



North Coast

POP 970,000

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Why Go?

Veering from a manicured coast of plush golf resorts and posh surf spots, this region rears up into the less-visited vine-tangled crags of karst country, where landscapes seem positively prehistoric with yawning cave systems, *mogotes* (vegetated, steep-sided hillocks) and lonely spreads of forest. However renowned the teeing in the east and the paddleboarding in the west might be, don't make the mistake of forgoing what lies in between.

The sights here have neither the untouched exotic natural spectacle of El Yunque nor the rustic allure of the central mountains, but the north has more than enough DIY adventures for travelers with no fixed timetable, plus its own generous share of world-class diversions. Goggle at the world's largest radio telescope, clamber inside some of its largest caverns, relax at serene eco-retreats or strike out on a trail in some of Puerto Rico's remotest forest – and still, should you wish, make your dinner reservation in San Juan.

When to Go

Outside of the island's rainy months (late summer to early fall), the north coast is generally sunny.

Big Atlantic storms can barrel in out of nowhere to whip the waves into white-capped frenzy. The arrival of low pressure systems come late fall starts the big waves a-rolling and October's international surf tournament in Isabella starts drawing the surfers as surely as wasps to nectar.

Inland, the humidity increases, but on the shore the 80°F temperatures aren't at all oppressive. As there's only a difference of a few degrees between the coldest month, January, and the warmest, August, the region offers consistently sunny, breezy days year-round.

History

The north coast contains one of the island's largest and oldest Native American ceremonial sites near Utuado, an archaeological find offering dramatic proof that a well-organized Taíno culture thrived on the island before the arrival of the Spanish. Though Arecibo is the third-oldest city on the island, there is little of historical note remaining on the north coast outside of a couple of picturesque Spanish-colonial light-houses. The 20th century saw a burgeoning of San Juan's suburbs westward into satellite towns such as Vega Alta and Manatí. At the same time a concerted effort has been made to protect karst country through tree-planting projects and the formation of half a dozen forest reserves in the 1940s.

Territorial Parks & Reserves

The north coast is dotted with small karst-country parks and reserves, although they're not nearly as well-equipped (or as well trodden) as El Yunque. They vary in size from the diminutive 1000-acre Bosque Estatal de Cambalache to larger reserves such as the 5000-acre Bosque Estatal de Río Abajo. This particular park has better-maintained trails and a wider range of facilities, but still pales in comparison to the Parque de las Cavernas de Río Camuy, one of Puerto Rico's most oft-visited tourist attractions. Nestled in the northwest, the Bosque Estatal de Guajataca has caves, *mogotes* and plenty of signposted trails.

Getting There & Around

Aguadilla has an international airport widely used by vacationers heading for the west coast beaches and scientists keen to study the stars at the Observatorio de Arecibo. Erratic *públicos* run between the smaller coastal towns and from San Juan out to the main population centers along Hwy 2. Renting a car is easily the best option for getting around, although reliably scheduled public buses connect Dorado to San Juan's Tren Urbano metro system. The Isabela region is good for cycling.

Dorado

POP 37,000

For those who love golf, Dorado is pure gold, legendary for its exceptional courses. It boasts five championship-standard golf courses that are an international draw. If

your interest in the fairways wanes, several stunning local beaches offer a welcome break from the clubhouse banter. If you're only interested in beaches, bypass Dorado for locales further west.

Founded in 1842, Dorado first became a resort town in the early 1900s when the Rockefeller family started building a Caribbean Shangri-la. The venture went public in 1958 when Laurance Rockefeller, the well-known philanthropist and conservationist, opened up the region's first hotel, the Dorado Beach, a pioneering ecoresort where no building was taller than the surrounding palm trees. Today, although there have been some formidable resorts here over the years, many golfers opt for time-shares and condo rentals, robbing the hotel scene of its once-ritzy image.

Away from the resorts, Dorado has a timeless public beach in town and an even prettier free option a few miles to the west at Cerro Gordo. Back in town, the original 19th-century settlement, with its teardrop-shaped lights rimming the main plaza, is a pleasant spot to while away a lazy afternoon.

El Dorado's urban core is spread out, and the route between PR 22 and the coast is almost entirely developed. Rte 165 turns into Calle Méndez Vigo, the town's central road.

Sights

Dorado has a trio of small museums, none of which is too remarkable, but a decent breather between golf rounds. The **Museo y Centro Cultural Casa del Rey** (📍787-796-5740; Calle Méndez Vigo; ☀8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) is an old Spanish garrison that displays antique furniture; the **Museo del Plata** (📍787-796-9031; Industria; ☀8am-4pm Mon-Sat) showcases local art, sculpture and paintings; and the **Museo de Arte e Historia de Dorado** (📍787-796-5740; cnr Calles Méndez Vigo & Juan Francisco; ☀8am-3:30pm Mon-Sat) gives you the rundown on local history and archaeology. Admissions are free.

Beaches

Balneario Manuel Morales BEACH (parking \$3) Although nobody is advertising it, there is, in fact, a public beach in Dorado where you can swim. Balneario Manuel Morales is at the end of Rte 697. But it's a rather boring bit of sand surrounded by rocky