



Ponce & South Coast

POP 485,000

Includes ➔

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Best Places to Eat

- ➔ El Negocio de Panchi (p152)
- ➔ El Vejigante (p152)
- ➔ La Casa de Los Pastelillos (p156)
- ➔ Restaurante La Guardarraya (p163)
- ➔ Alexandra (p165)
- ➔ Moon's Bar & Tapas (p169)

Best Places to Sleep

- ➔ Mary Lee's by the Sea (p165)
- ➔ Copamarina Beach Resort (p165)
- ➔ La Jamaca (p169)
- ➔ Hotel Bélgica (p151)

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, rough-and-tumble piratical past.

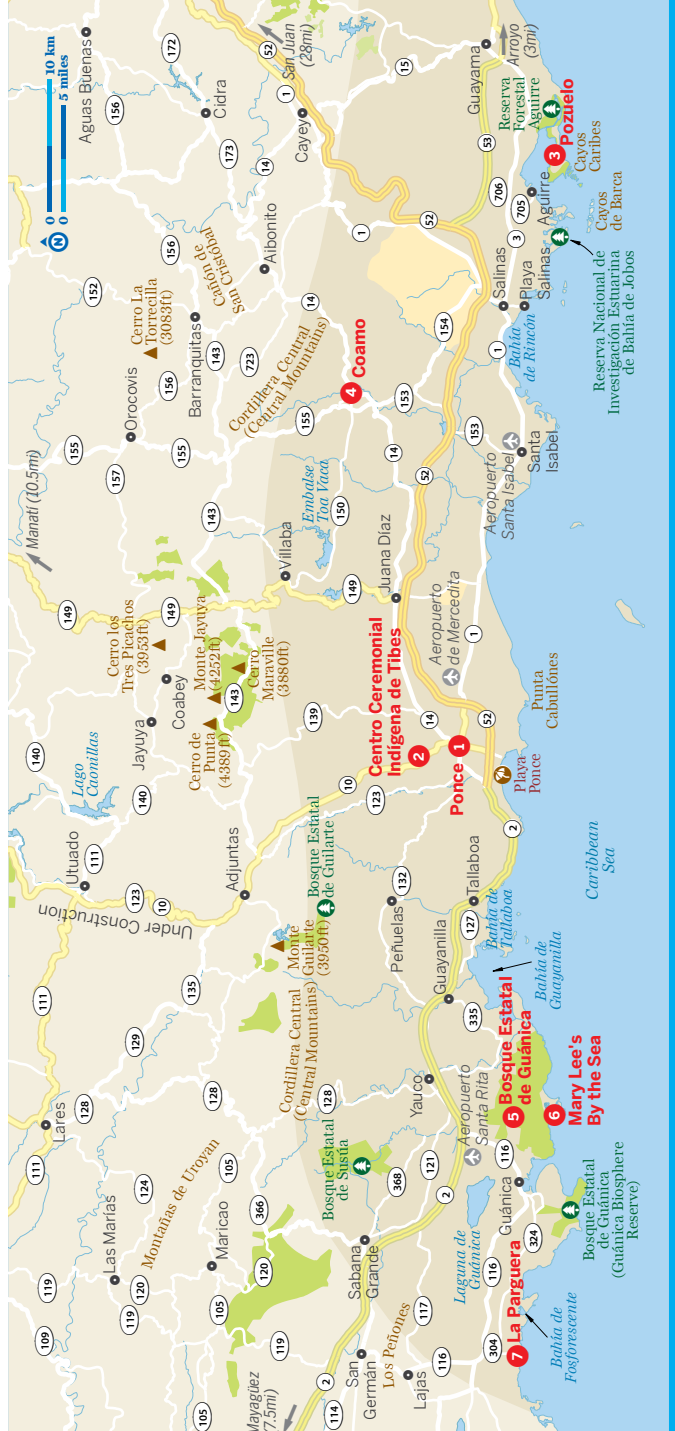
Even the proud southern capital of Ponce – the so-called Perla de Sur (Pearl of the South) – stands in elegant disrepair, where haute eateries and mesmerizing museums neighbor slouching colonial-era facades. Along coastal Hwys 2 and 3, the dilapidation increases, with crumbling chimneys of sugar mills standing 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, ethereal dry tropical forest and, finally, the surreal glow of the Bahía de Fosforescente alongside some of the Caribbean's most captivating diving.

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.

During summer school holidays (August), Puerto Rican families fill the sun-washed plazas, wander through colonial-era buildings and enjoy alfresco dining at the ubiquitous seafood shacks. Book accommodation in advance at this time – and in Ponce, during its many festivals.

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. October and November can be particularly dead months in tourist-dependent places like La Parguera, with facilities closing up almost completely.



Ponce & South Coast Highlights

- 1 Museo de Arte de Ponce** (p147) Falling in love with *Flaming June* in the cultural hot spot of Ponce.
- 2 Centro Ceremonial Indígena de Tibes** (p154) Connecting with the mysterious Taino past at the island's largest archaeological site.
- 3 La Casa de Los Pastelillos** (p156) Swaying on a hammock while lunching on golden, octopus-stuffed pastries in Pozuelo.
- 4 Baños de Coamo** (p159) Soaking in waters once thought to be the fountain of youth.
- 5 Bosque Estatal de Guánica** (p163) Hiking the birding trails of one of this amazing subtropical dry forests.
- 6 Mary Lee's By The Sea** (p165) Checking in to this tranquil place and spending your days paddling out to the nearby cays.
- 7 The Wall** (p168) Taking the plunge with world-class diving in La Parguera.