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ACCOMMODATIONS

Puerto Rico's proximity to the United States has its upsides and its downsides. On the one hand the standard of accommodations is generally better than it is elsewhere in the Caribbean (although rarely as consistent as the US). On the other hand, prices are generally higher.

For package tourists there are plenty of high quality resorts, although few of them are all-inclusive (you must pay extra for food, drink and other activities). Prices for these establishments can vary depending on the season, ongoing offers and who you book through. Elsewhere there's a good system of *paradores* or midrange accommodations scattered across the island, often in historical buildings or old coffee haciendas. Vacation rentals are a more

economical option for long-term guests or big groups. There are no youth hostels in Puerto Rico, and very few dorm-style accommodations, even near local universities. Motels in the traditional American sense are also thin on the ground. All this means that, aside from camping, there's a huge dearth of budget options.

Lodging rates in Puerto Rico vary, sometimes by more than 30%, from season to season and even from day to day, as hotels adjust rates according to the perceived demand. In general, rates are highest from December 15 through the end of May. They are also high from mid-June to August, when many island families take their vacations. Rates are lowest from September 1 to December 14. Because prices change so frequently, the rates listed in this book are often given as ranges. The prices given in this book do not include room taxes, which are 15% at hotels with casinos, and 9% elsewhere.

Camping

PUBLIC CAMPGROUNDS

These are on public lands such as national forests and commonwealth *reservas forestales* (forest reserves). To camp in one of the reserves, contact the **Departamento de Recursos Naturales y Ambientales** (DRNA; Department of Natural Resources; Map p87; ☎ 787-999-2200; www.drna.gobierno.pr in Spanish; Rte 8838 Km 6.3, Sector El Cinco, Río Piedras) at least 15 days in advance for reservations and a permit. Commonwealth-run forest-reserve campgrounds are likely to have showers and RV hookups available; national forest campgrounds tend to be less developed.

If you want to camp on the beach but don't want to risk running afoul of the law, call the

BOOK YOUR STAY ONLINE

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Compañía de Parques Nacionales (CPN; National Park Company; ☎ 787-622-5200, ext 355 or 369; www.parquesnacionalespr.com in Spanish; Apartado Postal No 3207, San Juan, 00904), which allows camping at six public beaches: Cerro Gordo, La Monserrate, Seven Seas, Punta Guilarte (near Arroyo), Vieques and Culebra.

The grounds are big and grassy, and get packed during holidays. They've got picnic tables, showers and toilets. Not all CPN sites have 24-hour guards.

Never camp alone at a site without a guard, and be extra careful at Cerro Gordo and La Monserrate. You don't need a reservation to camp at these places, but in high season if you don't call ahead you'll likely be out of luck if you just pull up. To make a reservation, you must pay with Visa, MasterCard or Discover Card.

Summer is high camping season on the island; during the other seasons, camping areas at the balnearios and *reservas forestales* are often closed (although sometimes you can just set up camp for free and no one will bother you).

Getting in touch with the DRNA or CPN isn't always easy; your best bet is to call early and often – someone will eventually pick up the phone.

There is no fee or reservation necessary to camp in El Yunque, but you must get a permit at the Catalina Work Center (p132) in the forest.

PRIVATE CAMPGROUNDS

These are on private property and are usually close to or in a town. Most are designed with RVs in mind; few accept tents. Facilities can include hot showers, coin-operated laundry, a swimming pool, full RV hookups, a games area, a playground and a convenience store.

Guesthouses

Places calling themselves 'guesthouses' can differ vastly from one to another. While some guesthouses may have as few as two rooms for travelers, others may boast 25. While one guesthouse may look like a roadside motel, another may be a beach house with a pool, bar and restaurant.

The cheapest establishments, with rooms around \$75, may have clean but unexciting rooms with a shared bathroom. Pricier places have rooms with private bathrooms, balconies, sun decks and public dining rooms with extensive menus and table service (at extra cost). They may be in a modern structure, quaint country home or urban beach house. Rooms at most guesthouses fall in the \$75 to \$180 price range, but some cost more than \$200.

Hotels

Puerto Rico has plenty of top end resort hotels and a growing number of boutique options. Major chains represented include Marriott, Hilton and Sheraton. There are also a couple of unique world-class hotels, namely the Horned Dorset Primavera (near Rincón; p232) and El Convento in Viejo San Juan (p109). Ecohotels are another growing area, particularly around El Yunque and on the island of Vieques. Ocean Park has some rather deluxe beachside B&Bs and in recent years Rincón and Boquerón have gone more upmarket.

There are only a few accommodations on the island with rooms for less than \$75, and almost all of these are found in small towns or unsavory neighborhoods of the cities. Rooms are usually small, and beds may be soft or saggy, but the sheets should be clean. A minimal level of cleanliness is generally maintained, but expect scuffed walls, old furniture and strange noises from your shower.

PRACTICALITIES

Electricity Puerto Rico has the 110V AC system used in America.

Newspapers & magazines *San Juan Star* (www.thesanjuanstar.com) is a bilingual daily newspaper. *Puerto Rico Breeze* is a biweekly newspaper on gay nightlife in San Juan. *Que Pasa!* is a bimonthly magazine put out by the Puerto Rico Tourism Company (PRTC).

TV American TV is broadcast across the island. Radio is mostly in Spanish; the English-language radio station is WOSO San Juan, at 1030AM.

Video systems Puerto Rico uses VHS for videos.

Weights & measures Puerto Rico follows the American imperial system with two exceptions: all distances you see on road signs are in kilometers and gas is pumped in liters. See the Quick Reference page (inside front cover) for a metric conversion chart.