



Culebra & Vieques

POP 11,200

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Best Beaches

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Why Go?

Separated from mainland Puerto Rico by a 7-mile stretch of choppy blue water, the two bejeweled Caribbean havens of Culebra and Vieques have an irresistible charm thanks to mellow locals, laid-back expats and itinerant sailors.

Disembark for a few days and you'll uncover a wealth of surprises – wild horses in Vieques, endangered turtles in Culebra – and people who reclaimed their prized islands from the US Navy in 1975 (Culebra) and 2003 (Vieques) after more than 50 years of military occupation.

But it's the beaches that will have you purring with delight. Between them, the two members of the Spanish Virgin Islands may have the greatest variety of truly superb beaches in the Caribbean. Many are deserted, giving you the chance for boundless frolic. Best of all, these two islands have yet to attract mass tourism, so there's nary a golf course, casino or huge resort.

When to Go

September and October can be pretty slow on the islands, with many restaurants taking a break or cutting back their hours. It's 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's still hot and balmy 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, flatter 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 Spaniards from the big island.

When Spain conceded Puerto Rico and her territories to the US following the Spanish-American War in 1898, both Culebra and Vieques became municipalities of the Republic of Puerto Rico. Residents are therefore recognized as US citizens (half of them are expat Americans, in any case).

i Getting There & Around

There's frequent air service from San Juan to both Vieques and Culebra. Much cheaper are the regular public ferries between Fajardo and the islands. In January, ferry passengers can sometimes spot humpback whales.

There are direct flights but no ferries between Vieques and Culebra; you can go by water on a costly boat charter. Trying to connect the two islands by ferry via Fajardo will likely erase every mellow vibe you've gained.

Distances on the islands are fairly small, but some form of wheels will be needed to explore those alluring remote beaches.

Culebra

POP 1800

An elusive lizard (not seen since 1974) hides in a unique mountain 'boulder' forest, an abandoned US tank lies rusting on a paradisaical beach, a sign on a shop door in the 'capital' Dewey reads 'Open some days, closed others.' Welcome to Culebra, the island that time forgot; mainland Puerto Rico's weird, wonderful and distinctly wacky smaller cousin that lies just off the east coast.

Long feted for its diamond-dust beaches and world-class diving reefs, sleepy Culebra is probably more famous for what it *hasn't* got than for what it actually pos-

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

ISLA CULEBRITA

If you need a reason to hire a water taxi, Isla Culebrita is it. This small island, just a mile east of Playa Zoni, is part of the Culebra National Wildlife Refuge. With its abandoned and decaying 1880s lighthouse, six beaches, tide pools, reefs and nesting areas for seabirds, Isla Culebrita has changed little in the past 500 years. The north beaches, such as the long crescent of Playa Tortuga, are popular nesting grounds for sea turtles, and you may see these animals swimming near the reefs just offshore. Bring a lot of water, sunscreen, a shirt and a hat if you head for Isla Culebrita, as there is little shade here.

sesses. There are no big hotels here, no golf courses, no casinos, no fast-food chains, no rush-hour traffic, no postmodern stress and *no problemas, amigo*. Situated 17 miles off mainland Puerto Rico, but inhabiting an entirely different planet culturally speaking, the island's peculiar brand of offbeat charm can sometimes take a bit of getting used to. It's home to rat-race dropouts, earnest idealists, solitude seekers, myriad eccentrics and anyone else who's forsaken the hassles and manic intricacies of modern life.

It's also home to a range of gorgeous natural areas, bays, snorkeling sites and all manner of fine beaches. Come, join the local vibe and explore.

History

First hunting grounds for Taíno and Carib tribes, then a pirate stronghold during the days of the Spanish Empire, much of Culebra's 7000 acres has remained essentially the same ever since two-legged creatures took to walking its shores. The US Navy grabbed control of most of the island early in the 20th century and didn't cede its lands back to the locals until 1975.

Although development was threatened on the pristine lands after the military left, resident expats and native-born *culebrenses* (people from Culebra) combined forces to resist rampant growth. They've continued to work together to preserve the island's low-key vibe.