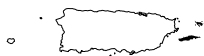


# Culebra & Vieques



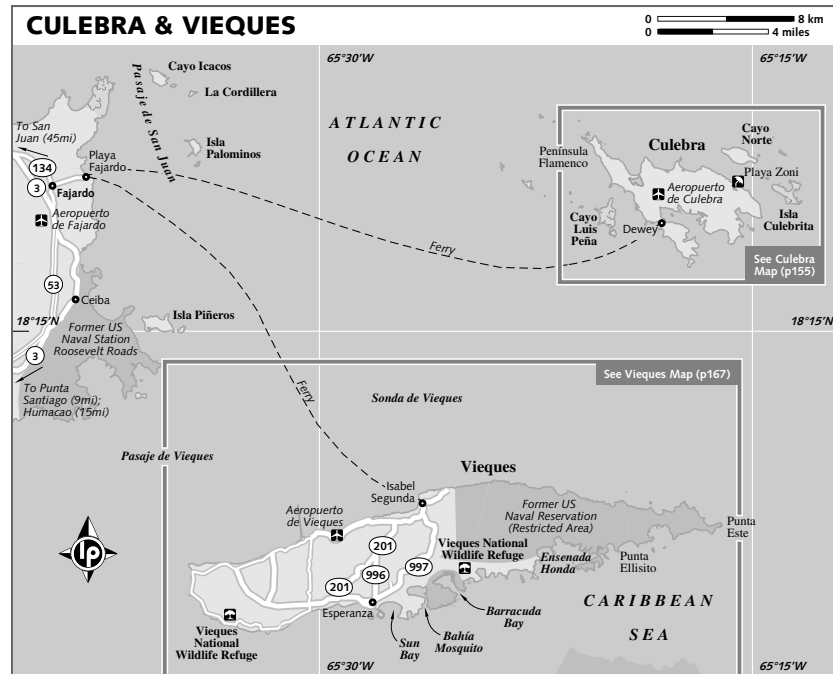
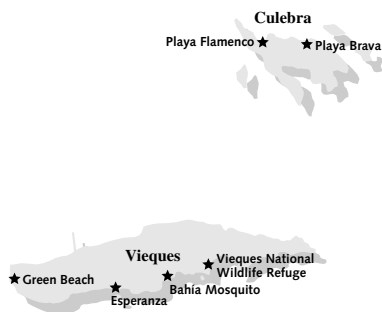
Islands often have a reputation for being insular, eccentric and slightly rebellious, and Culebra and Vieques are no different. Separated from mainland Puerto Rico by a 7-mile stretch of choppy ocean, the first hints of seditious nonconformity appear as you dock at the ramshackle ferry ports of Dewey or Isabel II to be met by a colorful cast of American expats and maverick locals. Closer geographically to the US Virgin Islands than they are to the rest of the commonwealth (they are often referred to, colloquially, as the Spanish Virgin Islands), these two bejeweled Caribbean havens are noticeably slower and more easygoing than their main island counterpart. Covered in a blanket of dry subtropical forest and blessed with a handful of rare endemic plant and animal species, they also exhibit distinct physical characteristics. Disembark for a few days and you'll uncover more surreptitious surprises: wild horses in Vieques, rare turtles in Culebra – and quite a few rare people too, many of whom were instrumental in the fight to reclaim their prized islands from the US Navy in 1975 (Culebra) and 2003 (Vieques) after more than 50 years of military occupation.

Ironically, things couldn't have turned out better. Thanks largely to their military history; the Spanish Virgins – in keeping with their name – remain tranquil and refreshingly undeveloped. With former navy land recently given over to two new US Fish & Wildlife Refuges, the main draw card for contemporary visitors is the unsullied beaches – Vieques and Culebra protect some of the best arcs of sand in the Caribbean – and the unblemished countryside that glimmers invitingly with nary a resort, golf course or casino to break the natural vista.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Staking out leatherback turtles on a starlit volunteer turtle-watching program on **Playa Brava** (p158), Culebra
- Swapping four wheels for two and going on a picturesque spin to **Green Beach** (p173) on bike-friendly Vieques
- Finding dilapidated US tanks and a refreshing lack of tourists on paradisiacal **Playa Flamenco** (p159)
- Eating, drinking, playing or just plain chilling on the colorful 'strip' in laid-back **Esperanza** (p170)
- Foraging into the newly formed **Vieques National Wildlife Refuge** (p169) to discover unblemished beaches, thriving wildlife and excellent snorkeling
- Seeing stars on a serene but distinctly surreal evening boat tour of bioluminescent **Bahía Mosquito** (p171)

■ POPULATION: 12,000



## HISTORY

Some 500 years ago the islands east of Puerto Rico, including Culebra and Vieques, were disputed territory between the Taíno and the Caribs. Groups from both tribes came and went from the islands according to the season – probably to hunt the turtles nesting here. Vieques had more fertile, flatter land for farming and therefore was the more popular island. The first real settlement came to Culebra during the early 16th century, when Taíno and Carib refugees from Borinquen gathered here and on Vieques to make peace with each other, pool their resources and mount a fierce (but ultimately unsuccessful) campaign to drive the Spaniards from the big island. When Spain conceded Puerto Rico and her territories to the US following the Spanish-American War in 1898, both Culebra and Vieques became municipalities of the Republic of Puerto Rico. Therefore, residents are recognized as US citizens (half of them are expat Americans, in any case).

For most of the 20th century, the US Navy and Marine Corps used the islands for target practice and for rehearsing 20th-century

military actions carried out on other shores, such as Iwo Jima, the Philippines, Haiti and Kuwait. The navy left Culebra several decades ago to concentrate its activities on Vieques, where it set up a military camp and proceeded to hold practice bombings in nearby waters with alarming regularity. After an errant bomb killed a civilian in 1999, *viequenses* reached their breaking point. A long struggle ensued, but the navy was eventually ejected. Of course, the tracts of pristine land that opened up with the military's departure caught the attention of many developers, including the Puerto Rican government itself, which wants a beefed-up tourism infrastructure on both Culebra and Vieques. Locals are trying hard to bring in new jobs through sustainable tourism that won't destroy the wild land and beaches that make the Spanish Virgin Islands truly special. So far so good – but the battle rages on.

## CLIMATE

The famous Caribbean trade winds gently buffet these two islands, but it is still hot, hot, hot just about every day of the year. Average temperatures are around 85°F with

relatively low humidity. Add the glare from surrounding water and white sand and it feels like 110°F in the shade. Rainy season, which doesn't do much to cool things off, is May through November. Hurricane season is August/September through November, with October generally being the wettest month.

## TERRITORIAL PARKS & RESERVES

The Puerto Rico Department of Natural Resources protects more than 1500 acres of land along the Península Flamenco and from Monte Resaca east to the sea. Named the Culebra National Wildlife Refuge (p156), it includes the coastline as well as more than 20 offshore cays. The **US Fish & Wildlife Service** (☎ 787-742-0115; www.fws.gov) administers all of these lands.

Vieques National Wildlife Refuge (p169) protects 18,000 acres on the eastern and western ends of the island. Formed between 2001 and 2003, it is the largest natural reserve in Puerto Rico and offers visitors a chance to mountain bike, hike, snorkel and swim on newly opened beaches and pristine land.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Culebra is virtually crime-free, but petty thievery is sadly somewhat common on Vieques, especially around the Sun Bay public beach. Lock hotel rooms and don't bring valuables to the beach. Be careful with cell phones, as thieves have been known to grab them right out of people's hands. Don't leave anything in sight in the car and lock the doors, always.

## GETTING THERE & AROUND

There's frequent air service from San Juan, Fajardo and St Thomas in the Virgin Islands to both Vieques (see p180) and Culebra (see p165). Cheaper and more environmentally friendly are the government-run ferries that run from Fajardo to Vieques (see p180) and Culebra (p165) regularly. If you're lucky you might find a private operator to connect you by boat to St Thomas.

Many travel agencies will tell you that cars are a must on Culebra and Vieques, which is probably why there are far too many of them plying the islands' small towns and quiet lanes. However, with a little extra effort and some lung-expanding leg work, both islands can be negotiated via a mixture of publicos, taxis, bicycles and your own two feet.

# CULEBRA

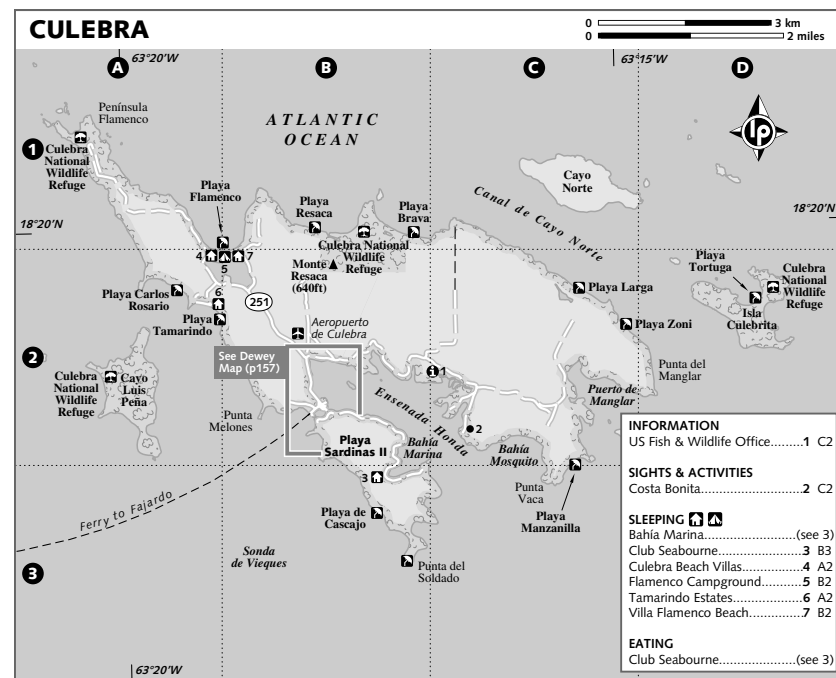
## pop 2000

An elusive lizard (not seen since 1974) hides in a unique mountain 'boulder' forest, a couple of abandoned US tanks lie rusting on a paradisiacal beach, a sign on a shop door in the 'capital' Dewey reads 'Open some days, closed others.' Welcome to Culebra – the island that time forgot; mainland Puerto Rico's weird, wonderful and distinctly wacky smaller cousin that lies glistening like a bejeweled Eden to the east.

Long feted for its diamond dust beaches and world-class diving reefs, sleepy Culebra is probably more famous for what it *hasn't* got than for what it actually possesses. There are no big hotels here, no golf courses, no casinos, no fast-food chains, no rush-hour traffic, no postmodern stress and *no problemas, amigo*. Situated 17 miles to the east of mainland Puerto Rico, but inhabiting an entirely different planet culturally speaking, the island's peculiar brand of off-beat charm can sometimes take a bit of getting used to. Don't expect open-armed cordiality here. Culebran friendliness is of the more backwards-coming-forwards variety. Home to rat-race dropouts, earnest idealists, solitude seekers, myriad eccentrics, and anyone else who can't quite get their heads around the manic intricacies of modern life, the island is the ultimate 'riddle wrapped up in a mystery inside an enigma.' Among the traveling fraternity, it has long inspired a religiouslike devotion in some, and head-scratching bafflement in others. There's but one binding thread – the place is jaw-droppingly beautiful.

## HISTORY

First hunting grounds for Taino and Carib tribes, then a pirate stronghold during the days of the Spanish Empire, much of Culebra's 7000 acres has remained essentially the same ever since two-legged creatures took to walking its shores. The US Navy grabbed control of most of the island early in the 20th century and didn't cede its lands back to the locals until 1975. Some modern structures went up on the newly accessible land rather rapidly, but resident expats and native-born *culebrenses* were very quickly able to find a common language and they have continued to work together quite fiercely to hold overdevelopment and commercialization at bay.



## ORIENTATION

There's very little you need to know to navigate the island. The cheery little ferry dock fronts a strip of shops and the Kokomo Hotel. Cab drivers and public vans also congregate here.

Heading left away from the dock will bring you to Calle Pedro Márquez, usually referred to as the 'main road,' which leads into Dewey, the island's principal settlement. There are only a few roads leading in and out of Dewey.

It is easier to walk than drive in town due to one-way streets and some parking congestion. The main road eventually leads out to the single landing strip airport on Rte 251; if you continue past the airport you get to Playa Flamenco. If you take Rte 250 east you'll come to turn-offs for Playas Resaca and Brava, eventually winding up at Playa Zoni. Another road, Calle Fulladoza, heads south to Punta del Soldado.

Culebrita and Cayo Norte are two of the more popular cays off Culebra and are easily visited; there are about 18 others surrounding the island.

## INFORMATION

Few establishments have meaningful street addresses on Culebra; descriptive addresses are generally used here. Basic island maps are handed out by hotels and car-rental agencies. All of the services listed here are in Dewey.

## Emergency

*Culebrenses* will tell you that if you have an emergency on the island, you will get a much faster, more professional response by calling the island detachment of the Puerto Rican police than by contacting the municipal police. There's a police station in Calle Pero Márquez.

**Municipal police** (☎ 787-742-0106)

**Puerto Rican police** (☎ 787-742-3501)

## Internet

**Excétera** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-0844; 162 Calle Escudero; per 15min/hr \$5/15; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) Hefily priced internet. You can also buy stationary, newspapers and magazines such as *National Geographic*.

## Laundry

**Tommy's** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-0722; Calle Romero) Same-day laundry service.

**Media**

*Culebra Calendar* is the island newspaper and has complete listings of upcoming events, jobs, tide tables and articles on important Culebra issues. You can find the online version at [www.theculebracalendar.com](http://www.theculebracalendar.com).

**Medical Services**

Despite its small population, Culebra has good health services. Some basic toiletries are carried in local shops, but it's wise to bring things like condoms, tampons, saline solution, contact-lens supplies and medicine for tummy troubles – not that you are more likely to get sick on Culebra than anywhere else, but you will want something at hand if you do.

**Clinic** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-3511) In town on the road to Punta Melones; has drugs and resident doctors. The island also keeps a plane on emergency standby at the airport overnight for medical transport to the main island.

**Walgreens** (☎ 787-860-1060) With no pharmacy on the island, *culebrenses* call Walgreens in Fajardo. The pharmacy ships drugs to the island on Vieques Air Link flights.

**Money**

**Banco Popular** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-3572; Calle Pedro Márquez; 🕒 8:30am-2:30pm Mon & Wed-Fri) There's an ATM here.

**Post**

**Post office** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-3862; Calle Pedro Márquez; 🕒 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) Right in the center of town.

**Tourist Information**

There are some good websites available. Try [www.islaculebra.com](http://www.islaculebra.com) or [www.culebra-island.com](http://www.culebra-island.com) for a general overview.

**Tourist office** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-3116; Calle Pedro Márquez; 🕒 8:30am-3:30pm Mon-Fri) Good island-wide information can be found at this booth outside the Alcaldía (Town Hall) on the main street 200m from the ferry terminal.

**DANGERS & ANNOYANCES**

Culebra breeds swarms of mosquitoes, especially during the rainy season (August to November). Some of the daytime species have been known to carry dengue.

Wear your seatbelt and obey local parking laws! Officers on Culebra love issuing traffic tickets.

**SIGHTS Dewey**

Dewey, Culebra's diminutive main town, is an intriguing hodgepodge of ramshackle buildings and off-beat locals that lies nestled on a thin knob of land between two glistening bays. More gritty rural backwater than drop-dead gorgeous Caribbean idyll, the settlement's exotic charm is as idiosyncratic as it is hard to capture. Asthmatic trucks crawl along narrow muddy streets, grey cats muse in the sweltering afternoon sun, and snatches of pulsating *bomba* drums intrude like rhythmic invitations from behind the colorful pink and purple facades of the myriad guesthouses. Named after an illustrious US admiral, Dewey is generally referred to as 'Da Town' by locals, a large number of whom are US expats. You can buy groceries here, post a letter, shoot a game of pool and buy a decent meal, if the chef decides to wake up from his afternoon siesta. Beyond that, Dewey is a sleepy backwater that serves as a serviceable launching pad for Culebra's other rustic attractions.

The little **Museum of Ildefonso** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-0240; Rte 250; 🕒 8am-noon & 1-3pm) is tucked behind the office of the Department of Natural Resources, and has some historical pictures of the island and lots of Taino artifacts. Beware: the hours – like everything in Culebra – are rather sporadic.

**Culebra National Wildlife Refuge**

More than 1500 acres of Culebra's 7000 acres constitute a national wildlife refuge (Map p155), which US President Theodore Roosevelt signed into law almost 100 years ago, and which is protected by the Departamento de Recursos Naturales y Ambientales (DRNA; Department of Natural Resources & Environment). Most of this land lies along the Península Flamenco, and from Monte Resaca east to the sea, and includes all of the coastline as well as more than 20 offshore cays, with the exception of Cayo Norte. The **US Fish & Wildlife Service** (Map p155; ☎ 787-742-0115; [www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov); 🕒 7am-4pm Mon-Fri) administers these lands. Monte Resaca, Isla Culebrita and Cayo Luis Peña are open to the public from sunrise to sunset daily, and all have some fairly challenging hikes. Stop by the office on the east side of Ensenada Honda for maps, literature and permission to visit other sections of the refuge.

**DEWEY**

Scale: 0 to 200 m / 0 to 0.1 miles

Map labels include: A, B, C, D, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, To Playa Flamenco (2mi), To Playa Rósaca (2mi), To Playa Brava (5mi); Playa Zoni (6.5mi), Villa Muñoz, Aeropuerto de Culebra, Barriada Clark, Playa Sardinias, Basebal Field, Calle de Escribana, Calle Pedro Márquez, Calle Fulladoza, Bahía de Sardinias, Ferry Dock, Ferry to Fajardo, Playa Sardinias II, To Bahía Marina (3mi), Fire Department, Calle Fulladoza, Casita Linda, Culebra Island Realty, Culebra Vacation Planners, Hotel Kokomo, Hotel Puerto Rico, Mamacita's, Palmetto Guesthouse, Posada La Hamaca, Villa Boheme, Villa Fulladoza, Panadería El Patio, Pandeli, Superette Mayra, ENTERTAINMENT, El Batey, Happy Landings, Mamacita's, SHOPPING, Butiki, Galería de Regalos, TRANSPORT, Puerto Rican Port Authority Office, Thrifty Car Rental/JM Scooter Rentals.

<b>INFORMATION</b>	Casita Linda.....	12	C4	Panadería El Patio.....	26	B1		
Banco Popular.....	1	B4	Culebra Island Realty.....	13	C4	Pandeli.....	27	B4
Clinic.....	2	B4	Culebra Vacation Planners.....	(see 14)		Superette Mayra.....	28	B4
Excétera.....	3	B4	Hotel Kokomo.....	14	B4			
Police Station.....	4	B4	Hotel Puerto Rico.....	15	B4	<b>ENTERTAINMENT</b> 🎪		
Post Office.....	5	B4	Mamacita's.....	16	B4	El Batey.....	29	B3
Tommy's.....	6	B4	Palmetto Guesthouse.....	17	A2	Happy Landings.....	30	B1
Tourist Office.....	7	B4	Posada La Hamaca.....	18	C4	Mamacita's.....	(see 16)	
			Villa Boheme.....	19	C4			
			Villa Fulladoza.....	20	D4	<b>SHOPPING</b> 🛍️		
<b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>						Butiki.....	31	C4
Culebra Bike Shop.....	8	C4				Galería de Regalos.....	32	B4
Culebra Dive Shop.....	9	B4	<b>EATING</b> 🍴					
Culebra Divers.....	(see 14)		Barbara Rosa.....	21	B2			
Museum of Ildefonso.....	10	C2	Colmado Milka.....	22	C4	<b>TRANSPORT</b>		
			Dinghy Dock.....	23	C4	Puerto Rican Port Authority Office.....	33	B4
			Heather's.....	24	B4	Thrifty Car Rental/JM Scooter		
<b>SLEEPING</b> 🛏️						Rentals.....	34	A1
Casa Ensenada.....	11	B4	Juanita Bananas.....	25	A4			

CULEBRA & VIEQUES

CULEBRA & VIEQUES

## Isla Culebrita

If you need a reason to rent a kayak or hire a water taxi, Isla Culebrita (Map p155) is it. This small island, just a mile east of Playa Zoni, is part of the wildlife refuge. With its abandoned lighthouse, six beaches, tide pools, reefs and nesting areas for seabirds, Isla Culebrita has changed little in the past 500 years. The north beaches, such as the long crescent of Playa Tortuga, are popular nesting grounds for sea turtle, and you may see these animals swimming near the reefs just offshore. Bring a lot of water, sunscreen, a shirt and a hat if you head for Isla Culebrita, because there is little shade here. See *Kayaking* (p161) and *Boating* (p161) for details on renting and hiring boats to reach this island. The Isla is also home to a ruined lighthouse earmarked for extensive repairs.

## Cayo Luis Peña

Less visited than Isla Culebrita, Luis Peña (Map p155) is the island of peaks, rocks, forests and coves you'll pass just a few minutes before the ferry lands you at Culebra's dock. This island is another part of the wildlife refuge, and it has a collection of small sheltered beaches. Luis Peña is a short kayak or water-taxi trip from town; it has good beaches and snorkeling all around the island.

## Beaches

Culebra's beaches offer wild natural beauty, but little in the way of tourist facilities. The only beach that has amenities is Playa Flamenco, and even these are limited. Be sure to bring lots of water/snacks when venturing out and don't take risks swimming if you're on your own. The following beaches are listed clockwise around the island from Dewey.

### VOLUNTEERING FOR A TURTLE WATCH

Two of Culebra's most isolated beaches – Resaca and Brava – are nesting sites for the endangered leatherback sea turtle, the largest living sea turtle in the world. The nesting season runs April through early June and each year small groups of volunteers are recruited by the US Fish & Wildlife Refuge to oversee the delicate egg-laying process. Volunteers meet at sunset before traveling out to the beaches where they are required to count eggs, measure turtles, and document the event for environmental records. At the same time, participants are able to witness one of nature's most transfixing and timeless events in stunning close-up.

Volunteer postings are understandably limited so, if you are keen to take part, it is wise to plan ahead. Start by contacting either nonprofit organization **CORALations** (☎ 787-556-6234; www.coralations.org) or the **US Fish & Wildlife Service** (Map p155; ☎ 787-742-0115; www.fws.gov; 📍 7am-4pm Mon-Fri) for more details. CORALations also undertakes important coral-reef restoration work on the island.

## PUNTA MELONES

The nearest beach to town. Take the road past the clinic about a half-mile north until you reach a development on the hill to your right. Ahead on your left, you'll see the rocky Melones point with a navigation light; to the right of the point is a stony beach. If you head down to this beach, you will find great snorkeling at both ends. The point's name comes from the prevalence of a species of melon cactus in this part of the island. It's a good idea to bring shoes you can wear in the water; cacti line the sea floor. There's also not a lot of shade on the beach, so strong sunscreen is imperative.

## PLAYA TAMARINDO

A little bit beyond Melones, this is a very good snorkeling beach. You can swim here from Melones by heading north along the peninsula; it's also accessible by foot or car by turning off the Dewey-Flamenco Beach road at the bottom of the hill just before the lagoon. This is an often-overlooked beach; it's not as flashy and fabulous-looking as others are, but offers a good combination of sun and shade, gentle currents and lots of underwater life for good snorkeling.

## PLAYA CARLOS ROSARIO

If you follow a path west from the parking lot at Playa Flamenco, a 12- to 15-minute hike over the hill will bring you to Playa Carlos Rosario, an antidote to the crowds at Playa Flamenco and one of the best snorkeling areas in Puerto Rico. But don't get confused: Playa Carlos Rosario is not the first beach you'll reach along this path. This first nameless beach is one of the few places in Puerto Rico where you'll see nude or topless bathers taking in the sun in privacy.

## BEAUTY & THE BEAST

In *The Beach*, a widely-acclaimed novel by British writer Alex Garland, a group of idealistic backpackers go off in search of a paradisiacal beach that is, as yet, undiscovered by modern tourism. Take away the food kiosks and the sprinkling of summer sunbathers, and Flamenco on the rustic island of Culebra could quite easily fit the bill. Long touted by newspaper articles and travel spreads as 'the finest beach in the Caribbean' (and one of the top 10 in the world), this mile-long scimitar of sand is undeniably beautiful, though the history of the area is a little less beguiling.

Up until the early 1970s, Flamenco was part of a live firing range used by the US Navy for target practice. First requisitioned by the military in 1902 to counter a rising German threat in the Caribbean, Culebra's beaches were used to stage mock amphibious landings and myriad ground maneuvers. In 1936, with WWII in the offing, the Flamenco peninsula yielded to its first live arms fire and the beach was regularly shelled.

Burgeoning decade by decade, the military operations reached their peak during the late 1960s at the height of the Vietnam War, with the navy simulating gun attacks and submarine warfare. When the US government hinted at expanding the Culebra base in the early 1970s, public sentiment quickly turned bellicose. In what would become a dress rehearsal for the Navy-Vieques protests (see p168) 30 years later, a small committed group of Puerto Rican protesters – including Independence party leader Reubén Berrios – initiated a campaign of civil disobedience which culminated in squatters accessing the beach and having to be forcibly removed by police. Despite arrests and imprisonments, the tactics worked. In 1975 the US Navy pulled out of Culebra and the beach was returned to its natural state.

Well almost.... Over 30 years later you can still find graphic evidence of the war games that once wreaked havoc on Flamenco. At the beach's western end, contrasting rather sharply with the diamond-dust sand and translucent water, two rusty, seaweed-covered tanks sit like ghostly reminders of past military misdemeanors. Beauty and the beast – it's a photo opportunity too good to miss.

To reach Carlos Rosario, head north from this first beach, cross the narrow peninsula, and head down to the sandy basin and shade trees. A barrier reef almost encloses this beach, and you can snorkel on either side of it by swimming through the boat channel – look for the white plastic bottle marker – at the right side of the beach. But be *very* careful: water taxis and local powerboats cruise this channel and the reef, and in 1998 a long-time Culebra resident and diver was struck and killed by a boat.

For really spectacular snorkeling, work your way along the cliffs on the point south of the beach, or head about a quarter mile north to a place called the **Wall**, which has 40ft drop-offs and rich colors. By the way, a lot of local gringos call Carlos Rosario 'Impact Beach' because of all the shelling it took back in the navy days, and you may see ordnance in the water. It could be live – don't mess with it!

## PLAYA FLAMENCO

Stretching for a mile around a sheltered, horseshoe-shaped bay, Playa Flamenco is not just Culebra's best beach; it is also

generally regarded as the finest in Puerto Rico, and quite possibly the whole Caribbean. In fact, certain discerning travel writers have suggested that it is among the top 10 in the world. While individual musings may sound trite, there is no denying that this gentle arc of white sand and crystal surf is something special. Backed by low scrub rather than craning palms, and equipped with basic amenities, Flamenco is the only public beach on the island. It is also the only place where you are allowed to camp. Facilities include two rudimentary guesthouses, a collection of kiosks (selling both snack food and beach gear), toilets, outdoor showers, lifeguards, picnic tables and a parking lot. There are currently no fully blown restaurants or stores in the area, so visitors should stock up with provisions before they arrive.

In contrast to the main island's gargantuan resorts, Flamenco is refreshingly rustic and crowd-free. In the winter months you'll feel like Robinson Crusoe contemplating the clarity of the water here, while on a busy day in summer with perhaps 200 people spread across nearly a mile of beach, it will still seem

half-deserted. A nearby lagoon attracts flamingos in the winter – hence the name – while reefs at each end made for great snorkeling.

### PLAYA RESACA

A *resaca* is an undertow and a metaphor for a hangover, an allusion to the state of the water perhaps, or the way you will feel after climbing up and down 650ft Monte Resaca to reach it. The **US Fish & Wildlife Service** (☎ 787-742-0115) maintains the trail here, and you should call them for permission as well as directions to the trailhead. Monte Resaca, the island's highest point, is characterized by an ecologically unique boulder-strewn forest on its upper slopes that harbors rare types of flora and fauna (mainly lizards). It's a deceptively tough (and sometimes prickly) climb. Bring lots of water and sunscreen and don't try swimming from the beach.

### PLAYA BRAVA

The beauty of Brava lies in the fact that there is no road here; you *have* to hike – make that bushwhack – along a little-used trail that is often overgrown with sea grape and low scrub. The rewards are immense when you finally clear the last mangrove and are confronted with an isolated but stunning swathe of sand that glimmers with a fierce but utterly enchanting beauty.

To get here, travel around to the eastern side of Ensenada Honda. Pass the Km 4 marker and turn left a little way past the cemetery. Follow this road until the pavement ends and you come up against a gate. This is the entrance to a cattle farm, but it is also a public right-of-way, so park your car or bike and head due north on the trail beyond the gate. The second half of the trail

leads through a grove of trees that is often rife with butterflies.

### PLAYA ZONI

Head to the extreme eastern end of the island and you'll eventually run out of road at Playa Zoni. It's a straightforward 20-minute drive – or 45 minutes on a bike – but the road can be treacherous after heavy rains. It's paved but sometimes large chunks wash away. There's a small parking spot next to the sign alerting you to the fact that endangered turtles cross the beach. Zoni is long and straight, with beautiful Caribbean islands popping up in the distance, but again, it's an isolated place, so don't swim alone.

Some locals think this is a better beach than Flamenco; it doesn't have quite the same soft sand and gentle curves, but it certainly is stunning in its own right and is usually less crowded. Be careful entering waters for a few days after a storm. Sometimes the heavier currents will have pulled sand away from the shoreline that usually covers rocks; it will eventually wash back in, but until then there's the distinct possibility that you can bark your shins on some very sharp projectiles.

### PUNTA DEL SOLDADO

This site on the extreme southwestern tip of the island has a rocky beach and terrific snorkeling. To get here, follow the road south across the drawbridge for about 2 miles, passing Club Seabourne and finally scaling a steep hill. Here the pavement stops, so pull over to the side of the road and park. Walk down the dirt road to the beach at the end (about 10 minutes). You will see the reef about 50yd offshore to the southeast. Locals bring their children to snorkel in the shallow waters here.

### THE COSTA BONITA DEBACLE

Gaze across Ensenada Honda on a peaceful sunlit evening and you'll see an incongruous-looking minivillage chiseled onto a bluff on the opposite side of the bay. This is the inaptly named **Costa Bonita** (Pretty Coast), a sprawling cluster of buildings that was constructed in the early 2000s on the promise of being Culebra's first ecoresort. But local suspicion quickly turned to fury when it transpired that Costa Bonita had obtained its building permits in an underhand manner and was about as 'green' as an overloaded Hummer. Following complaints by residents, and a long list of environmental misdemeanors – including raw sewage, pollution from motorboats and illegal landfill – documented by local protection agency CORALations, the resort filed for bankruptcy in 2006 just a few years after it opened. It now sits disused, like a wantonly discarded Christmas present, a shocking testament to the naivety, ignorance and downright greed that unplanned tourist development can sometimes wreak.

## ACTIVITIES

### Diving & Snorkeling

Despite reef damage caused during the US Navy testing era, Culebra retains some of Puerto Rico's most amazing dive spots, including sunken ships, coral reefs, drop-offs and caves. Highlights include the *Wit Power* tug boat (which sank in 1984), the Geniqui Caves, the El Mono boulders, and the fish-filled water-world of Cayo Ratón. Good snorkeling can be accessed many beaches, in particular Playas Carlos Rosario, Tamarindo and Melones.

The island's two main dive operators are **Culebra Divers** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-0803; www.culebradivers.com), across from the ferry dock, and **Culebra Dive Shop** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-0566; Calle de Escudero), in Dewey. Both offer similar services and prices, and are generally open during normal business hours. You can rent snorkel gear for about \$10 to \$12 or arrange a day trip for adult/child \$50/35. The same vendors also offer dive instruction and trips. One-/two-tank dives cost around \$65/90.

### Kayaking

**Ocean Safaris** (☎ 787-379-1973) kayak trips have been featured in a number of magazine articles on Culebra – and for good reason. For just \$45, you can get instruction and a half-day guided tour to places such as Isla Culebrita or Cayo Luis Peña. It also rents out kayaks for \$25/40 for a half-/full day. **Culebra Water Toys** (☎ 787-742-1122) can help out with both kayaking and windsurfing – the latter is a popular activity in Ensenada Honda.

### Boating

Culebra's only glass-bottomed boat, the **Tanama Glass Bottom Boat** (☎ 787-501-0011; trips \$25-40) offers some really fantastic two-hour harbor cruises in and around the various reefs, snorkeling trips with equipment included, and trips out to Culebrita. The boat can generally be found at the Dinghy Dock (p164).

**Culebra Boats** (☎ 787-360-9807) rents fast inflatable dinghies with motors (\$50 per hour) to get around Ensenada Honda. Alternatively you can join Captain Luis and his crew for a ride on the water taxi out to Culebrita (\$45). Longer day excursions with kayaking and a lobster lunch go for \$79 per person. Pick-up and drop-off is from the dock at Club Seabourne (p163).

### Fishing

The real fish hawk on the island is **Chris Goldmark** (☎ 787-742-0412; per half-day \$220). He can take you out to the flats for some superb bonefishing, or offshore for the big stuff.

### Cycling

With its hills, dirt trails and back-to-nature ruggedness, Culebra is an excellent place to bike – not just for exercise but also as a handy means of transportation. **Culebra Bike Shop** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-2209; Calle Fulladoza) is sometimes open, sometimes not. If no one answers your hollering, try yer man, Steve, on the phone. Still no luck, look him up in the Dinghy Dock next door. If you do manage to pin him down, Steve rents decent mountain bikes like Diamondbacks for approximately \$25 a day, with discounts for longer rents. **Dick & Cathy** (☎ 787-742-0062) will also rent you wheels. Call them, tell them where you are, and they'll swiftly deliver it to you in their old-fashioned VW van – just like that!

### Surfing

The island's not known for great waves, but you can sometimes catch some action at Carlos Rosario, Zoni and Punta Soldado. Culebra Dive Shop (left) has boogie boards for rent.

### Hiking

Rejoice! The island is your oyster. The 2.5-mile hike from Dewey to Playa Flamenco is along a paved road with some inclines, but the destination is idyllic. You can veer off to Playa Tamarindo from a junction just before the lagoon. Playa Carlos Rosario is reached via a trail that starts at the west end of Playa Flamenco. The hike to Playa Brava begins at the end of a back road that cuts north from Rte 250 just past the graveyard. The trail rises to a ridge and then drops to the beach via thick bushes. The toughest hike on the island is the rough trail to Playa Resaca that traverses the eponymous mountain. Outside Dewey, Culebra's roads are light on traffic and excellent for an early morning jog.

### SLEEPING

Aside from guesthouses, inns and hotels, Culebra has an excellent selection of rental properties of all shapes and sizes dotted around the island. **Culebra Vacation Planners** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-3112, 866-285-3272;

(www.culebravacationplanners.com) can fix you up with some stunners. Situated opposite the ferry dock, next door to the Hotel Kokomo (which it owns), the friendly and knowledgeable staff here can quickly find a one-, two-, three- or more bedroom house or apartment for you to stay in. Some are very remote and private, while others are within walking distance of all Dewey's 'hot spots.' Disabled and special-needs travelers can also be catered for. Rates depend on where you stay. There are basic rooms for under \$100 and mansions with views of the British Virgin Islands for up to \$500 per night.

**Culebra Island Realty** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-0052; www.culebraislandrealty.com; Calle de Escudero) is another decent option that has numerous attractive secluded properties in the east of the island over toward Playa Zoni and Punta del Manglar.

## Dewey

**Hotel Puerto Rico** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-3372; r with fan/air-con \$40/50; 🏠) Right in the center of town, but bottom of the quality pile, this hotel gives new meaning to the term 'long in the tooth.' If your sole consideration is price, then think about resting your bags in the rugged accommodation here.

**Hotel Kokomo** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-0683; r \$45-85; 🏠) If you're anxious to dump your bags in the first visible crash pad in order to get out exploring, then Hotel Kokomo, the bright yellow building right on the ferry dock, is just the ticket. New management has given this old place a second lease on life, and rooms, while still basic, are clean and cheery enough. The cheapest have shared bathrooms.

**Villa Fulladoza** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-3576; Calle Fulladoza; apt \$70-85) Besides running a book exchange, Villa Fulladoza offers seven bright apartments in invigorating colors with clean kitchenettes and fans. The shared patio is shaded by several swaying mango trees and there's a boat dock if you are lucky enough to enjoy your own private water transportation.

**Mamacita's** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-0090; www.mamacitaspr.com; 64 Calle Castelar; r \$85-110; 🏠) Screaming lurid pink, pastel purple, green, blue and perhaps a little yellow, Mamacita's is the raffish Caribbean crash pit you've been dreaming about. And although the water's invariably cold, and the reception staff will have probably gone home by the time your boat arrives, there's something strangely contagious about this old Culebra stalwart.

Rooms are simple but attractive, the vibe in the adjacent bar fun and casual (once you've got your head around the local eccentricities – of which there are many) and the on-site restaurant a living legend.

**Posada La Hamaca** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-3516; www.posada.com; r \$92-146) Wedged right next to Mamacita's, La Hamaca has a tough act to follow and lies somewhat in its neighbor's shadow. It's a shame because it's not a bad option. Rooms are basic but comfortable and overlook the canal, while locationwise you're right in the heart of Dewey with plenty of eating options within walking distance. The front desk is a good font of local information.

**Palmetto Guesthouse** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-0257; www.palmettoculebra.com; r \$95-115; 🏠) Set up in Barriada Clark, this new business is a super-friendly and accommodating escape run by two ex-Peace Corps volunteers from New England. Five guestrooms have the run of two kitchens, a deck, a handy book exchange and a sporty magazine pile. Situated not far from the airport, it is possible to walk to most of Dewey's restaurants from here, as well as idyllic Flamenco Beach.

**Casita Linda** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-0360; casitalinda.beach@cs.com; r for up to 4 people \$100) Right on the canal, this house harbors three apartments – two on the ground floor and one on the upper floor – and is much nicer inside than out. It's also right in the thick of what passes for 'action' in downtown Dewey. Rooms are air-conditioned and decked out in local handicrafts. The two two-bed apartments have kitchenettes and living spaces and can accommodate a maximum of six people. Alternatively, the ground floor one-bed apartment can accommodate a maximum of four. Phone ahead for reservations, as it is sometimes hard to track the owners down.

**Casa Ensenada** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-3559; r \$100-150; 🏠) This pleasant B&B just north of town on the waterfront at Ensenada Honda is handily placed for almost everything. The inn has three units (two of which can accommodate four people) with kitchen, separate entrance, and air-conditioning. There are a lot of unexpected extras here such as free use of kayaks, free boat dock, beach towels, grill, hammocks and more. Throw away your BlackBerry and tune into Culebra time, amigos!

**Villa Boheme** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-3508; www.villabohe.com; Calle Fulladoza; r \$107-152; 🏠) The breezy communal patio, lovely bay views,

kayak rentals and proximity to town (not to mention the Dinghy Dock restaurant next door) are the highlights of Villa Boheme. Rooms are plain but clean and usually have bunk beds. Some are equipped with kitchenette for guests who don't care to make use of the shared cooking facilities.

## South of Dewey

**Bahía Marina** (Map p155; ☎ 787-742-3112; www.bahia.marina.net; Punta Soldado Rd, Km 2.4; r \$150-300; 🏠 🏠) One of the island's newest accommodations is also one of its most luxurious – in fact, it's Buckingham Palace by Culebra standards. Billed as a condo resort, this is not your average high-rise environmentally unsound concrete block. Abutting a 100-acre nature preserve, it has 16 well-integrated apartments with modern kitchenettes, water pressure (a recent invention in this part of the world), cable TV, swimming pool, restaurant/grill and live music at weekends. It's also the venue for the annual Culebra jazz festival.

**Club Seabourne** (Map p155; ☎ 787-742-3169; www.clubseabourne.com; r/villas \$165/549; 🏠 🏠) A deftly designed small resort that blends seamlessly into the southern portion of the island, Club Seabourne is Culebra luxury-style, with an outdoor bar, a secluded swimming pool and a restaurant decked out with tablecloths and wine glasses (see p164). The welcoming lobby has a library, video lounge and relaxing chairs, while the individual villas have sea views and are deliciously tranquil. Just remember that this is Culebra, so don't always expect Niagara Falls water pressure or room service waiting on your every beck and call. Seabourne is situated 1.4 miles south of Dewey on the road to Punta del Soldado.

## Playa Flamenco Area

**Flamenco Campground** (Map p155; 787-742-0700; campsites \$20; 🏠) The only place you can legally camp in Culebra is just feet from the paradisiacal Playa Flamenco. Report to the office at the entrance and you will be assigned a spot. Six people maximum per tent. There are outdoor showers with water available between 4pm and 7pm; bathrooms are open 24/7. The campground's pretty safe and reservations aren't usually necessary.

**Villa Flamenco Beach** (Map p155; ☎ 787-742-0023; studios \$100-125, apt \$130) Gentle waves lulling you to sleep, a night sky replete with twinkling stars, and one of the best beaches on the planet

just outside your window; this place would be a winner even if it was just a roof and four walls. To make your stay more comfortable, the management has added self-catering kitchen facilities, air-con units and inviting hammocks. Paradisiacal. It's right next to the Culebra Beach Villas.

**Culebra Beach Villas** (Map p155; ☎ 787-742-0319; www.culebrabeachrental.com; r \$125-295) The only visible building on the beach is this three-story Caribbean villa with wraparound balconies. It acts as the main building to a small complex which rents out self-catering apartments with kitchen and cable TV for between two and eight people. The setting is stunning, though you'll have to stock up on provisions in Dewey, 2.5 miles away.

**Tamarindo Estates** (Map p155; ☎ 787-742-3343; www.tamarindoestates.com; r \$175-210; 🏠) The Tamarindo is Culebra to the core; rustic, isolated and set facing one of the Caribbean's most serendipitous views overlooking Cayo Luis Peña and a national wildlife refuge. Being Culebra, the accommodations – which comprise 12 self-contained cottages spread over 60 acres – are not New York luxury. Then again, you probably didn't come here to watch Hollywood movies on flat-screen TV. Nestled near the water's edge there's a pool and restaurant, both of which may or may not be in operation, but remote Playa Tamarindo just down the road is guaranteed to be open 24/7 365 days a year. The main gripe here is the price, which is a tad high for such rustic accommodations.

## EATING

Most restaurants close down in the mid-afternoon (around 2pm or 3pm), ostensibly to prepare for dinner (but probably for a siesta). Things stutter into action again sometime around 6pm. Many places only take cash.

## Dewey

**Panadería El Patio** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-0374; dishes \$3-8) Positioned strategically at the end of the airport runway, El Patio offers fresh, warm *pan criollo* (a bit like French bread), coffee and sandwiches.

**Pandeli** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-0296; dishes \$4-10; ☎ 5:30am-5pm) Ideal if you're twiddling your thumbs waiting for the 6:30am ferry to Fajardo (the Pandeli opens at an eye-popping 5:30am), this deli/café sells pastries, pancakes, salads, sandwiches and coffee. Open 8am

and it's inundated with school kids and stray travelers using the internet. A good place to take breakfast and lunch and catch up on the local gossip.

**Barbara Rosa** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-3271; dishes \$6-11) *You* are the waiter at this diminutive restaurant/bistro. You're also in Barbara's house – her front verandah to be more exact, so tread carefully. When you've decided what you want, take the menu into the front room and holler through the kitchen hatch at the busy Barbara as she scurries around the kitchen. Hey presto, 15 minutes later out comes fish and chips, a juicy burger or a plate of homemade crab cakes. It's rather quaint, once you get your head round the system. Barbara's is situated on the road north out of Dewey toward the airport.

**Heather's** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-3175; pizza \$8-20) In the center of town, across from the town hall, Heather's is a popular hangout at night and a great pizza parlor. It gets popular in the high season so expect a wait.

**our pick Mamacita's** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-0090; mains \$11-20) The nexus of pretty much everything on Culebra, Mamacita's (also see Sleeping, above) offers some of the best-presented food outside of San Juan along with zero pretension and laid-back, quirky service. Fish and meat plates are tasty, seasoned and creative, and the menu – which always includes at least one vegetarian option – changes daily, as displayed on a handwritten blackboard. Of all the places on the island, this is where expats, locals and visitors mingle best. Fun is in the air at weekends when the *bomba* drums get warmed up.

**Juanita Bananas** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-3855; Harbor Villas; dishes \$12-24; ☎ 5:30-10pm Fri-Mon; ♻) Opened in 2004, this revolutionary restaurant gives new meaning to the words 'fresh' and 'sustainable.' Sporting its very own greenhouse and garden, almost all of the fruit, vegetables and herbs listed on the menu will have traveled only a few hundred yards before hitting your plate. The seafood is also local and fished using sustainable methods. Specialties include tasty soups, fruity desserts and the famous *sofrito* sauce (garlic, onions and pepper browned in olive oil and capped with *achiote* – annatto seeds). The restaurant is situated on a small rise about half a mile from Dewey. Reservations are necessary.

**Dinghy Dock** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-0581; Calle Fulladoza; mains \$13-28) If you can brave the

gauntlet of cigarette-smoking expats that requisition the steps nightly, you'll find the DD to be something of a culinary revelation. Unusually for Puerto Rico, there's an all-you-can-eat salad bar to quell your early hunger pangs, and you can chomp on your lettuce and cucumber while watching the kitchen staff throw morsels of food to the giant tarpon that swim right up to the deck. Fish is the obvious specialty here – fresh catches such as swordfish and snapper done in creole saucers. The busy bar is a frenzy of expats nursing Medalla beers and acts as the unofficial island grapevine. If you haven't heard it here first, it's not worth hearing.

Just past Mamacita's is a bridge on your right. Cross it and keep right. **Colmado Milka** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-2253; ☎ 7am-6pm Mon-Sat, to noon Sun), the island's second-largest supermarket (that's not saying much), is there.

At **Superette Mayra** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-3888; ☎ 9:30am-1:30pm & 3:30pm-6:30pm Mon-Sat) you'll find all of the basic food supplies along with other nonedible essentials such as washing powder, diapers and toilet rolls.

### South of Dewey

**Club Seabourne** (Map p155; ☎ 787-742-3169; mains \$19-27) Aside from being an upscale inn (see p163), Club Seabourne is also the king of Culebran *cordón bleu*. With 36 covers arranged around a mosquito-free screened-in porch, you can sup on wine (the place has its own wine cellar), chomp on cerviches and feast on steak filets while enjoying calming views of glistening Ensenada Honda framed by palms. The adjacent poolside bar and gazebo hosts a popular happy hour and can conjure up a formidable mojito.

### ENTERTAINMENT

If you ask a local about the nightlife in Culebra, they'll probably suggest you stand outside and look at the stars. But scratch around in Dewey and you could end up joining a drum circle, brandishing a karaoke mike, or putting the world to rights over several cold Medallas with a reformed shopaholic from Chicago.

**El Batey** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-3828) Not a large place, but seemingly big enough to accommodate the majority of Culebra's population at weekends, when locals swing by to shake a leg to reggaeton with a bit of salsa and meringue mixed in. During the week the place is esteemed for its cheap burgers, cold beers and

pool tables. It's situated on the road north out of Dewey toward the airport.

**Happy Landings** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-0135) Planted at the end of the airstrip, Happy Landings is a drinks-only dive these days (it used to serve food). Though hardly a font of pulsating nightlife, it may be worth sticking your head around the door to see if anything spontaneous is happening.

**Mamacita's** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-0090) Mamacita's has a lively happy hour and after-dinner scene. On weekends, locals, expats and yacht crews favor this place, with its open-air deck and selection of reggae, calypso and buffet. Mamacita's really smokes when *bomba y plena* drummers show up to rock the patio every Saturday night with *bomba* rhythms, as well as salsa and merengue. Everybody dances! See also the review in Eating (opposite).

**Dinghy Dock** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-0581; mains \$13-28) The 'dock' has karaoke on Thursdays – aarghhhh!

### SHOPPING

**Galería de Regalos** (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-2294; cnr Calles Pedro Márquez & Castelar; ☎ 10am-5pm) A colorful gift-and-clothes shop that sells priceless República de Culebra T-shirts and plenty of other unique knickknacks.

**Butiki** (Map p157; ☎ 787-935-2542; cnr Calles de Escudero & Romero) A local art shop run by an American expat that sells paintings, jewelry, masks, T-shirts and plenty more. Almost everything is island-made.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

#### Air

Culebra gets excellent air service from San Juan and Fajardo on the commuter carriers that also serve Vieques: **Isla Nena Air Service** (☎ 787-812-5144; www.islanena.8m.com), **Vieques Air Link** (☎ 787-741-8331; www.vieques-island.com/val) and **Air Flamenco** (☎ 787-724-1818; www.airflamenco.net). There are at least five flights a day to/from San Juan's Isla Grande and Luis Muñoz Marín (LMM) airports (from \$95), and more flights a day to/from Fajardo (from \$50). Isla Nena Air Service flies once a day between Culebra and Vieques (\$35 one way).

#### Boat Charter

Captain Luis of **Culebra Boats** (☎ 787-360-9807) will often charter a boat for one to four people to St Thomas in the US Virgin Islands. Phone to enquire about availability and prices.

### Ferry

Puerto Rican Port Authority ferries travel between Fajardo and Culebra thrice daily. The high-speed passenger ferry takes about an hour and a half. Round-trip passenger fares are \$4.50. Boats leave Fajardo daily at 9am, 3pm and 7pm, and Culebra at 6:30am, 1pm and 5pm. The cargo ferry (small/large car \$15/19) takes two hours.

To confirm the schedule and to make reservations (required for vehicles), call the **Puerto Rican Port Authority** Culebra office (Map p157; ☎ 787-742-3161; ferry dock, Dewey; ☎ 8-11am & 1-3pm Mon-Fri); Fajardo office (☎ 787-863-0705, car reservations 800-981-2005; ☎ 8-11am & 1-3pm Mon-Fri). Note that neither of these offices is great at answering their phones. So it goes.

### GETTING AROUND

Most of the island's natural attractions are not near the town, and chances are that your guesthouse or other rental isn't either. So you will need to organize a ride, by either rental car or taxi.

Biking, kayaking and water taxis are good options for reaching far-flung attractions around the island. See p174 for details.

### To/From the Airport

If you have not arranged an airport pick-up/drop-off with your guesthouse proprietor, you'll need one of the three island cabs (see below); \$5 to \$7 will get you just about anywhere on the island.

### Car & Scooter

It's not always necessary to hire a car on Culebra (there are too many cars on the island as it is). The Dewey area is all walkable, Flamenco Beach is a not unpleasant 30-minute hike, and everywhere else can be easily reached by público bus, taxi or, if you're energetic, bicycle. See p175 for bike hire. If you really can't be parted from your four wheels contact **Thrifty Car Rental/JM Scooter Rentals** (☎ 787-742-0521).

### Taxi

There is taxi service on the island, but the taxis are basically público vans designed to get large parties of people back and forth between the ferry dock and Playa Flamenco (where they will be partying or camping) for a couple of dollars per person. The públicos are not radio-dispatched, so getting a timely pickup has

been a problem for many people heading to or from dinner at a restaurant.

**Willy** (☎ 787-742-3537, 787-396-0076) generally meets every ferry and also arrives at your door when booked. If he's busy and you're stuck for a ride, try **Romero** (☎ 787-378-0250) or **Kiko's Transportation** (☎ 787-742-2678).

## VIEQUES

### pop 10,000

With a name stamped in infamy, Vieques was where Puerto Rico's most prickly political saga was played out in the public eye. For over five decades the US Navy used more than two-thirds of this lushly endowed Spanish Virgin Island for military target practice. The war games ended in 1999 after a misplaced 500lb bomb caused the death of a Puerto Rican civilian and set in motion a protest campaign that led to the navy's long-awaited withdrawal.

Measuring 21 miles long by 5 miles wide, Vieques is substantially bigger than Culebra and distinctly different in ambience. Though still a million metaphorical miles from the bright lights of the Puerto Rican mainland, the larger population here has meant more luxurious accommodations, hipper restaurants and – unfortunately – more petty thievery (particularly on the beaches).

Since the official military withdrawal in 2003, Vieques has regularly been touted as the Caribbean's next 'big thing,' with a pristine coastline ripe for the developer's bulldozer. Fortunately, environmental authorities swept in quickly after the handover and promptly declared all of the former military land (which consists of 70% of the island's total area) a US Fish & Wildlife Refuge. The measure has meant that the bulk of the island remains virgin territory to be explored and enjoyed by all.

Development elsewhere has been slow and low-key. Although many guesthouses and restaurants have expanded their business since 2003, much of this growth has centered on ecotourism and small but luxurious boutique hotels. The only real 'resort' was closed at the time of writing, and the island has yet to succumb to golf, gambling or Las Vegas-style glitz. It's a situation that seems unlikely to change in the short term. Vieques' residents – many of whom are US expats – are fiercely protective

of their Caribbean nirvana and, fresh from seeing off the US military in 2003, they are boldly accustomed to putting up a fight.

The name 'Vieques' is a 17th-century Spanish colonial corruption of the Taíno name *bieque* (small island). The Spaniards also called Vieques and Culebra *las islas inútiles* (the useless islands) because they lacked gold and silver. But over the centuries, residents and visitors who share affection for this place have come to call Vieques 'Isla Nena,' a term of endearment meaning 'Little Girl Island.'

These days Vieques is synonymous with its gorgeous beaches, semiwild horses and unforgettable bioluminescent bay.

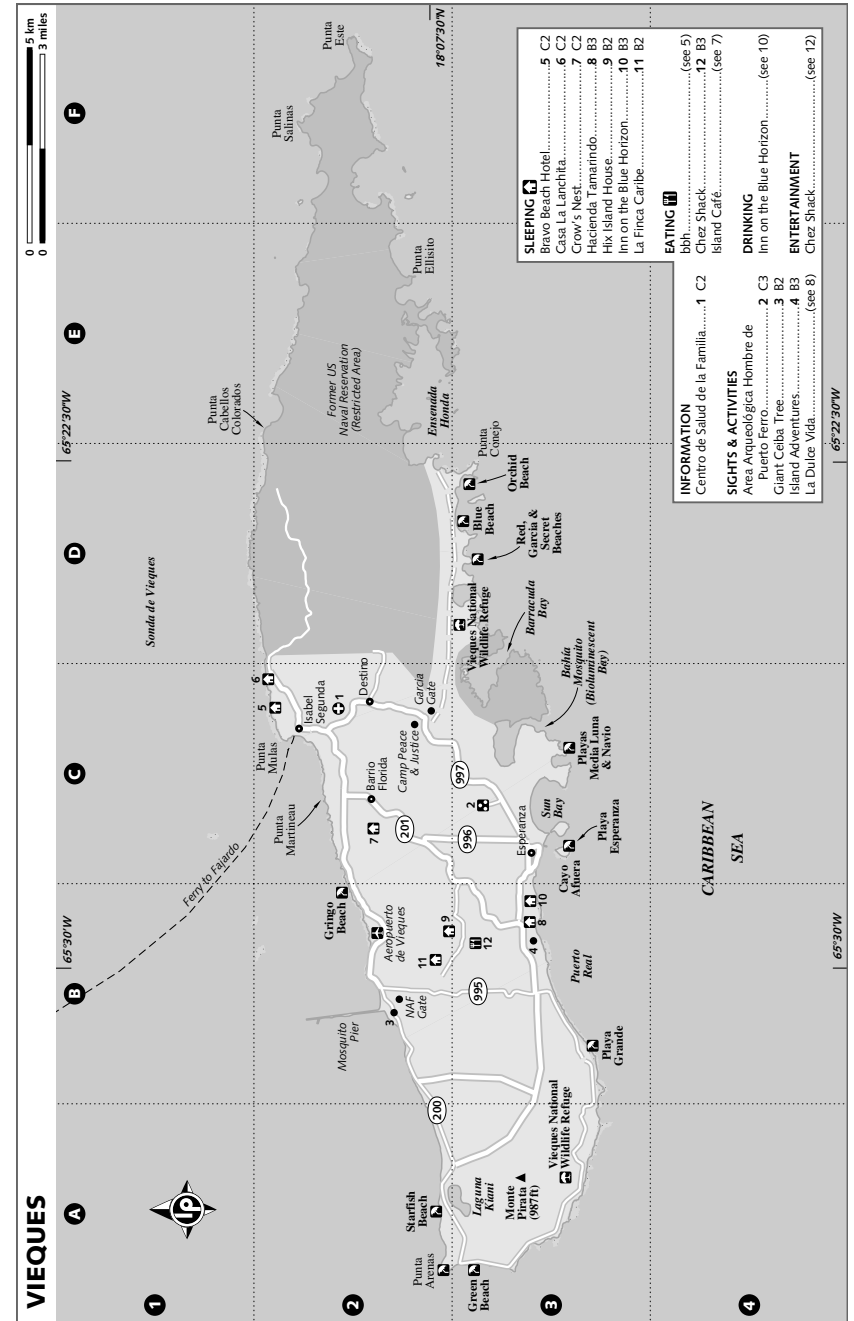
### HISTORY

When Columbus 'discovered' Puerto Rico on his second voyage in 1493, Taíno people were living peacefully (save for the occasional skirmish with Carib neighbors) on Vieques. With the expansion of Puerto Rico under Ponce de León, more Taíno fled to the island; Caribs joined them and the two groups mounted a fierce resistance to Spanish occupation. It failed. Spanish soldiers eventually overran the island, killing or enslaving the natives who remained.

Even so, Spanish control over the island remained tentative at best. In succeeding years, both the British and French tried to claim the island as their own. In reality, Vieques remained something of a free port, thriving as a smuggling center.

Sugarcane plantations covered much of Vieques when the island fell to the Americans in 1898 as spoils from the Spanish-American War, but during the first half of the 20th century the cane plantations failed. Vieques lost more than half its population and settled into near dormancy; the remaining locals survived as they always had, by subsistence farming, fishing and smuggling.

Shortly after WWII broke out, the US Navy showed up on Vieques and grabbed about 70% of the island's 33,000 acres to build military bases (see p168). They held onto it until May 2003 when, after four years of peaceful protests, the land was ceded to the US Fish & Wildlife Refuge. In the years since, Puerto Rican, US and international developers have been salivating at the prospect of building mega-hotels and more. But for the time being, ecotourism, construction, cattle raising, fishing and some light manufacturing (such as the





General Electric assembly plant) bring money and jobs to the island.

## ORIENTATION

With slightly more than 10,000 people, Vieques is considerably more populated than its sleepy sister island, Culebra. Consequently, it has two towns to Culebra's one. The main settlement, Isabel Segunda (Isabella II), is on the north side where the ferry docks. Most people run through Isabel Segunda en route to Esperanza, on the Caribbean side. Esperanza is indisputably prettier, with a public beach, and a *malecón* (waterfront promenade) lined with numerous attractive and entertaining restaurants and guesthouses.

Hwy 200 originates in Isabel Segunda and heads west past the airport as far as Green Beach on the island's western tip. To get to Esperanza, take either of two routes south over the mountains: Hwys 201/996 or Hwy 997. If you take the latter route, you will pass along the navy fence as you descend from the summits. Nothing has been taken down yet,

so the Garcia Gate is clearly visible on your left. Head through the gate and east along an unpaved road and you'll end up at pristine Red and Blue Beaches in the former military zone (now a national wildlife refuge).

## INFORMATION

Unless otherwise noted, all of these addresses are in Isabel Segunda. While some actual street addresses exist on Vieques, citizens and businesses rarely use them. Physical addresses are given when possible.

### Emergency

**Fire** (☎ 787-741-2111)

**Police** (☎ 787-741-2020) Isabel Segunda only.

### Internet Access

**Blackbeard Sports** (Map p170; ☎ 787-741-1892; 101 Muñoz Rivera, Isabel Segunda; per 15min \$3) Has a small but efficient business center located in its Isabel Segunda store.

**Museo de Esperanza** (Map p172; ☎ 787-741-8850; Calle Flamboyán 138, Esperanza; per 30min \$3; ☎ 11am-4pm) The museum has half a dozen computer terminals plus wi-fi.

## THE NAVY-VIEQUES PROTESTS

In a country where the national status is more often a topic of apathy than anarchy, the 1999–2003 protests against the US Navy presence on the island of Vieques were something of a wake-up call. First requisitioned by the US military in 1941, Vieques was originally intended to act as a safe haven for the British Navy during WWII, should the UK fall to the Nazis. But after 1945 the US decided to keep hold of the territory to use as a base for weapons testing during the ever chillier Cold War. Taking control of over 70% of the island's total land in the east and west, the military left the local population to live in a small strip down the middle while they shelled beaches and dropped live bombs on off-shore atolls. On average the military bombed Vieques 180 days a year and in 1998 alone they dropped a total of 23,000 explosive devices on the island.

With the public ire raised, things came to a head on April 19, 1999, after Viequense civilian guard David Sanes Rodríguez was accidentally killed when two 225kg bombs missed their target and exploded near an observation post he was manning. The incident triggered a massive campaign of civil disobedience that reached far beyond the shores of Vieques, recruiting Puerto Ricans and non-Puerto Ricans worldwide. The most common form of protest involved demonstrators entering the military base illegally and setting up makeshift encampments. The campaign gained international notoriety in May 2000 when over 700 protesters were arrested for trespassing, including notable celebrities such as Robert Kennedy Jr and Reubén Berríos, leader of the PIP (Puerto Rican Independence Party). Other names who threw their weight behind the cause were Jesse Jackson, Ricky Martin, boxer Felix Trinidad and Archbishop of San Juan Roberto González Nieves.

As in Culebra 25 years earlier, the pressure and publicity finally paid off and in 2001 Puerto Rican Governor Sila María Calderón brokered a deal with US President George W Bush promising that the US military would leave Vieques by May 2003.

Unfortunately, the clean-up campaign still continues. Furthermore, after decades of heavy shelling, various health and environmental bodies have reported that Vieques' eastern beaches are heavily contaminated and that its citizens have a cancer rate 27% higher than the Puerto Rican average.

## Laundry

**Familia Rios** (Map p170; ☎ 787-438-1846; Calle Benitez Castaño 1) A few yards up the street from the ferry dock, across the street from the Chinese restaurant, this Laundromat can do same-day service for a fee or you can use self-serve washers. Change and detergent are available.

## Media

**Vieques Times** (☎ 787-741-8508) Published monthly in both English and Spanish, this is no longer the only paper in town, but it is still one of the best.

## Medical Services

**Centro de Salud de la Familia** (Map p167; ☎ 787-741-0392; Rte 997 Km 0.4; ☎ clinic 7am-3:30pm Mon-Fri, emergency 24hr) Just south of Isabel Segunda on Hwy 997.

**Farmacia Antonio** (Map p170; ☎ 787-741-8397; Calle Benitez Guzman; ☎ 7:30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-6pm Sat, 11am-3pm Sun) For basic supplies and over-the-counter remedies, Antonio's is a good bet.

## Money

It's a good idea to carry cash on the island (but watch out for petty thieves) as the ATMs have been known to run dry.

**Banco Popular** (Map p170; ☎ 787-741-2071; Calle Muñoz Rivera; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri) Has one of two ATMs in Isabel Segunda.

## Post

**Post office** (Map p170; ☎ 787-741-3891; Calle Muñoz Rivera 97; ☎ 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Across from the Banco Popular, this is the island's only post office. It will take poste-restante letters.

## Tourist Information

Good websites include [www.enchanted-isle.com](http://www.enchanted-isle.com) or [www.vieques-island.com](http://www.vieques-island.com) for useful directories of island businesses, services and accommodations.

**Puerto Rico Tourism Company** (PRTC; Map p170; ☎ 787-741-0800; [www.gotopuertorico.com](http://www.gotopuertorico.com); Calle Carlos Lebrun 449; ☎ 8am-5pm) Friendly and helpful staff is on hand every day to give out information, brochures and the classic Vieques map, [www.theviequesmap.com](http://www.theviequesmap.com).

## SIGHTS

### Vieques National Wildlife Refuge

This 18,000-acre **refuge** (Map p167; ☎ 787-741-2138; [www.fws.gov/southeast/vieques](http://www.fws.gov/southeast/vieques)) occupies the land formerly administered by the US military. The 3100-acre western segment – used mainly as a storage area during the military occupation – was instituted in 2001. The 14,700-acre eastern segment, which includes a former live

firing range (still off-limits), was inaugurated two years later in 2003.

The refuge protects vast tracts of largely pristine land containing four different ecological habitats: beaches, coastal lagoons, mangrove wetlands and forested uplands. It also includes an important marine environment of sea grasses and coral reefs. Many colorful species survive in these areas, including the endangered brown pelican and the Antillean manatee. Vieques' dwarffish thicket-strewn forest, which includes some indigenous cacti, provides one of the best examples of dry subtropical forest in the Caribbean.

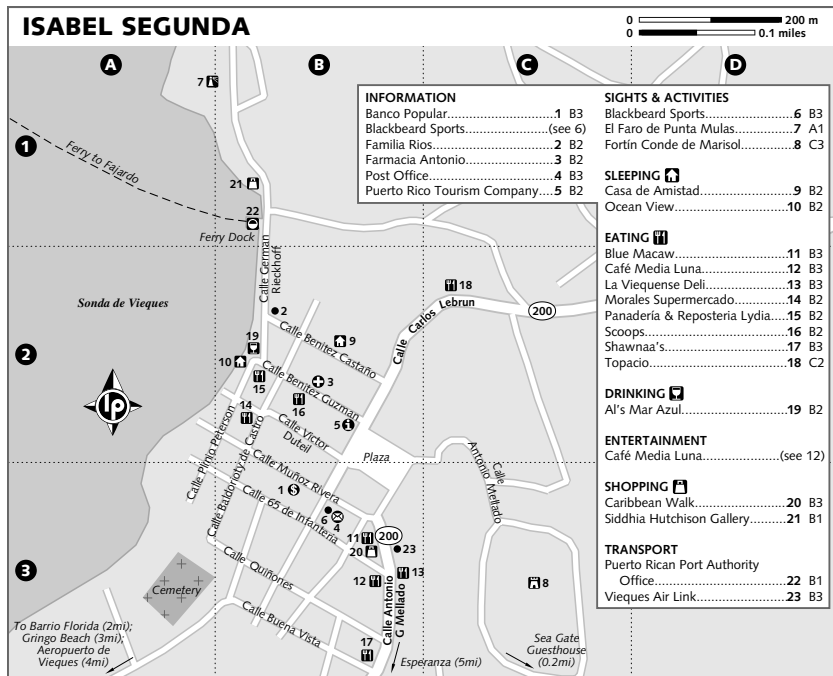
Existing as a military site until May 2003, much of the refuge's land is still officially off-limits to visitors. A potentially dangerous no-go zone is Punta Este in the far east of the island, where live ordinance is still being removed. Other restricted areas in the east include most of the north coast east of Isabel II along with the south coast east of Orchid Beach (although there are few obstacles to prevent you getting in). The most easily accessible area is the narrow ribbon of land that abuts the dirt road leading from the Garcia Gate to Orchid Beach.

Most of the western part of the refuge is open for business, and includes a lonely swathe of colorful wildflowers, locked up military bunkers and the looming hulk of Mt Pirata, the island's highest point at 987ft.

Perhaps the finest **Giant Ceiba Tree** (Map p167) in Puerto Rico is situated on the right-hand side of the road as you head toward Green Beach, adjacent to the Mosquito Pier. Rumored to be 400 years old, the tree resembles a gnarly African baobab, which is probably the reason why it was venerated so much by uprooted Afro-Caribbean slaves. The Ceiba is Puerto Rico's national tree.

## Isabel Segunda

A calm yet hardworking coastal town dotted over low hills on Vieques' north coast, non-touristy Isabel Segunda is the island's administrative center and grittily authentic capital. Sometimes busy, sometimes quiet – depending on ferry activity – the town is more urban than anything on Culebra (though that's not saying much). Lines of cars disgorge daily at the dock, the odd down-and-outer languishes on a bench in the otherwise empty central square, and a handful of new snazzy restaurants pull in a burgeoning stream of affluent American visitors.



Though less beguiling than its southern rival Esperanza, Isabel II is no ugly duckling. Named for the enigmatic Spanish queen who reigned between 1833 and 1868, the town is the island's oldest settlement, founded in 1843, and showcases a handful of historical sights, including an 1896 lighthouse and the last Spanish fort to be built in the Americas.

During the US naval occupation Isabel was a downbeat place with only basic amenities but, in more recent years, better services and a handful of boutique hotels in the hills to the east have established a more swanky reputation. But with only 5000 residents and more wild horses than wine waiters, it's a long way from sparkling modernity.

#### EL FARO DE PUNTA MULAS

One of Puerto Rico's 16 historic lighthouses, this pastel-shaded historic monument stands on the hilly point just north of the Isabel Segunda ferry dock. Built in 1896, it was restored in 1992 and contains a small **museum** (☎ 787-741-0060; admission free), which is open irregularly. Come for the vista and sunset, not the exhibition – a rather paltry collection of photos and artifacts

depicting local maritime history, island history and natural history of the coast.

#### FORTÍN CONDE DE MIRASOL

This small **fort** (☎ 787-741-1717; 471 Calle Magnolia; adult \$2; ☎ 10am-4pm Wed-Sun), on the hill above Isabel Segunda, is the last Spanish fort constructed in the Americas (1840s). Although never completed, the fort has ramparts and a fully restored central building that houses a history and art museum. It currently serves as a museum that showcases the island's 4000-year-old Indian and colonial history.

#### Esperanza

Esperanza is the quintessential Caribbean beach town; a shabby-chic cluster of wooden shacks and colorful open-fronted restaurants that has lifted many a dampened mainland spirit. If you've been fighting your way through the chaotic traffic and soulless suburbia of San Juan, this could be your nirvana; an exotic but laid-back mélange of infectious Latin music and friendly street-side sales-folk peddling rum, reggae and bioluminescent kayaking trips.

Set on Vieques' calm southern shores, Esperanza's waters are deep, clear and well sheltered to the north, east and south by two tall, lush islands. The white concrete railings of the modern *molecón* rise quaintly above the town's narrow beach and, if you arrive at sunset, you will see twinkling lights and hear ebullient music pouring from the cafés and restaurants that line the Calle Flamboyán 'Strip' facing the Caribbean.

Twenty-five years ago, Esperanza was a desolate former sugar port with a population of about 1500. Its residents survived by fishing, cattle raising and subsistence farming. But then a couple of expatriate Americans in search of the *Key Largo*, Bogart-and-Bacall life discovered the town and started a bar and guesthouse called 'Bananas' (p176). Gradually, word spread among independent travelers, and a cult following took root. Protected (rather ironically) by the presence of the US military on Vieques, Esperanza, despite a recent growth in popularity, has managed to retain much of its rustic pioneering spirit and remains an evocative but fun place to visit.

#### MUSEO DE ESPERANZA

This tiny **museum** (☎ 787-741-8850; www.vcht.com; 138 Calle Flamboyán; ☎ 11am-4pm Tue-Sun), on the Strip in Esperanza, is operated by the Vieques Conservation and Historical Trust (founded in 1984 to save the island's bioluminescent bays). The museum contains exhibits on the ecological efforts of the trust, the island's natural history and its early Indian inhabitants. Donations are welcome. Behind the gift shop, the museum runs what is supposedly the smallest aquarium on earth, a series of tanks in which baby sea creatures are displayed for a few weeks before being returned to the ocean. There's also a rotating exhibit on the island's flora and fauna, and an internet facility (see p168).

#### AREA ARQUEOLÓGICA HOMBRE DE PUERTO FERRO

You will find this site marked by a sign on Hwy 997, east of Esperanza. About a quarter mile east of the entrance to Sun Bay (Sombé), take the dirt road on your left (it heads inland). Drive for about two minutes until you find the burial site of the Indian known as the 'Hombre de Puerto Ferro' (Map p167), which is surrounded by a fence. Big boulders identify

a grave where a 4000-year-old skeleton (now on exhibit at the Fortín) was exhumed. Little is known about the skeleton, but archaeologists speculate that it is most likely the body of one of Los Arcaicos (the Archaics), Puerto Rico's earliest known inhabitants; this racial group made a sustained migration as well as seasonal pilgrimages to the Caribbean from bases in Florida.

Until the discovery of the Hombre de Puerto Ferro, many archaeologists imagined that the Arcaicos had reached Puerto Rico sometime shortly after the birth of Christ; the presence of the remains on Vieques could push that date back nearly two millennia if controversy surrounding the skeleton is resolved. Visitors are welcome to stop by the excavation site, but besides the original boulders, there's not much to see.

#### BAHÍA MOSQUITO

Locals claim that this bay (Map p167), a designated wildlife preserve about 2 miles east of Esperanza, has the highest concentration of phosphorescent dinoflagellates not only in Puerto Rico, but in the world (see p67). Indeed, it's also known as Bioluminescent Bay – and it's magnificent.

A trip through the lagoon is nothing short of psychedelic, with hundreds of fish whipping up bright-green sparkles below the surface as your kayak or electric boat passes by (don't ever accept a ride in a motorized boat – the engine pollution kills the organisms that create phosphorescence). But the best part is when you stop to swim: it's like bathing in the stars.

You can just drive east on the rough Sun Bay road (you'd better have a 4WD because the road's a mess) and jump in for a swim at any point that's glowing. However, an organized trip will give you far more opportunity to really take in the spread of phosphorescence.

There's another inlet to the east, Barracuda Bay, that's also filled with dinoflagellates, but most tour operators don't venture out that far.

Reservations are recommended for tours and kayak rentals in high season. For more information, see Boating (p174) and Kayaking (p174).

#### Beaches

Vieques' beaches are as legendary as Culebra's – and there are more of them. Environmentally



speaking, the US occupation was a blessing in disguise, in that it has left many of the island's more remote beaches in an underdeveloped and pristine state. Now protected in a national wildlife refuge, areas such as Blue, Red and Green Beaches are clean, untrammelled and paradisiacal. Others, encased in the former weapons-testing zones, remain closed off and are, effectively, virgin territory. It's a good idea to check with the **US Fish & Wildlife Service** (☎ 787-741-2138; www.fws.gov) before heading off to explore so you don't wander into any contaminated areas.

Unfortunately many of Vieques' beaches are prone to petty theft. No matter how remote your beach, don't leave your valuables unguarded while you swim or snorkel, especially on the beach in downtown Esperanza. They'll be gone in a heartbeat.

### PLAYA ESPERANZA

The advantage of slender Playa Esperanza (Map p172) is that it is within shouting distance of the *malecón* and most of Esperanza's bars, restaurants and guesthouses. The downside is that it is often dirty with litter, seaweed

and – even worse – shards of glass. Tread carefully. A popular option for those in the know is to journey across to the nearby islet of **Cayo Afuera** (Map p167), an uninhabited pinprick of land that is part of the Mosquito Bay Reserve. Situated a few hundred meters across the bay, many intrepid locals elect to swim (not advisable unless you are a strong swimmer and are aware of the local weather conditions), while others kayak or take a boat. There is great snorkeling here, both under the ruined pier and on the ocean side of the islet where a sunken sailboat languishes beneath the surface. Antler coral, nurse sharks and manatees have also been spotted in the vicinity.

### SUN BAY

This long half-moon-shaped bay (Map p167; also known as Sombé), less than a half mile east of Esperanza, is the island's balneario (public beach), with all the facilities you have come to expect in Puerto Rico. Measuring a mile in length, Sun Bay is rarely busy. Indeed, such is its size that even with 100 people congregated in its midst it will still appear almost deserted. The beach is also not always staffed,

so you can often drive in without paying the usual \$2. If the gate is locked, take the easy walk east along Playa Esperanza, and then walk across the narrow sand spit to Sombé.

### PLAYAS MEDIA LUNA & NAVIO

If it really is isolation you're after, continue east on the dirt road past Sombé, and you'll enter a forest. Go left at the fork in the road. In a couple of hundred yards, you'll stumble upon Playa Media Luna (Map p167), a very protected, shady beach that is excellent for kids. Beyond this on the same road is Playa Navio (Map p167), where bigger waves are the domain of bodysurfers. Both of these beaches served as sets in the 1961 film version of the famous William Golding novel *The Lord of the Flies*. If Vieques has a specific beach that attracts gays and lesbians, Navio is the one.

If you climb the rocks at the west end of Playa Navio, you'll find a path along the shore that you can follow to find petrified clams and corals dating from 50 million years ago.

### ORCHID, RED, GARCIA, SECRET & BLUE BEACHES

All these south-shore beaches (Map p167), which used to be on navy land, can be reached by entering the Garcia Gate on Hwy 997.

At the Garcia Gate, turn south on the dirt road to calm and clear **Red Beach** (Playa Caracas), which has a few gazebos with picnic tables to shade bathers from the sun. **Garcia Beach** is lesser known and has less shade, meaning that fewer people decamp here. **Secret Beach** is also in the vicinity. This deliciously deserted stretch of sand has absolutely no facilities – just jaw-dropping beauty. If you find it, don't tell anyone.

**Blue Beach** (Bahía de la Chiva), at the east end of the former Camp Garcia road, is long and open, and occasionally has rough surf. If you happen upon this beach during Semana Santa (the Holy Week preceding Easter), you'll see hordes of faithful Catholics camping on the beach, where they pray and party in honor of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There's good snorkeling here at an island just off the coast. **Orchid Beach**, further eastward, is as far as you can go at present. Called Playa La Plata by locals, this gorgeously secluded beach has sand like icing sugar and a calm sea that seems to shimmer

### TOP HIDDEN BEACHES

- Playa Brava (p160)
- Secret Beach (left)
- Playa Zoni (p160)
- Orchid Beach (left)
- Green Beach (p173)

in a thousand different shades of turquoise, cobalt and blue.

### GRINGO BEACH

Gringo Beach (Map p167) is the site of the now defunct Martineau Bay resort, earmarked by 'W' hotels as a new venture in 2008–09. You will find a great reef for snorkeling just 10yd offshore, but seas can be lumpy here from December to March, when trade winds can blow from the northeast.

### LAGUNA KIANI

Also at the western edge of the wildlife refuge, not far from Green Beach, is Laguna Kiani (Map p167), a large mangrove swamp. There is a wooden boardwalk around the lagoon with information panels on it about flora and fauna. It's an excellent area for hiking and wildlife observation. The dirt roads leading to Laguna Kiani or the surrounding beaches are excellent for biking, jogging or hiking. It is also an ideal area to view Mt Pirata, the highest elevation on the island and the original moist subtropical forest on Vieques.

### STARFISH BEACH

On the other side of Laguna Kiani is the most wonderful beach (Map p167) on Vieques for children, with gentle surf, crystal-clear waters and immense starfish to catch the eye lying all along the shore. It's a really good place for families to relax, and perfect for teaching youngsters the look-don't-touch approach to fragile ecosystems.

### GREEN BEACH/PUNTA ARENAS

Punta Arenas (Map p167) is the best beach for a quiet picnic, some family-friendly snorkeling, and up-close views of the big island and El Yunque across the water. To get here, pass through the former Nava Ammunitions Facility (NAF) Gate and head west for about 20 minutes through pastoral landscapes and

herds of wild horses. At the western tip of the island, the road turns to dirt and you can park in the clearings.

The strand here is not very broad and is punctuated with coral outcroppings, but there are plenty of shade trees. Snorkeling reefs extend for miles, and you can expect to have this place pretty much to yourself, except on summer weekends, when a lot of yachts out of Fajardo come here on day trips. Since this beach is generally sheltered from the trade winds, you definitely want bug repellent.

### PLAYA GRANDE

Mostly deserted, Playa Grande (Map p167) has a long, narrow strip of sand and water that drops off very quickly (not good for children or weak swimmers). If you head west on Rte 996 past Esperanza to Rte 201, you'll eventually come to a dead end. Park in the dirt (make sure to lock your car and hide valuables) and hit the sand.

## ACTIVITIES

### Diving

The island's biggest and best dive shop is **Blackbeard Sports** (Map p170; ☎ 787-741-1892; 101 Muñoz Rivera, Isabel Segunda). Based out of Isabel Segunda, these guys offer two-tank scuba dives from \$100 and Professional Association of Dive Instructors (PADI) certified basic open-water courses from \$350. You can also rent your own snorkel/scuba gear for \$15/50 a day.

### Snorkeling

**Golden Heron Ecotours** (☎ 787-615-1625; www.golden-heron.com) offers excellent snorkeling trips to almost virgin reefs that are reachable only by motorboat. The company only uses the boats of local fishermen and has a strong environmental ethos (helping people protect rather than exploit their local landscapes). Boats for up to six people can be chartered for \$600. The trip with a qualified guide lasts all day. Children are welcome.

### Boating

**Vieques Sailing** (☎ 787-508-7245) with Captain Bill and his boat *Willow* offer a variety of sailing trips. Pick from a two-hour sunset cruise (\$30), a half-day sailing and snorkeling trip (\$45), or an all-day sailing excursion including snorkeling, beach time and lunch (\$95).

Run by one of the conservation groups trying to keep the bioluminescent bay in tip-top shape, **Island Adventures** (Map p167; ☎ 787-741-0720; www.biobay.com; Rte 996 Km 4.5) offers 90-minute tours (\$30) in an electric boat just about every night, except when there's a full moon (take the trip to learn why!). Guides are bilingual and humorous although the groups are often a little on the large side. There's a Mexican restaurant next door to their offices where you dine either before or after your excursion.

### Kayaking

**Abe's Snorkeling & Bio-bay Tours** (☎ 787-741-2134; www.abessnorkeling.com), based in Esperanza, offers guided kayaking and snorkeling trips to Cayo Afuera, a few hundred meters offshore (adult/child \$35/17.50). This is a great trip for beginners and families. Its ecofriendly bio-bay tour (adult/child \$30/15) is equally child-friendly with kayaks that can accommodate families of three or even four.

**Blue Caribe Kayaks** (Map p172; ☎ 787-741-2522; http://enchanted-isle.com/bluecaribe; Calle Flamboyán, Esperanza; trips \$23-30) rents out kayaks to individuals (\$10/25 for one/four hours) and offers trips through the bioluminescent bay (\$30), with a swim stop included. Blue Caribe also does kayak/snorkeling trips in the day around Cayo Afuera. If nobody's in the office ask around for 'Pooch' – check the pier first.

### Fishing

Fishing is sublime in Vieques. Imagine Florida Keys with about one-tenth of the fisherfolk and enough bonefish, tarpon and permit to stock a mini ocean. Fishing boats can also allow you access to isolated stretches of coastline in the former naval zone.

For operators, it's a toss up between **Caribbean Fly-fishing Company** (☎ 787-741-1337; www.caribbeanflyfishingco.com) and **Wildfly Charters** (787-435-4833; www.wildflycharters.com). They've both received favorable *New York Times* reviews and charge similar rates (\$300 per half-day).

### Horseback Riding

**Penny Miller** (☎ 787-741-4661) runs highly recommended guided trail rides through the mountains or by the ocean, whatever you prefer. Tours cost \$65 for two hours. She is connected to the Sea Gate Guesthouse (opposite).

## VIEQUES BY BIKE

A hidden blessing of the erstwhile US occupation is that Vieques remains refreshingly undeveloped and ideal for cycling. Free from the main island's legendary traffic jams and unforgiving drivers, this 135-sq-mile slither of land has subsequently become a little-heralded biker's paradise with a couple of decent cycle outlets ready to kit you out with the essentials.

As well as renting out bikes, helmets and child-seats, Blackbeard Sports (below) in Isabel II organizes guided rides around the island. It also promotes a free women's riding group that meets at the store every Saturday morning. If you're up for going it alone, Blackbeard Sports can furnish you with maps, routes and insider tips. A few wider suggestions are listed below.

- The main road from Isabel II to Esperanza is Hwy 997, but head west on Hwy 200 and then south on Hwy 201 and you'll find a quieter, more pleasant alternative route. Halfway along, you can detour up Hwy 995, another lovely country road.
- The ultimate Vieques loop involves heading west out of Isabel II on Hwy 200 all the way to Green Beach (the last section is unpaved). After some shore snorkeling and an idyllic picnic lunch, swing south through the old military bunkers to Playa Grande before linking up with Hwy 996 to Esperanza. The most direct route back to Isabel II on Hwy 997.
- For the best off-road adventure, head south from Isabel II on Hwy 997 as far as the old Camp Garcia gate. Turn left along a dirt road and you'll encounter a plethora of pristine beaches spread out like golden jewels along the track. Pack a picnic, swimming gear and plenty of water.

### Cycling

Some of the best bicycling is along Hwys 995, 996 and 201, which wind through the countryside north and west of Esperanza and are light on traffic.

**Blackbeard Sports** (Map p170; ☎ 787-741-1892; 101 Muñoz Rivera, Isabel Segunda) rents out North American standard bikes from its store in Isabel Segunda for \$25 per day including helmet. It also rents child seats. These guys can fix you up with some fantastic tours (see boxed text, above).

**La Dulce Vida** (Map p167; ☎ 787-617-2453; www.bikevieques.com) are based on the south side of the island and offer similar prices and deals.

## SLEEPING

Vieques is a rural island. You can expect to hear chickens, dogs, cats, cattle and horses making their barnyard noises day and night. Travelers will find guesthouses in both of Vieques' main towns, as well as elsewhere.

Just like Culebra, Vieques is an open-minded and tolerant community, and you can safely assume that all tourist accommodations here are gay-friendly. Quite a few of the guesthouses and restaurants on the island are owned or staffed by lesbian or gay expats.

If you're looking for a rental agent, try gay-friendly **Rainbow Realty** (Map p172; ☎ 787-741-4312; www.enchanted-isle.com/rainbow; 278 Calle Flamboyán) in

Esperanza. **Crow's Nest Realty** (☎ 787-741-0033; www.enchanted-isle.com/crownsnestrealty) can also help you out. These agents represent a variety of vacation properties ranging from apartments to villas. Expect to pay \$675 to \$2800 per week.

If you wish to camp, just east of Esperanza you can pitch your tent at **Sun Bay** (Sombé balneario; ☎ 787-741-8198; campsites \$10). You'll need to make reservations, even though there are plans to add 50 new campsites. If you don't require facilities or security, you can camp with impunity on any of the more remote island beaches.

### Isabel Segunda

There are a few accommodations in the heart of town, easily reached on foot from the ferry. Lots of new offerings have popped up just above the lighthouse on North Shore Rd, an area called Bravos de Boston. They're not far as the crow flies, but a long uphill trek on foot.

**Sea Gate Guesthouse** (off Map p170; ☎ 787-741-4661; r \$50-110; ☐) Situated on a hill high above the town, the Sea Gate is a bit of a hike from the ferry dock, most of it uphill. But once you get here, it's a different world. Horses roam freely in the surrounding grounds (and can be rented for horseback riding, see opposite), lush vegetation fills the garden, and views of surrounding countryside are panoramic. The crux comes with the animals. This place

is dog-friendly – yes, they'll accommodate your pet and give him/her a 'doggie bag' on arrival. If sharing a house with myriad canines ain't your cup of tea, you might want to try something a little closer to town.

**Casa de Amistad** (Map p170; ☎ 787-741-3758; www.casadeamistad.com; 27 Calle Benítez Castaño; r \$70-90; 🏠 🚿 🚿) A fun and comfortable place to crash slap-bang in the middle of town, Casa de Amistad has seven rooms for rent with air-con and private bathrooms (two of the bathrooms, though private, are separated from bedrooms). Communal areas include an honor bar, sitting room/library, kitchen, landscaped yard and swimming pool, and rooftop deck.

**Ocean View** (Map p170; ☎ 787-741-3696; 751 Calle Plinio Peterson; r \$75-100; 🏠 🚿 🚿) Vieques' old dockside stalwart is centrally-located, convenient and... well, that's about it. Don't expect a plethora of home comforts in this faded and rather bleak town-center hotel. Situated just 200yd from the ferry dock, you shouldn't have any problem wheeling your suitcase here, but once inside its echoing corridors you might begin to wish you'd nabbed that haggling taxi to take you elsewhere. For the unfussy, the Ocean View does, at least, have friendly staff, a swimming pool and – surprise, surprise – a lovely ocean view.

**Casa La Lanchita** (Map p167; ☎ 800-774-4717; www.viequeslanchita.com; North Shore Rd 374, Bravos de Boston; r \$95-140; 🏠 🚿 🚿) In the same neighborhood as the Bravo Beach, but a little lower down the quality bracket, La Lanchita nonetheless turns out eight spiffy suites with private bathroom and kitchenette on the ocean's edge. The building's another whitewashed three-story colonial beauty that resembles an old plantation house rising up over the Atlantic. Bonus features include beach gear, view balconies and a placid pool with kid's section. There's a four-night minimum.

**our pick** **Bravo Beach Hotel** (Map p167; ☎ 787-741-1128; www.bravobeachhotel.com; North Shore Rd 1, Bravos de Boston; r \$190-300, villa \$550; 🏠 🚿 🚿) Up above the lighthouse, in the burgeoning Bravos de Boston neighborhood, Vieques is fast creating its very own Beverley Hills. The trend is epitomized in the Bravo Beach Hotel, a former sugar merchant's hacienda whose gorgeous 'Viejo San Juan' style exterior looks like it's been lifted straight off the front cover of *Travel & Leisure* magazine. Nine fantastical guest rooms are set in lush tropical grounds

with ample verandahs and two mesmerizing swimming pools. There are shaded gazebos here, along with floating cushions, Italian linens, placid Atlantic views...you'll spend days checking out the details. Honeymoons were invented for this.

## Esperanza

**Bananas** (Map p172; ☎ 787-741-8700; www.bananasguesthouse.com; Calle Flamboyán; r \$65-80; 🏠 🚿) This is where it all started. Bananas is Esperanza's original budget guesthouse-restaurant and it's a classic, in the mold of a backpacker's hostel in Thailand or a beach bar in Jamaica. Seasoned travelers will know the deal here: great prices; a lively downstairs bar; a funky and relaxed atmosphere; and basic but adequate rooms that receive the odd nightly visitor from the insect kingdom. Light sleepers should beware of noise from Esperanza's vibrant party strip outside.

**Trade Winds** (Map p172; ☎ 787-741-8666; Calle Flamboyán; r \$70; 🏠 🚿) Another vintage Vieques abode (vintage meaning since 1984). Situated on the far west end of the *malecón*, this popular guesthouse and inn has 10 rooms, most with air-con, including three terrace rooms that have a harbor view and catch the breeze. The biggest feature is probably the fabulous open-air deck where meals are served – it offers splendid views of the ocean.

**Amapola Inn** (Map p172; ☎ 787-741-1382; amapolainn.com; 144 Calle Flamboyán; r \$75-125) The Amapola Inn has five rustic but secluded rooms in a separate building behind its popular Bili restaurant on the Esperanza strip. They're clean, cool and relatively quiet without being too far removed from the central action.

**Acacia Guesthouse** (Map p172; ☎ 787-741-1059; www.acaciaguesthouse.com; 236 Calle Acacia; r \$95-140) Clean and airy are two words that spring to mind when you glimpse inside the four well-laid-out apartments encased in this three-story whitewashed building situated on a rise above Esperanza's beachside strip. From the 2nd- and 3rd-floor decks and rooftop patio you have spectacular views over hills and sea, and virginal St Croix is visible on clear days. The units have full kitchens, comfortable furnishings and friendly owners who live just across the street. There's also a free washing machine, and complementary air-con courtesy of the breezy trade winds that spread their freshness across the private terrace.

**Flamboyán Guesthouse** (Map p172; 140 Calle Flamboyán; r \$135; 🏠 🚿) These four à la mode rooms above Duffy's bar (p179) on the Strip in lively Esperanza are brand new and appear chic with their glass hand basins and luxuriant linens. Three of the rooms have small balconies that overlook Vieques' most happening beach boulevard with its soul-searching tourists and local dive operators bringing the boats in after a day on the waves. Duffy's and some frenetic bar action is just down the staircase. Bring earplugs or go to bed late.

## Elsewhere on the Island

**La Finca Caribe** (Map p167; ☎ 787-741-0495; www.lafinca.com; Hwy 995; r from \$85; 🏠 🚿) Finca Caribe is Vieques personified. Sitting high up on a mountain ridge seemingly a million miles from anywhere (but only actually 3 miles from either coast), it's the kind of rustic haven stressed-out city slickers probably dream about. Despite its back-to-nature facilities – outdoor communal showers, shared kitchen and hippyish decor – it has a religious following and has inspired gushing reviews from numerous top newspapers and magazines. The secret lies in the nuances. Picture the swaying hammocks, the unhurried games of croquet, the tangible proximity of nature...

**Crow's Nest** (Map p167; ☎ 787-741-0033; www.crowsnestvieques.com; r \$124-190; 🏠 🚿 🚿) Perched – figuratively speaking – in the Barrio Florida in the hills above Isabel Segunda, the Crow's Nest enjoys a rural airy setting with pink bougainvillea contrasting with its rippling turquoise swimming pool. More funky than luxurious, the rooms here have lounging area and kitchenette just in case you need to escape the simmering action at the adjacent Island Café (p179). Inspiring a small inn feel, the staff at the Crow's Nest is courteous and helpful, and local activity organizers regularly drop by to pick up budding recruits. Children under 12 are not admitted.

**Hacienda Tamarindo** (Map p167; ☎ 787-741-8525; www.enchanted-isle.com/tamarindo; r \$170-275; 🏠 🚿) Lying along Hwy 996 about three-quarters of a mile west of Esperanza, on a hill looking across fields to the Caribbean, this is one of the largest guesthouses (15 rooms) on the south side of the island. Rooms or suites are tricked out in 'Caribbean deluxe' style, which means lots of elegant doors opening to wrought-iron balconies filled with bougainvillea. Quite lovely, all of it.

**our pick** **Inn on the Blue Horizon** (Map p167; ☎ 787-741-3318; www.innonthebluehorizon.com; r \$200-400; 🏠 🚿 🚿) Small is beautiful. The Inn on the Blue Horizon was surely invented with such a motto in mind. With only nine rooms harbored in separate bungalows wedged onto a stunning ocean-side bluff a few clicks west of Esperanza, the sense of elegance here – both natural and contrived – is truly breathtaking. The luxury continues inside the restaurant and cozy communal lounge, which overlook an Italianate infinity pool fit for a Roman emperor. Not surprisingly, the establishment has featured in *Architectural Digest* magazine where it received kudos from well-traveled literary critic Paul Theroux.

**our pick** **Hix Island House** (Map p167; ☎ 787-741-2302; www.hixislandhouse.com; r \$235-295; Hwy 995; 🏠 🚿) And now for something completely different... Ecohip, new age – minimalist, environmental-austere; to describe the Hix house in a single sentence is nigh-on impossible, suffice to say that the place inspires robust opinions across the spectrum and is guaranteed to be like nowhere else you have ever visited. Designed by cutting-edge Canadian architect John Hix, this unique guesthouse consists of three industrial concrete blocks that arise out of the surrounding trees like huge granite boulders (or incongruous eyesores, if you're of a more cynical persuasion). Hosting 12 rooms, the ethos here is minimalist, ecological and close to nature – the idea is that the rooms open up to give you the feeling that you are actually living in the forest. Further green credentials are earned through solar panels, recycled water and natural air-conditioning (trade winds). It's a brave and surprisingly attractive experiment.

## EATING

After busy weekends, many restaurants on Vieques close to regroup on Monday. Many of the newer, high-end and American-run restaurants want reservations, especially on weekends in high season.

## Isabel Segunda

**Panadería & Repostería Lydia** (Map p170; ☎ 787-741-8679; cnr Calles Benítez Guzman & Plinio Peterson; snacks \$1-5; ☎ 4am-noon) With a 4am opening call, this veritable hole-in-the-wall bakery-cum-coffee bar is ideal for insomniacs, late-night party animals and ferry workers on the graveyard shift. On a quiet weekend morning in

sleepy Isabel, it's one of the only places likely to be open. Stop by for caffeine, pastries, sandwiches and sweet bread, and fight with the locals for one of the two plastic tables that furnish the sidewalk.

**Scoops** (Map p170; ☎ 787-741-5555; Calle Benitez Guzman; snacks \$2-8) Junk food hasn't arrived on Vieques yet but, if you need something fast and palatable, you can grab a cheap pizza here and watch the local teenagers as they gamble away their pocket money on the arcade machines. An adjacent room holds more tasty treats with Häagen-Dazs ice cream and fresh fruit juices. They're ridiculously expensive, but what the hell?

**La Viequense Deli** (Map p170; ☎ 787-741-8213; Calle Antonio Mellado; dishes \$5-12; ☎ 6am-6pm Mon-Sat, to 2pm Sun) If it's breakfast you're after, this is the place to come for your 6am pancakes or hangover-curing coffee. If you miss the 11am cut-off you can feast instead on decent baked goods, tortillas and sandwiches. Service is no-nonsense and fast, the decor clean and modern, and the clientele local with a smattering of in-the-know tourists.

**Shawnaa's** (Map p170; ☎ 787-741-1434; Calle Antonio G Mellado; dishes \$6-10; ☎ lunch Mon-Fri) Bring a big appetite to Shawnaa's buffet. It's full of superb *comida criolla* dishes that you can take out onto the patio or consume in the shaded interior.

**bbh** (Map p167; dishes \$12-28; closed Sun-Tue) With its high-end magazine cover setting in the Bravo Beach Hotel (p176), you would expect this restaurant to be trendy and chic. And naturally, it is. This place is foodie heaven, with European cheeses, New Zealand lamb and plenty of infused local ingredients. Tapas are the specialty, but there's also a wine room and the poolside Palms bar where you can enjoy an alcoholic appetizer.

**Topacio** (Map p170; ☎ 787-741-1179; Calle Carlos Lebrun; mains \$17-24; ☎ lunch & dinner) The newly opened Topacio has already cemented a firm reputation among those with a penchant for delicious seafood served Caribbean-style. Sheltered on an outside patio underneath colorful lights, you can sample the generous paella, fish in a creole sauce, seafood *mofongo* (mashed plantains) and lobster cooked in garlic. Unpretentious, efficient and brimming with fresh and locally caught ingredients, this place offers great Puerto Rican authenticity without sacrificing on the quality.

**Café Media Luna** (Map p170; ☎ 787-741-2594; 351 Calle Antonio G Mellado; mains \$18-30; ☎ dinner)

Romance is not dead in Vieques' original 'posh' restaurant where candlelit tables and a tiny street-side balcony add panache to any meal. And there's more. Isabel II's music scene more or less begins and ends in this attractive colonial building where smooth live jazz accompanies lamb chops, seared tuna and rather authentic pizza. OK, so the price is a little steep, but with a comprehensive wine list and free entertainment provided by the pizza-tossing chefs in the open-sided kitchen, you might just be inspired to dust off your credit card.

**Blue Macaw** (Map p170; ☎ 787-741-1147; Calle Antonio G Mellado; dishes \$24-32; ☎ dinner) No birds here, but plenty of fancy metal curves and elaborate downlighting. One of a trio of plush new eating houses that could quite easily have been plucked straight out of San Juan's SoFo neighborhood, the Blue Macaw was fire-damaged in 2005. Relunched in 2007 in polished chrome, it's reignited itself (the restaurant, not the fire that is) with all its old vigor, displaying a menu that's as delicious as the decor is plush. Try the scampi, the lamb tenderloin or the tempura trout and leave room for a lavish dessert.

If you're looking to stock up on provisions, try **Morales Supermercado** (Map p170; 15 Calle Baldorioty de Castro, Isabel Segunda) There is a second store a mile west of Isabel Segunda on the road to the airport (Hwy 200).

### Esperanza

**La Dulce Esperanza** (Map p172; ☎ 787-741-0085; Calle Almendro; dishes \$1-12) On the west end of this back street, this pleasant eatery serves Danish for a dollar, thick creamy coffee for half that, fat sandwiches at lunch and pizza for dinner.

**Trade Winds** (Map p172; dishes \$4-19; Calle Flamboyán; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Unpretentious dining at its finest. Sit back in a wide chair on the breezy verandah and enjoy scrumptious scrambled eggs or island-spiced fish and meat dishes later in the day. They're all good.

**Belly Button's** (Map p172; Calle Flamboyán; dishes \$5-11; ☎ 7am-2pm Wed-Sun) Make a beeline for breakfast at Belly Button's and bring a good appetite. Your belly will be more than happy after you've heroically demolished the three Frisbee-sized pancakes that appear rather magically on your plate here. Consisting of a small collection of alfresco tables located outside a kitchen trailer on the *malecón*, this expat-run breakfast phenomenon conjures up enough food to keep you going until 6pm.

Grab a copy of the *San Juan Star*, help yourself to a mug of gourmet coffee and make plans for a day of breathtaking action – or indolence.

**Bananas** (Map p172; Calle Flamboyán; dishes \$7-17) Bananas does everything in a sandwich: beef, red snapper, jerk chicken, you name it... The burgers are as thick as your forearm and the fries constitute a minimountain. You could easily while away a whole afternoon here eavesdropping on Navy-Vieques protest veterans and rat-race dodging expats. It's the people-watching potential that makes the place – as well as those juicy burgers, of course.

**Tito Bloque** (Map p172; Calle Acacia; dishes \$7-18; ☎ dinner) Head to this spot, at the foot of Calle Acacia next to the mangroves, when you want something different from Esperanza. This raised outdoor patio draws a local crowd and is known for its good, cheap grilled lobster.

**Bili** (Map p172; ☎ 787-741-1382; 144 Calle Flamboyán; dishes \$8-17; ☎) Bili is the recently rebranded restaurant at the Amapola Inn. Offering the island's finest selection of vegetarian food, it's also a haven for noncarnivores who've grown tired of eating omelets. The yucca salads are good as is the seafood and you can shoot the breeze alfresco as the *malecón* crowds steam past.

**Duffy's** (Map p172; ☎ 787-741-7000; Calle Flamboyán; dishes \$9-18) Esperanza's newest bar is a sleeker and slightly more refined version of Banana's next door. It fills a gap in the market with fresh salads and creative seafood, but still nurtures an undone Caribbean flavor. Opening out onto Esperanza's main strip, the laid-back street atmosphere infiltrates the shady interior where expats and locals mingle over beer and scallops.

**El Quenepo** (Map p172; ☎ 787-741-1215; Calle Flamboyán; dishes \$11-20) The new kid on Esperanza's seaside block, El Quenepo has a lovely interior and an equally delectable menu. The food's catch-of-the-day fresh and the decor is – by normal Viequesian standards – remarkably chic. A new trend?

For groceries, **La Tienda Verde** (Green Store; Map p172; Calle Robles) and the **Colmado Lydia** (Map p172; Calle Almendro), near the baseball field in the center of town, are your best bets in Esperanza.

### Elsewhere on the Island

**Chez Shack** (Map p167; ☎ 787-741-2175; Hwy 995 Km 1.8; dishes \$12-20) What have '60s psychedelic band the Mamas and Papas and Vieques' most bohemian restaurant got in common? They both owe at least a part of their success

to expat impresario and restaurateur Hugh Duffy. In the 1960s, Duffy owned a restaurant called 'Love Shack' on the nearby island of St Thomas, where he hosted folk-music nights with a quartet of spaced-out hippies called the New Journeymen. It was an important first break. But while the Journeymen changed their name to the Mamas and Papas and headed off to LA for some *California Dreamin'*, Duffy transplanted himself 13 miles to the west where he opened up Chez Shack, a quirky Caribbean hangout that quickly began to rival the luminous bio-bay as *the* place to go on Vieques. Two decades later both Duffy (now into his 80s) and the shack are still rustling up fine dinners that have become almost as celebrated as his erstwhile protégées. Monday is the big night, with live reggae and an outdoor grill featuring chicken, fish or steak.

**Island Café** (Map p167; mains \$16-22) Cocooned in the Crow's Nest (p177) in the lofty barrio of Florida, the Island Café features a variety of Caribbean mains served on a 2nd-story terrace with great views of the main island. Try the fiery West Indies pork and plantain stew with coconut.

**Inn on the Blue Horizon** (Map p167; mains \$16-28) A mile west of Esperanza on Hwy 996, the inn (p177) offers casual, elegant gazebo dining with a view like the name implies. Fresh trout goes for \$18. Reservations are a must.

### DRINKING

**Al's Mar Azul** (Map p170; ☎ 787-741-3400; Calle Plinio Peterson) shelters the ghosts of Charles Bukowski and Ernest Hemingway and is the nexus of local gossip. Locals come to play pool, and expats come to drink...and drink. Visitors teeter somewhere in between.

Bananas has an active pub scene with a popular dart board. At the Inn on the Blue Horizon, you'll find a friendly gringo crowd, especially on Friday night.

### ENTERTAINMENT

Café Media Luna has salsa, jazz and Latin rock on weekends, and draws a mixed crowd of gringos and locals, straights and gays.

On Monday, Chez Shack boogies to live reggae.

### SHOPPING

**Vieques Flowers & Gifts** (Map p172; ☎ 787-741-4197; Calle Flamboyán; ☎ 9am-6pm) On the Strip in Esperanza, this shop has everything from

local crafts, pottery, clothes and – of course – fresh flowers.

**Caribbean Walk** (Map p170; ☎ 787-741-7770; Calle Antonio G Mellado; ☎ 10am-6pm) Tiny, but full of local art, this creative shop in Isabel Segunda harbors intricate jewelry and plenty of other dexterously sculpted crafts.

**Siddhia Hutchinson Gallery** (Map p170; 787-741-8780; 15 Calle 3; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Sat) At this gallery of a local artist and designer, Siddhia Hutchison, you can pick up first-class paintings of colorful tropical scenes. Siddhia also organizes periodic painting workshops.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

Públicos greet just about every flight that comes in and will take you anywhere you want to go on the island.

The island has lots of air services from San Juan – both LMM International and Isla Grande airports – and Fajardo. There are a good 10 flights a day to/from San Juan's Isla Grande and LMM airports, and approximately half a dozen between Fajardo and the island. **Isla Nena Air Service** (☎ 787-863-4447) also links Vieques with Culebra. Round-trip prices start at \$165 (25 minutes) from LMM, \$90 from Isla Grande and \$45 (10 minutes) from Fajardo. Phone any of the following companies for more up-to-date information.

**Vieques Air Link** (Map p170; for San Juan-Vieques flights ☎ 888-901-9247, 787-741-8331, for Fajardo-Vieques flights

787-741-3266; www.vieques-island.com/val) is the major carrier with an office in Isabel Segunda.

Isla Nena Air Service flies daily to Culebra, Fajardo and San Juan for roughly the same prices as Vieques Air Link.

**Air Sunshine** (☎ 800-327-8900, 787-741-7900; www.air.sunshine.com) flies directly to St Thomas, St Croix, Tortola and Virgin Gorda in the US Virgin Islands. It also carries people between San Juan and Vieques, charging the same rates as the other carriers.

**M&N Aviation** (☎ 787-791-7008, 787-741-3911/2; www.mnaviation.com) flies to Fajardo, San Juan Isla Grande and San Juan International.

**Cape Air** (☎ 800-352-0714; www.flycapeair.com) flies four times a day from San Juan LMM International.

### Ferry

The Puerto Rican Port Authority's high-speed passenger ferries run between Fajardo and Vieques four times a day (three at weekends). Boats leave Fajardo at 9:30am, 1pm, 4:30pm and 8pm and Vieques at 6:30am, 11am, 3pm and 5pm. Passage takes one hour 15 minutes, weather permitting. The round trip costs a giveaway \$4. The thrice-daily cargo ferry from Fajardo to Vieques (weekdays only) takes two hours and costs \$15 for a small car or \$19 for a large one.

Call to confirm the schedule and to make reservations (particularly for trips on Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday). In Fajardo

call the **Puerto Rican Port Authority** (☎ 787-863-0705, 800-981-2005; ☎ 8-11am & 1-3pm Mon-Fri) for vehicle reservations (required), or call the **Vieques office** (Map p170; ☎ 787-741-4761; ☎ 8-11am & 1-3pm Mon-Fri) at the ferry dock in Isabel Segunda. Note that neither of these offices is good at answering its phones.

## GETTING AROUND

### Bicycle

Vieques is excellent for cycling, and partaking in a little two-wheeled transport will help ease the proliferation of cars that goes hand in hand with tourist growth. The road across the island from Isabel II to Esperanza is less than 6 miles in length and can be tackled by any moderately fit cyclist. See p175 for bike rental.

### Car

Unless you rent a scooter, almost all vehicles rented are Suzuki Samurai jeeps for about \$45 to \$65 a day.

Although Vieques is a big island, you may not need a car for your whole stay as most of the main facilities are located within close proximity to each other in the center of

the island. Reliable operators include **Island Car Rentals** (☎ 787-741-1666) and **Maritza's Car Rental** (☎ 787-741-0078).

### Public Transport

If you have not arranged for a rental car at the airport or an airport pick-up/drop-off with your guesthouse proprietor, you'll need one of the island cabs (below); \$10 to \$15 will get you just about anywhere on the island. Públicos usually greet both the ferries and the airplanes, and will take you where you need to go, but you can't be in a hurry to get there. Regulated fees are \$3 for anywhere in the old civilian area and \$5 for the beaches in the US Fish & Wildlife Refuge. Públicos run fairly regularly between Isabel Segunda and Esperanza.

### Taxi

For a ride, try one of the following cabs. They can usually be found hanging out around the ferry terminal and airport at arrival times.

**Angel** (☎ 787-741-1370)

**Coki Ayala Ayala** (☎ 787-375-5195)

**Eric** (☎ 787-741-0448)

**Fast Eddie** (☎ 787-741-0082)

### DETOUR: MONTE PIRATA

During the navy occupation, the hilly western quarter of Vieques was riddled with scores of cavernous military-style bunkers that were used to store ammunition. The overgrown bunkers remain, but today most of the land that was off-limits pre-2003 is open for public access. One little-visited highlight is Monte Pirata (Pirate's Mountain); at 987ft, it's the island's highest point. The trail to the summit follows an old paved road that veers south off Hwy 200 a couple of miles before you hit Green Beach. While it's still officially closed to cars, there's nothing to stop hikers and bikers tackling the steep 3-mile grunt to the top.

The scenic rewards are breathtaking in more ways than one. Never cleared for sugar cane, Monte Pirata is covered in Vieques' oldest forest and is a haven for copious species of bird. With a sharp eye and a good pair of binoculars, count on seeing *carpinteros*, Puerto Rican woodpeckers, Adelaide warblers, and a handful of red-tailed hawks.

Pirata's summit hosts a radar facility run by the Department of Homeland Security, but the 360° views are stupendous and include glimpses of Culebra, St Thomas and the purplish hump of El Yunque glowering on the main island to the northwest.

Check on trail access before you tackle this trek. Restricted land on Vieques is an ambiguous topic and there is often conflicting information on where you can and can't go. For the most reliable information enquire at the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge (p169) or the Vieques Conservation and Historical Trust situated in the museum (p171) in Esperanza.

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