

West Coast

POP 353,000

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Why Go?

West is best – at least as far as those quintessential snapshots of Puerto Rico go. Here the languid, azure ocean takes on a visceral palpability because this is the place to get in it: paddling like mad to catch a ride on one perfect wave after another, or swimming off sandy shorelines that regularly grace ‘world’s best beach’ lists. The region’s pièce de résistance is Rincón, a surfers’ safari outpost (named in a Beach Boys song, for goodness’ sake!) where grizzled beach bums and stoned locals catch waves in the salty dawn, and mingle around beach bonfires at twilight.

As well as taking the drop on flawless surf, Porta del Sol (Gateway to the Sun) is a land of stormy shorelines, low-key resorts and down-to-earth fishing villages. Grab a few cold ones, bite down on a conch fritter or three, and get ready to brave the waves, bask in the stunning sunsets and absorb the mellow spirit of slacker independence.

When to Go

Welcome to the endless summer: the west coast is pleasantly hot all year round. It gets heavy rain in late summer and early fall, but otherwise, expect it to be sunny, breezy and around 80°F nearly every day.

If you're here to surf, winter is an ideal time to visit, although surfing competitions kick off from mid-October. Around this time cold fronts bring big waves to the western beaches, when average crests of 5ft or 6ft can grow as large as 25ft. In December and February, you may also spot migrating whales offshore.

Those who aren't here to ride the waves will find the calmer waters more inviting for swimming and deep-sea fishing in summer.

History

The consensus is that Columbus first arrived in Puerto Rico in November 1493 and docked somewhere off the west coast (though there is some dispute as to actually *where*). Fifteen years later he was followed by Juan Ponce de León, who landed near Cabo Rojo before heading off east to found the settlement of Caparra. San Germán, the island's second-oldest city, was founded near Mayagüez in 1511, and moved to its present site in 1573.

More recently, the west has spawned many great liberal thinkers including Dr Ramón Emeterio Betances, the inspiration behind the revolutionary Grito de Lares in 1868. The details of this abortive rebellion were fine-tuned in a series of safe houses near Mayagüez.

Territorial Parks & Reserves

The Refugio Nacional Cabo Rojo (p186), part of the 4775-acre Bosque Estatal de Boquerón, is a favorite with casual outdoor enthusiasts; it's great for birdwatchers, and the flat, guided trails are easy to manage for young children. There're visitor centers and guided hikes, plus sublime Caribbean views. The Refugio de Boquerón (p183) has mangrove wetlands and excellent birdwatching opportunities. Nature lovers should nevertheless remember that the ultimate treat is a short jaunt southeast in Bosque Estatal de Guánica (p161).

Getting There & Around

Mayagüez is the regional hub and has its own airport (flights from San Juan and the US Virgin Islands only). You can fly direct from the US into Aguadilla airport 30 minutes' northeast of Rincón. The Cabo Rojo area southwest of Hwy 2 has Puerto Rico's best cycling: undulating, blissfully traffic-free roads and a top-notch bike shop (p181).

Rincón

POP 15,000

You'll know you've arrived in Rincón – 'the corner' – when you pass the group of sun-grizzled gringos cruising west in their rusty 1972 Volkswagen Beetle with surfboards piled on the roof. Shoehorned far out in the island's most remote corner, Rincón is Puerto Rico at its most ungaurded, a place where the sunsets shimmer scarlet and you're more likely to be called 'dude' than 'sir'. This is the surfing capital of the island, and one

of the premiere places to catch a wave in the northern hemisphere.

For numerous Californian dreamers this is where the short-lived summer of love ended up. Arriving for the World Surfing Championships in 1968, many never went home. Hence Rincón became a haven for draft-dodgers, alternative lifestylers, back-to-the-landers, and people more interested in riding the perfect wave than bagging \$100,000 a year, living in a Chicago suburb.

Breaking anywhere from 2ft to 25ft, Rincón's waves are often close to perfect. The names are evocative: Domes, Indicators, Spanish Wall and Dogman's. The crème de la crème is Tres Palmas, a white-tipped monster frequently dubbed the 'temple' of big-wave surfing in the Caribbean.

Though Rincón is crawling with American expats, the tourist/local divide is more seamless and less exclusive than in the resorts out east. However, with a new, more affluent surfing generation demanding a higher quality of living than their hippie parents, Rincón has developed a clutch of boutique hotels and gourmet restaurants aimed at surfing Gen X yuppies.

History

Rincón traces its history to the 16th century and a few low-key sugarcane plantations. The municipality is actually named after one of the area's original planters, Don Gonzalo Rincón. For most of its history, the town survived on cane farming and cattle-raising.

Things changed when the World Surfing Championships arrived in 1968. Glossy images of Rincón were plastered over international media – the word was out. Every year since then has seen successive generations of wave riders make the pilgrimage. And while they pursued an endless summer, they began to invest in the community, building their own restaurants, guesthouses and bars. Eventually, Rincón's perfect surf and permanent beach bums lent the place the vibe it retains today, something similar to a Hawaiian surfing outpost.

Sights

Rincón is more of a region than a town, encompassing a municipal center surrounded by clusters of commercial areas. The municipal center is only about four square blocks, encircling the Catholic church and the Presbyterian church that face each other across the traffic-crowded Plaza de Recreo. This