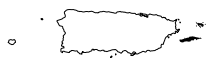


# Culebra & Vieques



Islands often have a reputation for being insular, eccentric and slightly rebellious, and Culebra and Vieques are no different. Separated from mainland Puerto Rico by a 7-mile stretch of choppy ocean, the first hints of seditious nonconformity appear as you dock at the ramshackle ferry ports of Dewey or Isabel II to be met by a colorful cast of American expats and maverick locals. Closer geographically to the US Virgin Islands than they are to the rest of the commonwealth (they are often referred to, colloquially, as the Spanish Virgin Islands), these two bejeweled Caribbean havens are noticeably slower and more easygoing than their main island counterpart. Covered in a blanket of dry subtropical forest and blessed with a handful of rare endemic plant and animal species, they also exhibit distinct physical characteristics. Disembark for a few days and you'll uncover more surreptitious surprises: wild horses in Vieques, rare turtles in Culebra – and quite a few rare people too, many of whom were instrumental in the fight to reclaim their prized islands from the US Navy in 1975 (Culebra) and 2003 (Vieques) after more than 50 years of military occupation.

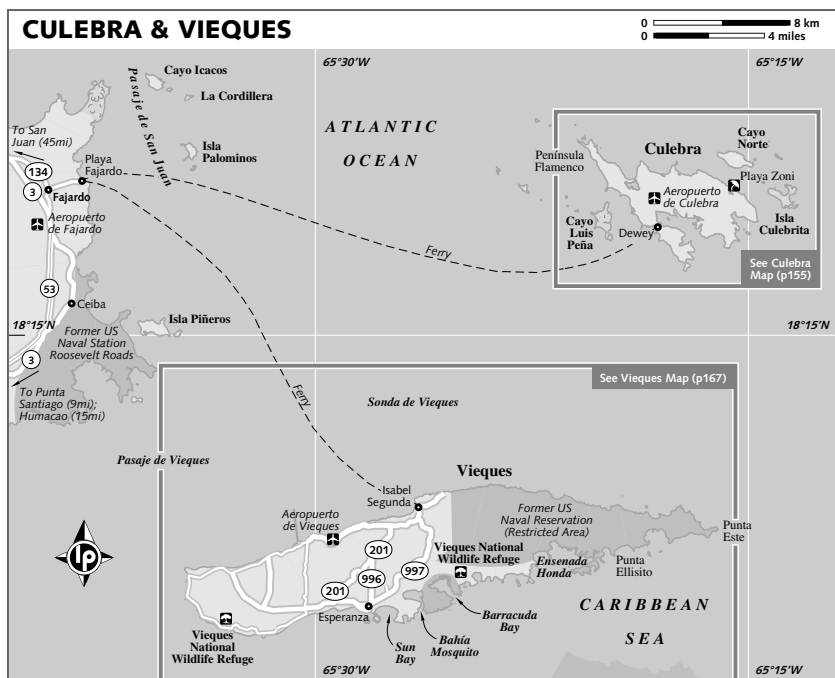
Ironically, things couldn't have turned out better. Thanks largely to their military history; the Spanish Virgins – in keeping with their name – remain tranquil and refreshingly undeveloped. With former navy land recently given over to two new US Fish & Wildlife Refuges, the main draw card for contemporary visitors is the unsullied beaches – Vieques and Culebra protect some of the best arcs of sand in the Caribbean – and the unblemished countryside that glimmers invitingly with nary a resort, golf course or casino to break the natural vista.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Staking out leatherback turtles on a starlit volunteer turtle-watching program on **Playa Brava** (p158), Culebra
- Swapping four wheels for two and going on a picturesque spin to **Green Beach** (p173) on bike-friendly Vieques
- Finding dilapidated US tanks and a refreshing lack of tourists on paradisiacal **Playa Flamenco** (p159)
- Eating, drinking, playing or just plain chilling on the colorful 'strip' in laid-back **Esperanza** (p170)
- Foraging into the newly formed **Vieques National Wildlife Refuge** (p169) to discover unblemished beaches, thriving wildlife and excellent snorkeling
- Seeing stars on a serene but distinctly surreal evening boat tour of bioluminescent **Bahía Mosquito** (p171)



■ POPULATION: 12,000



## HISTORY

Some 500 years ago the islands east of Puerto Rico, including Culebra and Vieques, were disputed territory between the Taíno and the Caribs. Groups from both tribes came and went from the islands according to the season – probably to hunt the turtles nesting here. Vieques had more fertile, flatter land for farming and therefore was the more popular island. The first real settlement came to Culebra during the early 16th century, when Taíno and Carib refugees from Borinquen gathered here and on Vieques to make peace with each other, pool their resources and mount a fierce (but ultimately unsuccessful) campaign to drive the Spaniards from the big island. When Spain conceded Puerto Rico and her territories to the US following the Spanish-American War in 1898, both Culebra and Vieques became municipalities of the Republic of Puerto Rico. Therefore, residents are recognized as US citizens (half of them are expat Americans, in any case).

For most of the 20th century, the US Navy and Marine Corps used the islands for target practice and for rehearsing 20th-century

military actions carried out on other shores, such as Iwo Jima, the Philippines, Haiti and Kuwait. The navy left Culebra several decades ago to concentrate its activities on Vieques, where it set up a military camp and proceeded to hold practice bombings in nearby waters with alarming regularity. After an errant bomb killed a civilian in 1999, *viequenses* reached their breaking point. A long struggle ensued, but the navy was eventually ejected. Of course, the tracts of pristine land that opened up with the military's departure caught the attention of many developers, including the Puerto Rican government itself, which wants a beefed-up tourism infrastructure on both Culebra and Vieques. Locals are trying hard to bring in new jobs through sustainable tourism that won't destroy the wild land and beaches that make the Spanish Virgin Islands truly special. So far so good – but the battle rages on.

## CLIMATE

The famous Caribbean trade winds gently buffet these two islands, but it is still hot, hot, hot just about every day of the year. Average temperatures are around 85°F with