

# Perfectly Puerto Rico

This eco-paradise in the northeastern Caribbean Sea – an American territory – bustles with a unique, chic vibe that other islands can't match.

by **Doug Wallace**

## EXPLORE SAN JUAN

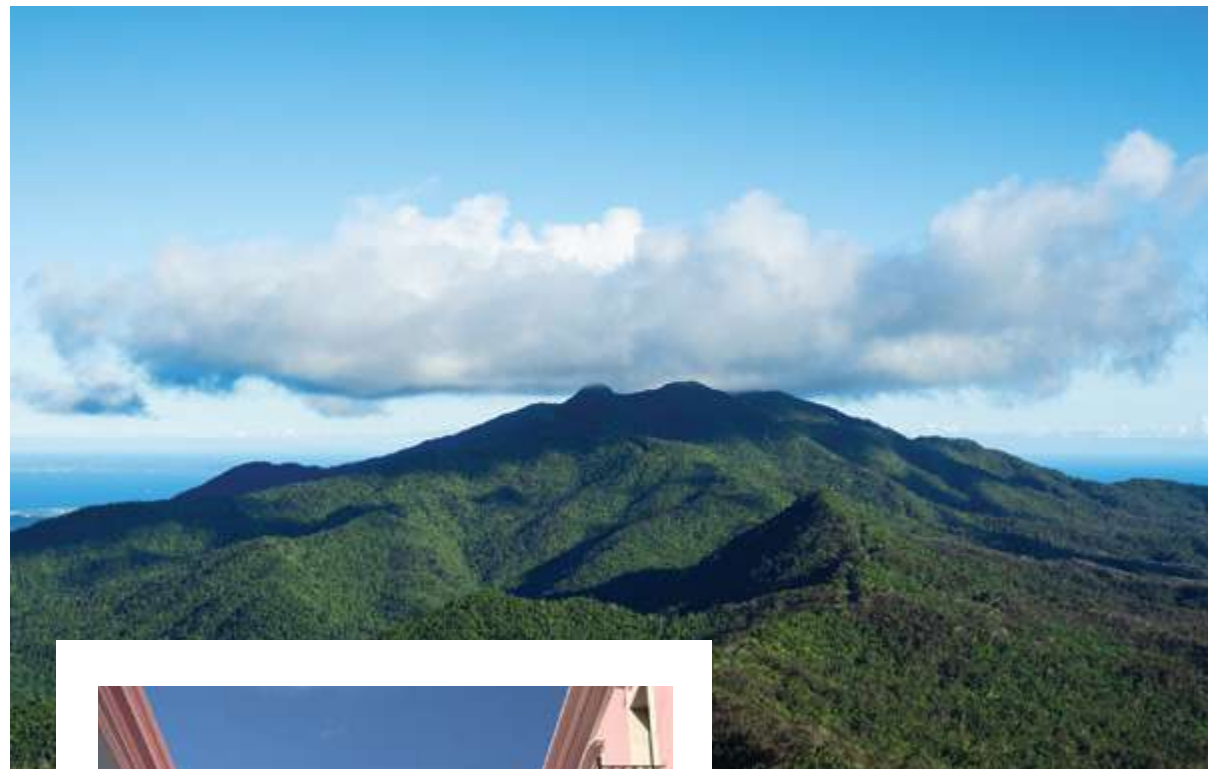
This is not your typical warm-weather getaway. The city is filled with beach clubs, waterfront fun and historic heft, plus a thriving arts scene and a busy café society. And with the 2017 hurricanes six years gone, the welcoming hospitality is back up to speed.

## GAD ABOUT TOWN

Take a walking tour through Old San Juan first – one of the oldest walled cities in North America. Weave among the pastel-hued buildings and 16th-century landmarks, the little plazas and cathedrals before spending an hour or so at the forts: El Morro and San Cristóbal. The blue cobblestone San Juan streets were made to last – from iron slag, brought over as ballast on European ships during the 18th century. Sofrito Tours can show you all the sights.

The hip Santurce neighbourhood is home to both the Museum of Art of Puerto Rico and the Museum of Contemporary Art. This is also where you can take The Art Walk PR, an engaging tour past the many murals around Calle Cerra. Across San Juan Bay, the landmark Casa Bacardi rum distillery delivers tours, tastings and mixology classes.

TOP PHOTO, RYAN WENHAO. OTHER PHOTOS, DISCOVER PUERTO RICO





**TUCK IN TO THE FOOD**

Begin with basic training: a Spoon Experience food tour to learn about the history of the island through its cuisine. Puerto Rican traditional foods — served in large portions — are the most satisfying. Be sure to try ham and mancheño croquettes, stewed red beans and rice, stuffed tostones with ceviche, and mofongo — fried and garlic-mashed plantains served with meat or seafood.

Foodie forwardness is on full display at La Placita de Santurce — a square of bars, restaurants and takeout kiosks ringing the old market — as well as at nearby Lote 23, a gastronomic picnic-table park filled with comfort-food trucks.

Out of town, you can indulge in day trips that showcase chocolate or coffee. The chocolate class at Montadero in Caguas or the Semila cacao experience in Barceloneta will fill you in — and up! — on bean-to-bar chocolate goodness. Drive to the mountain town of Jayuya and discover the artisanal wonders of the Hacienda San Pedro coffee tour; the nearby barrio of Ciales is home to the Museo del Café de Puerto Rico.



**SOAK UP THE SUN**

Puerto Rico's 435 kilometres of coastline and almost 300 beaches extend across diverse geography, revealing everything from secluded white-sand coves to marinas filled with water-sports adventure. While San Juan's Condado Beach is popular with tourists, locals head instead to the more swimmable Escambrón Beach or Ocean Park Beach. Closer to the airport, the safe and water-sports-friendly Isla Verde Beach props up a string of hotels, restaurants and cafés.

The beaches of the east islands of Culebra and Vieques are top-level, particularly the spectacular Flamenco Beach, regularly cited in the top-20 lists. Sun Bay is Vieques's most trendy hangout, a great place to break out the paddles. Over on Puerto Rico's west coast, the town of Aguadilla Pueblo is noted for a beach called Crash Boat, favoured for the surfing and the sunsets. And the isolated La Playuela in Cabo Rojo is Puerto Rico's best LGBTQ2SI-friendly beach, replete with azure water and postcard-perfect views.

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**BREAK FOR BIODIVERSITY**

Make time to experience the flora and fauna of Puerto Rico's 36 nature reserves and 19 state forests. Leaving the city behind, a trek in the interior jungles brings about a rejuvenating rainforest nature bath you didn't know you needed. El Yunque National Forest is a rainforest close to San Juan and filled with rare trees and birds, not to mention the freshest air you will ever experience. Toro Negro State Forest is the highest cloud forest, revealing incredible vistas, hiking trails, waterfalls and natural pools.

Along the coasts, Puerto Rico boasts three of the world's five bioluminescent bays — what are the chances? — which are filled with microscopic glow-in-the-dark algae. They are the stars of the nighttime tours that boat or paddle through them. Head to Mosquito Bay on the island of Vieques, Laguna Grande in Fajardo or La Parguera bio bay in Lajas.



TOP PHOTO, WEI-ZENG  
BOTTOM PHOTO, COURTESY OF DISCOVER PUERTO RICO

**WHERE TO STAY**

The smallish, adults-only Condado Ocean Club is a modern oasis of four-star fun on Condado Beach in San Juan. Dreamers Welcome hospitality group has a number of high-style apartments and home rentals nearby, plus the gorgeous Dreamcatcher boutique hotel near Ocean Park Beach. The refurbished Fairmont El San Juan delivers the glitz at Isla Verde, and the upscale Palacio Provincial in the old city was once a colonial-era government building, its historic charm restored to luxe good looks.

Out of the capital, Casa Alternativa wellness retreat specializes in personal development in Río Grande, while Combate Beach Resort offers serene seclusion in the southwest at Cabo Rojo. The Hilton and the Ponce Plaza hotels and casinos are also on our radar in the south-coast city of Ponce.

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