwardly mobile city dwellers, the opportunities for off-road equestrian adventures became a little more limited. If you're still adamant to recapture that centuries-old tradition of saddle and stirrups, a handful of horseback-riding outfits spread around the island can replicate some memorable journeys.

Palmas del Mar Resort (p148) in Humacao has the island's largest equestrian facility, Rancho Buena Vista, which serves the public with more than

40 horses. Here you will find instruction, trail rides and schooled hunters for jumping. Riders should also check out Tropical Trail Rides (p251) in Isabela and Hacienda Carabaldi (p139) in Mameyes, near Luquillo, at the east end of the island. There are also wilder, more off-the-beaten-track options in Vieques (p174). Horses at these stables will cost you around $30 an hour.

The Paso Fino horse has a smooth gait and sturdy endurance. It was originally bred by Spanish landowners in Puerto Rico and Columbia to work on the plantations.

## BIRD-WATCHING

Though land mammals may be rare in Puerto Rico, the exotic birdlife is refreshingly abundant with the island supporting 266 species, 11 of them endemic and 10 of them endangered, including the rarely seen Puerto Rican parrot. The most obvious place for budding ornithologists to brandish their binoculars is El Yunque National Forest, a tree-carpeted swathe of verdant tropical foliage that is both easily accessible and situated close to the capital. The El Portal Visitor's Center (p132) on Hwy 191 can divulge some good basic information on the local birdlife, though for a more detailed insight you can rummage through the bookstores of San Juan for more specialist bird literature.

The island's richest species diversity can be spied in the Cabo Rojo area, particularly around Las Salinas salt flats, where migratory birds from as far away as Canada populate a unique and highly varied ecosystem. Call in at the Centro Interpretativos Las Salinas de Cabo Rojo (p212) to speak to informed local experts.