

# Pink Puerto Rico

San Juan is increasingly becoming the Caribbean's most LGBTQ-friendly destination, writes Doug Wallace

We've been to this gay stretch of Condado Beach before - before three hurricanes, a series of earthquakes and a pandemic crushed Puerto Rico and its capital, San Juan, both their infrastructure and their spirit. While the beach itself still has the same blue waters and golden sand, the skyline is much different: an old condo gone, a new one in its place; a boutique hotel rebuilt and renamed; what was once a cool beach club, now just an empty shell.

It only takes a day or two on this Caribbean island of 3.3 million to grasp how much it's still hurting. Money starts to fly out of my wallet - we tip big and spend fast, but never quite as quickly as when I spy a slick, black baseball cap with a simple rainbow-flag patch in a shop window. It doesn't leave my head for days. We also notice how resilient Puerto Ricans are as they wait patiently for the return of the tourism dollars - the heft of the gay community's "pink dollar" included.

With the launch of Live Out, a 2022 campaign aimed at growing the LGBTQ+ market on the island, the tourist board Discover Puerto Rico hopes to not only attract more pink dollars, but also empower its LGBTQ+ citizenry.

"When people visit Puerto Rico, we want them to live out their experiences, explore the food, the nightlife and the nature," says Jose E. Arana Rodriguez, marketing and special events manager at Discover Puerto Rico. "We want to showcase that you can just be yourself when you visit the island."

Despite the Catholic backbone - and very much unlike many of its Caribbean neighbours - Puerto Rico embraces diversity; its LGBTQ+ community enjoys the same rights as those on the mainland United States, such as the protection of hate laws and the right to get married. And thanks to the above-mentioned beach, a rich nightlife, gay-owned hotels and two annual Pride parades - one in San Juan and one in Bo-

queron on the southwest coast - the international gay crowd likes it here. In fact, 41 per cent of LGBTQ+ visitors identified Puerto Rico as a gay-friendly destination in 2020, according to a survey taken by Strategic Marketing and Research Insights for Discover Puerto Rico, up from 19 per cent in 2019.

When we are abroad, my partner and I have honed our senses so finely, we notice even the slightest hint of homophobia. We travel in a continuous state of assessment of our surroundings and the people we come in contact with, a judgment call to see how we ourselves are being judged. Having been mistaken for "friends" on other Caribbean islands by hospitality industry staff (seriously, you'd have to be headless not to know we are gay), we realize that not all the hotspots have as much experience interacting with LGBTQ+ people as others do. In Puerto Rico, and not just in touristy Condado, we feel fully welcome, our guard dropping along with our shoulders. Tour guides, cab drivers, shopkeepers, even just people on the street - all are extremely friendly and intensely proud of their island.

Rodriguez says the Live Out campaign will encourage LGBTQ+ tourists to visit, and "at the same time, help Puerto Ricans broaden their culture and become a more welcoming destination." Photo shoots using real people - including non-binary and transgender people from the island - will anchor TV spots, social-media channels and print ads beginning in early 2022, pending funds from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), the almost US\$2-trillion law that funnels pandemic-recovery money into the U.S.

"Everyone will be visible," Rodriguez says.

The open-ended campaign will first hit the U.S., where more than 95 per cent of the island's tourists come from, Rodriguez says. "We hope to also explore our other international markets like Canada, Spain, Colombia, Germany and the U.K. later on."

Other players helping to create Live Out include the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA), LatinX and queer-rights activist Jhoni Jackson and the True Self Foundation, an LGBTQ+ political and social organization. As a sidebar to the cam-



Clockwise from top left: Condado Beach; Spoon Food Tours through Old San Juan; Condado Beach; La Concha Condado. TIM SHERIDAN/GETTY IMAGES (CONDADO BEACH); DISCOVER PUERTO RICO (OLD SAN JUAN), DOUG WALLACE (HOTELS); BEAUTIFUL DESTINATIONS (LA CONCHA CONDADO)

paign, Pathway to Employment, a new program in development by hospitality education company HospitableMe and the IGLTA's non-profit research arm, will help promote greater inclusion and fair treatment of the LGBTQ+ community within the island's hospitality industry, partnering with hotels and other visitors bureaus.

"We know that many of our destinations are having work shortages for whatever reason and we know that the transgender community is less represented within the hospitality industry, finding it harder to land jobs," Rodriguez says. "We're trying to identify how to partner with both groups to create a learning opportunity for everyone. In the end, we want hotels and hospitality brands and companies trained and prepared to welcome and provide job opportunities to this segment of the community."

Meanwhile, back at the resort after a day of wandering San Juan's blue cobblestone streets, the "gay end" of the pool, always the most fun, is getting its margarita on. And there's that cap again - this time on someone else. Snap! We smile and nod, a tacit acknowledgement of solidarity - and our great taste.

For Puerto Rico travel info, visit [discoverpuertorico.com/info/travel-guidelines](https://discoverpuertorico.com/info/travel-guidelines).

## IF YOU GO

As much as travelling to Puerto Rico is about the beach, it's also about enjoying the vibrant scene. These are some ways to get the most out of the island.

**SPOON CULINARY TOUR** An enlightening tour of the cobblestone streets of Old San Juan highlights the architecture of the city and the island to its cocktails, meats, seafood and dessert at five stops. [www.spoonfoodtours.com](https://www.spoonfoodtours.com). *blo Garcia Smith, a.k.a. WikiPablo. thespoon.com*

**THE ART WALK PR** This guided tour by Georgette explores the murals on La Calle Cerra in the Santurce neighborhood. Local and international artists include D'Angelo (Puerto Rico), Javier Cintron (Puerto Rico), Jhonny (Dominican Republic) and Danae (Cuba), among others. [theartwalkpr.com](https://www.theartwalkpr.com)

**RUM TASTING AT RON DEL BARRILITO** Head to the rum distillery in San Juan, where the oldest rum in Puerto Rico is produced and bottled by the Fernandez family for more than 150 years. Find it at Duty Free on the way home. [ron-del-barrilito.com](https://www.ron-del-barrilito.com)

**DINNER AT JUNGLE BIRD** Around the corner from La Placita market square, this cool retreat serves cocktails and serves an ever-changing menu of locally inspired tapas. [junglebirdbar.com](https://www.junglebirdbar.com)

**DRINKS AT LA FACTORIA** At this unmarked spot, patrons walk through bar after bar with a different decor, ambiance, cocktail menu and music. [lafactoriapr.com](https://www.lafactoriapr.com)

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