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Puerto Rico
Credit: pyzata/Getty

PUERTO RICO

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With tropical beaches, vibrant nightlife, innovative chefs, and new attractions, Puerto Rico continues to rebound after the devastating hurricane that hit the island in 2017. In the capital of San Juan, hotels and restaurants are back up and running, while the rest of the island continues to rebuild. The resilient spirit of the Puerto Rican people and their desire to share their island with visitors, regardless of the state of recovery, makes the island worthy of a visit. Why head there now? “The music is unbelievable. People are happy here,” says Juan Jose Cuevas, executive chef at 1919 restaurant in the newly reopened Hotel Condado Vanderbilt. “It’s a very good place to relax — we love and need tourists.”

Simply by visiting, travelers are helping the island get back on its feet. Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory, so U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents don’t need a passport to visit, and cell phones with U.S. domestic phone plans often work as they do at home, without additional fees. Nonstop flights from Washington D.C. to San Juan take less than four hours.

SIGHTS, EXPERIENCES, AND ATTRACTIONS

OLD SAN JUAN: If you’ve seen the video for the worldwide hit song “Despacito” — the most watched YouTube video ever, with more than 5.8 billion views — you’ve caught a glimpse of Old San Juan. Founded by Ponce de León in the early 1500s, Old San Juan still has cobblestone streets. Some houses and shops remain from five centuries ago; others have been rebuilt and are colorfully painted. Today Old San Juan is a lively place to dine, dance, and shop.

CASTILLO SAN FELIPE DEL MORRO: Located at the northeast tip of Old San Juan with sweeping views of the sea, this citadel guarded San Juan Bay for centuries. It dates to the 1500s, and its imposing stone walls and fortifications remain intact. Allow a couple of hours to explore the fort, which is now part of the National Park Service and the surrounding grounds. If you’re a history lover, a combination ticket includes admission to the nearby Castillo San Cristobal fort as well.

MUSEO DE ARTE Y DISEÑO DE MIRAMAR: This recently opened museum of art and design showcases interactive exhibits from some of Puerto Rico’s foremost creative minds. Located in San Juan’s Miramar district, it’s in a refurbished 1913 home that has been a hub for artists for decades.

BACARDI’S MIXOLOGY CLASS: Crafting a mojito seems easy, but it’s actually a complex mixture of flavors. Get behind the bar and learn from Bacardi’s mixologists how to make a mojito, daiquiri, and a Cuba libre in the rum producer’s mixology class, then taste what you’ve created (\$60).



FOOD TOURS: San Juan has become a destination for foodies. One of the best ways to savor the city is on a walking or driving tour that encompasses the island's history, culture, and epicurean delights. Spoon offers food tours of Old San Juan with tastes, for example, of mofongo, a Puerto Rican fried plantain dish.

SALSA CLASSES: Puerto Ricans know how to dance — and they want you to dance with them. Latin Roots offers salsa dance classes and live music.

PUERTO RICO'S SECOND CITY: Ponce, on Puerto Rico's south coast, is known as the Pearl of the South and is about a 90-minute drive from San Juan. A highlight is the Museo de Arte de Ponce, which has extraordinary exhibitions of Latin American and European art. Walk through Ponce's colonial center and enjoy a sunset drink at a coastside bar.

DINING

1919: Housed in the elegant Condado Vanderbilt Hotel, 1919 is helmed by Chef Juan Jose Cuevas, a Michelin-star chef and native Puerto Rican, who supports the island's small farmers by buying their exquisite produce. Cuevas' contemporary menu leans toward fresh local fish and island specialties. Chef Cuevas helped feed thousands of hurricane survivors in the weeks after Hurricane Maria.

MARMALADE: Chef Peter Schintler's inventive cuisine in a sleek and stylish room is a destination restaurant for foodies. Schintler supports sustainable farmers in Puerto Rico with a menu that will appeal to everyone from vegetarians and raw foodies to carnivores. This Michelin Star-rated hot spot is a trendy place to celebrate a special occasion.

JOSE ENRIQUE: This casual bar and eatery features a chalkboard menu listing some of the best food on the island, like the skirt steak with fried plantains at reasonable prices. Jose Enrique doesn't take

reservations so for less of a wait, go before 6 pm or after 9 pm. Or belly up to the bar, where the full menu is offered.

SANTAELLA: Beautiful people gather in this charmingly verdant room to have handmade cocktails (rum sours are popular) and small plates of local delicacies such as malanga fritters, created by famed chef, Jose Santaella.

EXPLORE

BEACHES: Puerto Rico's palm-shaded beaches encircle the island. They range from the easily accessible, such as Condado Beach in San Juan, to the somewhat remote, like Mar Chiquita north of Manatí. You'll need a car to reach Mar Chiquita, about an hour from San Juan, but that can lead to discoveries such as Las Tacas taco stand, at the intersection of roads 685 and 648, about half a mile inland from the beach.

LAS CABEZAS DE SAN JUAN: This nature reserve on the northeastern tip of Puerto Rico encompasses forests, mangroves, and coral reefs, making the bioluminescent bay an ideal place to kayak. When conditions are right, the bay glows with every paddle stroke during nighttime boating excursions.

VIEQUES: This island east of Puerto Rico's main island was devastated by Hurricane Maria but is gradually recovering and has beguiling beaches and bioluminescent bays. The part of Vieques formerly used as a U.S. Naval base is now a national wildlife refuge.

GETTING THERE

Jetblue offers nonstop service from Reagan National Airport (DCA) to San Juan Luis Munoz Marin International Airport (SJU) while United Airlines offers nonstop service from Dulles International Airport (IAD) to SJU.



San Juan, Puerto Rico
Credit: dbvirago/Getty



Alcapurrias at Santaella



San Juan, Puerto Rico
Credit: martalugo/Getty