

Puerto Rico: An exotic family vacation without leaving U.S.

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SPECIAL TO THE MIAMI HERALD

When we arrived in Puerto Rico on Christmas day, we weren't sure what would be open for dinner on this primarily Catholic island, and the kids were sick of our carry-on plane food. We managed to find an open sushi place. Instead of the usual array of sushi rolls, we found menu items we'd never seen before — like rolls wrapped in tortilla instead of seaweed, stuffed with mofongo (mashed, fried plantain) and fried chicken.

Traveling to foreign countries is much tougher with kids in tow. But it's possible to get that exotic travel experience without taking the typical beach or all-inclusive resort trip. In Puerto Rico, it feels like you've left the States: Spanish is the primary language, gas is sold in liters, and architecture resembles Mexico much more than Maryland.

The island, though, has been a U.S. territory since 1898, and there's no need for a passport or currency exchange.



La Mina Falls are at the end of a 30 minute hike along the water at El Yunque.

Here are the top sights when traveling with the family to Puerto Rico:

- **El Morro:** Forget the history — my kids just wanted to climb the high rock walls, duck through child-size tunnels, run up and down steep ramps, and explore a narrow three-story staircase that once provided quick passage for soldiers.

This Spanish fort in Old San Juan, officially called Castillo San Felipe del Morro, was built over 250 years, finished in 1787. The six-level fortification sports cannons, a dry moat and incredible water views. But the kids didn't care about that. They wanted to run and explore.

One favorite: the tiny, picturesque guard towers jutting over the fort's edge. The narrow walkway leading there provided an excellent perch for them to lean over, and my daughter was excited to spot iguanas on the walls and lawn below.

While signs tell of the soldiers who died fighting on that sprawling lawn, the scene couldn't be more bucolic, with locals and tourists alike flying kites that can be purchased at the gift shop or a street vendor at the Plaza de San Jose.

- **Bio Bay.** "That was awesome," said my 8-year-old son after we got out of our kayaks at 10:30 at night. We had paddled in utter darkness through mangroves en route to a lagoon that lit up naturally whenever the oar hit the water.

Puerto Rico has three of the world's dozen or so bioluminescent bays. These waters hold dinoflagellates, one-cell organisms so small there are almost 800,000 of them per gallon. When disturbed, they glow as defense. The kids eagerly dipped their hands in, watching the sparkles undulate like pixie dust. The kayak paddle glowed blue in the water, lighting up like a mobile x-ray whenever it moved.

The kids were just as happy about the late night paddle, which felt like we were on a Pirates of the Caribbean ride. It was dark and we bumped the other boats frequently.

Back at our launching point, Bahia Las Croabas, we found a cart making fresh churros, filled with Boston cream, cream cheese, strawberry or passionfruit jam.

- **El Yunque National Forest:** While my kids aren't usually willing hikers, they were excited to go to a rainforest, the only one in the U.S. Forest Service's purview. We hiked to the La Mina waterfall, a steep but paved trail taking 30 minutes each way.

The kids couldn't wait to swim under the pounding waterfall. While my son changed his mind at the bottom (the water was quite cold), my 10-year-old daughter and I waded out into the rocky natural pool, taking a deep breath before plunging underneath the falls. "It's really loud and it hurts!" my daughter said. My son was just as happy to scramble around the rocks while we swam.

During the hike back, we stopped at one of the scenic covered huts for a snack. While the kids hoped to see more wildlife, they did find tadpoles, lizards and a hummingbird.

- **Islands:** Like many kids, mine are happiest just playing on the beach. They wanted to go daily to the beaches near our rented Fajardo condo for good tidepooling, shell gathering and snorkeling.

They thought it would be fun, though, to take a boat trip to nearby Culebra or Vieques islands. We ended up at Red Beach in Vieques, and couldn't drag the kids out of the water (which was unfortunate because we didn't reapply sunscreen and they burned). While there were no shells at this beach, the white sand was fine and soft, and the kids found a ghost crab near our towels.

Island ferries, which leave several times daily from Fajardo, are ridiculously cheap at \$4 roundtrip per adult, \$2 per child.

Getting tickets to Culebra, with its gorgeous Flamenco Beach, can be trying. You can sometimes get tickets a day in advance, but sometimes they sell out or don't sell them a day ahead. You can chance it by showing up at 6 a.m. for same-day tickets, or just go to Vieques instead (it also has great beaches). The ferry rides are 60-75 minutes, and taxi vans await to whisk you off to the beach of your choice.

- **Roadside food:** While my son tried to scout out non-native pizza and sushi the entire trip, one of the highlights for the rest of us was tasting local foods. The coco frio (coconut water) stand was a favorite. For \$2 a coconut, we got a show, with the fruit stand owner slamming his machete into the unripe, green coconut to carve a flat base, then chopping off the top of the coconut to reveal the trap door to the sweet water. Stick a straw in, then sip. After we finished drinking, he chopped the coconut in half, showing us how we could peel out the smooth, creamy layer of flesh inside. For another \$3, we got the sweetest tasting pineapple ever, and a lesson in artistic fruit carving. A trip to the *kioskos* was next, at Luquillo Beach. While there were more than 50 kiosks to choose from, they all seemed to serve the same thing: fried plantains, fried plantains with ground beef, fried plantain and beef pastry, fried cornmeal with cheese inside, and similar dishes. A few had cerviche as well as rice and beans, and the cold beers were a welcome addition. My meat and potatoes-loving daughter went back for seconds on the fried mashed potato balls stuffed with meat.
- **Rum tastings:** Okay, this one is really for the adults. But as we told the kids, we do things for you, and you do things for us. San Juan has two rum-tasting options. The Bacardi Rum Visitor Center tour is not a factory tour, but includes a tram tour, videos, interactive exhibits, drink-making demonstrations, and most importantly, two free tastings (and soda/juice for the kids). We did not have time for this excursion (it's across the harbor from Old San Juan, requiring a boat ride and taxi ride if you're without a car), so we headed to the Don Q tasting room across from Pier 1 in Old San Juan.

The kids found a spot to sit and play cards while the adults imbibed (and then they got treated to ice cream nearby). Don Q gave us two samples each (the official policy is one, so choose carefully). Don't miss the coconut-flavored rum on the rocks.

We weren't able to do everything on our list, but here are some family-friendly options for the next trip:

- **Nature reserves:** The Laguna Grande bio bay is part of a nature reserve: Las Cabezas de San Juan. Call ahead to book a group tour of the Fajardo reserve (tours in English available). The tour includes a short tram ride, and you'll see seven different ecological systems, including coral reefs, dry forests, mangroves, beaches and lagoons. The park also has the island's oldest lighthouse, a restored 19th century building. It also hosts several night tours a week, a good option for families with kids too young to kayak, because they just walk to the lagoon.

- **Ziplining:** These adventure lines are popping up all over Puerto Rico, where you strap into their harnesses and zip through the lush forest canopy. Tour companies have different rules as to the minimum height, weight or age of the participant (age 5 is the youngest allowed).

- **Rio Camuy Cave Park:** This Puerto Rico cave system is the world's third largest. You'll see a massive main cavern with exceedingly high ceiling, a bat cave, huge sinkholes, a river running between caves, some stalactites and stalagmites, and lots of vegetation inside. The tour is an easy 30-45 minutes inside, and you can spend additional time outdoors. If your heart is set on going, get there early, as the park limits the number of daily visitors.

After you visit the cave, make sure to stop at Heladeria de Lares in the Lares town square about 20 minutes away. The store created more than 1,000 flavors of ice creams including cod fish, plaintain, almond cake, sweet rice, rice and beans, shrimp, beer, guava, corn, avocado and traditional flavors as well.

- **Arecibo Observatory:** Kids love seeing the largest radio telescope in the world, a dish spanning 20 acres and sitting in a karst sinkhole 1,300 feet across. You might have seen it in the James Bond movie, *GoldenEye*. It's a beautiful, if windy drive to the observatory, and there are some steep steps to climb from the parking area. Be mindful of that if traveling with very young children. You can do the observatory on the same day as Rio Camuy, if you get to the caves early enough.

GOING TO PUERTO RICO

Getting there: American Airlines flies nonstop from Miami to San Juan; JetBlue and Spirit fly nonstop from Fort Lauderdale, a 2 1/2-hour flight. Connecting flights from either airport are available but take 4 1/2 hours or longer (six hours from Fort Lauderdale). Roundtrip airfare for midweek travel in late April starts around \$220 from Miami, \$195 from Fort Lauderdale.

Information: www.seepuertorico.com; a good primer for kiosk/local food is at www.puertoricodaytrips.com/kiosk-food/.

WHERE TO STAY

Fajardo Inn: Located in the northeast part of the island, near the Bio Bay and not far from El Yunque. www.fajardoinn.com; 800-860-6006.

Wyndham Rio Mar: Secluded from the hubbub of San Juan, close to El Yunque; features a large beach and kids' pool. www.wyndhamriomar.com; 877-636-0636.

Caribe Hilton San Juan: Sporting location plus a private beach, kids' club; popular with families. www.caribehilton.com; 787-721-0303 or 877-GO-HILTON.

Condo rental: When traveling with kids, it's often easier to stay at a condo, with a kitchen, separate bedrooms and laundry facilities. We booked a great one through www.vrbo.com.

WHERE TO EAT

Pasion por el Fogon: Gourmet Puerto Rican meal with excellent service. Kids menu available. Entrees \$10-\$34. In Fajardo, 787-863-3502; www.pasionporelfogon.net.

La Bombonera: The equivalent of a Puerto Rican diner, known for its Mallorca (a grilled sandwich stuffed with your choice of egg, ham and/or cheese and topped with powdered sugar). \$4-\$10. 787-722-0658; 259 Calle San Francisco in Old San Juan.

Café Puerto Rico: Traditional Puerto Rican food in a beautiful plaza, frequented by locals and tourists alike. Entrees \$10-\$21. 208 O'Donnel, Plaza Colon, Old San Juan; 787-724-2281; www.cafepuertorico.com.

BIO BAY

Rates are around \$40-45/person, transportation not included. At least half a dozen companies operate tours for Laguna Grande in Fajardo. Some companies will transport you from San Juan. And you can book a walking tour to see it through the Las Cabezas de San Juan Nature Reserve.

Pure Adventure: 787-202-6551, www.pureadventurepr.com.

Yokahu Kayaks: 787-604-7375, www.yokahukayaks.com.

Kayaking Puerto Rico: 787-435-1665, <http://elyunque.com/KPR.htm>.

• MOSQUITO BAY, VIEQUES

Island Adventures Bio Bay Eco Tours: 787-741-0720, www.biobay.com.

Abe's Snorkeling: 787-741-2134, www.abessnorkeling.com.

• **LA PARGUERA**

Due to pollution, the luminescent strength is low at La Parguera. If you do go, consider these tour companies:

Rincon Tours: 787-632-2889, www.rinconvacations.com/bioluminescent-bay-puertorico.html.

Amigos Tours: www.amigostours.net/Tours.html.

ZIPLINING

Yunke Zipline Adventures: 787-242-3368, <http://yunkezipline.wordpress.com/>

La Marquesa Canopy Tour: www.canopytourpr.com.

Acampa Tours: www.acampapr.com.

WHAT TO DO

Las Cabezas de San Juan Nature Reserve: Two-hour tours in English are usually at 2 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday. Reserve in advance at 787-722-5882. They sometimes offer a nighttime walking tour (Thursday through Saturday), where you can see the bio bay. Tours are \$8/adult, \$4/kids 11 and under. Save \$2 by reserving online. www.fideicomiso.org.

El Morro: Open daily 9 a.m.-6 p.m. \$3/person ages 16+. Free for kids 15 and under. www.nps.gov/saju/index.htm.

Rio Camuy Cave Park: Costs are \$15/adult, \$10/kid over age 3, and \$3/parking. Open 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesday to Sunday. 787-898-3100.

Arecibo Observatory: Open days and times vary by season. Cost is \$10/adult, \$6/child. www.naic.edu.

El Yunque: 787-888-1880, www.fs.usda.gov/elyunque.

Islands: Culebra ferry schedule: www.islaculebra.com/puerto-rico/culebra-ferry-schedule.html. Vieques ferry schedule: www.viequestravelguide.com/Vieques-Ferry-Schedule.html. Puerto Rican Port Authority: 787-729-8715; www.prpa.gobierno.pr/