



Central Mountains

POP 350,000

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- » Casa Bavaria (p227)
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Best Places to Stay

- » Las Casas de la Selva & Tropic Ventures (p223)
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Why Go?

Those who explore the winding roads of this region find a dramatically different perspective on the island and a chance to commune with Puerto Rico's old soul. Rough around the edges and best approached with a flexible agenda, this is a place of Taíno legends and sugarcane moonshine, muddy hillside towns and misty afternoons.

The whole thing is strung together by the Ruta Panorámica, a vine-covered ribbon of potholed blacktop that rolls like a roller coaster along the island's rugged spine. Following rusty road signs, it passes ragged agricultural towns, humid patches of jungle and cliff-edge vistas where birds of prey glide in lazy circles. Between fog-covered valleys and the sharp scent of fresh-roasted beans, visitors get a whiff of the endangered cultural essence of Puerto Rico – moving decidedly more in time with the less-developed Caribbean neighbors than the paved-over hustle of the States.

When to Go

Unlike the reliably sunny shores, the mountains catch all kinds of weather, and are considerably cooler. Cerro Maravilla in the Toro Negro forest records average temperatures 10°F to 15°F lower than San Juan. In winter, towns in the hills can get downright chilly, sometimes dropping to 45°F. There's no rainy season, per se, but the hills catch clouds and dampness gets in the bones, making layered clothing a must. Mornings are clearer, making simultaneous views of the north and south coast possible. The Ruta Panorámica is often blanketed in mist.

Central Mountains Highlights

- 1 Load up on fresh, rich coffee and navigate the roller-coaster curves of the **Ruta Panorámica** (p221)
- 2 Join the spontaneous street party hosted by *lechonerías* (eateries) specializing in suckling pig) in **Guavate** (p224)
- 3 Whiff the aroma of homegrown Puerto Rican coffee in **Hacienda San Pedro** (p230)
- 4 Bushwhack your way up an overgrown trail in the **Reserva Forestal Toro Negro** (p228)

