

10 Top-Rated Tourist Attractions in Puerto Rico

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As a tropical Caribbean travel destination, Puerto Rico has it all and then some. Beautiful palm-lined beaches, some with calm warm waters lapping the golden sand, and others with huge waves and famous breaks, draw all kinds of beach seekers, from couples and families to hard-core surfers. Home to the US Forest System's only tropical rainforest and the nighttime wonders of the Bioluminescent Bay, Puerto Rico also pleasantly surprises nature lovers. Add to this the culture and charm of historic San Juan, with its lovely colonial architecture and old forts, and the picture is almost complete.

Puerto Rico is a complex island with a Spanish Caribbean culture and an obvious American twist. This is particularly visible around San Juan, with some American chain restaurants and other comforts associated with mainland USA. Venturing further afield, visitors will find quaint towns, small villages, beautiful islands, caves, and a rugged mountainous interior.

1. Old San Juan (San Juan Viejo)

Walking the streets of Old San Juan, with its lovely colonial architecture and imposing forts, is like stepping back into another era but with a number of modern conveniences. More than 500 years old, and the second oldest city in the Americas, Old San Juan is a mix of Spanish colonial history layered with present day Puerto Rican life. The entire area is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, with hundreds of restored 16th- and 17th-century Spanish colonial buildings. Today, visitors can dine, shop, or even stay in some of these beautiful old structures.

The main attraction is El Morro Fort (Fuerte San Felipe del Morro) jutting out on a peninsula high above the ocean, just a short walk from the city center. Constructed in 1539, El Morro's history, setting, and preservation make it one of the top tourist attractions in the country. While there is much to see in Old San Juan, some of the standout sites are the Fortaleza; the Castillo de San Cristóbal (San Cristóbal Fort); and the San Juan Cathedral, which holds the tomb of Ponce de León.

2. El Yunque National Forest

To experience some of Puerto Rico's lush inland beauty, this is the place to visit. Spread along the Luquillo Mountains, including Pico El Yunque, El Yunque National Forest is home to the only tropical rainforest in the National US Forest System. The climate here is considerably cooler than along the coast and at lower elevations, and it is noticeably wetter. Walking trails wind through the forest, allowing hikers a closer look at some of the 240 species of trees and hundreds of species of plants (50 species of orchids alone), as well as an abundance of smaller wildlife. El Yunque's peak reaches 3,500 feet above sea level, and the forest covers 43 square miles, including three-quarters of the island's remaining virgin forest.



El Yunque National Forest is one of Puerto Rico's most popular natural attractions and is often visited on a tour from San Juan. Some of the main highlights in El Yunque National Forest include La Coca Falls, Yokahú Tower, Baño Grande, Baño de Oro, and La Mina Falls. Located beside the highway, La Coca Falls features an 85-foot cascade onto boulder formations and is the first major attraction visitors will come to in El Yunque.

The El Portal Tropical Forest Center is a visitors' center for those seeking information on the area. Nearby is Yokahú Tower, a 1930's tower that is open to the public to climb, offering good views out over the rainforest.

3. Culebra Island

Although Culebra is often mentioned in the same breath as Vieques, this smaller island with beautiful beaches and lush hills has its own unique character. The pace here is unhurried and the atmosphere relaxed. Eco tourism is big on the island and many of the tourist establishments are run by expats. About 17 miles east of Puerto Rico and 12 miles west of the Caribbean island of Saint Thomas, Culebra is only seven miles long and three miles wide, with 23 offshore islands of its own. The area's coral reefs are considered some of the best in the entire Caribbean.

The horseshoe-shaped Playa Flamenco is the most popular beach on the island and as close to perfect as possible. The water is clear with no surf, making it a good place for swimming or diving, and the blazingly white sand is lined with palms. Isla de Culebra National Wildlife Refuge is a well-preserved slice of nature that includes the entire coastline of Culebra and more than 20 offshore cays. More than a third of Culebra is designated as the Culebra National Wildlife Refuge, which includes Cayo Luis Peña, a small island just west of Culebra. Here, coves and rugged terrain make for some interesting but challenging hiking opportunities.

4. Vieques

Vieques, eight miles from mainland Puerto Rico, has become a popular beach resort with small, upper-end hotels, restaurants, shops, and galleries. With the departure of the United States Army from the island in 2003, Vieques turned its focus to tourism. Beautiful beaches are now supported with a quality tourism infrastructure that attracts both Puerto Ricans and foreign travelers, who take the time to make their way over to the island. There are no large hotels or highrise condo complexes. At 21 miles long and five miles wide, Vieques is the largest of the Spanish Virgin Islands but still offers a small-island feel.

The island is also known for a unique phenomenon at Mosquito Bay (also known as Bioluminescent Bay), where a large concentration of phosphorescent dinoflagellates light up movement in the water at night. Visitors can take a tour, either in a boat, canoe, or kayak after dark to experience this natural wonder. While there are other areas in Puerto Rico where this phenomenon occurs, this is this best place to experience it. Vieques can be reached by air or ferry, with ferries departing from Fajardo.

5. Surfing and Whale Watching at Rincon

Often called "Pueblo del Surfing" (Surfing Town) and "Little Malibu," Rincón is known to Puerto Ricans as a "Gringo Paradise." The dominant language in the area is English, with many foreign surfers and other expats making this town their home. It became a surfing mecca after the World Surfing Championships in 1968, when images of Rincón and the frequent 15-foot-high waves were transmitted worldwide. Although waves do get quite big here, there are beautiful beaches that are suitable for swimming, mostly to the south of town.

Rincón is also one of Puerto Rico's main areas for whale watching excursions. The prime whale watching season is mid-January through to March, when humpback whales are in the area. Tours are easily arranged in town.

6. Luquillo Beach

For an easy escape from the busy beaches of San Juan, Luquillo is a terrific option. Luquillo Beach, just a short drive from the city, is a palm-lined stretch of golden sand that offers a fair degree of tranquility, without surrounding high-rise buildings and development. The water is generally calm for swimming and the beach stretches on for almost a mile, making it ideal for walking. On the grounds, which are shaded with coconut palms, are modern restrooms, showers, and changing rooms with lockers, and just outside the entrance are food sellers. A stop at the beach can be combined with a day trip to El Yunque National Forest.



7. Arecibo Radio Telescope

The Arecibo Radio Telescope features a 20-acre dish set in a sinkhole. Here, astronomers have proved the "music of the stars" (pulsars and quasars), and examined the moon, the earth's ionosphere, and other planets. There is an ongoing Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) program at the site as well. Scenes from the Jodie Foster film *Contact*, and others, have been filmed at the observatory. The setting is amazing and the complexity of the Observatorio de Arecibo is so impressive it is well worth the drive up the winding road for a visit.

8. Rio Camuy Caves

The Rio Camuy Cave Park features a huge cave system covering 268 acres and is thought to be the third largest cave system in the world. A trolley bus transports visitors to a 200-foot deep cave, or sinkhole, which is now a preserved area known as Cueva Clara Empalme. The caves feature various rooms, in some cases with extremely high ceilings, stalagmites, and stalactites, and rivers rushing along the base. A guided tour leads visitors through the Cueva Clara Empalme. In addition to the natural wonders the cave system presents, it's also interesting to note that the caves were used by the indigenous population long ago.



9. Ponce's Historic City Center

While Ponce is a large city and generally not on the typical tourist route through Puerto Rico, its historic city center is a delight, with 17th-century architecture and open plazas. The Plaza Las Delicias is a good starting point for visitors, with cafés and park benches for convenient people-watching. Buildings of particular note here are the red- and white-striped Old Ponce Fire Station, the City Hall, and the much more recently built Cathedral (Catedral Nuestra Señora de la Guadalupe). Ponce also has a large number of quality museums, most notably the Ponce Museum of Art.

10. Isla Verde

For the all-inclusive crowd looking for nice resorts and a decent beach within easy reach of a major airport, Isla Verde is just the answer. Everything an overworked, sun-seeking, beach-loving vacationer could ask for - minus Puerto Rican culture - can be found right here. With calm waters lined by a white-sand beach and backed by palm trees and resorts, Isla Verde is a tropical get away with all the comforts.

This area is a suburb of San Juan and those who are looking to get off the resort without venturing too far will find the historic streets of Old San Juan just a short taxi ride away. Similarly, El Yunque National Rainforest can also be done as an excursion for a quick escape from the beach.