

The Best of Puerto Rico

Whatever you want to do on a tropical vacation or business trip—play on the beach with the kids (or gamble away their college funds), enjoy a romantic honeymoon, or have a little fun after a grueling negotiating session—you’ll find it in Puerto Rico.

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

1 The Best Beaches

White sandy beaches put Puerto Rico and its offshore islands on tourist maps in the first place. Many other Caribbean destinations have only jagged coral outcroppings or black volcanic-sand beaches that get very hot in the noonday sun. The best beaches are labeled on the “Puerto Rico” map on p. 9.

- **Best for Singles (Straight & Gay):** Sandwiched between the Condado and Isla Verde beaches along San Juan’s beachfront, **Ocean Park Beach** attracts more adults and less of the family trade. Only Isla Verde beach to the east matches Ocean Park for its broad beach and good swimming. The people-watching here is nothing compared to the well-stuffed bikinis (both male and female) found on South Miami Beach or Rio de Janeiro. However, for the Caribbean, Ocean Park is as good as it gets. Because many gay boardinghouses lie in Ocean Park, a lot of the beach here is frequented by gay young men, mainly from New York. However, straight people looking to meet someone while wearing swimwear will find plenty of lookers (and perhaps takers). See p. 117.
- **Best Beach for Families:** Winning without contest, **Luquillo Beach**, 30 miles (48km) east of San Juan, has better sands and clearer waters than any beach in San Juan. The vast sandy beach opens onto a crescent-shaped bay edged by a coconut grove. Coral reefs protect the crystal-clear lagoon from the often rough Atlantic waters that can buffet the northern coast, making Luquillo a good place for young children to swim.

Much photographed because of its white sands, Luquillo also has tent sites and other facilities, including picnic areas with changing rooms, lockers, and showers. See p. 146.

- **Best for Swimming:** Whereas on much of the northwest coast of Puerto Rico, rough Atlantic waters often deter bathers but attract surfers (see below), the south coast waters are calmer. On the south coast, **Playa de Ponce**, outside Ponce, Puerto Rico's second-largest city, consists of a long strip of beautiful white sand that opens onto the tranquil waters of the Caribbean. Less crowded than Condado and Luquillo, Playa de Ponce is an ideal place to swim year-round in clearer, less polluted waters than those along the more heavily populated northern coastline. See p. 157.
- **Best for Windsurfing:** Rincón's winter surf, especially at **Playa Higüero**, puts Malibu to shame. Today surfers from all over the world are attracted to Rincón, which they have dubbed "Little Malibu." From Borinquén Point south to Rincón, nearly all the beaches along the western coast are ideal for surfing from November to April. As the windsurfing capital of the Caribbean, the Rincón area was put on the map when it was the site of the 1968 world surfing championships. Some of the 16-foot (4.9m) breakers here equal those on the north shore of Oahu. See p. 172.

2 The Best Golf & Tennis

- **Westin Rio Mar Beach Golf Resort & Spa** (Rio Grande; ☎ 888/627-8556 or 787/888-6000): A 45-minute drive from San Juan on the northeast coast, the 6,145-yard (5,619m) Rio Mar Golf Course is shorter than those at both Palmas del Mar and Dorado East. One avid golfer recommended it to "those whose games and egos have been bruised by the other two courses." Wind here can seriously influence the outcome of your game. The greens fees are a lot lower than those of its two major competitors. See p. 147.
- **Ponce Hilton & Casino** (Ponce; ☎ 787/259-7676): It's not only the most luxurious hotel along the southern coast of Puerto Rico, but is also home to the beautiful 27-hole golf course, the **Costa Caribe Golf & Country Club** (☎ 787/812-2650). The landscaped holes command views of the

ocean and mountains, and three nines can be played in 18-hole combinations as conceived by golf architect Bruce Besse. Not only that, but the Hilton also has the best tennis courts along the southern coast. See p. 160.

- **El Conquistador Resort & Golden Door Spa** (Las Croabas; ☎ 800/468-5228 or 787/863-1000): This sprawling resort east of San Juan is one of the island's finest tennis retreats, with seven Har-Tru courts and a pro on hand to offer guidance and advice. If you don't have a partner, the hotel will find one for you. Only guests of the hotel are allowed to play here. See p. 190.
- **Palmas del Mar Country Club** (Humacao; ☎ 787/285-2256): Lying on the southeast coast on the grounds of a former coconut plantation, the Palmas del Mar resort boasts the second-leading course in Puerto Rico—a par-72, 6,803-yard (6,221m) layout designed by Gary Player. Crack golfers consider holes 11 through 15 the toughest five successive holes in the Caribbean. See p. 194.

3 The Best Natural Wonders

- **El Yunque** (☎ 787/888-1880 for information): Forty-five minutes by road east of San Juan in the Luquillo Mountains and protected by the U.S. Forest Service, El Yunque is Puerto Rico's greatest natural attraction. Some 100 billion gallons of rain fall annually on this home to four forest types, containing 240 species of tropical trees. Families can walk one of the dozens of trails that wind past waterfalls, dwarf vegetation, and miniature flowers, while the island's colorful parrots fly overhead. You can hear the sound of Puerto Rico's mascot, the *coquí*, a small frog. See p. 143.
- **Río Camuy Caves** (☎ 787/898-3100): Some 2½ hours west of San Juan, visitors board a tram to descend into this forest-filled sinkhole at the mouth of the Clara Cave. They walk the footpaths of a 170-foot-high (52m) cave to a deeper sinkhole. Once they're inside, a 45-minute tour helps everyone, including kids, learn to differentiate stalactites from stalagmites. At the Pueblos sinkhole, a platform overlooks the Camuy River, passing through a network of cave tunnels. See p. 140.

- **Las Cabezas de San Juan Nature Reserve** (☎ 787/722-5882): This 316-acre (128ha) nature reserve about 45 minutes from San Juan encompasses seven different ecological systems, including forestland, mangroves, lagoons, beaches, cliffs, and offshore coral reefs. Five days a week (Wed–Sun), the park staff conducts tours in Spanish and English, the latter at 2pm only. Each tour lasts 2½ hours and is conducted with electric trolleys that traverse most of the park. Tours end with a climb to the top of the still-working 19th-century lighthouse for views over Puerto Rico’s eastern coast and nearby Caribbean islands. Call to reserve space. The cost is a relative bargain at \$5 for adults, \$2 for seniors and children under 11. See “Las Cabezas de San Juan Nature Reserve” on p. 188.

4 The Best Family Resorts

- **Condado Plaza Hotel & Casino** (San Juan; ☎ 800/468-8588 or 787/721-1000): This resort offers Camp Taíno, a regular program of activities and special events for children ages 5 to 12. The cost of \$25 per child includes lunch. The main pool has a kids’ water slide that starts in a Spanish castle turret, plus a toddler pool. For teenagers, the hotel has a video game room, tennis courts, and various organized activities. For the whole family, the resort offers two pools and opens onto a public beach. It also has the best collection of restaurants of any hotel on the Condado. See p. 66.
- **Westin Rio Mar Beach Golf Resort & Spa** (Palmer; ☎ 888/627-8556 or 787/888-6000): Here you’ll find family fun for the entire brood. Opening onto Rio Mar Beach, the resort is known for its varied restaurants, pools, golf courses, tennis courts, spa, casino, and also the best children’s programs east of San Juan. Many rooms are spacious enough to house the entire gang. See p. 147.
- **El Conquistador Resort & Golden Door Spa** (Las Croabas; ☎ 800/468-5228 or 787/863-1000): Located 31 miles (50km) east of San Juan, this resort offers Camp Coquí on Palomino Island for children 3 to 12 years of age. The hotel’s free water taxi takes kids to the island for a half- or full day of watersports and nature hikes. This resort has some of the best facilities and restaurants in eastern Puerto Rico. See p. 190.

5 The Best Big Resort Hotels

- **Ritz-Carlton San Juan Hotel, Spa & Casino** (San Juan; ☎ 800/241-3333 or 787/253-1700): At last Puerto Rico has a Ritz-Carlton, and this truly deluxe, oceanfront property is one of the island's most spectacular resorts. Guests are pampered in a setting of elegance and beautifully furnished guest rooms. Hotel dining is second only to that at El San Juan, and a European-style spa features 11 treatments "for body and beauty." See p. 75.
- **Ponce Hilton & Casino** (Ponce; ☎ 787/259-7676): This is the most elaborate resort along the southern coast, spread over an 80-acre (32ha) landscaped tract of land right on the beach, a 10-minute drive from the center of Ponce. Many guests check in and never leave the premises, as the resort has a wide array of gardens, a giant pool, a fitness center, a casino, a nightclub, and various restaurants and bars. It is preferred by many discerning visitors who want to escape the hustle and bustle of San Juan itself. See p. 160.
- **Westin Rio Mar Beach Golf Resort & Spa** (Río Grande; ☎ 800/627-8556 or 787/888-6000): This \$180-million 481-acre (195ha) resort, 19 miles (31km) east of the San Juan airport, is one of the three largest hotels in Puerto Rico. Despite its size, personal service and style are hallmarks of the property. Twelve restaurants and lounges boast an array of cuisines. Along with its proximity to two golf courses, entertainment—including an extensive program of live music—is a key ingredient in the hotel's success. See p. 147.
- **El Conquistador Resort & Golden Door Spa** (Las Croabas; ☎ 800/468-5228 or 787/863-1000): The finest resort in Puerto Rico, this is a world-class destination—a sybaritic haven for golfers, honeymooners, families, and anyone else. Three intimate "villages" combine with one grand hotel, draped along 300-foot (91m) bluffs overlooking both the Atlantic and the Caribbean at Puerto Rico's northeastern tip. The 500 landscaped acres (202ha) include tennis courts, an 18-hole Arthur Hills–designed championship golf course, and a marina filled with yachts and charter boats. See p. 190.

6 The Best Attractions

- **The Historic District of Old San Juan:** There's nothing like it in the Caribbean. Partially enclosed by old walls dating from the 17th century, Old San Juan was designated a U.S. National Historic Zone in 1950. Some 400 massively restored buildings fill this district, which is chockablock with tree-shaded squares, monuments, and open-air cafes, as well as shops, restaurants, and bars. If you're interested in history, there is no better stroll in the West Indies. See "Seeing the Sights" in chapter 6.
- **Castillo de San Felipe del Morro (Old San Juan):** Located in Old San Juan and nicknamed El Morro, this fort was originally built in 1540. It guards the bay from a rocky promontory on the northwestern tip of the old city. Rich in history and legend, the site covers enough territory to accommodate a 9-hole golf course. See p. 108.
- **The Historic District of Ponce:** Second only to Old San Juan in terms of historic significance, the central district of Ponce is a blend of Ponce Creole and Art Deco building styles, dating mainly from the 1890s to the 1930s. One street, Calle Isabel, offers an array of Ponceño architectural styles, which often incorporate neoclassic details. The city underwent a massive restoration preceding the celebration of its 300th anniversary in 1996. See "Ponce" in chapter 8.
- **Museo de Arte de Ponce (Ponce):** This museum has the finest collection of European and Latin American art in the Caribbean. The building was designed by Edward Durell Stone, who also designed the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Contemporary works by Puerto Ricans are displayed, as well as works by an array of old masters, including Renaissance and baroque pieces from Italy. See p. 154.
- **Tropical Agriculture Research Station:** These tropical gardens contain one of the largest collections of tropical species intended for practical use. These include cacao, fruit trees, spices, timbers, and ornamentals. Adjacent to the Mayagüez campus of the University of Puerto Rico, the site attracts botanists from around the world. See p. 166.