

Ponce & South Coast

POP 512,000

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Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Moon's Bar & Tapas (p165)
- ➔ La Casa de Los Pastelillos (p155)
- ➔ Restaurante La Guardarraya (p159)
- ➔ Alexandra (p161)
- ➔ Café Café (p149)

Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Mary Lee's by the Sea (p160)
- ➔ Copamarina Beach Resort (p160)
- ➔ Hotel Meliá (p148)

Why Go?

The Caribbean-facing south coast offers the opportunity to unplug, escape the cruise-ship crowds and take a DIY journey into Puerto Rico's tempestuous, piratical past.

The proud southern capital of Ponce – the so-called Perla de Sur (Pearl of the South) – stands in elegant disrepair, where haute eateries neighbor slouching colonial facades. Along coastal Hwys 2 and 3, crumbling sugar-mill chimneys stand beside their graying industrial replacements: chemical and pharmaceutical factories. But for all these dichotomies, unpolished charm abounds in the towns, and the tatty beaches get increasingly magical as you progress west through mazes of mangroves, dry tropical forest and, finally, the surreal glow of the Bahía de Fosforescente.

When to Go

With some of the most consistent weather in the world, the dry, sunny climate is enticing, though June through August can be blisteringly hot.

With school children on holidays over summer, Puerto Rican families fill the sun-washed plazas, wander through colonial buildings and enjoy alfresco dining at the ubiquitous seafood shacks.

Although the arid, breezy atmosphere doesn't change much in winter, the typically languid pace slows to a crawl between September and May, picking up only for local festivals during the extended Christmas holiday.

History

The rolling foothills and broad coastal plains of the south coast were home to a number of indigenous tribes when colonized by Spaniards, who raised cattle and horses here for the colonial expeditions across Latin America during the 16th century. In 1630 they built the hamlet that would eventually become Ponce on a port between the mountains and the coast.

For more than a century, goods and materials flowed through the harbors. Ostensibly the port of Ponce was open only to Spanish vessels trading directly with Spain, but the watchful eyes of the island governor were far away in San Juan, and free trade flourished, bringing with it goods, currencies, and people from across the New World and Africa.

When slave revolts erupted in the neighboring French-held island of Saint-Domingue in the 1790s and in South America between 1810 and 1822, many wealthy refugees fled to the south coast of Puerto Rico, buying land to grow coffee and sugarcane. Soon they imported former slaves from Caribbean colonies to meet the ever-increasing American appetite for sugar, coffee and rum. Production and profits from agriculture skyrocketed throughout the 19th century, when sugar barons built cities with elegant town squares, neoclassical architecture and imported French fountains.

The Spanish-American War ended the freebooting days, bringing with it military occupation, uniformly enforced trade laws and economic freefall. Hurricanes devastated the coffee industry, sugar prices fell, and the US government decided to develop San Juan, not Ponce, as a strategic port. When the Depression hit in the 1930s, the region went into an economic hibernation. These days the south limps along littered with contradictions between the past and the future.

Territorial Parks & Reserves

The jewel in the stash of territorial parks and reserves in this region is the Bosque Estatal de Guánica (p161), a 10,000-acre subtropical dry forest and a Unesco Biosphere Reserve. Wildlife enthusiasts can notch up some one-of-a-kind sightings.

In the east the Reserva Nacional de Investigación Estuarina de Bahía de Jobos (p155) is a mangrove-fringed coastal wilderness. Still less visited is the upland forest of Bosque Estatal de Susúa (p159), inland from Yauco.

i Getting There & Around

Ponce has an airport serving a few US cities direct. The main transport artery in and out of the region is Hwy 52 from San Juan. Things get slower as you head west.

PONCE

POP 160,000

Ponce es ponce (Ponce is Ponce), runs a simple yet telling Puerto Rican saying; the explanation given as to why the nation's haughty second city does things, well, uniquely – and, as is the wont of second cities worldwide, in defiance of the capital. Native son and author Abelardo Díaz Alfaro went a step further, famously calling Ponce *a baluarte irreductible de puertorriqueñidad* – ‘a bastion of the irreducible essence of Puerto Rico’. Strolling around the sparkling fountains in the central square and narrow streets of the city's historic center evokes the stately spirit of Puerto Rico's past. Unfortunately, the neighborhoods that surround the square bear witness to some woeful characteristics of Puerto Rico's present: irreducible snarls of congested traffic, economic stagnation and cookie-cutter urban sprawl.

But stick central amidst the outstanding colonial architecture and the city's dozen or so museums, or 3 miles south at the seashore-hugging, restaurant-lined boardwalk of La Guancha Paseo Tablado, and it's only Ponce's elegant, time-lost side that you need experience. Decent restaurants await, too, if you've tired of the otherwise prevalent pork and paper-plate dining culture.

History

History is better preserved in and around Ponce than almost anywhere else in Puerto Rico – both the colonial past (found downtown) and the indigenous past (just outside at the island's largest and most educational archaeological site, the Centro Ceremonial Indígena de Tibes).

The earliest European settlement saw numerous scuffles between Spanish Conquistador Ponce de León (from whom the town gets both its name and one of its nicknames, ‘City of Lions’) and the Taíno tribes, but the region was claimed for the Spanish Crown in 1511. The city was established around 1630, when the Spaniards built the first incarnation of the current cathedral and named it for the patron saint of Mexico, the Virgen de Guadalupe.