



El Yunque & East Coast

Includes ➔

El Yunque	93
Luquillo & Around	99
Fajardo & Around	103
Naguabo & Around ...	108
Yabucoa & Around ...	110

Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Luquillo Beach Kiosks (p102)
- ➔ Pasta y Pueblo (p102)
- ➔ Las Vistas (p107)
- ➔ La Estación (p107)
- ➔ Cafe De La Plaza (p110)

Best Beaches

- ➔ Playa Luquillo (p100)
- ➔ Playa Azul (p100)
- ➔ Playa Seven Seas (p103)
- ➔ Playa Naguabo (p108)

Why Go?

The east coast is Puerto Rico shrink-wrapped, a tantalizing taste of almost everything the island has to offer squeezed into an area you can drive across in a couple of hours. Sodden rainforest teems with noisy wildlife and jungle waterfalls at El Yunque National Forest, the commonwealth's tropical gem. Down at sea level, beach-lovers bask on the icing-sugar sand of Playa Luquillo.

Golfers and those craving a one-stop holiday will find delight in the highest concentration of large, upscale resorts outside San Juan.

Unvarnished Fajardo is the island's uncrowned water-sports capital, where adventurers kayak, dive, snorkel and fish, and yachters park their sailboats.

Cutting through the region like a thin, green ribbon is the Northeast Ecological Corridor, a slender tract of undeveloped and endangered pristine land featuring one of Puerto Rico's stunning bioluminescent bays at Las Cabezas de San Juan nature reserve.

When to Go

Noteworthy annual events in Luquillo include the Fiesta de los Platos Típicos (Traditional Food Festival) in November. Elsewhere along the coast your best timing depends on your priorities: peak winter season, the summer and weekends see the most places open (especially locally beloved food kiosks). But other times you'll enjoy a solitude that grows with your distance from San Juan.

Note that hurricane season – early June through late November – can bring sodden conditions to El Yunque, with the possibility of trails being closed due to mudslides and flooding.

History

Much of this region was once covered with lighter variations of the dense foliage now found only in El Yunque, but native Taíno successfully farmed the fertile land around the low-lying coasts. All that changed when the Spanish arrived en masse around 1700. The tremendous wealth of natural resources in El Yunque – lots of fresh water and timber, for example – attracted settlers, and existing farmlands were quickly turned into massive sugar plantations by colonizers.

A small gold rush added to the need for a strong labor force, and after most of the indigenous population was either wiped out by disease or forced deep into the mountains, the Spanish brought in West African slaves in considerable numbers. Descendants of those Yoruba people make up the bulk of the 30,000 residents who live in the municipalities around El Yunque today.

The next wave of colonization came when the US took control of the island in 1898, during the Spanish–American War, eventually setting up the commonwealth status that continues to this day. A region around a US military base near Fajardo that closed in 2003 has been the focus of developments like windpower farms.

Getting There & Around

Most of the east coast is traversable via Hwy 3 or Hwy 53. Once you leave San Juan, be it on Rte 187 (the scenic route via Piñones and behind Loíza Aldea) or on the main drag of Hwy 3, be prepared for bursts of concentrated development (fast-food restaurants and strip malls) and distant views of El Yunque. Públicos (shared taxis) serve most towns.

There are public vans running between Fajardo and San Juan, but to penetrate further into the countryside, a car or bike is necessary. It is easy to organize a tour into the El Yunque rainforest. The driving trip from San Juan to Fajardo takes about two hours. From San Juan to Yabucoa it's about three hours, although traffic can muck up the timings.

With its high concentration of cars, the northeast is not the most pleasant part of Puerto Rico in which to cycle. But stay off the main arteries of Hwys 3 and 66 and two-wheeled transport is possible.



Finally there are some beautiful drives through the lush mountains and hidden villages, including one along Hwy 181 (see boxed text, p111).

El Yunque

Covering some 28,000 acres of land in the Sierra de Luquillo, this verdant tropical rainforest is a shadow of what it was before ax-wielding Spanish conquerors arrived in the 16th and 17th centuries. But the ecological degradation has been largely reversed over the past 50 years, and today, under the auspices of the US Forest Service, El Yunque National Forest is once again sprouting a healthy abundance of dense tree cover.

Compared with other Puerto Rican forest reserves, El Yunque is well staffed and crisscrossed by an excellent network of signposted trails. Most of El Yunque's hikes are short, paved and relatively mild, a boon for casual visitors. Adventurers should note, however, that there's no true wilderness experience to be had here. Crowds flock to El Yunque's popular spots in peak summer season and on weekends, but if you stray off the standard routes, there are still plenty of places to slip under the radar.

Sights

Once you've entered **El Yunque National Forest** ( 787-888-1880; www.fs.usda.gov/elyunque;  most sights 7:30am-6pm), all of the forest's visitors centers, major attractions and trailheads appear as Hwy 191 twists, turns and climbs steeply on its way south toward the summit. (It's also possible to follow Hwy 186 along the west side of El Yunque, but to experience the forest's heart, Hwy 191 is the road to take.)

In addition to short and long hiking trails in El Yunque, there are highlights directly accessible by road within the forest.

★ La Coca Falls

WATERFALL

(Hwy 191 Km 8.1) The first spectacular natural feature you see as Hwy 191 climbs south toward the forest peaks is an 85ft cascade as the stream tumbles from a precipice to the right of the highway onto boulder formations.

Yokahú Tower

VIEWPOINT

(Hwy 191 Km 8.8) This 65ft, Moorish-looking stone tower was built as a lookout in 1962. It's the first good place for vistas of the islands to the east, but there are better vantage points higher up on the mountain. The tower often gets crowded with tour groups.