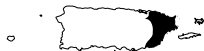


# East Coast



EAST COAST

The east coast is Puerto Rico shrink-wrapped; a tantalizing taste of almost everything the island has to offer squeezed into an area not much larger than Manhattan. Here in the foothills of the Sierra de Luquillo the sprawling suburbs of San Juan blend caustically with the junglelike quiescence of El Yunque National Forest, the commonwealth's giant green lungs and biggest outdoor attraction. At sea level, beach hedonists bask on the icing-sugar sand of Playa Luquillo while higher up among the forest's crinkled peaks heavy clouds gather like giant purple sponges ready to unleash their abundant rain into El Yunque's many waterfalls and rivers.

For golfers and the spring-break crowd, the east provides a different kind of nirvana. There are more mega-resorts here than in any other part of the island outside San Juan, a haul that includes the glitzy Conquistador – once used as a setting for the James Bond movie *Goldfinger* – and the colossal Palmas del Mar, a resort more reminiscent of a planned modern town than an authentic Caribbean getaway.

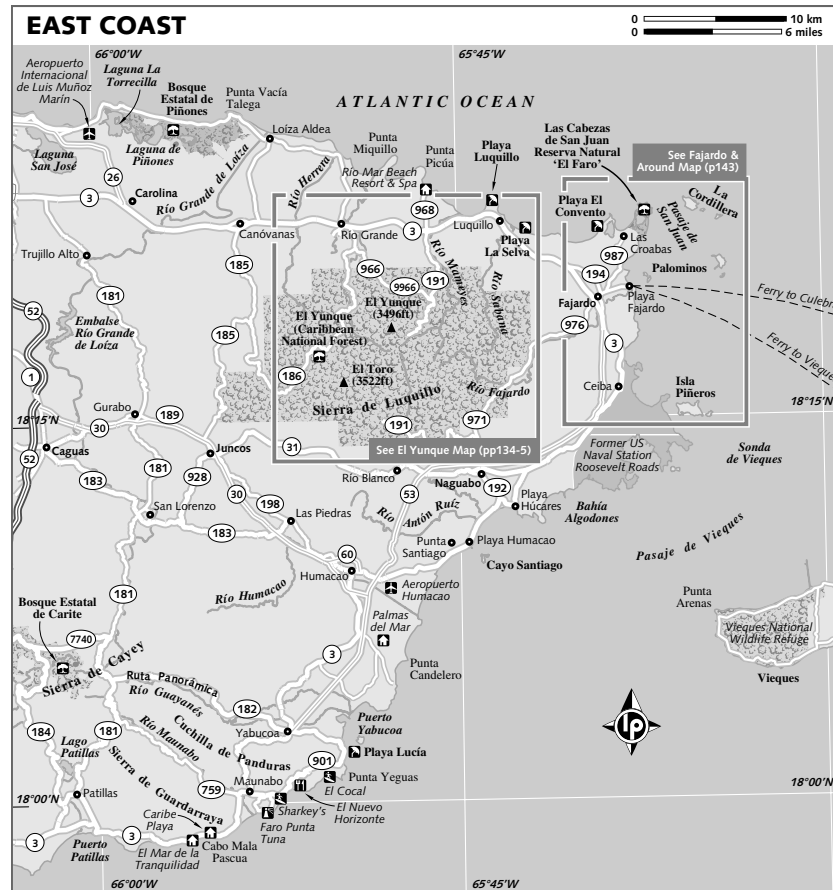
Scruffy Fajardo is the island's uncrowned water-sports capital, an interesting hodgepodge of the beautiful and the unsightly, where adventurous spirits gather to kayak, dive, snorkel and fish. Rich yachters park their sailboats at Puerto Real, the largest marina in the Caribbean, while a few miles north traditional fishing sloops nestle in a secluded little bay at Las Croabas.

Cutting through the region like a thin, green ribbon is the so-called northeastern ecological corridor, a slender tract of land that has been saved from the developers' axe thanks to persistent lobbying by local environmental groups. The jewel in its crown is Las Cabezas de San Juan Reserva Natural 'El Faro,' a tiny nodule of coastline that hosts seven different ecosystems and one of Puerto Rico's stunning bioluminescent bays.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Getting high on the challenging Tradewinds trail in **El Yunque National Forest** (p132)
- Escaping from the coastal chaos in the cool, green world of the **Casa Cubuy Ecodge** (p136)
- Supping a fruit smoothie and chomping on a fried *surullito* on action-packed **Playa Luquillo** (p138)
- Admiring the sea views, iguanas and seven different ecosystems in **Las Cabezas de San Juan Reserva Natural 'El Faro'** (p142)
- Enjoying lunch among the fishermen in a plastic-knife-and-fork restaurant on **Playa Húcares** (p149)

■ POPULATION: 450,000



EAST COAST

## History

Much of this region was once covered with lighter variations of the dense foliage now found only in El Yunque, but native Taino did manage to successfully farm the fertile land around the low-lying coasts. All that changed when the Spanish arrived en masse around 1700. The tremendous wealth of natural resources in El Yunque – lots of fresh water and timber, for example – attracted settlers, and existing farmlands were quickly turned into massive sugar plantations by colonizers. A small gold rush added to the need for a strong labor force, and after most of the indigenous population was either wiped out by disease or forced deep into the mountains, the Spanish brought in West African slaves

in considerable numbers. Descendants of those Yoruba people make up the bulk of the 30,000 residents who live in the municipalities around El Yunque today. The next wave of colonization came when the US took control of the island in 1898, eventually setting up the commonwealth status that continues to this day. Most of the highways and existing infrastructure on this part of the island were built by the US military, which maintained a base near Fajardo until 2003.

## Climate

The east coast tends to follow the same weather patterns as San Juan. The exception to this rule is El Yunque, with weather catering to the unique needs of its ecosystem. Sudden

surges of light rain can occur anytime during the year in this dense rainforest, but that goes with the territory – throw on some protective gear and get on with your day. During the island's hurricane season – late June through mid-November – El Yunque gets very wet indeed. Some trails might be closed down due to mud slides, and streams swell enormously. It's a good idea to check in at the visitors center for the latest weather update before heading out for a trek. Winter nights in the Luquillo Sierra can be damp and a little chilly.

### Getting There & Around

Most of the east coast is traversable via Hwy 3, which – while far from pretty – gets the job done with relative efficiency. Once you leave San Juan, be it on Rte 187 (the scenic route via Piñones and behind Loíza Aldea) or on the main drag of Hwy 3, be prepared for bursts of concentrated development (fast-food restaurants, several strip malls and the occasional pharmaceutical plant) and distant views of El Yunque. Públicos serve most towns.

There are public vans running between Fajardo and San Juan, but to penetrate further into the countryside, a car or bike is necessary. It is easy to organize a tour with car and driver into the El Yunque rainforest (see p135). The driving trip from San Juan to Fajardo takes about two hours (without traffic). From San Juan to Yabucoa it's about three hours (again, without traffic).

The northeast with its high concentration of cars is not the most pleasant part of Puerto Rico in which to cycle. But stay off the main arteries of Hwys 3 and 66 and two-wheeled transport is possible.

### EL YUNQUE

Covering some 28,000 acres of land in the Sierra de Luquillo, this verdant tropical rainforest – recently rebranded El Yunque National Forest – is a shadow of what it was before axe-wielding Spanish conquerors arrived in the 16th and 17th centuries. But, in common with other protected reserves on the island, the ecological degradation has been largely reversed over the past 50 years, and today, under the auspices of the US Forest Service, El Yunque is once again sprouting a healthy abundance of dense tree cover.

Compared to other Puerto Rican forest reserves, El Yunque is well staffed and crisscrossed by an excellent network of

signposted trails. But adventurers beware. In contrast to national parks in the mainland US, there's no true wilderness experience to be had here. Unlike North Americans, Puerto Ricans have never truly incorporated wilderness hiking in the national psyche. As a result, most of El Yunque's hikes are short, paved and relatively mild compared to the trails of Yellowstone and Yosemite. Crowds populate El Yunque's popular spots in peak season, but if you stray off the standard tourist routes, there are still plenty of places to slip under the radar (p150).

### Orientation

Once you've entered the El Yunque National Forest (see p137 for directions), all of the forest's visitors centers, major attractions and trailheads appear as Hwy 191 twists, turns and climbs steeply on its way south toward the summit. Although maps can make it seem like Hwy 191 descends through the forest to the south side, note that the road has been closed for decades due to landslides. Mountain-bike enthusiasts get their workout on this closed road, which is the *only route* open to bikers within the forest. It's also possible to follow Hwy 186 along the west side of El Yunque, but if you want to experience the forest's heart, Hwy 191 is the road to take.

### Information

First port of call for aspiring rainforest explorers should be the well-blended **El Portal Visitors Center** (☎ 787-888-1880; www.southernregion.fs.fed.us/caribbean; Hwy 191 Km 4.3; adult/under 4yr/4-12yr & senior \$3/free/1.50; ☎ 9am-5pm, closed Christmas Day). Built in 1996, El Portal is an intelligently landscaped visitors center that offers reams of information about both El Yunque and tropical rainforests in general. The facility has interactive exhibits, a 12-minute film in both English and Spanish, a walkway through the forest canopy and a gift shop. Vending machines serve up drinks and snacks, but there's no on-site restaurant. You can also pick up free basic maps and information on the forest. If you don't feel like paying the admission tariff or want to avoid crowds on weekends, head to one of the other visitors centers further up the mountain, where you can pick up brochures and basic maps for no charge.

Located after El Portal, the **Catalina Work Center** (☎ 787-888-1880; Hwy 191 Km 4.3; ☎ 8am-4:30pm Mon-Fri), connected to the National Forest

Office, is where you can get a camping permit – good for the day it is issued. Rangers hand out maps designating approved camping locations along with the permits.

It's worth enduring the switchbacks and steep road to get to the **Palo Colorado Visitors Center** (☎ 787-888-1880; Hwy 191 Km 11.9; ☎ 9:30am-4pm), which issues camping permits on weekends. Most of the short and spectacular hiking trails leave from this spot. The picnic area – which includes a series of sheltered concrete platforms hidden in the jungle, overlooking a ravine of rushing water – is hard to match anywhere on the island. The staff here offers first-aid service, and there's also a gift shop with maps and the like.

The Sierra Palm Visitors Center is a free visitors center on your way up the mountain. It is not always staffed, but its rest rooms are generally open for tour vans, and there's a food concession, Yuquiyú Delights (p137).

### Sights

In addition to short and long hiking trails in El Yunque (see right), there are a few places directly accessible by road within the forest.

**La Coca Falls** is the first spectacular natural feature you see as Hwy 191 climbs south toward the forest peaks. There is an 85ft cascade as the stream tumbles from a precipice to the right of the highway onto boulder formations. The gate is open every day from 7am to 6pm.

Less than a half mile further up the mountain, you see the 65ft, Moorish-looking stone **Yokahú Tower**, which was built as a lookout in 1962. This is the first good place for vistas of the islands to the east, but there are better vantage points higher up on the mountain. The tower often gets crowded with tour groups. Pass it by unless you have a lot of time and the view to yourself.

The **Baño Grande**, a former swimming hole built during the Depression, lies across Hwy 191 from the Palo Colorado Visitors Center (above). A little further along the road, **Baño de Oro** is another former swimming hole that is now a popular spot for photo opportunities. The water hole takes its name from the Río Baño de Oro, which feeds the pool. The name means 'bath of gold' in English, and Spaniards gave the river this name because they mined for gold here in the 16th century. The Baño de Oro Natural Area surrounding the pool is the catchment area for the river and pool. In addition to the short Baño de Oro trail to

the pool there are two overgrown trails in the Natural Area, which the National Park Service plans to open in the future.

If you really want to paddle in some water, take the 30-minute walk from Palo Colorado down the mountain to the swimming hole at the base of **La Mina Falls**. Here you'll find a water cascade, quite stunning in its natural beauty. Come early if you want tranquility, because it's popular with cavorting families.

### Activities

#### HIKING

With more than 23 miles of well-maintained trails, and plenty of rugged terrain, El Yunque has a plethora of easy day hikes. Come prepared and remember there are no water or trash or restroom facilities.

#### La Coca Trail

This popular 1.8-mile hike will take you a little over an hour each way. The trailhead is just up the road past the falls of the same name – just before the Yokahú Tower – and there is a small parking lot here. It's a fairly benign, low-altitude trail following streams through tabonuco forest. La Coca made its mark on El Yunque history when a US college professor disappeared here for 12 days in 1997, claiming after his rescue that he got off the trail and was lost. The Forest Service, which had enlisted a search party of 60 volunteers and aircraft, was hardly amused. If you follow La Coca to its end, you can go left (east) along Carrillo Trail to the eastern part of the forest, or right (west) to La Mina Falls on La Mina Trail (below).

#### Big Tree Trail

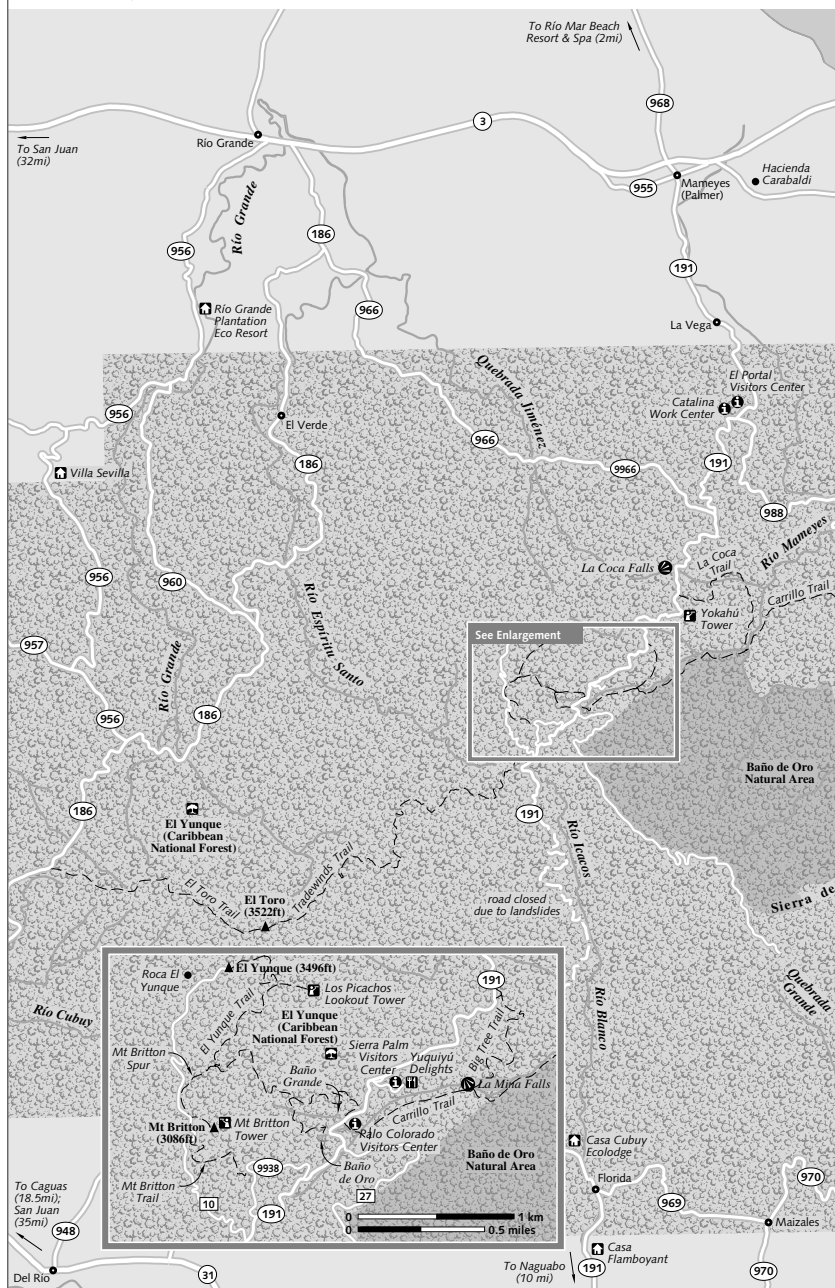
This short 0.86-mile trail of moderate difficulty gets its name from the size of the vegetation along the way. The walk takes about a half-hour each way, and it has interpretive signs along its route through tabonuco forest before ending at La Mina Falls. All these attractions make this probably the most popular trail in the park. The trailhead is at Km 10.4 on Hwy 191.

#### La Mina Trail

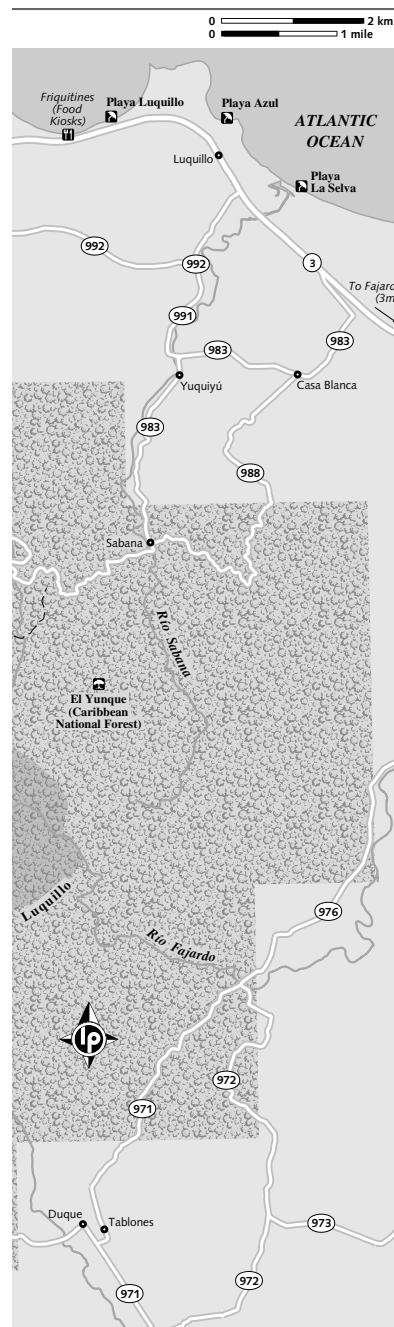
The forest's newest trail was opened in 1992 as an extension of the Big Tree trail, although it can be done in isolation from its starting point at the Palo Colorado Visitors Center. The trail heads downhill through Palo Colorado forest to La Mina Falls and an old mine tunnel.



**EL YUNQUE**



EAST COAST



EAST COAST

Mostly paved, it's an easy 0.7-mile walk down, but a bit of a hike back up. The La Mina trail connects with the Carrillo trail at La Mina Falls and with La Coca soon after.

**Mt Britton Trail**

If you are short on time and want to feel as if you have really 'summitted,' take the 0.8-mile, 45-minute climb up through the midlevel types of vegetation into the cloud forest that surrounds this peak, which is named after a famous botanist who worked here. This is a continuous climb on paved surfaces to the Mt Britton Tower, built in the 1930s. The trailhead is at the side of Hwy 9938, which veers off Hwy 191 south of Palo Colorado. The more adventurous and fit can connect to El Yunque Trail (below) via the 0.86-mile Mt Britton Spur.

**El Yunque Trail**

This is the big enchilada for most visitors and takes you to the top of El Yunque (3496ft, 1049m) in 1½ hours or longer. Starting on Rte 191 Km 12.2 opposite the Palo Colorado Visitors Center, the 2.4-mile trail is mostly paved or maintained gravel as you ascend through cloud forest to the observation deck, which is surrounded by microwave communication towers that transmit to the islands of Culebra and Vieques. If you want a rock scramble from here, take Los Picachos Trail (0.17 miles) to another old observation tower and feel as if you have crested a tropical Everest. You can return via a different route by descending down the Mt Britton Spur/Mt Britton Trail and then down Rtes 9938 and 191 to your start point.

**Tours**

San Juan-based tour operators (see p284) are handy in that they can transport you to and from the park, highlight the main sights and provide you with a mine of interesting information. In addition to the standard options, the National Park Service offers guided one-hour hikes from the Palo Colorado Visitors Center through **Forest Adventure Tours** (☎ 787-888-1880; adult/child \$5/3; 🕒 tours every hr 10:30am-3:30pm), a body which aims to offer visitors a better understanding of conservation and forest management.

Other good ecosensitive operators include **Eco-Action Tours** (☎ 787-791-7509; www.ecoactiontours.com), which offers half-/full day tours from

## EL YUNQUE'S FLORA & FAUNA

More than 240 species of tree and 1000 species of plant thrive in this misty, rain-soaked enclave, including 50 kinds of orchid. El Yunque is also the island's major water supply, with six substantial rivers tracing their sources here. The fauna is characterized by the presence of the critically endangered Puerto Rican parrot (*el higuaca*) and more than 60 other species of bird, nine species of rare freshwater shrimp, the coquí frog, anole tree lizards, and the 7ft-long Puerto Rican boa.

Four forest zones define El Yunque. The tabonuco forest grows below 2000ft and receives less than 100in of rain. This area is characterized by tall, straight trees such as the tabonuco and ausubo, and palms, epiphytes (including many orchids), flowers and aromatic shrubs of many kinds.

The palo colorado forest grows above 2000ft in the valleys and on gentle slopes. Here annual rainfall averages as much as 180in. This area is lush with ancient colorado trees (some more than 1000 years old). Vines and epiphytes hang from the trees.

Above 2500ft, look for sierra palms along the streams and on the steep valley slopes. The so-called mountain palm tree dominates here in the third zone, the Palma Sierra Forest, with mostly ferns and mosses growing beneath.

The highest forest zone, the so-called 'cloud forest,' grows above the Palma Sierra Forest and sees up to 200in of rain per year. Trees here are generally twisted from strong trade winds and are less than 12ft tall (hence the term 'dwarf forest' commonly applied to this ecosystem). Mosses and lichens hang from trees and cover the forest floor. Red-flowering bromeliads stand out like beacons in the fog.

\$37/50, depending on size of group, for hikes to Mt Britton and La Mina Falls. Guides are knowledgeable, environmentally conscious and eager to talk about the rainforest ecosystem. They'll pick you up from your San Juan hotel.

You might also connect with one of the park's volunteer guides, who post themselves around the Palo Colorado Visitors Center. Many of these guides are members of local Boy Scout Explorer Post 919. **AdventTours** (☎ 787-530-8311; www.adventourspr.com) is an eco-sensitive guiding company that offers birding tours, night hikes and biking excursions in the National Forest. Call for current prices.

## Sleeping

It's free to camp in El Yunque National Forest, but don't forget your permit (see p132). Camping is prohibited along many of the popular trails surrounding Palo Colorado Visitors Center and El Yunque peak, but you can camp in the wilder parts of the forest, including at its highest peak, El Toro, where it feels as if you have slipped into a primeval forest. Camping is all off-trail, and you must pack everything in and out. There are no water, trash or restroom facilities on the trails.

Several beautiful inns, B&Bs and guest-houses have opened up along the edges of El Yunque – not actually in the forest, but along its fringe. The proximity to the rainforest

means lots of loud animal activity: the sound of chirruping coquí will send you to sleep, and you'll wake to wild birds whistling. Most places are accessible along the north section of Hwy 191, coming from Río Grande (Luquillo beaches are only a few minutes away). Other accommodations are on the south side, also on Hwy 191. Due to mud slides, south side accommodations must be accessed from the Naguabo entrance to El Yunque. These are good choices if you want to be in close proximity to day trips in and around Fajardo.

**our pick** **Casa Cubuy Ecolodge** (☎ 787-874-6221; www.casacubuy.com; Hwy 191 Km 22 from Naguabo; r \$90-115; (P) (♿) (♿)) If listening to a frog symphony, conversing nightly around the dinner table, and relaxing on a shady balcony within hammock-swinging distance of a mystical tropical rainforest has you dashing for your jungle apparel, then this could be your place. Cocooned atop the winding Hwy 191 on El Yunque's wild and isolated southern slopes, Casa Cubuy Ecolodge offers a welcome antidote to the modern Puerto Rico of crowded beaches and spirit-crushing traffic. Ten cozy rooms rise just inches from the ethereal green forest, and a covered communal patio replete with games, books and an honesty bar encourages multilingual guest interaction. To top it all, the lodge even guards its own private trail to a nearby waterfall and natural swimming pool. Sublime.

**Río Grande Plantation Eco Resort** (☎ 787-887-2779; www.riograndeplantation.com; Hwy 956 Km 4.2, Río Grande; r \$125-175, villas \$150-300; (P) (♿) (♿)) The Río Grande is rustic; indeed nature is so close here that small living parts of it sometimes find their way into your room in the form of the odd gecko or two. But with immense grounds, a rushing river and tons of birds flying in all directions, the sight of this parcel of greenery so close to San Juan's urban sprawl is rather refreshing. Lots of weddings and corporate retreats are booked here in the summer, but off-season it can be a bit on the quiet side (phone ahead to let them know you're coming). Two-story villas are equipped with rocking chair, TV and huge Jacuzzi tub. It's not luxury bracket, but it's definitely eco.

**Villa Sevilla** (☎ 787-887-5889; www.villasevilla.net; Rte 956 Km 7.8, Río Grande; r \$145-250; (P) (♿)) This recent addition to the El Yunque accommodations stable is also arguably its finest. Villa Sevilla is a private estate with three different sets of digs that all share the same gorgeous swimming pool and foliage-framed Atlantic views. There's the three-bedroom Bella Vista chalet, the two-bedroom La Casita and the one-bedroom Pablo's Place. All apartments have kitchen, satellite TV, washer/dryer and linen. They're ideal for couples and families on longer stays. The service here is top-notch and the rainforest surroundings magnificent.

**Casa Flamboyant** (☎ 787-874-6074; Hwy 191 from Naguabo; r \$200-250; (P) (♿) (♿)) Some hotels try to create their own 'faux' paradise, others are located where paradise already exists. Tucked

way up high in the mountains and offering panoramic views of El Yunque, the Casa Flamboyant is of the latter variety. With its three gorgeous rooms with private bathrooms, and a private villa set off to one side (accessed across a stone bridge), this is as elegant as Puerto Rico's rainforest gets. Guests love to watch storm clouds march past en route to glowering El Yunque while lounging in the heated pool.

## Eating

**Yuquiyú Delights** (Hwy 191 Km 11.6) This small food concession with sheltered tables situated next to the Sierra Palm picnic area is the only real 'restaurant' in the forest. It does decent burgers (\$6), *comida criolla* (traditional Puerto Rican cuisine) and smoothies and should replenish your legs ready for a few more miles of hiking. A few smaller kiosks sell snacks and soft drinks around Km 7 on Hwy 191.

## Getting There & Away

There's no public transportation to El Yunque. The only way to get here is by private car, taxi (expensive), or in a pre-arranged tour (p135). You can see the rainforest from San Juan even though it lies 25 miles to the south-east. Driving from San Juan, there will be signs directing you from Hwy 3 to Hwy 191, but the sign for Hwy 191 is not always visible (heavy winds sometimes knock it down). If you see it, turn right as directed. Otherwise, watch for a large sign announcing 'El Yunque Portal' on the right-hand side of the road. It's

## DETOUR: BACKCOUNTRY ADVENTURE

The lofty Tradewinds–El Toro trail is the closest El Yunque gets to a true backcountry adventure. Although the 7.8-mile jaunt up to El Toro (3522ft) and back might not sound particularly daunting, wet conditions, thick mud and poorly maintained paths render it an all-day excursion for most hikers (some parties even camp out overnight). El Toro is El Yunque's highest point and the trail up from Hwy 191 traverses dense jungle broken by intermittent views of both coasts. During the ascent you'll pass through all four forest life systems, ending up in a haunting 'dwarf forest' above 3000ft characterized by its ghostly epiphytes and ubiquitous mist.

The trailhead for the Tradewinds trail is situated at Km 13.3 on Hwy 191, behind a locked gate where the road ends. The unpaved path climbs 3.9 miles to the summit of El Toro, from where you can either retrace your steps or continue west on the similarly vague El Toro trail to Km 10.8 on Hwy 186 (2.1 miles from El Toro and 6 miles from Hwy 191). From here you'll need to turn around and do the hike again in reverse, or arrange for a car to pick you up and take you back to the start.

Aspiring hikers should pack good walking shoes, water, food and rainwear. You'll also need to obtain a permit from the Catalina Work Center (p132; adjacent to the El Portal Visitors Center) prior to setting out.



at an intersection that also features a big sign for the Westin Río Mar Resort. Turn right at that intersection and go through the village of Palmer (Mameyes in Spanish), keeping your eyes peeled for more signage directing you to Hwy 191 and the El Yunque National Forest – there’s a sharp left shortly after turning off the main highway. Just after the road starts to rise abruptly into the mountains, you enter the El Yunque National Forest.

Take note that some highway maps suggest that you can traverse the forest on Hwy 191 (or access El Yunque from the south via this route), but south of the Palo Colorado Visitors Center, Hwy 191 has been closed by landslides for years. Road maps also suggest that El Yunque can be approached via a network of roads along the western border of the national forest. Don’t try it: these roads are rugged, untraveled, unmaintained tracks that dead-end in serious jungle. El Yunque is not immune to thievery, so if you park in a remote area to take a stroll, be sure to lock up and don’t leave anything of value in plain sight in the car.

## LUQUILLO & AROUND

pop 20,000

In many ways Luquillo is a typical Puerto Rican town; a physically beautiful coastal strip of magnificent beaches backed by a dull, uninspiring mishmash of condo towers, strip malls and unsightly urban sprawl. But here, in the island’s congested north-eastern corner, beauty easily outweighs the beast. Playa Luquillo, the mile-long crescent of surf and sand to the west of the town, is regularly touted as being the commonwealth’s finest balneario (public beach) and the proverbial home of Puerto Rican soul food. Meanwhile, winking a velvety shade of purple in the background, the crenellated ridges of El Yunque proffer a ghostly invitation.

Central Luquillo is a baffling place that has a dearth of easy-to-find accommodation and little in the way of history. Aside from the underrated Playa Azul and a couple of strung-out restaurants, there’s little worth exploring here. Instead, most travelers head a mile west to Puerto Rico’s so-called ‘Riviera’, the insanely popular Luquillo Beach that is as famous for its ramshackle strip of permanent food kiosks as it is for icing-sugar sand and sheltered bay.

Luquillo traces its history to an early Spanish settlement in 1797 and its name to a valorous Taino *cacique* (chief), Loquillo, who made a brave standoff against the early colonizers here in 1513. These days the 20,000-strong town is bypassed by the arterial Hwy 3 that carries traffic to Fajardo. Here you’ll find little of lasting architectural note save for a couple of craning condo towers that do their best to block out views of El Yunque. Thanks to Luquillo’s popularity with vacationing *sanjuaneros* (people from San Juan), público bus links with the capital are fairly regular during the week. If you’re going to the beach, make sure you disembark next to the kiosks, a mile or so before Luquillo Pueblo.

### Orientation & Information

Hwy 3 will take you to Rte 193 (aka Calle Fernandez Garcia), which is the main artery of Luquillo. It passes right by the Plaza de Recreo, the town’s central plaza. Playa Azul is the beach directly in front of the condominium development of the same name. Most of the shops and stores of interest to visitors are alongside Playa Azul, or on Fernandez Garcia. O the parallel street 14 de Julio you’ll find the Luquillo Community Health Center.

### Beaches

Luquillo is synonymous with its balneario, the fabulous **Playa Luquillo** (admission free, parking \$2; ☎ 8:30am-5:30pm). Set on a calm bay facing northwest and protected from the easterly trade winds, the public part of this beach makes a mile-long arc to a point of sand shaded by evocative coconut palms. The beach itself is a plane of broad, gently sloping yellow powder that continues its gradual slope below the water. Although crowds converge here at weekends and during holidays, Luquillo has always been more about atmosphere than solitude. With its famous strip of 50-plus food kiosks congregated at its western end, it’s also a great place to sample the local culinary culture, including scrumptious *surullitos* (fried cornmeal and cheese sticks). There is a bathhouse, a refreshment stand, a security patrol and well-kept bathrooms.

You do not have to park in the balneario lot if you want to visit the beach. Playa Luquillo extends at least another mile to the west. If you pull off Hwy 3 by the long row of food kiosks, you can drive around to the ocean side of the stalls and park under the

### TOP FIVE WATER ACTIVITIES

- Kayaking in the bioluminescent waters of Laguna Grande (p142)
- Boating from Puerto del Rey marina (p145)
- Diving in the Cayos Palominos and Icacos (p145)
- Surfing off the secluded El Cocal (p149)
- Fishing out of Fajardo (p145)

palms, just a few steps from the beach and with more cold beer and *pastelillos* (fried dumplings) than you could consume in a year.

Luquillo also has a section known as **Sea Without Barriers** (☎ 787-889-4329), the island’s only disabled-accessible beach. Sea Without Barriers has a ramp and other facilities to help anyone with limited mobility get into the water safely.

If the balneario feels too busy (and it does get cheek-to-jowl in high season), head for **Playa Azul**, east around the headland and in the town itself. While the beach is more exposed to the trade winds, seas and dangerous rip tides (people have drowned), Playa Azul is just as broad, white and gently sloping as Luquillo. Snorkeling enthusiasts particularly enjoy these waters, but swim with great caution.

A friendly contingent of surfers hang out at the east end of this beach – known as ‘La Pared’ (the Wall) – waiting for an offshore breeze to glass off a 3ft break. Scrambling over a stone jetty at the east end of Playa Azul will take you to a strand of beach and bays that stretch over 5 miles to the **Playa Seven Seas** balneario in Las Croabas (p143). The western section of this undeveloped beach is known as **La Selva**; the eastern end is called **El Convento** and features a beach house that is a retreat for government officials.

### Activities

**La Selva Surf Shop** (☎ 787-899-6205; 250 Calle Fernández García) has been around for more than 25 years. Well-stocked and friendly, it rents out surfboards and body boards and offers the latest on surf conditions at La Pared (literally two blocks away), La Selva (further east) and around the Humacao area to the south. While not exactly

hard-core, Luquillo’s waves are less crowded and less daunting than the west coast’s.

For a guided kayak tour along the coast, check out a host of different day and night options from mobile operations, including **Las Tortugas Adventures** (☎ 787-889-7734), whose tours focus on the importance of environmental conservation, and **Eco-Excursion Aquatica** (☎ 787-888-2887), whose trips have a similar vent as those of Las Tortugas. Prices start at about \$50.

The **Berwind Country Club** (☎ 787-876-3056; Hwy 187 Km 4.7, Río Grande; greens fee \$70) is open to the public Monday to Friday. The greens fee includes a golf cart.

Río Mar Beach Resort & Spa (p140) is frequented for its two excellent courses: the Greg Norman River Course and the Tom and George Fazio Ocean Course. Nonguests pay \$150 for morning tee times and \$90 after 2pm.

**Hacienda Carabaldi** (☎ 787-889-5820; Hwy 992 Km 5.1; adult/child per hr from \$30/25), a 600-acre eco-adventure ranch southwest of town, does trail rides on Paso Fino horses along the Río Mameyes and into the foothills of the rainforest, with time out for swimming and a picnic. Beach rides and simple jaunts around the ranch are also offered, as well as two-hour mountain-biking tours along rainforest trails. Aluminum bikes, with helmet and gloves, are provided for \$40 per person.

### Sleeping

For decades Puerto Ricans and adventure travelers have camped with impunity at La Selva and El Convento (opposite). During holidays and on high-season weekends, you’ll have plenty of company. Think twice, though, if it looks like you’ll be out there alone. Groups of young men have been known to roam the area looking for vulnerable targets. Muggings do occur.

**Balneario Luquillo** (☎ 787-889-5871, 787-622-5200; Hwy 3, Playa Luquillo; campsites with power hookup \$19; Ⓟ) There are more than 30 campsites and a bathhouse at this beachside spot. Insanely popular in the summer, but best avoided in the quiet winter months (when it’s often closed).

**Hotel Yunquemar** (☎ 787-889-5555; www.yunquemar.com; No 6 Calle 1, Fortuna Playa, Luquillo; r \$95-110; Ⓟ ☎ 🚰) The name Yunquemar sums it up. Lying in the shadow of El Yunque and within pebble-pitching distance of the *mar* (sea),

you've got the best of both worlds here. OK, so there's still the traffic bewilderment of Luquillo to negotiate, but when you're staying in a down-to-earth, family-run guest-house with its own swimming pool and home-cooking restaurant, the view appears so much sweeter.

**Luquillo Sunrise Beach Inn** (☎ 787-889-1713; www.luquillosunrise.com; A2 Costa Azul; d \$95-135; ☞ ☑) Filling a gap in the midrange market, the newly opened Sunrise Beach Inn is caressed by cooling Atlantic sea breezes in each of its spiffy 14 ocean-facing rooms. There's a communal patio and all upper-floor rooms have large balconies overlooking the beach. Other facilities include a conference room, breakfast service, cable TV and wi-fi internet. Luquillo plaza is two blocks away and the famous balneario and food kiosks a 30-minute stroll along the beach.

**Río Mar Beach Resort & Spa** (☎ 787-888-6000; www.westinriomar.com; 6000 Río Mar Blvd; r/ste \$315/675; ☞ ☑ ☑ ☑) Another sprawling east-coast resort where the reception staff dress like flight attendants and the guests get around in golf carts. The Río Mar inhabits an entire hill just west of Luquillo. Spread over a mammoth 500 acres on former plantation land, there are two golf courses here along with a 600-unit high-rise hotel facility with the obligatory casino. It's better landscaped than some of the island's mega-resorts with dotted palms and imaginative art that pays a nod to indigenous island culture. If you enjoy resort living in the style of Cancun and Acapulco this could be your nirvana.

## Eating

Luquillo's famous line of *friquitines* (also known as *quioscos*, or food stalls) along the western edge of Hwy 3 serve all sorts of tasty fried treats and outstanding *comida criolla* dishes (snacks \$1 to \$2, meals \$3 to \$9). Some of these kiosks are very run-down, while others look well kept and clean. Walk the line and follow your senses – or the locals.

**La Exquisita Bakery** (☎ 787-633-5554; 1 Calle Jesús Piñero; dishes \$1-6; ☞ 6am-9pm Mon-Sat, 8am-8pm Sun) Well perhaps not 'Champs Élysées' exquisite, but, as far as Luquillo goes, this place could satisfy a few sweet tooths. Slap-bang in the town's sleepy main square, this is where locals gather for cakes, pastry, coffee and sandwiches.

**Erik's Gyros & Deli** (☎ 787-889-0615; 352 Fernández García; sandwiches & combo meals \$6-10; ☞ 7am-4pm Mon-Sat) It doesn't look much and opening times can be sporadic, but locals swear by this place a few blocks south of the main plaza in downtown Luquillo. If you're missing gyro sandwiches or have an incurable penchant for feta cheese, this is the place.

**Lolita's** (☎ 787-889-5770; Hwy 3 Km 4.8; mains \$6-11; ☞ noon-10pm Tue-Sun) Lolita's is 3 miles east of town on the south side of Hwy 3. The Mexican meals are so popular that the owners have moved into a building twice the original size. A soft taco costs \$2.50, and many dinners run under \$10. Imported Mexican mariachis provide the music.

**Sandy's Seafood** (☎ 787-889-5765; 276 Fernández García; mains \$8-15; ☞ 11am-10pm) Obscured on a quiet street, Sandy's is the most popular restaurant in town and, by word-of-mouth, manages to attract the odd tourist-resort escapee. Perhaps best described as a fish-and-chip joint for lobster eaters, it's certainly not posh – sauce bottles adorn the tables – though you can get the full gamut of seafood here, from a traditional red snapper to jalapeño peppers stuffed with shrimp or lobster.

**Shimas** (☎ 787-888-6000; 6000 Río Mar Blvd; dishes \$12-28; ☞ 1-10pm) If you have a sushi craving that must be met while in Luquillo, head to Shimas at the Westin Río Mar resort. It serves authentic Japanese food, as well as some Thai and Chinese dishes. There are 12 restaurants and lounges in the Río Mar. Other good eating choices are Ajili Mójili, serving traditional Puerto Rican food, and Cactus Jack's, which has won awards for its innovative Tex-Mex cuisine.

**Bamboo Lounge** (☎ 787-889-5820; Hwy 992 Km 5.1; dishes \$13-24; ☞ 10am-10pm) Aside from offering first-rate horse rides and mountain biking (see Activities, p139), Carabaldí also has a great restaurant, with panoramic views of the ocean and the rainforest. There's great Puerto Rican fare, a kid's menu, and a bar and patio area that stays open until 2am.

## Entertainment

Aside from the makeshift barbecues and myriad people-watching possibilities, you only have a couple of options here (outside of the swankier bars in the Río Mar). Then again, the beach itself is often a full-on party, especially at weekends.

**El Flamboyán Café** (☎ 787-889-2928; Hwy 193 Km 1.2; ☞ 8am-midnight Thu-Tue) Rub some chalk onto your pool cue and twist the top off your Medalla beer (preferably by hand); yes, the Flamboyán is one of those rustic open-sided seaside bars with heavy stone tables and perennially popular pool tables that serves simple food and \$2 bottles of beer. The local gang shows up on weekend evenings to witness the sporadic African drumming, live salsa and reggaeton.

**Brass Cactus** (☎ 787-889-5735; Hwy 193 Km 1.3) Not at all prickly, the Brass Cactus serves big plates of American pub fare with the odd traditional dish thrown in (dishes \$8 to \$22). Children will find lots to eat (burgers, fries, chicken fingers) and the down-home decor (think license plates hanging from the walls) will give them plenty to look at. Around 11pm on weekends the Cactus gets more of a club vibe, with patrons coming in to drink rather than eat. Usually there's live rock music, at least during the high season.

## Getting There & Away

Públicos run regularly during the week from the Río Piedras terminal in San Juan (\$4) to and from the Luquillo plaza.

## FAJARDO & AROUND

pop 40,700

For the uninitiated observer, Fajardo is no oil painting. A spread-out municipality of just over 40,000 inhabitants, it sprawls like an untidy suburb between the El Yunque foothills and the sea. Part downbeat ferry port, part luxury boat launch, part swanky resort, and part busy commuter town, there's little rhyme or reason to this hard-to-fathom conurbation spread over seven wards, although there are plenty of amenities and ample hotels hidden amid the characteristic low hills and small hidden bays.

But delve beneath the outer turbidity and Fajardo has its raison d'être. A mecca for wealthy yacht owners and tourists heading to the gargantuan Conquistador (a mega-resort that once featured in the 1964 James Bond movie *Goldfinger*), Fajardo reigns as one of Puerto Rico's biggest water-activity centers and is the primary disembarkation point for the Spanish Virgin Islands of Vieques and Culebra.

You can do everything from diving in the waters of the coral-rich cordillera islands to exploring one of Puerto Rico's three bioluminescent bays here. On dry land there's the

## PÚBLICOS

To step into a Puerto Rican público (intertown public bus) is to immerse yourself into an entirely different world, a parallel universe where the modus operandi is carried out in harsh, guttural Spanish and the best way to turn up the air-conditioning is to wind down the window.

The colorful cast of characters is evident as soon as you take a seat by squeezing Houdini-like into a hot and often crowded interior. Beside you the joker, spluttering jibes in barely comprehensible Spanish; behind you the sage, lecturing a myriad audience on boxing and baseball; while, up front, a luggage-laden Dominican family is engaged in tough negotiations with the driver over the price of an off-route airport drop-off.

But beginners beware. Públicos are not for the claustrophobic, or anyone in an urgent hurry. In the true tradition of open-ended, spontaneous travel, these slow-paced 15-seater minibuses have no printed timetable and no pre-arranged departure times. Buses leave only when they're full or when the driver deems he has sufficient passengers to make the trip worth his while. At weekends, they barely run at all, unless you're willing to lure the driver out of his Sunday morning reverie with a tidy sum.

But the joy of público travel is not in their rocketlike speed or unflinching reliability, but rather in their earthy authenticity. Two hours inside one of these veritable street-theaters-on-wheels and you'll learn twice as much about Puerto Rico as you would in a coastal mega-resort – and for a fraction of the cost.

The best place to catch a público in San Juan is at the suburban terminal in Río Piedras (p123), where clearly marked buses fan out across the island. First-timers should allow themselves plenty of time to get to know the nuances of the none-too-simple system. Prices for the one-hour journey to Luquillo hover at around \$4 (compared to \$80 for an equivalent taxi ride).

affectionate fishing ‘village’ of Las Croabas with its creaky fishing sloops, and the commonwealth’s oldest colonial lighthouse. There’s even a rather attractive and ecologically important nature reserve – Las Cabezas de San Juan – juxtaposed, in true Puerto Rican fashion, against the ubiquitous out-of-town shopping infestations.

Founded in 1760, downtown Fajardo, which lies between Rte 194 and Hwy 3, has little to show for 250 years of history. Yachters head a few miles south to Puerto del Rey, the largest marina in the Caribbean, while the most interesting sights for travelers – including the bio-bay, the nature reserve and the well-maintained Seven Seas Beach – punctuate the strung-out neighborhood of Las Croabas to the north.

### Orientation

The city is quite spread out and navigation will require a bike, a car or a (very) sturdy pair of legs. Hwy 3 (sometimes bumper to bumper with traffic) divides the city and connects you to other roads leading to popular attractions.

Jumping off onto Rte 195 from Hwy 3 will bring you to the ferry docks; follow signs that say ‘Embarcadero’ until arriving at Rte 987. There the roads split; continuing straight on Rte 195 goes to the docks, while turning left onto Rte 987 passes Villa Marina and eventually brings you to the beach, the nature reserve and Las Croabas.

Most restaurants and sleeping accommodations are either near the docks or spread out along Rte 987.

### Information

**Fajardo Mayor’s Office** (☎ 787-863-1400; www.fajardopr.org; cnr Muñoz Rivera & Dr López; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4:30pm Mon-Fri) There’s no real tourism office in town, but the mayor’s office does what it can. Call with any questions.

**Hospital San Pablo del Este** (☎ 787-863-0505; Rte 194 off Ave Conquistador; ☎ 24hr) The largest hospital along the east coast and your best option for treatment for any medical issues that may arise.

**Pizz@Net** (☎ 787-860-4230; per 30/60min \$3/5; ☎ 11am-11pm) At the marina in Villa Marina, this is a great place to nosh on a pizza and surf the net.

**Wash-n-Post** (☎ 787-863-1995; Villa Marina shopping center; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun) A one-stop FedEx, Western Union and UPS service that also has fluff and fold.

### Sights

Culture vultures should look elsewhere: Fajardo has few interesting historical artifacts and little indigenous culture. The area’s best activities can be enjoyed on the beach, in or under the water, or at the small but illuminating Las Cabezas de San Juan nature reserve.

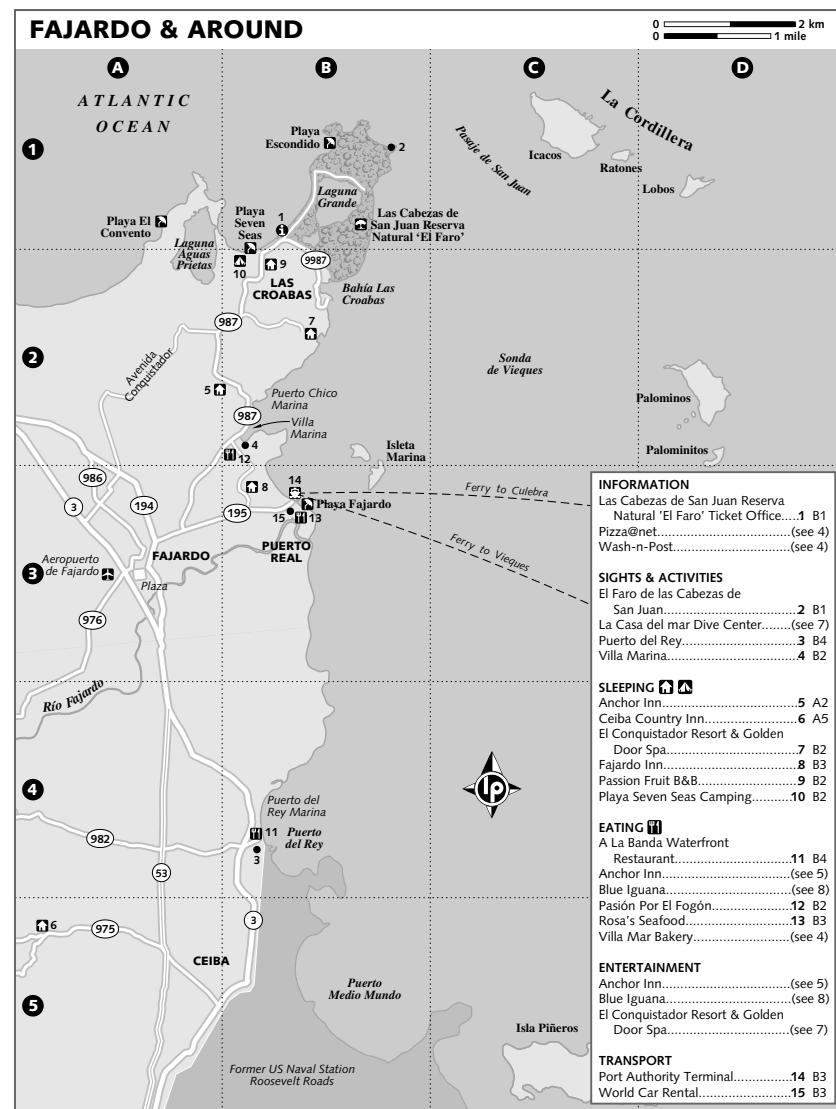
### LAS CABEZAS DE SAN JUAN

A 316-acre nodule of land on Puerto Rico’s extreme northeast tip, the **Las Cabezas de San Juan Reserva Natural ‘El Faro’** (☎ 787-722-5882, 787-860-2560; www.fideicomiso.org; Hwy 987 at Las Croabas; adult/under 11yr & senior \$7/4; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun, Spanish tours 9:30am, 10am, 10:30am & 2pm, English tours 2pm) protects an historic lighthouse, a bioluminescent bay, rare flora and fauna, lush rainforest, various trails and boardwalks, and an important scientific research center. Despite its diminutive size, the reserve shelters seven – yes *seven* – different ecological systems, including beaches, lagoons, dry forest, coral reefs and mangroves. Animal species that forage here include big iguanas, fiddler crabs, myriad insects and all kinds of birds. Such condensed biodiversity is typical of Puerto Rico’s compact island status and ‘Las Cabezas’ is highlighted as an integral part of the commonwealth’s vital – but dangerously threatened – northeast ecological corridor.

Adding historical value to a potent natural brew is the splendidly restored 19th-century **lighthouse** (El Faro de Las Cabezas de San Juan; Puerto Rico’s oldest, dating from 1882) that overlooks the peninsula’s steep, craggy cliffs where the stormy Atlantic meets the Sonda de Vieques (Vieques Sound). The lighthouse has an information center and observation deck, open the same hours as the reserve, which offers spectacular views of El Yunque.

There are about 2 miles of trails and boardwalks that lead through the park, but you can’t follow them on your own: you must take a guided tour. This lasts more than two hours, including the short tram ride through the dry forest section. Reservations are required.

You can get a glimpse of some of the reserve by simply walking east down the narrow beach from the Playa Seven Seas. Better yet, take a kayak tour (see p145) at sunset, and head into **Laguna Grande** after dark for



INFORMATION	
Las Cabezas de San Juan Reserva Natural ‘El Faro’ Ticket Office.....	1 B1
Pizza@net.....	(see 4)
Wash-n-Post.....	(see 4)
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	
El Faro de las Cabezas de San Juan.....	2 B1
La Casa del mar Dive Center.....	(see 7)
Puerto del Rey.....	3 B4
Villa Marina.....	4 B2
SLEEPING	
Anchor Inn.....	5 A2
Ceiba Country Inn.....	6 A5
El Conquistador Resort & Golden Door Spa.....	7 B2
Fajardo Inn.....	8 B3
Passion Fruit B&B.....	9 B2
Playa Seven Seas Camping.....	10 B2
EATING	
A La Banda Waterfront Restaurant.....	11 B4
Anchor Inn.....	(see 5)
Blue Iguana.....	(see 8)
Pasión Por El Fogón.....	12 B2
Rosa’s Seafood.....	13 B3
Villa Mar Bakery.....	(see 4)
ENTERTAINMENT	
Anchor Inn.....	(see 5)
Blue Iguana.....	(see 8)
El Conquistador Resort & Golden Door Spa.....	(see 7)
TRANSPORT	
Port Authority Terminal.....	14 B3
World Car Rental.....	15 B3

the green-glowing, underwater ‘fireworks’ of bioluminescent micro-organisms. Make sure you go in a kayak or sailboat; engine pollution is slowly killing the very micro-organisms that create the bioluminescence. Check that you’re not doing anything to harm the environment before making deals with local boat owners.

### PLAYA SEVEN SEAS

On the southwestern shore of the peninsula of Las Cabezas, **Playa Seven Seas** (www.parquesnacionalespr.com; admission free, parking \$3) is a sheltered, coconut-shaded horseshoe public beach. While not be quite as pretty as Playa Luquillo, fear not – it is attractive. The beach gets packed on weekends and during summer.



For good snorkeling or to get away from it all, follow the beach about a half mile to the northeast along the Las Cabezas property to an area known as **Playa Escondida** (Hidden Beach). The reefs are just offshore. Taking the trail to the west eventually brings you to the nearly empty **Playa El Convento**, with its beach house for government officials.

### BAHÍA LAS CROABAS

You find this spot where Hwy 987 ends at a little seaside park rimmed by seafood restaurants and bars looking east across the water to the peaks of Culebra. There is not much of a beach here, but there's a view of the offshore islands and the air blows fresh with the trade winds. The anchorage accommodates the fishermen's co-op and the last half-dozen *nativos*, the 'out-island' sloops that everyone around here once used for fishing and

gathering conch or lobster. The fishermen here are friendly, and you can probably strike a deal with one of them for a boat ride (usually about \$100 per boat per day).

### PUERTO DEL REY

This **marina** (☎ 787-860-1000; Hwy 3 Km 51.4) stands behind a breakwater in a cove 2 miles south of Fajardo. It is the largest marina in the Caribbean (1100 slips). You will find a complete marina village here with restaurants, stores, laundry facilities, banking and all manner of boat-hauling and maintenance capabilities. Many yachts stop here to take advantage of the marina's courtesy car and Fajardo's supermarkets when stocking up for a winter in the tropics or the ride back home to the USA. Travelers will find that many of the sailing, diving and fishing charters run from here. It's about 5 miles south of Villa Marina.

### LIGHTHOUSES

In common with other small, seafaring islands, the Puerto Rican coastline is dotted with lighthouses. From the imposing hulk of El Morro fort to the formidable surf breaks of Rincón, these sturdy, storm-lashed sentinels (16 in all, of which 11 are still operational) stand as important historical monuments to a rugged bygone era.

Puerto Rico's oldest existing lighthouse, dating from 1882, is El Faro de Las Cabezas de San Juan, situated in the eponymous natural reserve on a craggy headland in the island's extreme northeastern corner. Adorned with rich neoclassical detail and topped by a distinctive Spanish colonial tower, it today houses a nature center which offers fine views over toward El Yunque rainforest.

You'll need to cross over to the island's extreme southwestern corner to find the commonwealth's second-oldest lighthouse, Los Morrillos, perched atop rust red cliffs in the Cabo Rojo National Wildlife Refuge. Recently renovated and still active, this rather austere gray-and-white late-colonial-era construction guards some of the island's most spectacular coastal scenery and is open periodically to the public.

Languishing as one of Puerto Rico's most endangered lighthouses, El Faro de Mona, situated on bleak Mona Island, has been inactive since 1976. Constructed in 1900 on the designs of famous French engineer Gustave Eiffel, the structure is redolent of a mini Eiffel Tower and was once crucial in guiding ships through the tempestuous Mona Passage.

An erstwhile west-coast beacon, the original Punta Borinquen lighthouse near Aguadilla was all but destroyed by a tsunami that swept through the area after a devastating earthquake in 1918, and today only a few crumbling walls remain. Nearby stands its modern replacement, a whitewashed cylindrical tower built in 1920 that is now used both as a lighthouse and a vacation retreat for coastguard personnel.

In operation since 1846, San Juan's El Morro fort houses Puerto Rico's oldest light station. After suffering severe damage during a US navy bombardment during the 1898 Spanish-American War, the original lighthouse was rebuilt with unique Spanish-Moorish features, a style that blends in surprisingly well with the rest of the fort.

Constructed in the early 1880s to demonstrate Spanish hegemony over the island of Culebra, the historic Culebrita lighthouse was deactivated in 1959 and subsequently decimated by a double whammy of terrifying hurricanes (Hugo in 1989 and Marilyn in 1995). In 2003 the Culebra Foundation was formed to save it from extinction.

### Activities

Fajardo is decidedly amphibian – life is as exciting in the water as it is on land. This coastal region is blessed with many tiny islands (not to mention Culebra and Vieques) that provide fabulous opportunities for swimming, snorkeling, diving, fishing or just relaxing on a quiet beach.

### BOATING

Almost all sailing trips advertised for travelers on the island sail out of one of the marinas in Fajardo. The operators listed here have been around for a while and know the area well, but there are many more good choices if these are all booked; *Que Pasa* (the island's tourism magazine) updates listings of new charter operators throughout the year. Many will pick you up in San Juan. Advance reservations are recommended for all charter tours.

**Erin Go Bragh Charters** (☎ 787-860-4401; www.egbc.net; Puerto del Rey Marina) offers ecofriendly sunset trips, dinner trips, daily trips (with BBQ and other lunches provided) and overnight charters to Vieques and Culebra. Captain Bill and his wife Ingrid visit various islands in the cordillera where you can swim, fish and snorkel.

**East Island Excursions** (☎ 787-860-3434; www.eastwindcats.com; Puerto del Rey Marina) has glass-bottomed catamarans that are in high demand, so book early. All kinds of day trips to La Cordillera islands are offered, and it even does quick runs over to St Thomas. One of the catamarans has a water slide that launches you right into the ocean. Day trips start at \$69 per person (10am to 3:30pm).

**Salty Dreams** (☎ 787-717-6378; www.saltydreams.com; Villa Marina) offers day trips with lunch to Icacos, Lobos, Palominos and Palominos Cays in its 46ft catamaran *Salty Dogs* from \$59 per day.

**Traveler** (☎ 787-863-2821; www.travelerpr.com; Villa Marina) offers similar daily tours with all-you-can-eat salad bars and snorkeling equipment provided for reasonable prices.

### KAYAKING

This is absolutely the most entrancing way to see Fajardo's bioluminescent attractions – and the most environmentally sound as well. Swimming was banned in the bay in 2007.

Although technically located in Río Grande, **Eco Xursion Aquatica** (☎ 787-888-2887; trips \$45-65) is a mobile operation with guided flotilla trips to La Cordillera cays for snorkeling, and a sunset trip around Las Cabezas and into the

bioluminescent Laguna Grande, where microorganisms glow in the dark water.

**Yokahú Kayaks** (☎ 787-604-7375, 863-5374) provides equipment, and the guides are very professional. Children under seven aren't allowed on the night trips, which leave at 7pm and generally last two hours. Their nonpolluting kayaks are one of the most environmentally friendly ways of seeing the laguna.

**Eco-Action Tours** (787-791-7509; www.ecoactiontours.com) offers kayak tours (one- to three-person kayaks) as well as excursions in a nonpolluting electric boat (minimum four people). Prices start at \$25 per person.

### FISHING

**Capt Osva Alcaide** (☎ 787-547-4851; www.deepseafishinpr.com) offers half- and full-day deep-sea fishing charters out of Fajardo, and snorkeling to Icacos and Palomino Island. Expect to pay at least \$400.

### DIVING

There's no shortage of dive operators in Fajardo.

Operating since 1963, the **Caribbean School of Aquatics** (☎ 787-728-6606; www.saildiveparty.com; Villa Marina; ☎ 7am-10pm) has National Association of Underwater Instructors (NAUI) and Professional Association of Dive Instructors (PADI) scuba classes, and Captain Greg Korwek will take you on all-day boat trips to the best spots around La Cordillera and elsewhere; two-tank dives start from \$119 per person.

Set inside the grounds of El Conquistador resort, the PADI-certified **La Casa del Mar Dive Center** (☎ 787-860-3483; www.lacasadelmar.net; 1000 Ave Conquistador; ☎ 8am-6pm) is great for all levels. The 'Bubblemakers for Kids' appeals to the younger crowd (8 to 15 years; \$49); more experienced divers can take the trips to local reefs (one/two tanks \$69/99). A two-tank dive over in Culebra is \$125.

**Sea Ventures Pro Dive Center** (☎ 800-739-3483, 787-863-3483; www.divepuertorico.com; Puerto del Rey; ☎ 8:30am-6pm) has three outlets in Fajardo, Palmas del Mar and Guánica. They're staffed by very experienced professionals offering one-week PADI certification courses. For those who just want the basics or already know how to dive, there are multiple trips to Palominos and Icacos Cays daily (one/two tanks \$65/99), and on Sunday there are trips to Vieques and Culebra.



## Sleeping

Officials don't hassle people who pitch tents on Playa El Convento, which is reached by the path heading west from Playa Seven Seas. The area is popular so you'll usually find at least one or two tents up at all times; avoid pitching here if there are no other campers. Muggings do occur.

**Playa Seven Seas Camping** (☎ 787-863-8180; 622-5200; Hwy 987; campsites per tent \$10) One of Puerto Rico's safest beaches, Playa Seven Seas near Las Croabas fills up fast. Make sure you reserve in advance if you plan to come during the summer or holidays. Showers and bathrooms are available and there's a restaurant on the beach; portable toilets are not allowed.

**Anchor Inn** (☎ 787-863-7200; frenchman@libertypr.net; Hwy 987 Km 2.7; r from \$70; 🍷) The Anchor is a rather odd red, black and white construction situated in a similarly odd slice of space land between Fajardo and Las Croabas. This place can be as dead as a dodo off-season, but arrive with low expectations and the cheap prices, no-frills rooms and reasonable on-site restaurant might be enough to make you stay.

**Ceiba Country Inn** (☎ 787-885-0471; www.geocities.com/countryinn00735; Hwy 997 Km 2.1; s/d \$85/95; 🍷) A classic mountain retreat, this place has nine units overlooking the Caribbean and the off-shore islands. On a clear day St Thomas can be seen on the horizon. Picture a landscaped hillside villa with decks, BBQ grill, continental breakfast and lounge. From San Juan, take Hwy 3 past Fajardo until the road becomes Rte 53. Take exit 5 (Ceiba North) and then make a right onto Rd 975 and go 1 mile. Turn right onto Hwy 977. Half a mile down the road is a sign for Ceiba Country Inn.

**Passion Fruit B&B** (☎ 800-670-3196; www.passionfruitbb.com; Hwy 987 Km 0.1; r \$100-130; 🍷 🍷) A tropically themed guesthouse with a personal touch, the Passion Fruit is quite likely to inspire plenty of summer passion with its pool-side breakfast spread and colorful 3rd-floor honeymoon suites. Discreet, private and bang for your buck.

**our pick Fajardo Inn** (☎ 787-860-6000; www.fajardoinn.com; 52 Parcelas Beltrán, Hwy 195; r \$100-300; 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷) Perched on a hill overlooking the scruffy Fajardo corridor (and distant sea views), the Spanish hacienda-style Fajardo Inn is hard to miss. Recently extended to include a new pool, crazy golf, kid's playground, tennis court and a gym so huge it would look impressive in New York's Upper East Side,

this peach-hued Puerto Rican parador (country inn) exudes comfort, charm and a refreshing blend of unhurried ambience. Rooms are large and uncluttered, with cable TV, massive beds, wood furnishings and a daily dose of complimentary Puerto Rican coffee. A miniresort without the wristband.

**El Conquistador Resort & Golden Door Spa** (☎ 787-863-1000; www.elconresort.com; 1000 Ave Conquistador; r \$300-700; 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷) Lush, tropical paradise, or a spin-off of the allegorical 1960s sci-fi series *The Prisoner*? The gargantuan El Conquistador attracts and repels visitors in equal measure. A 900-unit mega-resort that encompasses a steep coastal escarpment a few clicks northeast of Fajardo, this mini-town boasts its own cove, cable car, mock Andalusian village, and – just in case you were harboring any James Bond allusions – private fantasy island. If your idea of a good vacation revolves around golf, tennis, spa pampering, water sports, fine dining and around-the-clock gambling, this could be your bag. If you're more intent on cross-fertilizing with the 'real' Puerto Rico, try the nice little guesthouse down the road.

## Eating

**Villa Mar Bakery** (☎ 787-860-5590; Villa Marina; snacks \$2-7) A kind of neighborhood bakery in the small row of shops adjacent to the Villa Marina; you can top up on coffee, pastries and sandwiches here. It's next to the Pizza@net (p142).

**Bluelguana** (☎ 787-860-6000; dishes \$7-21; 🍷) 4-10pm Mon-Thu, to 1am Fri-Sun) The Fajardo Inn (left) has two restaurants, but this one is by far the best, with great Mexican fare, sharp service and unbelievably cheap prices (for sizable portions). In the earlier hours it's a good option for families; later on the pool table and ample bar attracts a drinking crowd. On weekends it's very popular after 10pm.

**Anchor Inn** (☎ 787-863-7200; Hwy 987 Km 2.7; dishes \$8-24) This inn seems to focus more on its food than its accommodations. It has a big dining room specializing in lobster dishes that usually cost about \$22. You can also go light here with a chef's salad for about \$9.

**A La Banda Waterfront Restaurant** (☎ 787-860-9162; Puerto del Rey Marina, Hwy 3 Km 51.4; dishes \$12-25) Live lobsters are easily transferred from the aquarium to your plate here – with a side trip to the kitchen, of course. If you prefer not to see your food swimming before you eat it, go for the Italian dishes or hearty steaks.

**our pick Rosa's Seafood** (☎ 809-863-0213; 536 Tablazo; dishes \$14-25; 🍷) 11am-10pm Thu-Tue) Frustrated ferry passengers mix with loyal locals at this much vaunted seafood salon situated within anchor-dropping distance of Fajardo docks. You'll walk through a gauntlet of rusting cars and snarling canines to get here, but enter the bright-yellow building at road's end and the smell of fresh fish and the sound of sizzling onions will soon leave you forgetting about your ferry delays. Lobster, red snapper, and fish and chips are the more delectable in-house specialties, though Rosa's can also knock up a good steak – all for a tidy sum, of course.

**Pasión por el Fogón** (☎ 787-863-3502; Rte 987 Km 2.3; dishes \$16-32) Lobster medallions, filet mignon and chicken stuffed with sweet banana and bacon – sound tasty? The governor of New York, Mariah Carey and Carlos Delgado obviously thought so, as they've all eaten here at one time or another. Listed as one of Puerto Rico's leading Mesónes Gastronómicos, Pasión por el Fogón is situated opposite the Villa Marina and – in keeping with its name – has a real passion for cooking.

## Entertainment

**Anchor Inn** (☎ 787-863-7200; Hwy 987 Km 2.7) This place showcases music on weekend nights when salsa, merengue and Latin rock groups perform here.

The casino, bars and restaurants at the El Conquistador Resort & Golden Door Spa are actually open to the public; you're perfectly welcome to try your luck at the tables or take in a floor show from the bar no matter where you lay your head later that night.

Blue Iguana (opposite) gets busy on weekend nights during high season.

The stores and bars at Villa Marina sometimes put out tables for dominoes and become a popular hangout for locals on weekends. Friday night has live music.

## Shopping

The malls are on Hwy 3 just north of town if you need a supermarket, Blockbuster Video, Payless Shoes or Wal-Mart fix.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

The small, busy **Aeropuerto de Fajardo** (☎ 787-860-3110; 24hr parking \$8.50) lies west of town near the intersection of Hwy 3 and Hwy 976.

All aircraft are Islander twins or tri-motor Trilanders. Typical one-way fares are \$25 to Vieques (15 minutes), \$30 to Culebra (15 minutes) and \$80 to St Croix (30 minutes).

**Isla Nena Air Service** (☎ 787-761-6362) flies on demand to Vieques and Culebra.

**Vieques Air Link** (☎ 888-901-9247; www.viequesairlink.com) offers daily on-demand flights to from Fajardo to Vieques, Culebra and St Croix.

**Air Flamenco** (☎ 787-801-8256; www.airflamenco.net) flights go to Culebra and San Juan.

### CAR

There's a spacious outdoor parking lot on the right-hand side of the road as you approach the ferry docks. The lot is surrounded by secure fencing and has 24-hour surveillance. It's \$5 a day.

Directly across from the public parking lot, the small **World Car Rental** (☎ 787-863-9696; Rte 195 at the docks; per day \$35; 🍷) 7:30-6pm) offers compact cars at daily and weekly rates.

### FERRY

The ferries to Vieques and Culebra leave from the **Port Authority terminal** (☎ 787-863-3360; reservations 787-801-0250) for the islands. The terminal is about 1.5 miles east of town in the run-down Playa de Fajardo/Puerto Real neighborhood (follow the signs to either). For the ferry schedule for Culebra, see p165; for Vieques, see p180.

There's an irregular ferry that runs between Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands leaving Fajardo twice a month on Sundays at 1pm. Phone **Transportation Services Virgin Islands** (☎ 340-776-6282) for further details. The ferry takes approximately two hours and costs \$125 per person. Reservations are required.

### PÚBLICO

The **main público stop** (☎ 787-860-1820; www.fajardopr.org; 🍷) 4am-6pm Mon-Sat) is off the plaza in the old commercial center of town; but you will also find públicos at the ferry terminal (to meet incoming ferries) and near the seafood restaurants in Las Croabas. Many of the públicos at the ferry terminal will take you to and from the Río Piedras section of San Juan (\$6, 1½ hours). You can also get to Las Croabas (\$2, 20 minutes); a trip south to Humacao to catch another público on to Ponce and the south coast is around \$5 and takes 30 minutes. Other options include

Luquillo (\$1, 15 minutes) and Palmer (near El Yunque; \$2, 20 minutes). If you are coming from San Juan and going to the ferry dock, make sure to tell the driver to go all the way to the port.

#### TAXI

You can always find taxis at the ferry terminal to take you to Luis Muñoz Marín (LMM) airport in San Juan (\$80).

### NAGUABO & AROUND

pop 24,800

There are two parts to modern Naguabo; the so-called downtown – which you'll curse for its nutty traffic and impossible-to-understand one-way system – and the unkempt Playa Húcares, where you might want to linger for views, a snooze, and lunch in one of its down-to-earth seafood restaurants.

#### Sights

Playa Húcares doesn't actually have a beach – the waterfront is a rock seawall overlooking a bay. It does, however, have a dramatic view of Vieques, 10 miles out to sea, and Cayo Santiago, closer to the coastline. It's worth visiting to get a look at the brightly painted fishing sloops and the two Victorian mansions that stand like sentinels over the sleepy little boardwalk, officially named Malecón Arturo Corsino. One of the mansions, the Castillo Villa del Mar, is on the National Registry of Historic Places (despite the dilapidation and the graffiti) and was once home to a restaurant and art gallery where local painters showed their work. These days it's a run-down old eyesore, but the mansion next to it has been somewhat restored, giving rise to hopes that both structures will eventually be returned to their former state of grace.

On weekends people flock to the line of open-air seafood restaurants just across the street for freshly caught *chillo* (snapper) and *sierra* (kingfish). If you follow Hwy 3 a half mile further south, you'll see about 2 miles of thin, tree-lined, vacant beach. Beyond this, the road carries you into the tiny village of **Playa Humacao**. Dilapidated Playa Humacao has one bright spot. There is a pristine balneario and *centro vacacional* (vacation center) at the neighborhood west of the village. **Punta Santiago** has become a bit of a weekend and holiday hotspot, and its bright *friquitines* offer lots of succulent treats like *arroz con juyes*

(rice with crab chunks) and shark nuggets. During the busy season it's fun and upbeat and nowhere near as crowded as Luquillo.

#### Activities

**Captain Frank López** (☎ 787-850-7881, 787-316-0441) offers fishing or snorkeling trips and sea excursions to Cayo Santiago. Prices are negotiable: start your bidding at about \$30. Look for *La Paseadora* boat at Playa Naguabo. At the Palmas del Mar Resort (below) you can also organize diving and snorkeling trips through the **Palmas Dive Center** (☎ 787-863-3483; Marina de Palmas), which will take you to Cayo Santiago and the deeper sites offshore (there are 35 within a 5-mile radius). Prices start at \$60/89 for a half-day snorkel/dive.

Golfers can make reservations at either of the two **golf courses** (☎ 787-285-2256) at the Palmas del Mar resort. The greens fee for the 6800yd Reese Jones course is \$125, or \$80 after 2pm for nonguests; the old course (called 'the Palms') has similar prices.

The resort also has 20 **tennis courts** (☎ 787-852-6000), but you will need to make a reservation. Court fees are \$25 an hour during the day, or \$33 at night.

The **Palmas del Mar Equestrian Center** (☎ 787-852-6000; ☹ Tue-Sun) boards about 40 horses, including hunters and jumpers. One-hour-plus trail rides cost about \$40.

#### Sleeping

There are several pretty guesthouses tucked into the south side of El Yunque that can be reached from Naguabo (see Sleeping, p136). Accommodations in Naguabo are very limited, with the exception of the Palmas del Mar Resort, which lies a few miles to the south. Yabucoa has more to offer.

**Centro Vacacional Punta Santiago** (☎ 787-852-1660; Hwy 3 Km 72.4, Playa Humacao; campsites with/without hookups \$20/10, r/villas \$66/110) This spot has a balneario and 36 cottages and 63 villas in a coconut grove on a pristine beach. Each unit can accommodate up to six people.

There are also more than 40 campsites around Playa Naguabo and Playa Humacao. Make reservations for the campsites through the central San Juan office of the **Recreational Development Company** (☎ 787-853-1660).

**Palmas del Mar Resort** (☎ 787-852-6000, 800-725-6273; www.palmasdelmar.com; 170 Candelero Dr; r \$250-430) At first it's rather hard to work out exactly what Palmas del Mar is. A gargantuan resort?

An ultra-exclusive gated community? Or a manufactured minitown strangely redolent of Jim Carey's 'prison' in *The Truman Show*? Covering 2700 acres, this massive complex is significantly larger than most of Puerto Rico's state forests and is a world unto itself. At its opulent core lies a huge cluster of privately owned villas (ranging in price from \$365,000 to \$5 million) and time-share units built around a marina, 6.5 miles of beach and a golf course. Of more interest to itinerant travelers are the casino and token hotel: the Four Points by Sheraton, which has 107 amply furnished rooms and access to any of the resort's 19 restaurants. The only thing missing is *anything* inherently Puerto Rican.

#### Eating

While there's very little foodwise in Naguabo proper save the usual burger joints, the more easygoing strip of Playa Húcares is a cheap-skate's heaven, and perfect for a bit of do-it-yourself research. Comb the kiosks and holes-in-the-wall at the north end for great *empanadillas* (dough stuffed with meat or fish), *mojito criollo* (rum, mint and lemon) sauce on fresh fish and tasty *surrullitos*.

**our pick Restaurant Vinny** (☎ 787-874-7664; ☹ 8am-10pm) If you've no time to barter, head for Restaurant Vinny, a plastic-fork and -chair place that does a bang-up lunch for \$4 (and the best *empanadillas* on the island).

#### Getting There & Away

Coming from San Juan, the easiest way to get to this part of the east coast is to follow Hwy 3 past Fajardo. Exits will soon follow for Naguabo and surrounding towns. Note that the Punta Santiago exit brings you off the highway and into a busy intersection with lots of fast-food restaurants, gas stations and shopping malls. If you are planning on going up into the south side of El Yunque or the Ruta Panorámica, gas up here first. Punta Santiago is 10 more minutes down the road by car; follow the signs.

The público vans in Playa Naguabo park near the promenade. They go to Naguabo (\$1) or Humacao (\$2), from where you can move on to the greener pastures of Fajardo, Ponce or San Juan.

The Palmas del Mar Resort will arrange for a minivan to haul you to and from LMM airport in San Juan – about a 40-minute trip in normal traffic. During peak

season, the scheduled trip is \$25 per person (four person minimum). For reservations call ☎ 787-285-4323.

The entrance to Palmas is a well-marked road off Hwy 3, a couple of miles south of Puerto Humacao. Driving from San Juan, take Hwy 52 south to Caguas and Hwy 30 to Humacao – all expressway, toll-road driving.

### YABUCOA & AROUND

pop 39,200

Surrounded by hills on three sides and ocean on the other, Yabucoa sits on a tract of well-watered fertile land that once played host to Puerto Rico's all-encompassing sugar industry. Unless you have a penchant for poking around the ruins of old sugar mills, the town holds little for modern-day travelers. Out on the periphery, it's a different story. Yabucoa is the start point for two dramatic drives: the famed Ruta Panorámica and the less heralded, but no less spectacular, Hwy 901 that tracks the coast between Playa Lucía and the Punta Tuna lighthouse. On this road you'll find accommodations, restaurants and two of the island's most isolated surfing spots.

If you are traveling south to Yabucoa from the Humacao area, take the Hwy 53 toll road to avoid the traffic on Hwy 3. This lightly traveled section of road bisects miles of sugarcane fields and estuary where three mountain rivers meet.

#### Sights & Activities

The balneario at **Playa Lucía** (parking \$2), near the intersection of Hwy 901 and Hwy 9911 in Yabucoa, has great shade under its coconut trees and several little beach bar-restaurants just off its premises. **El Cocal** is one of the few good surfing spots in the area (ask for directions at the balneario). Further southwest toward Maunabo is Sharkey's, another decent surf break where you're likely to have the waves to yourself.

Off Hwy 901 along the coast, you can ponder the ruins of **Hacienda de Santa Lucía**, an old sugar plantation a mile north of Playa Lucía. Don't expect a haunted mansion; there's only one wall left. **Central Roig** is the still active, old-time sugar hacienda and mill on the same road.

Lovers and solitary types like the view from the base of the **Faro Punta Tuna**, the lighthouse just southeast of Maunabo. From

### GO FURTHER INTO THE COUNTRYSIDE

If you have an aversion to large crowds or can't face getting swallowed up by another ranger-led tour group from Texas, give El Yunque's northern highlights a body-swerve and head instead to the region's alternative entrance road just west of the town of Naguabo. Since mud slides closed the central section of Hwy 191 in the 1970s, this southern portion of the rainforest has remained relatively isolated and unexplored.

The best trail starts at the Casa Cubuy Ecolodge (p136) some 15 miles up the precipitous and winding Hwy 191. To tackle it, it's best to spend a night or two at the lodge itself, where you can park your car, procure directions, and enquire about the possibility of a guided hike with local expert **Robin Phillips** (☎ 787-874-2138; per person \$22, minimum 5 people). If you choose to go it alone, start your excursion by hiking up Hwy 191 for 0.5 miles beyond Casa Cubuy until you reach road's end by a cluster of picnic pavilions. Turn right past the 'Do Not Enter' sign and follow a narrow trail alongside a half buried pipeline. After a mile or so you'll be forced to scramble across a landslide and pick up the trail again on the other side, just behind a copse of bamboo. Keep going alongside the pipeline until you reach a dam and aluminum bridge. Cross the bridge and proceed along the trail to a waterfall, where you'll encounter a steel ladder. Carefully ascend the ladder before climbing through a dry streambed and scrambling up to a small pool/swimming hole at the top.

This challenging out-and-back hike is approximately 12 miles round-trip and takes a good five to six hours. Go prepared for mud, rain and plenty of uphill scrambling. It is strongly advised that you enquire about current hiking conditions at the Casa Cubuy Ecolodge before setting out.

Hwy 901, take Hwy 760 toward the ocean. A path leads down to the extremely secluded **Playa Larga**.

### Sleeping

**Playa de Emajaguas Guest House** (☎ 787-861-6023; Hwy 901 Km 2.5; dm/d \$50/160) Ah...the view. Here in the island's southeastern corner, where the Cuchilla de Panduras Mountains meet the sea, you'll find Puerto Rico almost as Columbus must have found it. The no-frills Emajaguas Guest House nestles in verdant mountain foothills above a stunning deserted beach near El Cocal and Sharkey's surf breaks. The place is akin to a simple African 'rest-house,' light on luxuries and close to nature, but you come here for the surroundings and the sense of isolation (not always easy to find in Puerto Rico), not the complementary soap bars. The once grand house shelters seven scruffy but efficient apartments, with private baths and kitchenettes. Grab a hammock and turn off, tune in and drop out.

**Caribe Playa** (☎ 787-839-6339, 787-839-1817; www.caribeplaya.com; Hwy 3 Km 112; r \$79-104; 🍷) You will spot this place where Hwy 3 runs along the seashore between Maunabo and Patillas. Tucked right on the shore under a slanting plantation of coconuts, this inn has 29 units, many with beachfront balconies; most rooms have a kitchen sink and fridge, but no stove.

There's a restaurant on the premises and a natural pool carved into the rocky coast. A licensed therapist can do beachside massages for \$50 an hour.

**Parador Costa del Mar** (☎ 787-266-6276; Hwy 901 Km 5.6; r \$84-102; 🍷 🍷) Well clear of the urban infestations of Yabucoa, the Costa del Mar is the younger sibling of the Palmas de Lucia (it's owned by the same family) and fits the same price and comfort bracket. Its position on a grassy bluff overlooking the ocean at the start of spectacular Hwy 901 gives it extra kudos, as do the vividly colored flowers, luminous pool and brilliant yellow paintwork. But there's substance under the superficiality. You can also bank on five-star cleanliness, zippy service and gym, sauna and a 100yd trek to the beach.

**Parador Palmas de Lucía** (☎ 787-893-4423; www.palmasdelucia.com; cnr Hwy 901 & Hwy 9911; r \$90-109; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Just when you thought mall-infested Yabucoa was uninhabitable, you hit the end of the road at Playa Lucia and stumble upon what is surely one of Puerto Rico's best paradises. Backing up onto the beach, but with its own secluded pool and restaurant, the Palmas de Lucía is a light, airy place with huge, clean rooms decked out with rather plush furnishings. To add spice to an already strong brew, there's also a small but well-kept gymnasium which offers a good alternative

to jogging around Yabucoa's traffic-clogged roads. Good service is par for the course at this family-friendly hotel, and it makes an excellent launch pad for a lengthy road trip across the Ruta Panorámica.

### Eating

**El Mar de la Tranquilidad** (☎ 787-839-4870; Hwy 3 Km 118.9; dishes \$7-22) Once the road returns to sea level (heading west), look for this establishment on the seaward side of Hwy 3. Beer on the outdoor terrace is a rare pleasure, and you can get *salmorejo de jueyes* (land crab in tomato sauce), lobster and some decent cocktails.

**El Nuevo Horizonte** (☎ 787-893-5492; Hwy 901 Km 9.8; dishes \$7-23) Just a mile or two west of

Parador Costa del Mar, the view rarely gets better than it does from this place. This restaurant is perched high on the mountainside overlooking the Caribbean. You can smell the *asopao de langosta* (lobster stew) cooking 200yd before you get here. A cauldron of the stew will set you back about \$18 and serves at least two people.

### Getting There & Away

Públicos link Yabucoa with the nearby urban centers of Humacao (\$3) and Maunabo (\$2), with connections onto Fajardo and San Juan. A new tunnel on Hwy 3 connects Yabucoa and Maunabo, although the oceanside Hwy 901 is a far more scenic route (especially if you're on a bike).

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'