



# Moment of Change

SINCE HURRICANE MARIA, THE STORY ABOUT PUERTO RICO HAS FOCUSED ON DISASTER AND RECOVERY. BUT THERE'S SO MUCH MORE TO THIS U.S. TERRITORY, FROM PHOTOGENIC CITIES TO RAINFORESTS—AND NOW IS THE TIME TO DISCOVER IT.

 KRISTEN KOCH

## HOW DO YOU IMPROVE ON HAM AND CHEESE?

Put it on a **sweet** roll, dust it with powdered sugar and call it a **mallorca**. Oh, and eat it on a deserted beach on the island of Vieques, then step over wild-horse hoofprints to rinse the sugar from your fingers.

Puerto Rico is, after all, *la isla del encanto*: the island of enchantment, a place where the rivers once ran with gold, and the mountains produced coffee fit for popes and kings. Though Hurricane Maria brought devastation in 2017,

Puerto Ricans have rebuilt, and they've come up with a new phrase: *Puerto Rico se levanta*, Puerto Rico rises. Today, you'll find a wonderland of vibrant cities, forest-topped peaks and spectacular beaches.

"The island is up and running, and people are asking about it again," says Cindy McDonnell, a CAA Travel Consultant in Oshawa, Ont. "There's lots to explore beyond beaches, and Puerto Ricans definitely want people to stay and enjoy the local culture." ▷

**Above: public art exhibitions bring life to the back streets of San Juan**



This page, from left: the blue-cobblestoned streets of Old San Juan slope up toward El Morro; oceanfront kiosks, like this one at Luquillo Beach near El Yunque, serve great mofongo

My own visit starts in San Juan, at Castillo San Felipe del Morro, a six-level fortress at the entrance to the harbour, built during the 400 years of Spanish rule. For centuries, when travel depended on the trade winds, whoever controlled El Morro controlled the Caribbean. Its five-metre-thick walls are formidable, even if the watchtowers are now full of cruise-ship passengers grinning for photos instead of guards.

Leaving the fort, I head down the Paseo del Morro, a flat waterfront walkway that winds around the outside of Old San Juan, with its compact grid of sloping cobblestone streets.

*“There’s lots to explore beyond beaches... stay and enjoy the local culture”*

“You’re in the Caribbean, but it feels like Europe,” McDonnell says of Old San Juan.

After exploring the walled city, I go east through the swank-but-not-snooty resort area of Condado to the Santurce neighbourhood for the city’s hipster scene, complete with pizza and cupcake shops along Calle Loíza as well as resale and jewelry boutiques.

Later, I join Rocio from Spoon Food Tours, who introduces me to cocktails made with local rum and fresh fruit juice, and *mofongo*,



a staple made from mashed, fried plantain.

“I can taste when it’s not a plantain from Puerto Rico,” she insists. To me, it’s all delicious.

From San Juan, I make my way to the south coast and arrive in Ponce, the second-oldest city. While San Juan was the official port under Spanish rule, Ponce was the black-market hub, buying and selling goods from other countries and welcoming visitors from all over (which is why you’ll see names like Wiechers and Armstrong on historic-house museums here).

The profits built a city centre of pastel-coloured shops and homes that I explore on a walking tour with Isla Caribe, which starts in pretty Plaza las Delicias. We pass the Parque de Bombas, a firehouse turned museum whose gingerbread-delicate architecture is splashed with red and black stripes. My guide, Ernesto, points out the murals painted for the *Ponce Es Ley* public art festival, whose exuberant colours (and sometimes overt political messaging) stand out against the neoclassical buildings.

In the city’s heyday, a trolley ran between the centre and the port; today I drive to La Guancha, a palm-lined boardwalk. The wood planks are still being repaired after Maria, but that doesn’t stop middle-aged couples in matching trainers from strolling in the evening sun or groups of young people from sipping beers in the restaurants along the water.

To experience Puerto Rico’s natural side, I head north to El Yunque National Forest, the only rainforest in the U.S. national forest system. I’m awestruck by the carpet of green covering the hills, all of it regrown after Maria. I follow



**ARE YOU COVERED?**

Ontario has eliminated basic out-of-country travel insurance. To stay covered, snowbirds and holiday travellers are reminded to purchase CAA Travel Medical Insurance by calling 1-800-267-8713 or visiting [caaneo.ca/insurance/orion-travel-insurance](http://caaneo.ca/insurance/orion-travel-insurance).



Route 191 through the forest until it loops—it's still closed beyond a certain point due to hurricane damage—and hop out to hike the paved Mt. Britton trail to a lookout tower. From here, I can see mist blowing across the face of El Yunque peak and, beyond the sea of palm fronds, the sea itself, lapping at golden beaches on the island's northeast coast.

Returning to San Juan, I board a tiny Cessna for the 25-minute flight to Vieques, a nearby island known for its bioluminescent bay—one of the brightest in the world. My hotel helps arrange a two-hour excursion with Dimary Cubero, who whisks me from beach to beach in her taxi-slash-tour van. “Vieques is a special place,” she says. “There aren’t many like this in the world.”

I’m inclined to agree after seeing white-sand Caracas Beach, cooled by ocean breezes; gorgeously golden El Gallito Beach, dotted with only three people; and Playa Negra, where couples take turns burying each other in the black sand for photos. ▷



This page, clockwise from top: the can’t-miss-them colours of the Parque de Bombas museum in Ponce; a stroll on the Paseo del Morro; the Puerto Rican flag shows up on balconies and in street art; island-grown produce at an outdoor market near Condado Beach



## A Brief History of Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico’s European connection goes back to 1493, when Columbus arrived and started taking land from the indigenous Taíno to kick off 400 years of Spanish rule. Spain gave the island autonomy in 1897 after years of revolt, only to cede Puerto Rico to the United States in 1898 after losing the Spanish-American War.

It’s now a self-governing U.S. commonwealth, though you’ll see both sides of Puerto Rico’s heritage everywhere. City outskirts are full of American chain stores doing business in U.S. dollars, and most people replied to my *buenos días* in English. But co-workers greet each other with cheek kisses, road signs are in Spanish, and, as my walking-tour guide in Ponce points out, “how can you not feel Spanish when you speak the same language?”

## Did You Know?

Today's car keys can cost hundreds of dollars to replace.



“I lost my car keys and inquired about getting a new set – nearly \$400 to replace! Just received them back by courier from The War Amps, free of charge, thanks to my key tag. What a service!”

– Marilyn



Your support of the Key Tag Service helps provide child amputees like Jaelynn with the artificial limbs they need to lead active lives.

Safeguard your keys with a War Amps key tag. They're free – and they work! Order yours online.



The War Amps

1 800 250-3030  
waramps.ca

## PUERTO RICO



After nightfall, the scenery comes alive on a kayak trip around Mosquito Bay. The bay was partly destroyed by Maria when the storm felled the mangrove trees that feed the bioluminescent dinoflagellates. But the trees grew back, and the water has lit up once more.

We climb into clear plastic kayaks and head out in near-total darkness, stopping to swirl our paddles and wave our hands underwater; the soft, whitish glow of bioluminescence seems to bubble up in their wake. It feels like a special effect to see your fingers giving off faint bursts of light—like I'm watching myself do magic.

This is an enchanted place, that's bursting, literally glowing, with life. And it's easy to fall under its spell. **CAA**

From left: activities on offer in the sleepy Vieques town of Esperanza; only non-motorized watercraft, like these kayaks, are allowed on bioluminescent Mosquito Bay

PHOTOGRAPHY [SIGN] GYNN/ALAMY; [KAYAKING] COURTESY OF PUERTO RICO TOURISM

## Where to Stay

Puerto Rico has tons of hotel options, with more big-name properties slated to open in 2020. Here's where to make reservations:

**FOR A  
RESTORED HISTORIC  
PROPERTY**

**Hotel  
El Convento**  
OLD SAN JUAN

Walking into this European-style former convent will make you feel like Maria entering the church gates in *The Sound of Music*. The distinctive yellow building in the heart of Old San Juan housed nuns from 1651 to 1903, then became a dance hall, a flophouse and a parking lot for garbage trucks. Today, 58 exquisite rooms with tiled floors and wooden shutters surround a courtyard shaded by a 300-plus-year-old níspero tree.

**FOR A  
BOUTIQUE HOTEL**

**El Blok**  
VIEQUES

Sculptural (and hurricane-resistant) concrete curves around the outside of this 22-room adults-only property in the tiny town of Esperanza, filtering light onto the private balconies. The boho-contemporary rooms aren't for the shy, with glass-walled showers, and the plastic wristbands used as room keys lend a summer-camp-for-grown-ups feel. Watch the waves hit Sun Bay from the plunge pool on the rooftop terrace and save room for the churros at Placita, the ground-floor restaurant and bar.

**FOR MODERN  
CONVENIENCE (AND  
A MEMBER-EXCLUSIVE  
CAA DISCOUNT)**

**Hyatt Place**  
SAN JUAN CITY CENTER

Set between Old San Juan and Condado, this newly built 149-room hotel makes it easy to explore attractions old and new. Put your feet up on the rooms' pull-out sectionals after a day on the cobblestones or let kids play in the pirate-themed pool. After dark, head east to La Placita, the centre of Santurce nightlife, or west to District San Juan, a five-acre entertainment complex set to open in 2020.

**Plus, CAA Members can save up to 10 per cent.**