

West Coast



'Go West, surfer dude,' was the unofficial mantra for a whole generation of '60s wave-riders who ran out of untrammelled Californian coastline to colonize. Intuitively, they switched south to a utopia not too far removed from the golden sands that they had left behind. Puerto Rico's west coast is a paradisiacal amalgam of crashing surf, sultry fishing villages and psychedelic sunsets. Its pièce de résistance is Rincón, a tropical surfin' safari that throws grizzled expats among wacky locals in a laid-back town that was once immortalized in a song by the Beach Boys.

Collectively rebranded and renamed, Puerto Rico's 'Wild West' now goes under the rather anodyne pseudonym of Porta del Sol (Gateway to the Sun), a tourist-company invention that does little justice to its diverse scenery and colorful heritage. San Juan – although only two hours' drive to the east – is a distant memory out here in a grandiose land of stormy shorelines and blinking lighthouses where resorts are low-key and deep-fried cod fritters from a Caribbean food shack are considered a cordon bleu meal.

Even the region's biggest city Mayagüez retains a proud and slightly bolshie sense of independence, stoked perhaps by the belief that Columbus allegedly hit these shores first. Adding authenticity to myth is San Germán, the island's second-oldest city with colonial relics to rival anything in Mexico, and Boquerón, one of the commonwealth's most down-to-earth fishing villages with an atmosphere that is more Montego Bay than South Beach.

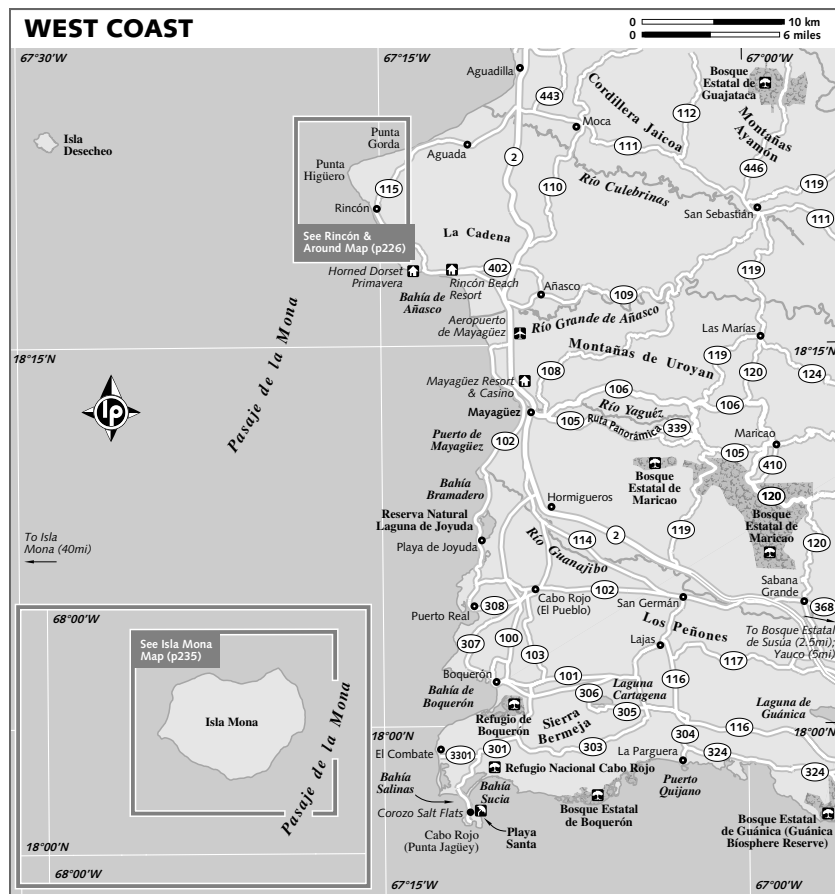
The southwest also has nature, a compact triangle of land around the Cabo Rojo lighthouse that falls outside Puerto Rico's main road grid and defies conventional island ecology with its prickly cacti and eerie salt flats.

HIGHLIGHTS

- 'Taking the tube' and 'walking the nose' with a posse of multitalented, multinational surfers in **Rincón** (p228)
- Bargaining at myriad seafood stalls along Calle José de Diego in downbeat **Boquerón** (p213)
- Contemplating the well-preserved architectural artifacts of colonial **San Germán** (p217)
- Climbing an observation tower to spy abundant birdlife at the **Corozo Salt Flats** (p211)
- Experiencing the animated but subtle local vibe in lovingly restored Plaza Colón in **Mayagüez** (p221)
- Braving rough seas to visit the 'Galápagos of Puerto Rico' on **Isla Mona** (p234)



■ POPULATION: 400,000



History

The consensus is that Columbus first arrived in Puerto Rico in November 1493 and docked somewhere off the west coast (though there is some dispute as to actually *where*). Fifteen years later he was followed by Juan Ponce de León who landed near Cabo Rojo before heading off north to found the settlement of Caparra. San Germán, the island's second-oldest city, was founded near Mayagüez in 1511 and moved to its present site in 1573. More recently, the west has spawned many great liberal thinkers including Dr Ramón Emeterio Betances, the inspiration behind the revolutionary Grito de Lares (p35) in 1868. The details of this abortive rebellion were fine-tuned in a series of safe houses on the outskirts of Mayagüez.

Climate

The west coast of Puerto Rico is pleasantly hot all year round. Late in the summer and early in the fall rains get heavy. Otherwise, it's sunny, breezy and around 80°F nearly every day.

Territorial Parks & Reserves

The 4775-acre Bosque Estatal de Boquerón is split into eight different segments spread around the Cabo Rojo area. The two of most interest to travelers are the Refugio de Boquerón (p214) with its mangrove wetlands and excellent bird-watching opportunities, and the Reserva Natural Laguna de Joyuda (p217) which plays host to numerous species of waterfowl. Close by, the Refugio

Nacional Cabo Rojo (p212) is another bird-watchers haven with trails, a visitor's center and guided hikes.

In the foothills of the Central Mountains further east the 3300-acre Bosque Estatal de Susúa (p219) exhibits an interesting blend of dry forest and tropical jungle.

Getting There & Around

The west is easily accessed by Hwy 2, the island's nominal ring road – although it's not as fast as the newer toll roads further east. Públicos serve most of the main towns, with Mayagüez acting as the regional hub. You can fly direct from the US into Aguadilla airport 30 minutes northeast of Rincón. Mayagüez also has its own airport (flights from San Juan and the US Virgin Islands only). The area around Cabo Rojo southwest of Hwy 2 is ideal for cycling.

CABO ROJO

Cabo Rojo (Red Cape) is the name of both a small administrative town, 8 miles west of San Germán, and the wider municipality that surrounds it. To add to the confusion, it is also the name used to describe the rugged coastline that constitutes Puerto Rico's extreme southwestern tip. Characterized by rust-red limestone cliffs that fall precipitously away into the ocean, the region is dominated by the Faro de Cabo Rojo (Red Cape Lighthouse), which sits atop a wild and windswept promontory surrounded by coastal mangroves, dry cacti and crystalline salt pans.

Busy Hwy 2 cuts inland west of Yaucó, leaving this rather isolated corner of the island refreshingly untrammelled and unspoiled. There's an extensive patchwork of wildlife refuges here along with a quiet network of country roads that make for excellent cycling. Closer to the lighthouse you'll find trails, extensive salt pans and the bejeweled but little-known Playuela Beach. In-the-know locals will tell you in surreptitious whispers that this is one of the island's best stretches of sand.

The Cabo Rojo municipality incorporates the settlements of Boquerón, El Combate, Playa de Joyuda and Cabo Rojo (El Pueblo), which lies 10 miles north of the eponymous cape. There's little to see in the town today aside from a small museum dedicated to local heroes such as Dr Ramón Emeterio Betances,

the father of Puerto Rico's independence movement, and Roberto Confresí, a once notorious local pirate. The best selection of accommodations lie in Boquerón and the best restaurants in Joyuda.

Information

The Porta del Sol branch of the **Puerto Rico Tourism Company** (PRTC; ☎ 787-255-1560; www.gotopuertorico.com; La Campana Bldg, Muñoz Rivera; ☎ 8am-4pm) is located in Cabo Rojo (El Pueblo).

Sights & Activities

MUSEO DE LOS PROCERES

If you've got a half hour to kill in the town of Cabo Rojo and have more than a passing interest in Puerto Rican history, this small **museum** (☎ 787-255-1560; Rte 312 Km 0.5; admission free; ☎ 7am-4pm Tue-Fri, 8am-4:30pm Sat) can enlighten you on local painting, indigenous Taino culture and the life and times of various 19th-century liberal luminaries such as native-born Ramón Emeterio Betances.

COROZO SALT FLATS, PUNTA JAGÜEY & PLAYA SANTA

For a serene drive through undeveloped coastal plain or a cycling adventure, approach Cabo Rojo from La Parguera (p205) via Hwy 304, Hwy 305 and Hwy 303. Then follow Hwy 301 south until it turns to dirt, where you'll traverse a spit of sand between Bahía Salinas (Salt Bay) and the aptly named Bahía Sucia (Dirty Bay).

Vast salt flats surround this narrow peninsula, especially to the east; humans have been gathering salt here since AD 700. When the first Spaniards arrived, they quickly took over the evaporation pools used by the Taino to collect salt and expanded the business, making it a sustaining force in the local economy until efficient sugarcane farming arrived in the 18th century.

At the Corozo Salt Flats you'll see pools of evaporating brine and mounds of salt waiting to be shipped to market alongside the dirt road as you head south toward the headland of Punta Jagüey, where scrub forest sets in and the land rises to the steep limestone cliffs. Go to the end of the road and park on the left near the crescent beach known as Playa Santa. Although this is not a designated camping area, Puerto Ricans have been pitching tents on Playa Santa for years. Swimming is safe, but salty.

REFUGIO NACIONAL CABO ROJO

This **refuge** (☎ 787-851-7258, ext 35; Hwy 301 Km 5.1; admission free; 🕒 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) is about a mile north of the Hwy 3301 turnoff to El Combate. Its visitors center contains displays on local wildlife and wildlife management techniques. Outdoors you will find bird-watching trails among the ruins of an old farmstead in the Valle de Lajas (Lajas Valley). This area around the coastal plains and shores of Cabo Rojo is a major winter ground for migratory ducks, herons and songbirds, and more than 130 bird species have been sighted here. You can arrange guided hikes through the refuge at the Centro Interpretativos Las Salinas de Cabo Rojo (below).

CENTRO INTERPRETATIVOS LAS SALINAS DE CABO ROJO

A small **center** (☎ 787-851-2999; Hwy 301 Km 11; admission free; 🕒 8:30am-4:30pm Wed-Sat, 9:30am-5:30pm Sun) further south along Hwy 301 toward the lighthouse explains the geology and ecology of the salt pans. It is staffed by knowledgeable ecosensitive guides who can give thorough explanations of the local flora and fauna. Across the road is a three-story wooden lookout tower that offers a bird's-eye view of the salt pans, a major bird migratory corridor.

CYCLING

There are numerous cycling trails around the Cabo Rojo lighthouse and wildlife refuge. Ask at the Centro Interpretativos Las Salinas de Cabo Rojo (above) for details. The nearest bike rental is at the **Wheel Shop** (☎ 787-255-0095; www.wheelshoppr.com, in Spanish; Hwy 100 Km 5.9) in Cabo Rojo (El Pueblo). Expect to pay from \$20 per day.

Sleeping & Eating

Punta Aguila Resort (☎ 787-254-4954; Hwy 301 Km 11.5; r \$100-160; 📞 📺 🚿) Next door to Parador Bahía Salinas Beach Hotel and palming somewhat by comparison, this small resort rents out a variety of efficiency apartments in a multilevel condo-style building facing the Pasaje de la Mona. There is a free-form pool and seaside cabanas (for shade).

Parador Bahía Salinas Beach Hotel (☎ 787-254-1212; www.bahiasalinas.com; Hwy 301 Km 11.5; r \$150-190; 📞 📺 🚿) As if the location wasn't enough – rust-red cliffs, salt flats and an adjacent wildlife refuge – this gorgeous parador goes one step further. Imagine drape-covered sun loungers,

TOP AUTHENTIC PUERTO RICAN EXPERIENCES

- Sampling Brazo Gitano at E Franco & Co in Mayagüez (p224)
- Hitting the Surfer's beach at Dogman's in Rincón (p229)
- Sunday Service at the Catedral de San Germán de Auxerre in San German (p219)
- Strolling along the 'Gourmet Golden Mile' in Playa Joyuda (p216)
- Soaking up the late night ambience of the beachside strip in Boquerón (p216)

canopy beds and marble statues of lions and maidens surrounding an infinity pool that frames some of the island's most spectacular sunsets. Added to this is the award-winning Aqua al Cuello Restaurant (below) and Bohemio Bar where you can recline next to the lapping ocean waves amid pretty palms and lush vegetation in perfect serenity. In contrast to bigger resorts, the low-rise, low-key Bahía Salinas is gentle with the environment and threads its luxury quite seamlessly into the surrounding landscape.

Aqua al Cuello Restaurant (☎ 787-254-1212; www.bahiasalinas.com; Parador Bahía Salinas Beach Hotel, Hwy 301 Km 11.5; meals \$8-28; 🕒 lunch & dinner) On a beautiful deck over the water this place cooks up equally beautiful food that has bagged it Puerto Rico's best Mesón Gastronómico award in recent years. The mahimahi in creole sauce is backed up by some surprising specials. Ever tried kangaroo?

Getting There & Away

There is no regular público service available to the Punta Jagüey area, which is the most remote corner of the island. Some days there is a morning público that runs between the town of Cabo Rojo (El Pueblo) and the point, but you can't count on it. A more reliable option is to come by rental car or bike (following the route from La Parguera via Hwy 304, Hwy 305 and Hwy 303; see p211).

EL COMBATE

Named after a 1759 colonial turf war waged for control of the lucrative salt flats to the south, El Combate (The Battle) retains its wayward and embattled image. Indeed, people

from this gritty seaside settlement, wedged incongruously between Boquerón beach and the Cabo Rojo lighthouse, are still known locally as Los Mata con Hacha (Those Who Kill with Axes) for their historical penchant to wield sharp weaponry against rivals from the nearby town of Lajas.

Situated at the end of Hwy 3301, a short spur road that branches west from Hwy 301, El Combate today is an untidy sprawl of tawdry guesthouses, backyard trailer-camping sites, beach houses and restaurants. But while the down-at-heel bar scene might be a little on the rough side, the thin 3-mile-long strip of sand that affronts the Pasaje de la Mona is a perennially popular vacation spot for Puerto Rican families and high-school and college kids looking for some fun during the weekends.

Sleeping & Eating

Luichy Sea Food Restaurant & Guest House (☎ 787-254-7053; Hwy 3301 Km 2.9; r \$80-100; 📞 📺 🚿) Among more than half a dozen guesthouses at the south end of town, this place is a good bet for cleanliness. Rooms are very basic with private bathrooms.

Combate Beach Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 787-254-7053; Hwy 3301 Km 2.7; d/q \$90/110; 📞 📺 🚿) A favorite oasis in El Combate, this hotel is right on the beach about a quarter of a mile from all the development in the town. The motel-style rooms are simple but clean with private bathrooms. There's a casual restaurant serving seafood and *comida criolla* (traditional Puerto Rican cuisine).

Villas Mojacasabe (☎ 787-254-4888; www.mojacasabe.com; Hwy 3301 Km 3.2; r/cabins \$90/141; 📞 📺 🚿) Nothing fancy here; then again, it is El Combate. Built inside a sturdy fence on the north side of the village, these cabins come in concrete or wood and sleep up to six people. There are also double bedrooms in a larger block. Scattered around the complex is an amusement hall with a bar, a boardwalk and a launch ramp for boats. The crowds pile in to listen to live Latin rock, salsa and merengue on weekends, so don't expect too much tranquility.

Annie's Place (☎ 787-254-0021; Hwy 3301 Km 2.9; mains \$5-15) Annie's is a bar and restaurant with great *empanadillas* (dough stuffed with meat or fish), lobster soup, fish salad and homemade burgers. Right on the water, it's very popular in the early evening when

young kids on double dates drop by to play billiards and watch the sun set.

Getting There & Away

Públicos run frequently to and from the town of Cabo Rojo (El Pueblo) from April to the end of August (\$2). In Cabo Rojo you can connect to Mayagüez (\$4, 30 minutes) or Ponce (\$7, two hours).

If you're arriving by car, El Combate is at the bitter end of Hwy 3301. Go west at the turnoff from Hwy 301.

BOQUERÓN

pop 8000

Easy-going Boquerón, where Puerto Rico meets the Caribbean with a cool Calypso twist, is a colorful west-coast fishing community with wooden-shack restaurants and open-air food stalls that pulsates at weekends to a jaunty but inherently Puerto Rican nightlife. Rightly famous for its sheltered balneario (public beach) and up-and-coming marina, Boquerón is surrounded by a verdant patchwork of refuges, nature reserves and state forests – a nuance that lends the settlement a refreshing small-town, semi-rural feel. Down here in the island's extreme southwestern corner, a tangible sense of isolation contrasts with the maelstrom elsewhere and many stressed-out *sanjuaneros* happily tackle the three-hour drive from the capital to bliss out on the region's palm-shaded beaches.

Historically, Boquerón's legacy is possibly even older than Caparra's. Certain scholars have claimed that this is where Columbus first set anchor when he 'discovered' the island of Puerto Rico in 1493. However, no town existed here until the 1700s and the new colony's administrative focus was ultimately centered further to the east.

Boquerón attracts travelers of all types, from cell-phone-wielding yacht owners to colorfully attired Rastafarians, and has lately become a favorite destination for wealthy islanders. But with few restaurants outside the standard mom-and-pop luncheonettes and zero resort hotels, the atmosphere remains informal and relaxed. There's a lot of fun to be had at the waterfront here, particularly at night when the two main roads are shut down to traffic and people can indulge in that favorite Caribbean pastime of *limin'* – hanging out, chilling, and moving from one bar to another with a drink in hand.

Sights

REFUGIO DE BOQUERÓN

The western part of the Bosque Estatal de Boquerón carries the name Refugio de Boquerón. It is made up of more than 400 acres of mangrove wetlands, about 2 miles south of town between the coast and Hwy 301. This is an excellent area for bird-watching; more than 60 species are commonly sighted. A number of duck species migrate here in the winter, as well as osprey and mangrove canary. An excellent way to see this sanctuary is to rent a kayak (right) and paddle south across Bahía de Boquerón (Boquerón Bay). The **main office** (☎ 787-851-7260; Rte 101 Km 1.1, Boquerón; ☎ 7:30am-3:30pm) can provide more information and has a 700ft walkway leading into the mangroves. Or stop at Km 1.1 just off Rte 101 and start walking along the trail you see there. Insect repellent is a must-carry in dry season, as is water, and always watch where you put your feet: tiny crabs scuttle about.

BEACHES

Rated as one of the best public beaches in Puerto Rico (along with Luquillo), the **Balneario Boquerón** (parking \$3) is a mile-long arc of sand backed by coconut palms and ample grassy lawns. Facilities include showers, changing rooms, toilets and picnic tables. The waters here are calm making it popular with Frisbee-throwing families who come down at weekends. To get there turn left (heading towards town) off Hwy 101 at the Boquerón Beach Hotel and proceed along a small spur road for a ¼-mile.

Playa Buyé is a smaller palm-fringed beach that's about 2½ miles north of town off Hwy 307.

Activities

DIVING & SNORKELING

Next to the *club náutico* (marina), west of the center of town, **Mona Aquatics** (☎ 787-851-2185; Calle José de Diego; www.monaaquatics.com) has a 40ft dive boat – *Orca Too* – that takes you on local dives (\$125) or longer excursions to Isla Desecho (\$150). Prices include snack, weights, instruction and two dives. Mona Aquatics also rents out snorkeling gear and operates boats to Isla Mona (p234).

Nearby La Parguera has good diving and snorkeling opportunities as well (see p206).

KAYAKING

North of Shamar Bar-Restaurant & Hotel you'll find **Kaipo Kayak Rentals** (☎ 787-254-3413; Calle José de Diego), which rents out boats, kayaks and surf bikes (half surfboard, half bicycle) at hour and day rates.

Boquerón Kayak Rental (☎ 787-255-1849; Calle José de Diego) has pedal boats and surf bikes, as well as kayaks (all from \$15 per hour). Boat rides are also available. Cash only.

GOLF

Near the intersection of Hwy 102 and Hwy 308 in Cabo Rojo (El Pueblo) is **Club Deportivo de Oeste** (☎ 787-851-8880; greens fee walk/cart from \$10/30). It's a Jack Bender–designed 18-hole course with a panoramic view along its 3360yd. Greens fees vary depending on the time you play.

Sleeping

Shamar Bar-Restaurant & Hotel (☎ 787-851-0542; Calle José de Diego; r \$60-85) If you've been backpacking around Thailand you'll know the deal – a glorified beach bar that sells cheap snacks and rents out slightly more expensive 'shacks.' Clean, bright and comfy – though not particularly quiet – the upstairs rooms are good crash pads if you want to be in the thick of Boquerón's small but vibrant commercial strip. For history buffs, the Shamar is the oldest commercial building in Boquerón and has been a working bar for more than 50 years.

Centro Vacacional Boquerón (☎ 787-851-1900; reservations 787-622-5200; apt s/d \$68/109) Each of the 158 apartments (in two-story duplex units) holds six people and comes with bathroom, kitchen, bunk beds and ceiling fans. Activity rooms, a convenience store and a first-aid station are on the premises. The place gets booked a year in advance for summer and holidays; it's right on the beach.

Buyé Beach Resort (☎ 787-255-0358; Hwy 30 Km 4.8; cabins \$75; ☎ ☎) Located on a popular beach north of town, this clean and simple operation has 16 cabins on the beach. Each cabin accommodates three to four people and includes a private bathroom and kitchen. There is a coin laundry here, too.

Adamari's Apartments (☎ 787-851-6860; Calle José de Diego; r \$85; ☎ ☎) Adamari's is the tall building right next to Parador Boquemar, with a laundrette out the front. While not state of the art, this place does have nine

clean efficiency apartments (each with a kitchenette and many with ocean views).

Parador Boquemar (☎ 787-851-2158; Calle José de Diego; r \$85-110; ☎ ☎ ☎) There's a bit of a rabbit-hutch feel to the 60 generic rooms here, which are piled on top of each other over three crowded stories. That said, because this is Boquerón and because you're essentially 'downtown,' the Boquemar is rather popular. In common with standard Puerto Rican paradises, there's a pool, an above-average on-site restaurant and friendly down-to-earth service.

El Muelle Guest House (☎ 787-254-2801; Calle José de Diego; apt \$85-125; ☎ ☎) For a quiet night, El Muelle's the best bet. Rooms are spacious and have been nicely decorated. Check carefully for cleanliness before handing over any cash; it's a good idea to ask to see the room before agreeing to anything. Prices drop in the low season.

Boquerón Beach Hotel (☎ 787-851-7110; www.boqueronbeachhotel.com; r \$88-149; ☎ ☎ ☎) Plunked conveniently at the turnoff for the balneario (a quarter of a mile away and the primary reason why a lot of people visit the area), the Boquerón Beach Hotel offers good bang for your buck. Rooms in the front have been re-decorated and are now passably pretty. You certainly won't fall in love with this place, but it's clean, brightly painted and efficiently run. Beware of the beach tag – it's actually on a busy road.

Cofresi Beach Hotel (☎ 787-254-3000; www.cofresi.beach.com; 57 Calle Muñoz Rivera; apt \$89-219; ☎) OK, so it's not exactly a hotel, rather it's a three-story building with one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments for rent. Each unit is fully equipped, including a microwave and TV with VCR, and there's a limited maid service available by pre-arrangement. There's a view of the bay from the pool.

Wildflowers (☎ 787-851-1793; 13 Calle Muñoz Rivera; r \$100-125; ☎ ☎) An attractive Victorian-era house in the heart of Boquerón, Wildflowers feels like a homey B&B out of a small New England town. Doubling up as a gallery, both the cozy rooms and sleek communal areas display the work of deft local artists. There's no maid service or breakfast, but economically priced rooms can sleep up to four and there's shared use of a microwave and coffee machine along with private refrigerators. Dark-wood floors and furnishings add a dash of 19th-century romance.

Eating

Shamar Bar-Restaurant & Hotel (☎ 787-851-0542; Calle José de Diego; lunch \$2-7) Need a seat? Tough luck, the Shamar doesn't have any, unless you can locate one of its much-sought-after bar stools or are happy perching on the corner of the pool table while your partner cleans up. Right up against the water, this laid-back beach joint is where you come in your swimming gear to order anything and everything – as long as it's deep-fried. Try the empanadas or the tasty *surullitos* (fried cornmeal and cheese sticks) and come back in the evening when the action really kicks off (see p216).

Fish Net (☎ 787-859-6009; Calle José de Diego; mains \$5-20) Boquerón is famous for its fish and this is as good a place as any to get it. In keeping with the image of the downbeat town center, there's nothing fancy about the decor here. But Boquerón has always been more about authenticity than architectural awards. Owner Roberto is the local Jamie Oliver and has been known to serve up a mean *pilones* (mashed plantain mixed with shrimps and salsa).

Pizzeria Lykken (☎ 787-851-6335; Calle José de Diego; pizza \$8-15) Mimicking the main strip's vaguely Caribbean/bohemian air, the Lykken has myriad beads, jewelry and mobiles hanging from its wooden rafters. Its specialty is pizza, but you can get much more here, including potent cocktails.

Pika-Pika (☎ 787-851-2440; 224 Calle Estación; mains \$12-24) A first-rate Mexican cantina located on Boquerón's back street, just a short block north of all the commerce on Calle José de Diego. Deep-dish burritos and tacos are savory and can be prepared vegetarian-style.

Galloway's Bar & Restaurant (☎ 787-254-3302; Calle José de Diego; dinner mains \$12-24) 'Snowbirds Welcome' reads the sign out the front, but those four-seasoned spring-breakers from Minneapolis you've just spied sitting out on the waterfront deck aren't the only birds pecking at the food. Small black feathered creatures will make a beeline for any spare tasty morsels, so hold on to your seafood crab salad and freshly prepared octopus before it all ends up as birdfeed. Something of a local legend, Galloway's combines great seafood with a picturesque waterfront setting on Boquerón's rustic downtown strip. It's terrific for children, too.

Entertainment

The minute you hit the ground running in Boquerón you can tell from the shabby-chic bars and relaxed Caribbean ambience that this is a party town. Strangely, it is also one of the few towns on the island that puts a cap on serving alcohol – midnight on weekdays, 1am on weekends.

Shamar Bar-Restaurant & Hotel (☎ 787-851-0542; Calle José de Diego) Shirtless dudes down beers at the bar, reggaeton blasts out of the speakers set up in the street outside, and the pool table becomes a psychological battleground between well-known cue masters and wannabe hustlers; the Shamar is that kind of place – laid-back, cool and friendly on its own terms. People jams can occur at the bar during happy hour, but the street's a good refuge, as is the space out front which offers up a nightly show of awe-inspiring sunsets. Dress down, polish up on your Puerto Rican slang, and try not to look too geeky when you shimmy your hips to the live salsa.

Galloways Bar & Restaurant (☎ 787-254-3302; Calle José de Diego) All pretense of being a restaurant is dropped by 9pm on weekends, when a yuppie crowd shows up for live 1980s and '90s rock. There's live Spanish guitar music on Sundays.

Crash Boat Café (☎ 787-851-5003; Calle José de Diego; ☹ 9pm-3am) Wedged with its bows sticking out into the bay, the Crash Boat is – exactly as its name implies – shaped rather ingeniously like a crashed boat. The bar is in the bows and sports an authentic ship's wheel along with some deftly sculpted male torsos (minus heads). Behind is a stage where live music entertains a mixed bag of gay and straight revelers with techno, house and reggaeton music. Trendy without being trashy, this is quite the place for a raucous late-night beer or six.

Getting There & Away

The easiest way to get to Boquerón by público is via the town of Cabo Rojo (El Pueblo). From April to August, it's easy to find one for about \$2. From El Pueblo, you can also catch a van to Mayagüez (\$4, 40 minutes), Ponce (\$7, two hours) or San Germán (\$5, 20 minutes).

If you're driving from El Pueblo or Mayagüez, follow Hwy 100 south to Hwy 101 and turn right (west). Driving from San Germán, it's a straight shot west on Hwy 101 south of Lajas.

PUERTO REAL

Another coastal village that is part of the Cabo Rojo municipality, Puerto Real lies about 4 miles north of Boquerón (follow Hwy 307 north and then head west on Hwy 308) and is frequently referred to as 'the biggest fishing port on the west coast.' That's not saying much on an island where fishing brings in less than 1% of the GNP, but Puerto Real is starting to look a bit more prosperous with extra yachts at the docks these days.

Water-sports enthusiasts should not overlook this port. The local marina operator offers first-rate diving trips, and whale-watching, as well as boat safaris out to the marine sanctuary of Isla Mona, 50 miles offshore.

Captain Bill Casperson, who you will find at **Driftwood Charters** (☎ 787-323-8682), can take you on half-day snorkeling trips, two-tank dives from a 46ft dive boat and whale-watching trips; call for prices.

You can access Puerto Real via público from the station on the eastern fringe of Cabo Rojo (El Pueblo). The trip costs \$2. These vans don't leave in a timely fashion, so don't depend on them if you are planning to make a fixed departure time for a diving or nautical excursion.

PLAYA DE JOYUDA

Acting as a kind of alternative Boquerón, Joyuda is famous for its cheap seafood restaurants and known island-wide as the Milla de Oro del Buen Comer (Gourmet Golden Mile). More than 35 family-owned eating establishments specializing in oysters, crab and shrimp have popped up in recent decades along a 3-mile stretch of Hwy 102. They abut a scrubby shoreline of sand and dirt that has suffered after years of coastal erosion. Problems with erosion in 2006 led to the island's temporary closure while local biologists replanted the coastal areas with *Mangle rojo* (red mangrove).

While Joyuda isn't a standard beach haven, there are plenty of accommodation options in this sprawling west-coast outpost, and with a couple of decent sailing/dive operators and a nearby nature reserve, there's enough outdoor adventures to work up an appetite for an evening of shellfish-restaurant-hopping. Just offshore, the tiny Isla de Ratonés has a white sandy beach and is great for snorkeling.

Sights & Activities

The heart of the 300-acre **Reserva Natural Laguna de Joyuda** is a saltwater lagoon a mile long and a half-mile wide, with a depth that rarely exceeds 4ft. The sanctuary is of great importance to waterfowl and other migratory birds that come here to prey on more than 40 species of fish. Humans come here for the same reason.

The reserve is also home to another of Puerto Rico's famous bioluminescent bodies of water, which is like its famous cousins in La Parguera and Vieques but free of commercial tourism. After dark, micro-organisms give the dark water a green glow. Travelers with access to a kayak can launch a nighttime exploration of the lagoon; watch for the access road off Hwy 102 near Parador Perichi's.

For trips or tours around the area on a 33ft lobster boat, try **Tourmarine Adventures** (☎ 787-375-2625; www.tourmarinepr.com; Rte 102 Km 14.1). If you've got a big enough group (10 or more people), the owner will arrange trips to Isla Mona for approximately \$150 per person. There are also snorkeling trips offered around the nearby cliffs (\$40 without equipment), deep-sea fishing in the Pasaje de la Mona (\$375 per half-day charter) and diving off Isla Desecheo (\$75 per person). The owner also has a handful of apartments for rent.

Sleeping

Hotel Costa de Oro Inn (☎ 787-851-5010; Rte 102 Km 14.7; r\$50-85; 🏠) A tiny pool and spotless rooms make this little guesthouse a great deal. There are no big luxuries on the property, but you'll be very comfortable.

Joyuda Plaza (☎ 787-851-8800; Hwy 102 Km 14.7; r\$65-125; 🏠 🍷 🍷) If you're a sucker for luxury then you shouldn't really be staying in Joyuda in the first place, though this 55-room hotel on the famous seafood strip does the job in terms of facilities and friendliness. There are TVs, private room phones, two swimming pools, corporate meeting facilities and some of the best fish restaurants in Puerto Rico a mere rod and line's length from the front door.

Parador Joyuda Beach (☎ 787-851-5650; Hwy 102 Km 11.7; r\$70-125; 🏠 🍷 🍷) Further up the road from Parador Perichi's and the Joyuda Plaza, this hotel is actually on a narrow strand of beach (as opposed to the other hotels that abut a road and a muddy shoreline). It's not exactly Boquerón, but the snorkeling right offshore is OK, as long as the wind stays southerly. The hotel has a restaurant, a swimming pool and 41

standard rooms with those ubiquitous flowery bedspreads. Arrive expecting a tropical-flavored motel and you shouldn't be disappointed.

Parador Perichi's (☎ 787-435-7197; Rte 102 Km 14.3; r\$75-139; 🏠 🍷 🍷) Close to Joyuda Plaza and across the road from the ocean (but no beach), Perichi's is high-end Joyuda style (which is a bit of an oxymoron). More popular with Puerto Ricans than Americans, it's definitely seen better days, although the 41 rooms have air-con, there's a large pool downstairs and the on-site restaurant carries a Mesón Gastronómico tag.

Eating

Joyuda is a great place for a bit of culinary exploration. Park your car or bike, stroll up and down the strip a few times and see where your nose leads you. For informal dining, locals swear by El Bohío, Raito and Vista Bahía. Others champion El Gato Negro. You might end up in all or none of these, sampling lobster, *mofongo* (mashed plantains), oysters or crab. Joyuda's restaurants aren't always fancy in terms of decor, but the food is legendary – and for good reason. If you're really short on time the following two places are tried and proven.

Island View (☎ 787-851-9264; Hwy 102 Km 13.7; dishes \$7-21; ☹ lunch & dinner Thu-Tue) Great views of the few small cays that dot the water off the coast and big steaming dishes of seafood specialties, such as rice and crab, have made Island View very popular.

Tino's (☎ 787-851-2976; Hwy 102 Km 13.6; dishes \$10-25; ☹ lunch & dinner Wed-Sun) If you want a really nice meal – with real silverware and paper plates that don't bend under their load – then Tino's is your best bet in Joyuda. It's not got the pretty views, but it does have the tourist office's stamp of approval as a Mesón Gastronómico.

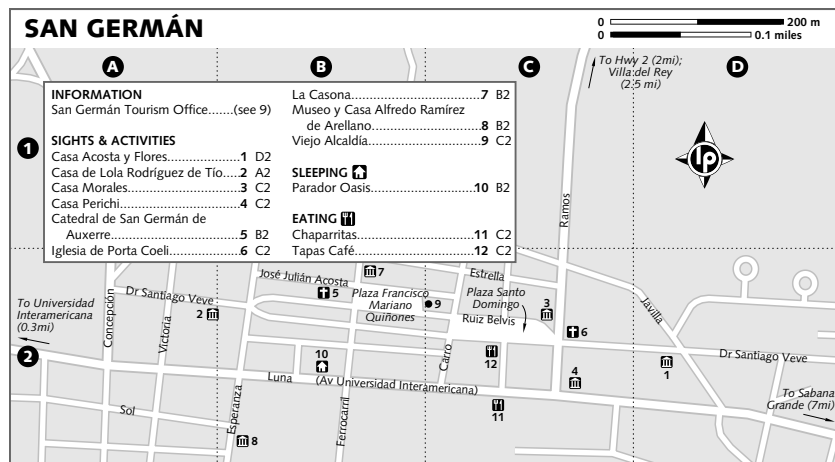
Getting There & Away

Joyuda isn't on a regular público route, but you can drive here easily enough from either Mayagüez or Cabo Rojo on Rte 102. Alternatively, take a taxi or hire a bike from The Wheel Shop in Cabo Rojo (p212).

SAN GERMÁN

pop 37,700

Puerto Rico's second-oldest city (after San Juan), San Germán is also one of its best preserved. Founded in 1511 near present-day Mayagüez on the orders of Juan Ponce



de León, the original coastal settlement was moved twice in its early life to escape the unwelcome attention of plundering French corsairs. The current town, which lies about 10 miles inland from the Cabo Rojo coast, was established in 1573 and once administered a municipality that encompassed the whole western half of the island. Downsizing itself over the ensuing four centuries, contemporary San Germán (named for Germaine de Foix, the second wife of Spain's King Ferdinand) is far more unassuming than the colonial capital of yore, although the historical buildings – some of which date from the 17th century – retain a regal grandiosity.

Despite its rich architectural heritage and lofty listing on the National Register of Historic Places, San Germán is largely ignored by its modern inhabitants. Few tourists make it this far either. As a result, the classic four-square-block colonial center – laid out in an unusual irregular pattern – is a veritable ghost town after dark as busy locals head for out-of-town shopping malls and time-poor travelers whiz past on their way to Boquerón and the beaches. The city's one downtown hotel sports cobwebs, few of the numerous historic buildings are open for public viewing, and the uninspiring nightlife is confined to just one – admittedly good – tapas restaurant.

Fortuitously, San Germán's semi-abandonment lends it an air of authenticity. It is also one of the few settlements in Puerto Rico where the central city core hasn't been demeaned by thoughtless development.

Information

The government recently changed the name of Calle Luna to Av Universidad Interamericana; nobody uses it, however, so addresses in this book still refer to Calle Luna.

San Germán Tourism Office (☎ 787-892-3790; Viejo Alcaldía, Plaza Francisco Mariano Quiñones; ☎ 8am-4pm) This office also runs the San Germán trolley bus around the town's main sights, but schedules are erratic; phone ahead.

Sights

IGLESIA DE PORTA COELI

This small church might not look much, but it is actually one of the oldest surviving ecclesial buildings in the Americas. Originally constructed between 1606 and 1607 on the orders of Queen Isabella of Spain, it once served as the chapel for a Dominican monastery that stood on this site until the 1860s. The current structure dates from a 1692 renovation and despite its architectural simplicity it retains a dramatic position at the crown of a long, steep flight of steps overlooking Plaza Santo Domingo. The Porta Coeli ('Heaven's Gate' in Latin) has an interior with ausubo pillars and roof beams, and a ceiling made from palm wood, which is typical of construction in Puerto Rico during the 17th and 18th centuries. Inside, a small **museum** (☎ 787-892-5845; Plaza Santo Domingo; admission \$1; ☎ 8:30am-4:30pm Wed-Sun) displays statues of the black Virgin of Montserrat, folksy carvings of Christ imported from the early days of San Juan, choral books dating back 300 years and other curios.

CATEDRAL DE SAN GERMÁN DE AUXERRE

San Germán's **cathedral** (☎ 787-892-1027; ☎ 8-11:30am & 1-3pm Mon-Fri, 8-11am Sat, mass 7am & 7:30pm Mon-Sat, 7am, 8:30am, 10am & 7:30pm Sun) is named for the town's patron saint and is noticeably grander than the diminutive Porta Coeli. Facing Plaza Francisco Mariano Quiñones, it dates back to 1739, but major restorations and expansions over the years (especially in the 19th century) have created a mélange of architectural styles, including colonial, neo-classical and baroque elements. This is an active parish; if you visit for a Saturday or Sunday service, take note of the crystal chandelier that helps to light the main nave and the trompe l'oeil fresco.

CASA PERICHI

Situated on the main drag, this **house** (94 Luna) is a 1920s estate that's been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1986. Its eclectic architectural style featuring wraparound balconies and decorative wood trim has been called 'Puerto Rican ornamental artisan.' It's not currently open for public viewing.

CASA MORALES

Highlighting the eclecticism and historical diversity of San Germán's architecture this Victorian-era **house** (38 Ramos) was built soon after the American occupation in

1898. With its gables, porches and roof turrets, it is redolent of a Queen Anne-style structure from the plush neighborhood of a US mainland city. It also exemplifies how quickly American aesthetics infiltrated the island. It is a private home and not open to the public.

CASA ACOSTA Y FLORES

Built in a crisscross of styles, this **house** (70 Dr Santiago Veve), dating from 1917, exhibits elements of criollo, Victorian and art-nouveau architecture. Painted in cream and white with intricately decorated iron railing it resembles a beautifully crafted wedding cake. The house is a private residence, but can be admired from the outside.

VIEJO ALCALDÍA

The old city hall, which acts as a dividing line between the city's two central squares, is a classic example of a 19th-century colonial municipal building with its stately facade and cool inner courtyard. The building currently serves as a police station and the headquarters for San Germán's rather low-key tourist office (opposite).

LA CASONA

The beguiling yellow and blue Spanish-colonial building that dominates the north side of Plaza Francisco Mariano Quiñones is

DETOUR: BOSQUE ESTATAL DE SUSÚA

Although geographically Susúa lies closer to the south coast than the west, locals in San Germán have long considered it their backyard and have subsequently claimed unofficial 'ownership' rights. Juxtaposed between the dry coastal flats and the humid mountain foothills of the Cordillera Central, the forest's diminutive 3300 acres is certainly no Yellowstone; indeed, it's only marginally bigger than Puerto Rico's largest resort, the gargantuan Palmas del Mar on the east coast.

But what it lacks in acres it makes up for in peaceful solitude. Well off the main tourist trails and notoriously difficult to find, Susúa is invariably deserted year-round – save for the odd binocular-wielding ornithologist (the forest boasts 44 species of bird) and in-the-know mountain biker.

To get here, drive east out of Sabana Grande on Rte 368 to Km 2.1. Turn left and keep going until you arrive at the shack for the **Departamento de Recursos Naturales y Ambientales** (DRNA; Department of Natural Resources & Environment; ☎ 787-721-5495; admission free; ☎ 7am-3:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun). There's not much in the way of amenities at the entrance – just a few picnic tables, a toilet, a scattering of fire pits and some campsites (though you'd be wise to check on availability/hours before arrival; camping per tent \$4).

The hiking trails that leave from the entrance are – surprise, surprise – poorly marked and can be quite hard to find. Speak to a ranger and they should be able to furnish you with a hand-drawn, worryingly simplistic map that will clarify things momentarily. For mountain bikers, there's a very challenging 6.3-mile trail that incorporates river crossings and a technical ravine reverently called La Pared (The Wall). The nearest bike rental is in the town of Cabo Rojo (see p212).

La Casona (cnr José Julián Acosta & De la Cruz), a mid-19th-century townhouse that was once the meeting place for an elite San Germán social group known as the Círculo de Recreo. In more recent times it has served as a cultural center and a shop. At the time of writing it was undergoing refurbishments.

CASA DE LOLA RODRÍGUEZ DE TIÓ

Built in 1843 in a neoclassical criollo style and said to be an excellent example of local 17th-century domestic architecture, this house (☎ 787-892-3500; 13 Dr Santiago Veve) is said to be the most continually occupied residence in the town. Its most famous resident was a 19th-century poet and patriot named Lola Rodríguez de Tió, who was exiled in the 1860s for her revolutionary activities. Lola's mother was a descendant of Ponce de León. The house is supposed to act as a museum, but is often closed. Phone ahead.

MUSEO Y CASA ALFREDO RAMÍREZ DE ARELLANO

Another eclectic house, built in 1903, this building is home to the local art and history museum (☎ 787-892-8870; 7 Esperanza; admission free; ☎ 10am-3pm Wed-Sun). Rooms are dedicated to different subjects, such as Taíno artifacts, religious curios like an old confessional booth, and colonial furniture.

UNIVERSIDAD INTERAMERICANA

Founded in 1912, this university (☎ 787-892-3090; Luna) is now the largest private facility of its kind in the Western hemisphere. The 267-acre campus just west of San Germán is probably the most attractive college setting in Puerto Rico and it draws about 6000 students from all corners of the globe. There are branch campuses in San Juan, Arecibo, Barranquitas, Bayamón, Fajardo, Guayama and Ponce, and tens of thousands of students work toward degrees in both its Spanish and English programs.

Festivals & Events

If you're here for the **Sugar Harvest Festival** (☎ 787-892-5574), held late in April, you'll be able to drink huge quantities of rum (which is distilled from sugarcane) while learning about the farming process.

Sleeping

Parador Oasis (☎ 787-892-1175, 800-942-8086; 72 Luna; r\$75; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) If you wanted luxury, you've come to the right place – the catch is, you're 20 years too late. Hidden under the cobwebs of the lackluster modern-day Oasis is a once grand dame of Puerto Rican paradises. Down on its luck and seemingly bereft of guests, the place today has the air of Miss Havisham's house in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, though the Italianate pool still glistens invitingly and the staff try hard to plug the gaps (of which there are many). Framed testimonies on the wall highlight favorable reviews from years past; the most recent dates from 1984. Get the drift?

Villa del Rey (☎ 787-642-2627; www.villadelrey.net; Rte 361 Km 0.8; s \$85-110; ☎ ☎ ☎) Your only alternative to the antiquated Oasis is this family-run country inn just north of town. A sturdy midrange option, it has big rooms, suites with kitchenettes, and an unhurried west-coast ambience (you may have to holler to raise the receptionist). Certainly fit for the kids – though perhaps not for a king (*rey*).

Eating

Tapas Café (☎ 787-264-0610; 48 Dr Santiago Veve; tapas \$4-11; ☎ dinner Wed-Fri, lunch & dinner Sat & Sun) Central San Germán has a perplexing dearth of decent restaurants so if you're staying in town for more than one day you'll probably end up here at least twice. Thankfully both the food and atmosphere are great, and on a busy night with a little bit of imagination you can picture yourself in the Triana district of Seville. Flamenco and bullfighting paraphernalia adorn the walls, while the plates are decorated with delicious fare such as *albondigas* (meatballs), *queso manchego* (Manchego cheese), *tortilla española* (Spanish omelette) and *jamon serrano* (cured Spanish ham).

Chaparritas (☎ 787-892-1078; 171 Luna; mains \$10-15; ☎ Wed-Sun) Vegetarians might have a hard time finding something to eat here, because Chaparritas puts meat on everything and cooks with a lot of lard, but the food is undeniably hot and tasty when it comes to the table. It's the usual Mexican burritos, tacos and enchiladas, but presented with flair.

Getting There & Away

San Germán enjoys frequent público services to and from Ponce (\$6, 90 minutes) or Mayagüez (\$4, 45 minutes). It lies just south

of the Hwy 2 expressway, so if you are driving here from the west coast, follow Hwy 102 from the town of Cabo Rojo (El Pueblo).

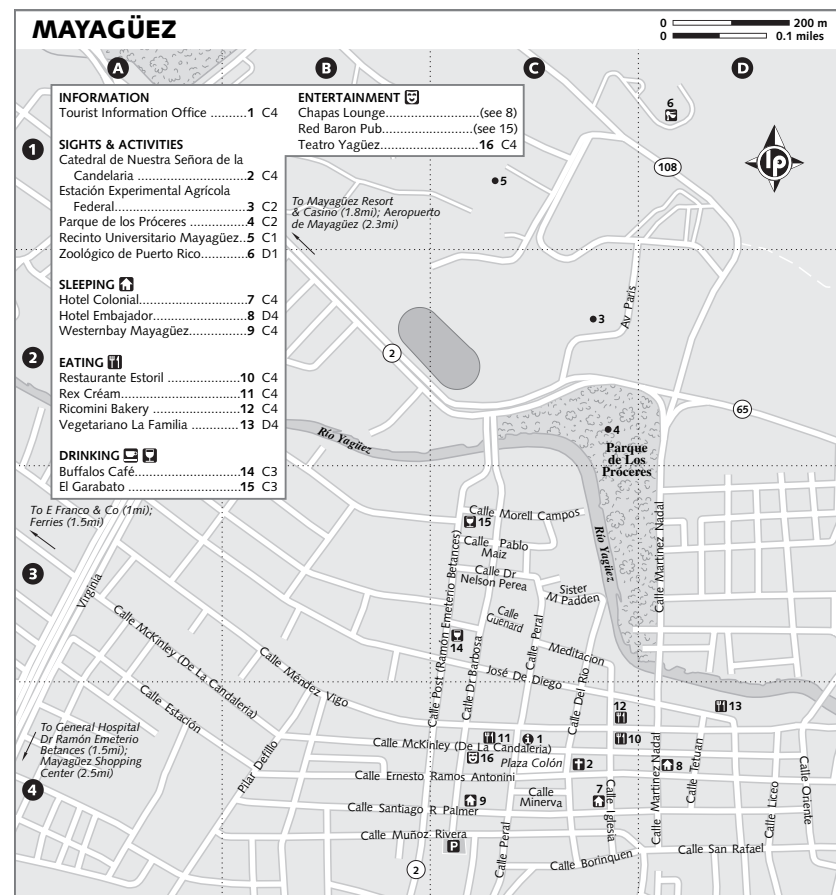
MAYAGÜEZ

pop 98,400

Ah...Mayagüez, the Sultan of the West, the commonwealth's underrated and slightly disheveled dock town that has always had to play third fiddle to San Juan and Ponce. But savvy travelers should take note. Mayagüez is undergoing a dramatic rebirth. Positive signs are everywhere. Examine the deftly renovated cathedral and adjoining central plaza (Plaza Colón). Mull over the rebranding of Puerto Rico's west coast as the 'Porta del Sol' with Mayagüez as its HQ. Consider the prospect of

Mayagüez hosting the 2010 Central American and Caribbean Games.

Founded in 1760 by émigrés from the Canary Islands, Mayagüez had an inauspicious early history considering its current size and importance. The emerging economy was based on fruit production and agriculture, and even today the city remains noted for the sweetness of its mangos. In the mid-19th century Mayagüez developed a contrarian nature and sheltered numerous revolutionary thinkers including Ramón Emeterio Betances, architect of the abortive Grito de Lares (p35). Disaster struck in 1918 when an earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale all but destroyed the central business district, but the city rose from the rubble.



Mayagüez today boasts a vibrant university (specializing in sciences), numerous historic buildings, a couple of parks and one of the most salubrious central plazas on the island. Exciting local taste buds, the settlement has also been heralded for its contributions to Puerto Rican gastronomy and drinking. Two 19th-century bakeries concoct a locally famous delicacy known as *brazo gitano* (gypsy's arm; a jam sponge cake presented in the style of a Swiss roll). Additionally, there's a factory producing Medalla beer, a popular ice-cream store and a dive bar that invented an insanely sweet rum-and-wine cocktail known as Sangría de Fido.

Little visited by tourists who veer north-west to Rincón or south toward Cabo Rojo, Mayagüez has enough distractions to fill a long afternoon (including Puerto Rico's only zoo and planetarium), the delightful Yagüez theater and a lively student nightlife. Then there's the congenial *mayagüezians*, always up for a spontaneous fiesta, such as **Cinco Días con Nuestro Tierra**, an agricultural-industrial fair (see p279).

Information

General Hospital Dr Ramón Emeterio Betances (☎ 787-735-8001; Rte 2 Km 157)

Tourist Information Office (☎ 787-833-1650; cnr Calles McKinley & Peral; ☎ 8am-4pm) In the main square, it's well stocked with local maps and has helpful staff.

Sights

CATEDRAL DE NUESTRA SEÑORA DE LA CANDELARIA

Consecrated in 1760, Mayagüez' original Catholic church was replaced by the current model in 1836.

The cathedral suffered many blows over the subsequent 100 years, culminating in the 1918 earthquake which destroyed its ceiling, and a lightning bolt that toppled one of its bell towers. Ambitious renovation plans were drawn up by architect Luis Perocier in 1922, but due to lack of funds they were never truly realized.

The full refurbishment wasn't actually completed until 2004. The cathedral now sparkles afresh and survives as one of Puerto Rico's most evocative ecclesial monuments with gilded scenes from the life of Christ behind the altar.

RECINTO UNIVERSITARIO MAYAGÜEZ

Over 12,000 students are enrolled at this university (RUM; ☎ 787-832-4040; 259 Post) in a host of disciplines. Over the years, RUM has become the premier math and science campus of the University of Puerto Rico system and boasts internationally respected programs in agriculture and engineering, as well as in the physical and biological sciences. The campus lies just out of town off Calle Post (Hwy 2).

ARCHITECTURAL ICONS: TEATRO YAGÜEZ

The beautiful **Teatro Yagüez** (☎ 787-834-0523; cnr Calles McKinley & Dr Barbosa) would be an architectural icon in any European capital, let alone quiescent Mayagüez, a city that sometimes struggles to assert its understated cultural identity. Dubbed the 'Cathedral of Sonorous Art' by enamored locals, the building was the brainchild of Francisco Maymón, the son of Italian immigrants who was an early pioneer of silent movies in Puerto Rico at the beginning of the 20th century. Maymón inaugurated his first theater in 1909, an opulent neobaroque structure that was filled with Italian ceilings and tiles imported from Spain. Hosting opera, orchestral concerts, silent movies and plays, it rapidly became the font of polite society in the island's proud western city. But the glory wasn't to last. Although the Yagüez miraculously withstood the catastrophic earthquake that rocked Mayagüez in 1918, the theater faced disaster the following year when it burned down in a mysterious fire that claimed the lives of 150 people. After several bitter lawsuits with potential land-grabbers, Maymón finally won the right to rebuild the Yagüez on its original site in the early 1920s. The building that rose from the ashes was designed by the brilliant architect Sabás Honoré and was every bit as opulent as its predecessor.

Today, sparking after a recent \$4-million restoration, the Yagüez is a national historic monument that is widely feted by architectural buffs for its plasters, cornices, French doors and decorative red-and-black dome. In Mayagüez' cultural life it continues to act as an important venue for concerts, drama, expositions and – yes – those beloved Puerto Rican beauty pageants.

ESTACIÓN EXPERIMENTAL AGRÍCOLA FEDERAL

Strolling is an attraction at both the **Estación Experimental Agrícola Federal** (☎ 787-831-3435; Av Paris; admission free; ☎ 7am-4pm Mon-Fri), the tropical agricultural research station of the US Department of Agriculture, and in the adjacent city park known as **Parque de los Próceres** (Patriots' Park; ☎ dawn-dusk). These grounds lie just southeast of the RUM campus. At the agricultural station you will see plantations of yams, plantains, bananas, cassavas and other tropical 'cash crops' as researchers evaluate new hybrids and species introduced to the island (including a cinnamon tree from Sri Lanka). The gardens have one of the largest collections of tropical plants in the world known to have beneficial effects on human health. The Parque de los Próceres, on the south side of Hwy 65, has more verdant walkways.

ZOOLOGÍCO DE PUERTO RICO

The only serious **zoo** (☎ 787-834-6330; Bario Miradero, Hwy 108 Interior; admission \$6; ☎ 8:30am-4pm Wed-Sun) in Puerto Rico is just to the northeast of the university, off Hwy 108, in the same neighborhood as the agricultural research station and city park. Here you can see some 300 species of reptiles, birds, amphibians and mammals moving around in habitats somewhat similar to what they would have in the wild. Refurbished a couple of years ago, the zoo's still not exactly on the cutting edge, but it has done a lot to get away from steel cages.

Sleeping

Hotel Colonial (☎ 787-833-2150; www.hotelcolonial.com; 14 Calle Iglesia; s/d incl breakfast \$39/59; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) A former convent, the Colonial looks rather picturesque from the outside. Upstairs, however, the 29 rooms hold slightly dustier secrets. The thing to remember is that this place is cheap (possibly the cheapest on the island), local (Mayagüez isn't exactly a tourist town) and exhibits few luxury pretensions. Keep this in mind when you're suffering the basic breakfast, up-and-down water pressure and hard, plastic beds, and you should be just fine.

Hotel Embajador (☎ 787-833-3340; 111 Calle Ernesto Ramos Antonini; r \$45-95; ☎ ☎) Wake up in one of these rooms and you'll swear you've been transported back to 1972 – a tatty, sepia-toned

version of 1972, that is. In dire need of a refurb, the Embajador, despite its shortcomings, is friendly and rather handily placed a few blocks west of the central Plaza Colón. It also boasts an interesting literary history. A number of years ago, when the famous Caribbean poet Derek Walcott visited RUM for a reading, the English faculty put him up at the Embajador and he allegedly composed some of *Omeros* here, the work that won him the Nobel Prize in 1992. If the poet in you is not quite up to emulating Walcott, try retiring to the new downstairs Chapas Lounge (p224), which has lent the establishment a new sophistication.

Westernbay Mayagüez (☎ 787-834-0303; www.westernbaymayaguez.com; 9 Calle Santiago R Palmer; r \$75-85; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This six-story '70s high-rise one block from the main square was recently revamped and renamed, though it essentially remains a paradox. There's nothing knock-out about the rooms, but they're comfortable enough if you like small. Downstairs there is the standard pool and fountain (par for the course in Puerto Rico), and a reasonable Italian-themed restaurant. The hotel's probably designed more for the business traveler than the tourist, but you can't argue about the price.

Mayagüez Resort & Casino (☎ 787-831-7575; www.mayaguezresort.com; Rte 104 Km 0.3; r \$160-325; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Just when you thought the resort frenzy had gone into hibernation, up springs another hotel-and-casino combo. Located off Hwy 2 north of town, this 140-unit property – with tennis courts, pool and casino – will be strangely familiar to travelers who have frequented the hotels of Isla Verde or the megaresorts that populate Fajardo and the east coast. Surprisingly, it is not on the water, but on 20 acres of tropical gardens – actually an adjunct to the nearby agricultural research station.

Eating

Rex Cream (Calle Méndez Vigo; dishes \$1-3) Rex is a small Puerto Rican ice-cream chain that was founded in Mayagüez in the 1960s by Chinese immigrants who came to the island via Costa Rica. This signature store near the central plaza is still something of a local tradition and gets full, particularly on public holidays. Among the numerous weird and wonderful flavors you can sample are corn sherbet and tamarind.

Ricomini Bakery (☎ 787-832-0565; 101 Calle Méndez Vigo; dishes \$2-8; ☎ 5am-1am) The Ricomini bakery and deli has been on this corner for well over a century and is still packing in the punters. Business deals are made here, relationships forged (and broken), and gossip boisterously exchanged. Ricomini's is always happy to serve the odd stray traveler and you can roll up for steaming coffee, scrambled eggs or a slice of the famous *brazo gitano*. The decor is open and clean and the atmosphere local.

Vegetariano La Familia (☎ 787-833-7571; José de Diego 151; mains \$5-12; ☎) Bankers, teachers, students, office workers and itinerant travelers; they all line up here at another Mayagüez classic where the portions are huge, the tastes are rustic and the price is...well...peanuts. The lunch buffet on its own is a sight to behold – tofu dishes and salads stretching across a big table. Then there are the rice dishes, the pasta, the beans and the strangely tasty vegan lasagna. Even incurable carnivores have been known to lick their lips.

our pick **E Franco & Co** (☎ 787-832-0070; www.brazogitano.com, in Spanish; 3 Manuel Pirallo; dishes \$7-16) Most of Puerto Rico's culinary legends are less than 20 years old, but this salt-of-the-earth grocery-store-cum-café has been here for over a century and a half and is still drawing in punters from as far away as San Juan for a monthly stock up. Cocooned in the waterfront warehouse district, Franco's is an upmarket place with tables scattered around a glass-topped deli counter in the style of an old English tearoom. Order your lunch from a set menu and you'll receive a complimentary *brazo gitano* that goes down well with a cup of fine Puerto Rican coffee. Stocked with assorted condiments, fresh baked goods and opulent hampers, the store affords plenty of people-watching opportunities as shoppers from around the island arrive to pick up their favorite treats.

Restaurante Estoril (☎ 787-834-2288; cnr Calles Méndez Vigo & Iglesia; mains \$12-20) Across the street from Ricomini Bakery, Estoril is known for its romantic setting and authentic Portuguese food. It's got murmuring fountains on the patio, festive plates on the walls and a stellar lunch buffet.

Entertainment

For entertainment and upscale atmosphere, head to the Mayagüez Resort & Casino (p223).

Otherwise, stay around town where a tight knot of student bars at the end of Calle Post has created a gregarious nighttime buzz.

Red Baron Pub (☎ 787-265-5770; 102 Calle Post; cover with live band \$6; ☎ 9pm-2am) The dance club above El Garabato, Red Baron often has a DJ spinning reggaeton, rap, hip-hop and Spanish rock. Lots of students get tanked up downstairs and then come up to work the dance floor until the small hours. Cash only.

El Garabato (☎ 787-834-2524; 102 Calle Post; ☎ 1pm-2am) In the same building as Red Baron but on the 1st floor, El Garabato is more of a typical pub than a dance hall. Here students swing by for a quick one between classes or stop to play dominos with the regulars. Happy-hour prices are laughably low – \$2 for a mixed drink and \$1 for a beer.

Buffalos Café (☎ 787-265-1395; 252 Calle Post; ☎ 11am-midnight) Another stop on the Calle Post crawl is this amiable place where you can munch on hot wings, sip on cold beer and dance salsa with people who know all the moves.

Chapas Lounge (☎ 787-834-0577; 111 Calle Ernesto Ramos Antonini; ☎ 11am-11pm Tue-Sat) On the ground floor of the faded 1970s Hotel Embajador (p223) is a rather plush restaurant and cocktail lounge that has developed into something of a hotspot in the city's nightlife. Come for a filet mignon and stick around for a few mojitos afterwards.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The Aeropuerto de Mayagüez is about 3 miles north of town, just off Hwy 2. **Cape Air** (☎ 800-352-0714) currently has several flights daily to and from San Juan (\$98 one-way). There are also direct flights to the towns of St Thomas and St Croix (\$335 one-way) in the US Virgin Islands.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Hwy 2, part of the island's nominal ring road, brings you to town from the north or south. While this is a four-lane road, it is plagued by traffic lights. Hwy 105 is the west end of the Ruta Panorámica, which leads from Mayagüez into the mountains and to Maricao.

FERRY

Mayagüez is Puerto Rico's gateway to the Dominican Republic, at least by sea. **Ferries**

Del Caribe (☎ 787-832-4800; www.ferriesdelcaribe.com, in Spanish), on the docks of Mayagüez north of the tuna canneries, offers the serious 'off-island' adventure across the Pasaje de la Mona. Its massive M/S *Caribbean Express* sails every other day across the Pasaje de la Mona for Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic (a 12-hour trip). On board you will find a restaurant, cafeteria, bar, casino and disco, as well as conference rooms, private cabins, a sauna and a Jacuzzi. There is room for 250 cars along with 1125 passengers.

The ferry usually leaves Mayagüez at 8pm Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and Santo Domingo at 8pm Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday, arriving in the respective destinations at 8am the following morning.

One-way tickets start at \$115 for a sleeping chair and \$165 for a single cabin. Returns go from \$165 for a chair to \$250 for a cabin, though there are more deluxe options. If you buy a one-way ticket you must have an air-plane ticket or some other proof of departure from the Dominican Republic. You pay extra for your car on a round-trip journey – up to \$150. Reserve a day in advance, especially with a car, and show up two hours early.

PÚBLICO

The terminal is in Barrio Paris, about two blocks north of Plaza Colón. Públicos make the trip to west-coast beach towns such as Aguadilla and Rincón (each about an hour away), and the long trek to San Juan (\$18 to \$25, plan on four hours at least).

Getting Around

A few taxis usually show up at the airport when the flights arrive from San Juan; if none are there, or if you need to get to the airport, call **White Taxi** (☎ 787-832-1115). The one-way fare to town is about \$8.

To rent a car you will find the following vendors at the airport or in Mayagüez Shopping Center, 2.5 miles south of the town on Hwy 2.

Avis (☎ 787-833-7070)

Budget (☎ 787-831-4570)

Hertz (☎ 787-832-3314)

RINCÓN

pop 14,300

You'll know you've arrived in Rincón when you pass the group of sun-grizzled gringos cruising west in their rusty 1972 Volkswagen

Beetle with a pile of surfboards attached to the roof. Shoehorned far out in the island's most psychedelic corner, Rincón is Puerto Rico at its most unguarded, a place where the sunsets shimmer scarlet and the waiters are more likely to call you 'dude' than 'sir.' For numerous Californian dreamers this is where the short-lived summer of love ended up. Arriving for the Surfing World Championships in 1968, many never went home. Hence Rincón became a haven for draft-dodgers, alternative lifestylers, back-to-the-landers and people more interested in catching the perfect wave than bagging \$100,000 a year in a Chicago garden suburb.

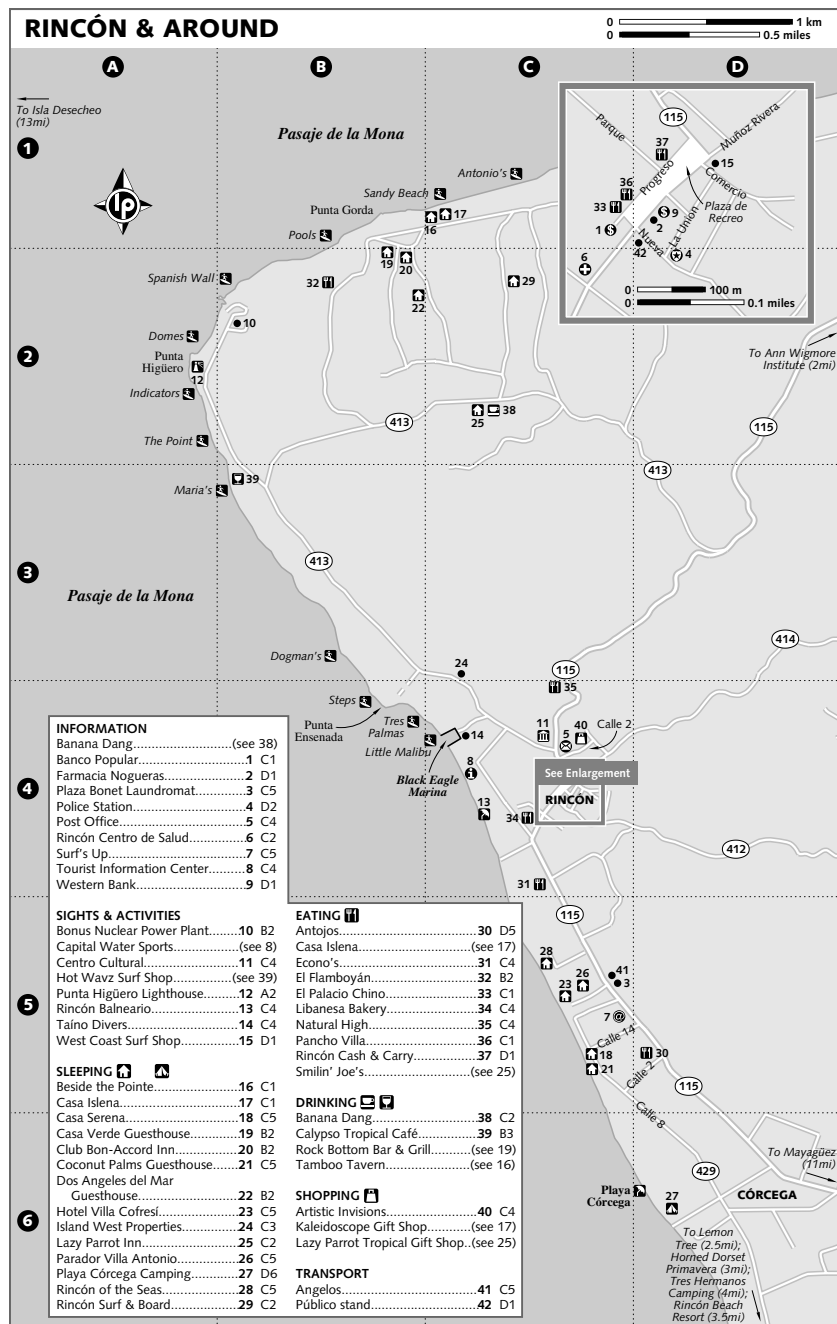
Rincón's waves are often close to perfect. Breaking anywhere from 2ft to 25ft, the names are chillingly evocative: Domes, Indicators, Spanish Wall and Dogman's. The crème de la crème is Tres Palmas, a white-tipped monster that is often dubbed the 'temple' of big wave surfing in the Caribbean.

Though Rincón is crawling with American expats (many of them residents), the tourist/local divide is more seamless and less exclusive than in the resorts out east. However, with a new, more affluent surfing generation demanding a higher quality of living than their 'turn off, tune in, drop out' parents, Rincón has increasingly embraced car culture and witnessed a noticeable expansion in the boutique hotel market. Indeed, these days the dudes with the boards are more likely to be lawyers than high school dropouts.

History

Rincón traces its history to the 16th century and a few low-key sugarcane plantations. And while many people believe it gets its name from the Spanish word *rincón* (corner) because of its shape, the municipality is actually named after one of the area's original planters, Don Gonzalo Rincón. For most of its history, the town survived on cane farming and cattle raising.

Things changed when the World Surfing Championships arrived in 1968. Glossy images of Rincón were plastered all over international magazines and TV – and the word was out. Every year since then has seen successive generations of wave riders make the pilgrimage. And while they pursued an endless summer, they began to invest in the community, building their own restaurants, guesthouses and bars.



As the baby-boomer generation of surfers got older, they continued to harbor romantic images of Rincón. But when they traveled with their own children, they demanded better accommodations, slicker restaurants and a broader variety of activities – and the town responded. Today, you can rent distinctive vacation homes or stay in luxurious hotels. While the old-style bunkhouses are all but gone, imaginative and moderately priced guesthouses remain a staple in Rincón.

Orientation

The actual municipal center is only about four square blocks, encircling the Catholic church and the Presbyterian church that face each other across the small Plaza de Recreo. While this urban core has many essential services, most of the inns, restaurants and beach attractions lie north or south of the town.

The best swimming beaches are south of the village, as are many of the larger hotels. A number of different snorkeling and surfing sites lie off Hwy 413 along the west side of the peninsula as it runs north to the lighthouse and the side road to the Bonus nuclear power plant. Moving further north, Hwy 413 climbs into steep hills.

There is a strong representation of guesthouses and a few bar-restaurants in this area, especially on a loop of road that circles down to the north-facing beach and rejoins Hwy 413 a mile further to the northwest. The larger, plusher accommodations generally lie to the south of town along Hwy 429.

Many of the accommodations, restaurants and pubs listed later do not have street addresses per se; in these cases we offer descriptive addresses.

MAPS

The Tourism Association of Rincón puts out a great, amusing map, complete with site descriptions, cartoon drawings and essential phone numbers (it's completely not to scale). You can get one from your innkeeper. Sometimes you can get a map for free; sometimes it's \$1.

Information

EMERGENCY

Police station (☎ 787-823-2020) In the south corner of the village off Nueva.

INTERNET ACCESS

Banana Dang (☎ 787-823-0963; Hwy 413 Km 4.1; per 30mins \$3; ☎ 7am-7pm Mon & Wed-Sat, 9am-7pm Sun) Wi-fi and terminals available here.

Surf's Up (Hwy 115 Km 12; per 30mins \$3; ☎ 6am-8:30pm) Internet, wi-fi, coffee and bagels.

LAUNDRY

Plaza Bonet Laundromat (☎ 787-823-3504; Hwy 115 Km 12.3) South of town. No washing service (ie DIY only). Wash/dry \$1/\$1.50.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Farmacia Nogueras (☎ 787-823-1704; 11 Muñoz Rivera) Downtown next to the Plaza de Recreo.

Rincón Centro de Salud (☎ 787-823-5171/2795/3120; 28 Muñoz Rivera) In town next to Paco's Grocery, this health center is a block south of Plaza de Recreo.

MONEY

Banco Popular (☎ 9am-2:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) Downtown near Plaza de Recreo. Has an ATM.

Western Bank (☎ 9am-2:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) Also downtown near Plaza de Recreo, with an ATM.

POST

Post office (☎ 787-823-2625; ☎ 7:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat) A mile north of the Plaza de Recreo on Hwy 115.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourism Association of Rincón (☎ 888-237-2073; www.rincon.org) For a complete list of the area's offerings, check out the virtual office here. There are links to accommodation websites.

Tourist Information Center (☎ 787-823-5024; Sunset Bldg, Cambija St; ☎ 8am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) In the new Sunset Building adjacent to Rincón public beach.

Sights

PUNTA HIGÜERO LIGHTHOUSE

Nicknamed El Faro, the lighthouse dates from 1892 and rises almost 100ft above the terrain. It was restored in 1922 after being severely damaged by a tsunami set off by the devastating 1918 earthquake. The 26,000-candlepower light has been automated since 1933 and still helps ships navigate the Pasaje de la Mona.

The lighthouse park is a popular attraction in Rincón. There are picnic tables, the odd food kiosk and a small museum (admission free; ☎ 10am-2pm) inside the lighthouse building that displays artifacts from shipwrecks and relays anecdotes from the area's maritime history. The principal reason to come

here, however, is for the view. Five great surf breaks are nearby, and sometimes, during the winter, humpback whales come within 100yd of the coast.

BONUS NUCLEAR POWER PLANT

To purists, Rincón and nuclear energy probably go together like Nixon and Brezhnev. But paradise is full of surprises. That tell-tale green dome that pokes out from behind the palm trees behind the Punta Higüero lighthouse isn't a Maharishi yoga retreat or a temple to expired surfers. Rather, it's a building that once housed the first nuclear-powered electrical generating facility in the Caribbean. Back in the days when the Beach Boys led the Surfin' Safari, the Boiling Nuclear Superheater Plant (known half-sarcastically by the acronym of Bonus) was a test facility that produced a minuscule 16,000kW of electricity in order to introduce Latin America to the benefits of nuclear power and to train visiting engineers.

The plant never functioned properly, however, and in its short life from 1960 to 1968 it allegedly contaminated employees and suffered a reactor failure. Finally, the US government closed the plant and at the time claimed to have decontaminated it.

For 20 years Bonus became a rusting relic of the nuclear age and a favorite venue for graffiti writers, who had everything from anti-nuke to pro-marijuana biases. The locals even named a surf break after it: Domes, one of Rincón's most consistent breaks. In the mid-1990s cooperation between the town and the electrical company brought about the reopening of the building and total decontamination of the site.

Now, with the building 'clean,' dollars have been spent to paint and polish everything as a museum. At the time of research the Museo Tecnológico Dr Modesto Iriarte Beachamp was due to open in 2008.

CENTRO CULTURAL

Contrary to popular opinion, Rincón's history didn't begin in 1968 with the World Surfing Championships. Proof lies in this tiny **museum** (Hwy 413 Km 0.3; admission free; ☎ 9am-2pm Thu & Sat), which harbors articles salvaged from shipwrecks and testimonies on the area's social history. Like a lot of the municipal museums on the island, the Centro Cultural is open irregularly and is dependent

on the state of the current municipal budget and volunteerism. Enquire first at the Tourist Information Center (p227); staff there should be able to enlighten you as to current opening times and/or the possibility of a private viewing.

Activities SURFING

Downtown on the Plaza de Recreo you will find the **West Coast Surf Shop** (☎ 787-823-3935; www.westcoastsurf.com; 2e Muñoz Rivera), a cool and funky place with some excellent graphics and big-screen TV images. Aside from selling all the appropriate gear, the owners have great local knowledge and can organize lessons for any standard or age at short notice. **Hot Wavz Surf Shop** (☎ 787-823-3942) is on the lighthouse road and can rent you a surfboard to fit conditions for \$20 to \$25; boogie boards cost about \$15.

DIVING & SNORKELING

Rincón has two good dive shops thanks to the popularity of diving the pristine reefs around Rincón and Isla Desecheo.

Located inside the little marina on the north side of town, **Taino Divers** (☎ 787-823-6429; www.tainodivers.com; Black Eagle Marina; 2-tank dive \$109, snorkeling \$75) is probably the best outfit on the west coast. Guides are responsible, professional and very environmentally aware. They do almost daily runs to Desecheo (8am to 2pm) and shorter trips to nearby reefs (8am to noon). Snorkel trips, one-tank dives, whale-watching and sunset cruises are also available, as well as chartered deep-sea fishing trips.

Snorkelers should head for either **Playa Shacks** or **Playa Steps** near Black Eagle Marina for the best of what the beaches have to offer.

SWIMMING

The surf is often too rough for swimming at many sites along the coast. Fortunately, there's a safe and newly renovated **Rincón balneario** about half a mile from the Plaza de Recreo. Here you'll find restrooms, showers, some temporary food shacks and a new mall which contains the tourist office, harbor restaurant and lookout tower.

There is also good, safe swimming on the adjacent strand in front of Parador Villa Antonio and Hotel Villa Cofresi.

SURFING BEACHES

As far as surfing folklore goes, Rincón wins the ultimate accolade: it's mentioned in a song by the Beach Boys. Released in 1962, *Surfin' Safari* name checks Rincón as the place where 'they're walking the nose,' surfer slang for moving forward on the board toward the front. But, to save you trying to translate all of that other unintelligible babble that cool dudes with surfboards shout from their car windows, here's a quick rundown on Rincón's hottest surfing beaches (running south to north):

Little Malibu Just north of the marina. OK in the winter, with easy 4ft breaks.

Tres Palmas The big kahuna, with breaks of up to 25ft. Requires *bon courage* and a long paddle out. Handle with care.

Steps Also known by its Spanish name, *Escalera*, this is the 'inside' break to Tres Palmas' 'outside' break. Good snorkeling spot when it's calm.

Dogman's A local favorite that is anything but predictable. Expect waves that are high and hollow.

Maria's A good right, but needs a decent swell. Three times a year the waves break big here, but otherwise it's average.

The Point In front of the lighthouse, this one is not for amateurs. Waves can break big here while Maria's is lying flat.

Indicators Good powerful rights. Watch out for rocks and a pipe and coral bottom.

Domes Named for the nearby former nuclear facility (opposite). Good rights with the occasional left. A strong undercurrent, but probably the most consistent spot in Rincón.

Spanish Wall A beautiful secluded spot only reachable by a rough path, this place gets up in the winter and can be particularly fabulous after a cold front.

Pools Offers a few shallow reef-break peaks that can occasionally barrel.

Sandy Beach Good beginner's beach with decent waves when the swell is right.

Antonio's Used heavily during the 1968 World Surfing Championships, this has a right wall with a shorter left. Two take-off points spread the crowd.

KAYAKING

You can rent kayaks from **Capital Water Sports** (☎ 787-823-2789; Sunset Village, Rincón Balneario) and at Taino Divers (opposite) for approximately \$25 an hour for use around the balneario.

FISHING & WHALE-WATCHING

Taino Divers (opposite) does responsible whale-watching tours (about \$35 per person). Boats are required to keep a minimum distance from the gentle giants, but less scrupulous operators don't always adhere to that rule. Taino Divers can also take you on half-day deep-sea fishing excursions for \$725 per chartered boat (eight people maximum). Whale-watching is also possible from the Punta Higüero lighthouse park in December.

Captain Pepi Alfonso is a licensed US Coast Guard who runs **Makaira Charters** (☎ 787-823-4391, 787-299-7374; www.makairafishingcharters.com; half/full day \$525/800). He does deep-sea fishing charters for up to six people and can sometimes split charters if your party is smaller. Drinks are included, but bring your own food – no bananas (an old fishing superstition)!

Festivals & Events

The **Rincón Triathlon** (www.rinconpr.com/triathlon/home.htm) has been going since 1982, which is pretty much ancient history in the triathlon world. Held every June, it's a classic ironman contest that's starting to draw some quality international athletes – it makes for a serious fiesta for spectators.

Sleeping

Reservations are recommended, especially in high season (see p273).

Rincón is awash with rental properties of all shapes and sizes. To make your search easier you can enlist the services of **Island West Properties** (☎ 787-823-2323; www.rinconrealestateforsale.com) which maintains an office on Hwy 413 about a mile out of town toward the lighthouse. Villa rentals with one to eight bedrooms go from between \$120 and \$700 per night.

NORTH OF TOWN

Rincón Surf & Board (☎ 787-823-0610; dm \$20, d \$55-65, ste \$85-95) In the Sandy Beach area north of town, this place advertises basic apartments 'over the jungle.' It's a favorite haunt of the

RINCÓN SURFER, JOAQUIM CRUZ

What's so special about surfing in Rincón? It was the first place in Puerto Rico to sponsor surfing in a big way after the 1968 World Championships. It also embraces surfing culture in its entirety, with friendly people, plenty of places to stay, a decent local mayor, rural tranquility and an excellent array of other sports.

What's your favorite spot to surf and why? Dogman's, because the waves there are really hollow. Often the waves elsewhere are just as high, but Dogman's invariably has the best tubes.

What kinds of dudes come here? All kinds – young, old, rich, poor, European and American.

What's the best time of year to surf? From the second week in October through April.

Where do surfers go after hours? To bars like the Calypso (p233), where you can hear good bands playing Latin, rock, salsa and reggae.

What was your hairiest moment in the water? Fifteen years ago I was out on my board at Domes surfing way too hard. I had made the Point to the rocks six or seven times and went for one last wave, but it was too much. I ended up on the rocks below the lighthouse, with my board attached to me by the lead trying to suck me back out to sea. I clung onto the rocks for dear life until someone threw a rope down from the lighthouse. There were plenty of cuts and bruises to count later.

When and where did you catch the perfect wave? Ten years ago I was surfing with my friend, Rasta, up at Crashboat Beach near Aguadilla. The swell was so awesome that the local dudes with boogie boards were actually fighting with each other for space in the water. I took a gorgeous wave and dropped down, turning as I went, hand on the wall. I think I took the tube three times before I ran out of water and hit the shore. There was this guy behind me watching and whooping. I'm not sure whether he was wishing he was up there with me or he was just sharing in the moment.

As told to Brendan Sainsbury

'surf trolls' who show up to ride the waves all winter, and the guesthouse offers 10% to 15% discounts if you stay a week or more. Facilities are basic and the service is pretty hands off.

Casa Verde Guesthouse (☎ 787-605-5351; www.find-paradise.com; Beach Rd off Hwy 413; apt 560-180; (P) (24)) This faded green house has horses in front and the popular Rock Bottom Bar & Grill (p233) next door. Casa Verde is a surfer-friendly guesthouse with supermodern accommodations. There are one-, two- and three-bedroom choices available – with the added plus of a late-night bar scene right next door. Well, it's a plus if you are willing to trade great lobster and live music for peace and quiet!

Beside the Pointe (☎ 787-823-8550; www.besidethepointe.com; r \$75-125; (P) (24)) Right on Sandy Beach, this guesthouse has a very popular restaurant, Bamboo Tavern (p233), which attracts a fun crowd. Rooms are actually like small apartments, with cooking facilities and kitchenettes, but overall aren't quite as well cared for as the newer places. If you just want somewhere to rest your surfboard while you hit the beach bars, this could be the place. Expect plenty of background noise after hours.

Dos Angeles del Mar Guesthouse (☎ 787-431-6057; www.dosangelesdelmar.8k.com; Beach Rd off Hwy 413; r \$99-149; (P) (24)) Right up the street from Casa Verde, this guesthouse has four immaculate rooms with ocean views and daily maid service. Everything's impeccably clean and rooms are attractively tricked out with wicker furniture.

our pick Lazy Parrot Inn (☎ 787-823-5654; www.lazyparrot.com; Hwy 413 Km 4.1; r \$110-155; (P) (24) (24)) Claiming the middle ground between high quality and high quirky, the Lazy Parrot captures the unique essence of Rincón without scrimping on the home comforts. A venerable inn crammed full with all kinds of parrots – including real ones, carved ones, inflated ones and stuffed ones – it occupies the high country above Rincón, offering peekaboo glimpses of the sparkling ocean. Rooms are comfortable, but not flash; the restaurant, Smilin' Joe's (p233), is a culinary corker; and the inviting pool and Jacuzzi – not to mention the leafy Bamboo bar – are positively sublime (especially at night). The staff is friendly and the clientele well-dressed gringos with surfing aspirations.

Club Bon-Accord Inn (☎ 787-823-2525; Hwy 413 Km 3.3; r \$120-220; (P) (24) (24)) Anchored on the so-called 'Fun Coast' overlooking Punta Gorda and Sandy Beach, the Bon-Accord is the new kid on the hotel block and, like all new-generation Rincón kids, it's measurably swisher and richer than its parents. That's not to say that this hyperhip 10-room boutique hotel is out of step with the traditional west-coast eccentricities. Despite a clientele of surfing doctors, lawyers and businessmen, the ambience here is intimate, laid-back and dude friendly. All that's missing is the rusted up old VW Beetle.

Casa Islena (☎ 787-823-1525; www.casa-islena.com; Hwy 413, Beach Rd; r incl breakfast \$145-195; (P) (24) (24)) Location, location, location. You could have built a shack at this gorgeous spot on moody and magnificent Sandy Beach and got away with it. But, Casa Islena is a minipalace, an elegant Mediterranean-style guesthouse that takes paradise and subtly blends in a bit of extra magic. The secrets lie in nine delicious sea-view rooms, a full poolside breakfast bar and free front seats to Rincón's dazzling surfing show. Roll in at 9am-ish and you'll spy the more chilled out guests practicing their early-morning yoga under the palm trees. For information on the restaurant, see p232.

Ann Wigmore Institute (☎ 787-868-6307; www.annwigmore.org; dm/r incl therapy & meals per fortnight \$900/1900; (P)) You'll find this retreat and spa 4 miles northeast of central Rincón on Hwy 115 (on the way to Aguadilla). Clients are drawn here for wheat-grass therapy, 'internal cleansing' and lots of organic gardening.

SOUTH OF TOWN

Tres Hermanos Camping (☎ 787-826-1610; Hwy 115 Km 5; campsites \$17) The nearest tent camping to Rincón is at this public beach off Hwy 115 just west of the town of Añasco and 5 miles south of Rincón. The shaded sites are steps from a lovely beach. There's showers and toilets, and RVs are accepted.

Playa Córcega Camping (☎ 787-823-6140; Hwy 115 Km 10.8; RV sites with/without power \$25/15) This is for RVs only; there is no tent camping here. It's a few minutes south of the Rincón of the Seas resort. Rates vary depending on the season. Amenities include showers, toilets, and electricity.

Coconut Palms Guesthouse (☎ 787-823-0147; www.coconutpalmsinn.com; 2734 Calle 8, Comunidad Estela; r \$75-150) Sandwiched in between Rincón's more upscale southern resorts lies this fun and un-

pretentious guesthouse in a residential neighborhood just off Hwy 115. The Coconut's best feature is its fern-draped and bird-filled courtyard along with its lovely setting right on a calm, nonsurfing stretch of beach. This is a great choice for those who want to relax with a good book or just laze around on the sand.

Lemon Tree (☎ 787-823-6452; www.lemontreepre.com; Hwy 429 Km 4.1; r \$110-185) You can wrap yourself in a Japanese *yurkata* (robe) and enjoy a fresh morning coffee on your own private ocean-front deck at this luxury beachside property. Six self-contained suites with fully furnished kitchens are decorated in thematic tropical colors. There's the indulgent Banana suite with its Jacuzzi tub and terrazzo floors, or the three-bedroom Papaya suite with its flat-screen TV and sweeping beach views. An extra bonus is the on-site PADI-certified Lemon Tree Divers.

Hotel Villa Cofresi (☎ 787-823-2450; www.villacofresi.com; Hwy 115 Km 12.3; r \$115-160; (P) (24) (24)) If Rincón of the Seas is the 'plush new resort,' the down-to-earth Villa Cofresi is the older place down the road that puts fabulous customer service over fabulous art and wicker furniture over wood. Standard rooms have king-sized beds and some come with kitchenettes. There's also a pool, restaurant, bar and water-sports concession on the property.

Parador Villa Antonio (☎ 787-823-2645; www.villa-antonio.com; Hwy 115 Km 12.3; r \$115-170; (P) (24) (24)) Rincón's token parador is atypical of the genre: family-friendly, affordable and good with the basics. It's also got a loyal following among Puerto Rican families and seniors thanks to its playground, games room and lovely beachside setting. Suffice to say, many aspiring surfers or travelers on a budget gravitate to the quirkier, more Rincónesque places.

Casa Serena (☎ 787-823-2026; 2730 Calle 14, off Hwy 115 Km 11.4; apt \$175) A good option, this informal beach house sits in a tropical garden on a quiet, wide, sandy beach. There are two apartments, each with two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen, a living/dining room, and a 15ft covered patio. You can swim and snorkel in the Caribbean right outside your garden gate, pick your own exotic fruit in season and watch the sun setting over the Paseo de la Mona. Minimum stay: three nights.

Rincón of the Seas (☎ 787-823-6189; www.rinconoftheseas.com; Hwy 115 Km 12.2; r \$235-495; (P) (24) (24)) This is a resort with all the usual upscale touches, yet it somehow retains a more laid-back

Rincón feel than the bigger piles further east. Maybe it's the tasteful antiques that adorn the lavish lobby, or the gaggles of nouveau-riche surfers who congregate around the swimming pool. Parked right on a calm stretch of beach, the Rincón is a modern hotel with a swathe of beautifully landscaped grounds. Regular rooms go for under \$200 in summer, but travelers with a penchant for art deco will have to fork out over \$400 for the special ocean-view suite. There are tons of on-site amenities and staff more than willing to hook you up with snorkeling and diving adventures.

Rincón Beach Resort (☎ 787-589-9000; www.rinconbeach.com; Hwy 115 Km 5.8; r/ste \$240/459; P ♻️ 🚰 🚰) Not quite as luxurious as the Dorset, this neighboring resort is also outside of Rincón proper. It's a boutique hotel that has some private villas, a gorgeous beach and lots of opulent amenities for guests. If you like all-inclusive places where you rarely have to leave the property unless it's to head into the water, then try this place – tennis, massages, golf and more right at your fingertips. The rates for suites drop in low season.

Horned Dorset Primavera (☎ 787-823-4030; www.horneddorset.com; Hwy 429 Km 0.3; r \$650-4000; P ♻️ 🚰 🚰) Undoubtedly the best small resort in Puerto Rico – and perhaps even the Caribbean (though you may have to remortgage your house to stay here). Forget the rather obscure name; this place claims to offer the 'epitome of privacy, elegance and service,' and it certainly delivers. There are 30 suites in private villas that are furnished with hand-carved antiques and come equipped with their own private plunge pools (just in case you get bored of the communal infinity pool). Dripping with exclusivity, the Horned Dorset doesn't accept children under 12, shuns TVs in the rooms and encourages people to dress up – especially for dinner (see above). It's a long way from Rincón's surf scene, but it's blissful.

Eating

A lot of Rincón's guesthouses and hotels also serve food, so the list of restaurants in this small municipality is impressive. Vegetarian options can be had at most places.

Libanesa Bakery (☎ 787-823-4440; 52 Muñoz Rivera; snacks \$3-7) There's quite a smattering of bakeries in Rincón, but first prize for freshness and variety has to go to this Lebanese-run

place that guards the entrance to the small downtown core.

El Palacio Chino (☎ 787-823-3300; 18c Progreso; mains \$4-8; ☎ lunch & dinner) This local Chinese restaurant doesn't look much but commands a loyal local following. Sweet-and-sour chicken costs \$5.

El Flamboyán (Hwy 413 Km 3.1 Interior; mains \$6-11; ☎ lunch & dinner) With its faded Che Guevara posters and vaguely bucolic setting overlooking the surf break at Pools, the Flamboyán is definitely old-school Rincón. This is where you come for *comida criolla* and inexpensive fish and chicken dishes and to converse with weather-beaten expats about the days before the dudes with money crashed in.

Natural High (☎ 787-823-1772; Hwy 115 Km 14.3; sandwiches \$7-9; ☎ 11am-3pm Thu-Tue, 5-9pm Fri; V) Glowingly healthy and unadulterated enough to suit even the strictest vegans, Natural High is – much to the surprise of visiting carnivores – also rather tasty. Mixing good old-fashioned home cooking with an unusual blend of raw, organic ingredients, the dishes here are as delicious as they are different. Try the crunchy fresh salads or the fruit-infused smoothies and save the muesli-munching for another day.

Casa Islena (☎ 787-823-1525; www.casa-islena.com; Hwy 413, Beach Rd; tapas \$7-10; ☎ 11am-3pm & 5-9pm) They could serve tripe here and it would still taste good, so evocative is the ocean-side setting. Fortuitously, so is the food. Casa Islena serves delicious tapas washed down with rum-laced sangria. Picture grilled swordfish in spicy coconut broth and skirt steak marinated in ginger, soy and garlic, enjoyed over a scarlet-streaked sunset. The restaurant also follows a good environmental code using filtered water (no plastic), biodegradable take-out containers and sustainably harvested seafood. For accommodation information, see p231.

Antojos (☎ 787-823-4377; Hwy 115 Km 11.2; dishes \$8-14) In Spanish *antojos* means 'cravings' and you can satisfy a few at this local bar and restaurant situated on Hwy 115 south of the town. The specialty is fish served up with *comida criolla* side dishes, such as rice, beans and fried plantains. It's nothing fancy, but after a day of catching the waves it will replenish a hearty surfer's appetite.

Pancho Villa (☎ 787-823-8226; Plaza de Recreo; mains \$10-12; ☎ 11am-3pm & 5-10pm Tue-Sun) If you have long grown bored of lukewarm enchiladas

or unpalatable refried beans, this modest place in Rincón's main square could quite easily reignite your taste buds for all things Mexican. Though the decor's nothing fancy and the service only so-so, the Rancho Villa delivers the goods where it matters: the food's damn tasty. Try the house burrito or the crispy chimichanga washed down with a salt-laced margarita and beware the rose-toting mariachis on Friday nights.

Smilin' Joe's (☎ 787-823-5654; www.lazyparrot.com; Hwy 413 Km 4.1; mains \$16-21; ☎ noon-9:30pm) Wonderfully creative food is par for the course at this happening restaurant situated in the Lazy Parrot Inn (p230). Try the sesame-ginger churrasco steak or the mango-glazed chicken breast and choose something full-bodied from the comprehensive wine list. Then there's the guesthouse itself, which provides a strangely romantic setting (considering all the parrot paraphernalia) with its cleverly lit swimming pool and strategically positioned Rum Shack bar, which lives by its rather Hemingway-esque motto 'Conserve water – drink rum.'

Horned Dorset Primavera (☎ 787-823-4030; www.horneddorset.com; Hwy 429 Km 0.3; mains \$30-50; ☎ dinner) Weird. One of Puerto Rico's most formal restaurants in one of its most informal towns. Don't even think about dragging your flip-flops, shorts or surfboard here. The dress code requires smart casual and appreciates suits. Suffice to say, the place is exquisite, with stunning views and equally stunning French-influenced food that would have Gordon Ramsey looking over his shoulder. People propose marriage here or carve out high-powered business deals over skillfully seasoned duck, mahimahi, chateaubriand, porterhouse steaks and delicately prepared seafood dishes. For accommodation information, see opposite.

Self-caterers will find **Rincón Cash & Carry** (☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) in the center of town, right across from the Plaza de Recreo, and **Econo's** (☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) on Hwy 115, a half-mile south of the village.

DRINKING

Rock Bottom Bar & Grill (☎ 787-605-5351; Beach Rd off Hwy 413; ☎ noon-2am) Rock Bottom is a 'treehouse' style bar situated next to the Casa Verde Guesthouse (p230) in the Sandy Beach neighborhood. It has ladies nights, surf videos, tasty bar snacks (buffalo wings and mozzarella sticks) and a novel, less tacky version of

karaoke which it calls the 'Acoustic Jam.' Swap your surfboard for a guitar and become the next Brian Wilson.

our pick Calypso Tropical Café (☎ 787-823-4151; ☎ noon-midnight) Wall-to-wall suntans, svelte girls in bikini tops, bare-chested blokes nursing cold beers, and syncopated reggae music drifting out beneath the sun-dappled palm trees; the Calypso is everything you'd expect a beachside surfers' bar to be – and perhaps a little more. All that's missing is a prepsychedelic-era Brian Wilson propping up the jukebox (then again, Brian never *could* surf). On the ocean side of the leafy road to the lighthouse, Calypso hosts the oldest pub scene in Rincón and regularly books live bands to cover rock, reggae and calypso classics. Not surprisingly, it's a microcosm of the region at large and *the* place to go to find out about surf gossip, weather and waves.

Tambo Tavern (☎ 787-823-8550; www.besidethepointe.com; Sandy Beach; ☎ noon-midnight) You don't have to be a surfer to hang out at Tambo, but it helps. This is actually the patio bar of the Beside the Pointe guesthouse, but it doubles up as a great place for burgers, relaxation and a congenial après-surf scene. You may not always get live music here, but the sound system is pretty good and the twilight beach panorama something to behold. For information on the guesthouse, see p230.

Banana Dang (☎ 787-823-0963; Hwy 413 Km 4.1; ☎ 7am-7pm Mon & Wed-Sat, 9am-7pm Sun) Set up in 2007 by two committed coffee and banana addicts from LA, Banana Dang comes pretty close to delivering the best shots of caffeine on the island. Next door to the Lazy Parrot Inn in the hills above Rincón, it's well worth stopping off here to – in the words of the owners – think, drink and link (yes, there are computer terminals and wi-fi access). The banana smoothies are pretty memorable too.

Shopping

Artistic Invisions (☎ 787-431-2439; cnr Hwy 115 & Parada Muñoz; ☎ 11am-5pm Wed-Sat, 11am-4pm Sun) This gallery displays and sells the work of local artists, including paintings, mosaics and sea glass. You can even get your favorite piece reproduced on a mug or T-shirt.

Lazy Parrot Tropical Gift Shop (☎ 787-823-5654; www.lazyparrot.com; Lazy Parrot Inn, Hwy 413 Km 4.1; ☎ 9am-6pm) In the Lazy Parrot Inn (p230), this shop is a must-stop for parrot-heads. You will also see Lisl Voigt's handmade sea-glass jewelry here.

Getting There & Away

Rincón doesn't have an airport, but there are two in the area. If you are coming from San Juan, fly into Mayagüez. Aguadilla's Aeropuerto Rafael Hernández generally has a couple of flights a day from the New York area or Miami.

The público stand is just off Plaza de Recreo on Calle Nueva. Expect to pay about \$4 if you are headed north to Aguadilla or \$2 to go south to Mayagüez (you can access San Juan from either of these cities). Both trips take about 40 minutes.

In spite of what your map might suggest, the easiest way to approach the town is via the valley roads of Hwy 402 and Hwy 115, both of which intersect Hwy 2 south of the Rincón peninsula.

Getting Around

Now for the summer: Rincón – despite its mantle as an 'alternative' beach haven – has little provision for nonmotorized transport. Perhaps all the references to '49 Chevy's and vintage 'woodies' in erstwhile Beach Boys' songs have been taken a bit too literally. A spaced out community with minimal public transport, Rincón has few sidewalks and almost no facilities for bicycles (the nearest bike rental is in Aguadilla; see p254). The only reliable way to get around the area is by rented car, taxi, irregular públicos or – if you're energetic and careful – walking. You will pay \$18 or more for a taxi from either the Aguadilla or Mayagüez airports. Car rentals can also be found at both of these destinations (see p256 and p225) or you can try **Angelos** (☎ 787-823-3438; Hwy 115 Km 12), in the town itself.

ISLA MONA

There is no rarer wilderness adventure in the Caribbean than a trip to Isla Mona, Puerto Rico's 'Jurassic Park,' 50 miles to the west of the main island in the Pasaje de la Mona. And although few Puerto Ricans or travelers actually ever visit Mona, this nearly circular island of 14,000 acres looms large in many people's imagination.

A nature reserve since 1919 and uninhabited for more than 50 years, Mona is so full of history, dramatic geological formations and wildlife that it can overwhelm your senses and pique your curiosity in ways you cannot even imagine. Keep in mind, though, that concerns about safety on the island caused

the Departamento de Recursos Naturales y Ambientales (DRNA; Department of Natural Resources & Environment) to close the island to visitors for months, so make sure Mona is open to visitors before you plan your trip.

You suddenly begin taking the 'long view' of our planet's history when you see the violet cliffs of the tabletop island rising like a *fata morgana* (mirage) above the deep blue waves, or a collection of giant iguanas scrambling onto a trail to sniff your scent. Puerto Rican traffic jams seem like only the tiniest wrinkles in time when a pod of humpback whales near Mona begin breaching in front of you, a nurse shark surprises you beneath some antler coral, or you scramble through one of the island's limestone caves toward a point of light until you come to a hole that opens in the side of a cliff 100ft above the sea.

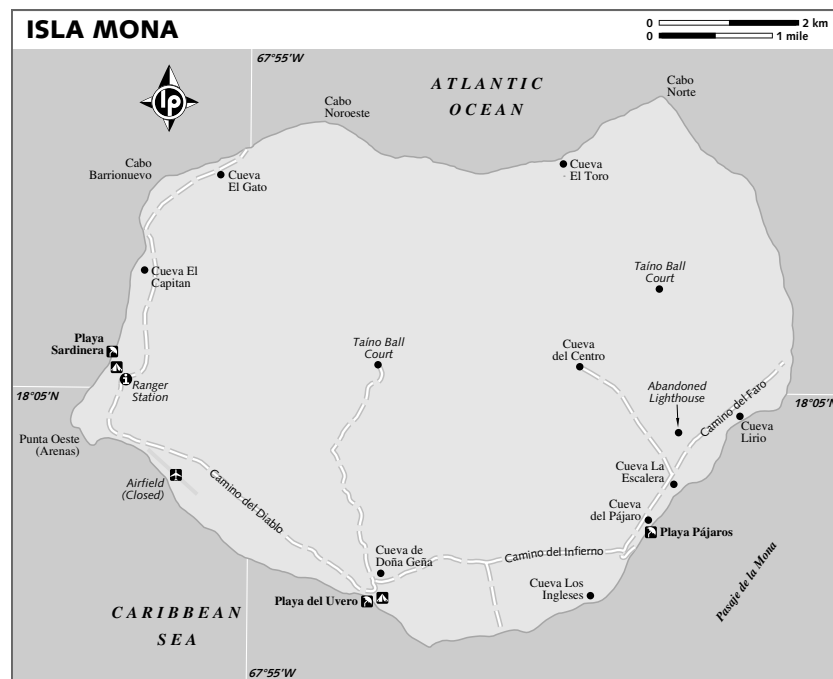
Then there are fish-eating bats, wild goats and pigs, Taíno petroglyphs on cave walls and the stories – stories of enslaved Indians, sunken galleons holding treasures of gold, skeletons of 18th-century pirates uncovered on Playa Pájaros, buried buccaneer loot and a government-sponsored search for the same that ended abruptly when a member of the search party committed suicide.

All this serves as ample food for thought when you are sitting around your campfire in the starlit night – and a reminder that a trip to Mona cannot be undertaken on a whim. While the DRNA provides toilets and salt-water showers at Playa Sardinera, Mona is a backcountry camping experience and boat trips here can take more than five hours in rough seas.

The rangers and police detachment (in their small station at Playa Sardinera) can provide basic first aid and have radio contact with the main island, but beyond this you are on your own in a beautiful – but hostile – environment.

History

Scholars believe that Mona was first settled about 1000 years ago as pre-Columbian peoples migrated north through the Caribbean archipelago. Petroglyphs in some caves and the subtle ruins of *bateyes* (Taíno ball courts) are the chief remnants of the Indian presence. Another remnant is the island's name, a corruption of the original indigenous name 'Amona.' Most likely the Indians used Mona as a way station in their travels between



Puerto Rico and Hispaniola, and owing to the rich soil on the island, the Indians developed farms of cassava and sweet potatoes here to replenish the larders of voyagers.

Columbus stopped at Mona on September 24, 1494 (at the end of his second New World voyage) and remained several days to gather water and provisions for the long trip back to Spain. When the Spaniards returned in 1508, Mona had become a sanctuary for Taíno people escaping the slavery that the Spanish were impressing on the islanders of Hispaniola.

But, like Columbus, this small group of Spaniards had not come to conquer the island people, but simply to trade with them for water, cassava and sweet potatoes. This group of voyagers – led by Juan Ponce de León – was on its way to start a colony in Puerto Rico. In successive years Mona served as the breadbasket for the new Puerto Rican colony.

The Spanish government did eventually claim the island to guard the ship traffic through the Pasaje de la Mona, which was fast becoming the highway to and from the gold coast of the Americas. But after two

decades of enslaving and decimating the population of Indians throughout the New World, the Crown found its resources of men and money stretched too thin and withdrew. Abandoned and defenseless, Mona fell into the hands of pirates by the late 1500s, when French corsairs used Mona as a staging ground and refuge in their attacks on the Spanish colony at San Germán.

During the next 300 years, Mona became the refuge of a host of privateers, including Sirs Walter Raleigh and Francis Drake, John Hawkins, William Kidd and the Puerto Rican buccaneer Roberto Cofresi. The 1832 execution of the freebooter Almeida, known as 'El Portugués,' brought an end to Mona's days as a pirates' den.

Throughout the next century, Mona went through cycles of activity and decline as various entrepreneurs tried to get rich mining the bat guano from Mona's caves. Rich in phosphate, the guano made exceptional agricultural fertilizer, but by 1924 the mines went dry and the citizens left (except for the family of Doña Geña Rodríguez, who lived in a cave – called Cueva de Doña Geña – on the south

end of the island until 1943). It was about this time that a German submarine fired on the island (thinking it was a post for the Allies), probably scaring the living daylight out of the iguanas, goats and pigs.

Following Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) activities on the island, the comings and goings of treasure hunters, WWII and a scam to turn Mona into an airbase, the government of Puerto Rico slowly began to take seriously its duty to protect the island as a nature preserve, and eventually prohibited development. Finally, after almost 500 years of human interference, Mona returned to her wild state.

Wildlife

Although its dry, semitropical climate might suggest an area with little variety in vegetation, Mona claims about 600 species of plants and 50 species of trees. Four of the plant species here are endemic, unknown to the rest of the world. Over the years many exotic species have been introduced to the island. Mahogany and coconut palms are two such species that still thrive. If you are exploring here, wear protective clothing. Mona has four types of venomous trees and bushes: indio, papayo, manzanillo and carrasco. Almost 3000 acres of the island consist of cactus thickets, while 11,000 acres are in scrub forest.

The biggest stars of the island's wildlife menagerie are the giant rock iguanas, *Cyclura stejnegeri* (similar to the iguanas at Anagada in the British Virgin Islands and Allan's Cays in the Bahamas). These guys can grow a body the size of a very large tomcat with a tail that makes them 5ft long. But it is their large heads and powerful jaws that are most fascinating, giving the iguanas the appearance of small-scale *Tyrannosaurus rexes*. Generally, these critters hunt and nest among the limestone ruts of the coastal plain, but you may see their tracks on the island's trails or beaches.

Do not offer food to these animals, and keep your distance. They have sharp teeth and claws, and they could charge if they feel cornered.

This advice also holds true for the feral pigs, goats and cattle whose ancestors got left behind by former settlers. There is a hunt here every winter to thin the herds, but there are still plenty around. Store your food out of their range or you may find your campsite invaded.

Humpback whales breed during the winter around the Pasaje de la Mona and during a trip to or from the island it is not uncommon to see pods of these gregarious animals breaching, spy-hopping with their heads out of the water to look around and slapping their pectoral flippers on the water. There are also schools of dolphins and pygmy sperm whales here.

Between May and October, Isla Mona's beaches are important nesting grounds for a number of species of marine turtle, including the chronically endangered Carey turtle.

If you are a bird-watcher, you will no doubt be attracted to the osprey, pelicans and hawks that hunt here, as well as about 100 other species.

Mona is also loaded with all kinds of bugs, so be aware and prepared. Fifty-two species of spider, three kinds of scorpion and four types of centipede are here for your pleasure. Several are venomous, including the black widow spider.

Orientation

Isla Mona is almost a perfect oval, measuring about 7 miles from east to west and 4 miles from north to south. Most of the island's coastline is made up of rough, rocky cliffs, especially along the north side. The south side, meanwhile, has a number of narrow beaches that fringe the highlands. The most approachable of these beaches is Playa Sardinera, where you will find toilets, showers and the concrete living quarters of the rangers and police detachment. The airfield, lying about a mile further east, has been closed since 1999.

The island's terrain consists of a broad rim of coastal plain that rises gently to a central mesa. Because the land is relatively flat and overgrown with vegetation, it is very difficult to find landmarks on the horizon. More than a few people have gotten lost here – including the pirate William Kidd. In 2001 a boy scout and his father were hiking on Mona and got lost; the boy died of dehydration and heat exhaustion.

Beware – if you venture to Mona, stick to main roads near Playa Sardinera. The basic photocopied map you get from the DRNA in San Juan is useless; the US Geological Survey (USGS), an agency of the US Department of the Interior, publishes a better map (\$4). But even this map is of little help in the flat, featureless scrub terrain of the interior. Mona veterans

strongly recommend first-time visitors go in company with a knowledgeable guide.

Sights & Activities

CAVES

Mona has 18 named caves that tunnel through the limestone in every part of the island. Many, like Cueva Lirio (Lily Cave), were mined for their guano, and some caves contain remains of railway tracks and machinery. Cueva de Doña Geña (Doña Geña Cave) was inhabited by a family for many years. A number of the most dramatic caves lie near the southeast cliffs, including Cueva La Escalera (Stairway Cave), Cueva del Pájaro (Bird Cave) and Cueva Los Ingleses (English Cave).

DIVING

This is one of the main reasons to come here. You will find spectacular 150ft visibility (or better) in the waters around the island. There are excellent barrier and fringe-reef dives filled with lagoons and ruts on the south side of the island, with eight different kinds of coral. Divers particularly enjoy the sharp drop-off along one reef that creates an overhanging wall; some fascinating creatures come to drift in its cool shadow. If you hang there too, you'll see spectacular things. **Scuba Dogs** (☎ 787-783-6377; www.scubadogs.net) is a San Juan-based diving outfit that organizes diving trips to the island.

Tours

Acampa Nature Adventure (☎ 787-706-0695; www.acampapr.com) Organizes four-day trips of the island with guided hikes; billed as 'roughing it with all the comforts.'

Adventour (☎ 787-889-0251; adventourspr.com) Respected eco-operator organizing adventure trips.

Adventures Tourmarine (☎ 787-375-2625; www.tourmarinepr.com; Rte 102 Km 14.1, Playa de Joyuda) The esteemed Captain Hernández is based in Joyuda in Cabo Rojo and is an old Mona hand; call for prices and availability.

Copladet (☎ 787-765-8595; www.copladet.com, in Spanish; 528 Calle Soller, San Juan) An acronym for the Corporación de Planificación y Desarrollo Turístico.

Sleeping

The only option for staying overnight on Mona is to camp. This is totally primitive camping to the point where you must bring your own water. The DRNA office in San Juan (p87) issues permits to camp on Mona (in designated areas on the south side of the island) for a maximum of three days. It's best to apply at least a week in advance. Campsites cost \$2 per night per person. If you go with an outfitter, the outfitter will take care of the permits for you.

Visitors on a diving expedition will probably pitch camp at Playa Sardinera on the west end of the island. You can head up to the old grass airstrip at Punta Oeste (Arenas) to get away from the detachment of rangers and police who are here to protect the environment and watch for illegal immigrants crossing from the poorer Dominican Republic.

With time to trek, you can hike across the island on the Camino del Diablo (Devil's Rd) to rough it at the camping areas of Playa del Uvero, on the south of the island, or further on the Camino del Infierno (Hell's Rd) to Playa Pájaros on the southeast side.

Getting There & Away

The only way to get to Isla Mona is by boat. It is highly recommended you go with a professional and experienced guide as part of an organized trip. A number of people have actually died on the island after getting lost or becoming stranded (usually through dehydration).

All of the tour operators listed earlier run regular trips, although there are rarely set schedules. Prices vary depending on the length of trip and number of people. Phone ahead for a quote. Visiting Mona requires advanced planning. Don't expect to turn up on the west coast and leave the next day. If you are prone to seasickness, beware, the Pasaje de la Mona makes for a rough crossing.

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