

Central Mountains

POP 340,000

Includes ➔

Caguas.....	211
Bosque Estatal de Carite.....	212
Aibonito & Around.....	214
Barranquitas & Around.....	216
Reserva Forestal Toro Negro.....	219
Jayuya.....	221
Adjuntas & Around.....	222
Bosque Estatal de Guilarte.....	223
Maricao.....	223

Best Places to Eat

- El Rancho Original (p218)
- Vaca Brava (p218)
- Casa Bavaria (p221)
- Restaurante Toro Verde (p218)
- El Burén (p222)

Best Places to Stay

- Las Casas de la Selva & Tropic Ventures (p214)
- Jájome Terrace (p214)
- Hacienda Gripiñas (p222)
- Parador Villas de Sotomayor (p223)

Why Go?

Those who explore these winding roads gain 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 winds through ragged agricultural towns, humid patches of jungle and past 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 their 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 be downright chilly, sometimes dropping to 45°F. There's no rainy season, per se, but the dampness gets into the bones, making layered clothing a must.

Mornings are clearer, making simultaneous views of the north and south coast possible, but the Ruta Panorámica will still often be blanketed in mist.

History

Legend has it that native Taíno survived here until the mid-19th century and, even today, Indian traditions run strong in the festivals and artisan workshops scattered along the Ruta Panorámica. In more recent times, notoriety has struck these mountains twice. In 1950 an unsuccessful uprising in Jayuya marked the death knell of the Puerto Rican independence movement as an effective political force. Further scandal erupted in 1978 when two young independence supporters were shot by police posing as revolutionaries on Cerro Maravilla in an incident that uncovered corruption, ballot-box fraud and an alleged FBI cover-up.

Territorial Parks & Reserves

The Central Mountains is one long chain of protected reserves, give or take the odd road. By far the best for hiking are Bosque Estatal de Carite in the east, Reserva Forestal Toro Negro in the middle of the Ruta Panorámica and, biggest of the lot, the Bosque Estatal de Maricao in the west.

i Getting There & Around

The Ruta Panorámica, a chain of 40 mountain roads, travels 165 miles across the roof of Puerto Rico, from Yabucoa in the east to Mayagüez in the west. It is generally well-marked with distinctive brown road signs, and highlighted on almost all commercial maps of the island. If driving, be careful and never drive after dark.

Major towns in the central region – Aibonito, Barranquitas, Jayuya and Adjuntas – are accessible by *público* from either coast. Some of the more remote places, however, are a little more difficult to reach and, if you're without a car, you may require lifts, taxis or plenty of forward planning. Bikes can be precarious on the Ruta Panorámica, where drivers are famously erratic. Riders should stick to the wider link roads such as Rte 15 between Cayey and Guayama and listen to local advice.

Caguas

POP 80,000

Large, smart, modern Caguas, just 20 miles south of San Juan, is a misleading introduction to Puerto Rico's central massif (which although large is neither smart nor modern). The thickly forested hills seem far away here, despite it being the best place to pick up supplies for mountainous sojourns such as Bosque Estatal de Carite. La Ciudad Cri-

olla (the Creole City) is, however, a worthy half-day stop for its proud cultural scene, evidenced in a clutch of museums near leafy Plaza Palmer. This central square is where you will find the attractive cream-colored cathedral, dating from the 1930s and, amid the foliage, an intriguing floral clock and a statue of José Gautier Benítez, one of Puerto Rico's best-known poets.

👁 Sights

★ Museo Artes

Populares de Caguas

MUSEUM

(☎787-258-3505; cnr Betances & Luis Padial; ☉9am-noon & 1-5pm Tue-Sat) **FREE** A leading contemporary Puerto Rican artist, Edwin Báez Carrasquillo, specializes in creating *retablos*, three-dimensional scenes of Puerto Rican life full of fascinating minute detail, and his work forms the bulk of this riveting little museum. Subjects covered here range from the museum's founder in his study piled high with curios to the devastation of the 1918 hurricane.

Centro de Bellas Artes de Caguas

ARTS CENTER

(☎787-653-8833; cnr Luis Padial & Segundo Ruiz Belvo; ☉9am-5pm) **FREE** On the west side of Calle Luis Padial, spreading along a grand walkway replete with fountains and sculptures, the former premises of the General Cigar Company has been converted into an impressive three-tier cultural center, with artwork by Caguas artists and two dedicated performance spaces. With its bold art installations, including striking vestibule stained glass remembering Caguas author Abelardo Díaz Alfaro, it is one of the island's most impressive arts venues. The ground-floor cafe offers the city's best caffeine fix.

Museo del Tobacco

MUSEUM

(☎787-744-8833; cnr Betances 87 & Luis Padial; ☉9am-noon & 1-5pm Tue-Sat) **FREE** Puerto Rico's tobacco industry might be outshone by Cuba's, but the island produced plenty of its own tobacco back in the day, which was then often shipped to Cuba for manufacture into cigars. Tobacco growing, cutting, drying and processing was once an economic mainstay of Caguas and this museum offers a history of all of it. There is a reconstruction of a tobacco ranch and tobacco rolling demonstrations. Oh, and you can buy handmade smokes here, too.