



Culebra & Vieques

POP 11,100

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Why Go?

Separated from mainland Puerto Rico by a 7-mile stretch of choppy ocean, the two bejeweled Caribbean havens of Culebra and Vieques have sizable populations of American expats and maverick locals and are noticeably slower and more easygoing than their main-island counterpart.

Disembark for a few days and you'll uncover a wealth of surprises: wild horses in Vieques, endangered turtles in Culebra – and people of rare courage, many of whom were instrumental in the fight to reclaim their prized islands from the US Navy in 1975 (Culebra) and 2003 (Vieques) after more than 50 years of military occupation.

The main drawcard for contemporary visitors is the unsullied beaches – Vieques and Culebra protect some of the best arcs of sand in the Caribbean – and the unblemished countryside, which glimmers invitingly with nary a golf course or casino to break the natural vista.

When to Go

September and October can be pretty slow on the islands, with many restaurants taking a break or cutting back their hours. But it's also a good time to find lodging discounts and have less company on the island ferries.

The best viewing of the bioluminescent bay in Vieques is during the new moon; some operators don't go out when it's full. From April through June, wildlife fans can volunteer for a turtle-egg protection project on Culebra.

The famous Caribbean trade winds gently buffet these two islands, but it is still hot, hot, hot just about every day of the year.

History

Some 500 years ago the islands east of Puerto Rico, including Culebra and Vieques, were disputed territory between the Taíno and the Caribs. Groups from both tribes came and went from the islands according to the season – probably to hunt the turtles nesting here. Vieques had more fertile, flat-

ter land for farming and therefore was the more popular island. The first real settlement came to Culebra during the early 16th century, when Taíno and Carib refugees from Borinquen gathered here and on Vieques to make peace with each other, pool their resources and mount a fierce (but ultimately unsuccessful) campaign to drive the



Culebra & Vieques Highlights

1 Trail mongooses and wild horses and explore abandoned navy bunkers on a backcountry exploration of the **Vieques National Wildlife Refuge** (p129)

2 Swap four wheels for two and go for a picturesque spin to **Green Beach** (p135) on bike-friendly Vieques

3 Find dilapidated US tanks and a refreshing lack of tourists on paradisiacal **Playa Flamenco** (p119)

4 Eat, drink, play or just plain chill on the colorful 'strip' in laid-back **Esperanza** (p131)

5 See aquatic stars on a serene but distinctly surreal evening boat tour

of bioluminescent **Bahía Mosquito** (p131)

6 Hike the gentle hills on the offshore islands **Isla Culebrita** (p118) and **Cayo de Tierra** (p132)

7 Plunge in and **dive** (p120) the reefs and sunken treasures of Culebra's clear waters