

Puerto Rico: the 51st state of luxury

San Juan's Condado Vanderbilt is just one of the luxury openings that are putting Puerto Rico on the map for affluent visitors



Puerto Rico has long been on the map for in the know Americans looking for luxury Photo: © Hemis / Alamy

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3:22PM GMT 05 Nov 2014

When the Ritz-Carlton Reserve at Dorado Beach opened on Puerto Rico's northern shores in late 2012, it announced to the world what a lot of in-the-know Americans had been enjoying for some years: the island's arrival in the uppermost echelon of luxury destinations.

It is relatively easy, of course, to plant a hotel with well-appointed rooms and a decent restaurant in front of a band of golden sand and call it "luxury". It is something else to deliver an experience that surpasses and redefines the term.

For a small island to bag a Ritz-Carlton Reserve is pretty prestigious. There are, after all, a mere six dotted about the globe: each unique, each elite, each at a level of luxury most five-star accommodation never reaches.

Ritz-Carlton Reserve Dorado Beach (ritzcarlton.com) is the newest of these six. It's ensconced within an estate formerly owned by Laurance Rockefeller, on a 140-acre emerald tract of land that includes just 115 huge rooms amidst a glut of facilities too lengthy to list. Fourteen suites stand out from the other hundred. Fronting the ocean, they feature floor-to-ceiling doors that yield uninterrupted ocean views, espresso machines and private infinity pools. The 115th room? Su Casa, a rose-pink mansion from the Twenties whose 8,000 sq-ft nevertheless get lost in the surrounding private grounds.



San Juan's Old Town architecture is impressive (Alamy)

The Royal Isabela Golf Resort (royalisabela.com) is built on the cliffs in the northwest coast surfing hotspot of Isabella. Its new approach to “glamour golfing” has in many ways out-trumped Trump International, previously the most esteemed of the island’s several, already world renowned, courses.

Perhaps, once more, it is the boutique feel here that appeals most. Long-term golfing enthusiasts Charlie and Stanley Pasarell lovingly created these serene eighteen greens and the colonial-style La Casa restaurant, sourcing food straight from the resort’s own farm. Hurdles on holes include a recreation of a Scottish burn, and tees over a huge cleft in the sea cliffs and through old sugar plantation ruins. It’s a course designed for golf purists who are happy to pay top dollar for a play on holes that have been dubbed some of the best in the world. You might want to stay over in the secluded casitas – each with 1500sq-ft of space, individual pools and gardens – even if you loathed golf.

Top-end hotel openings only really become exciting when no expense is spared; when financial considerations at least appear to have been cast aside to pursue unfettered indulgence. The opening – or rather, re-opening – of San Juan’s Condado Vanderbilt (condadovanderbilt.com), falls firmly into this category.

The hotel debuted in 1919 as the island’s first luxury place to stay – a lavish address that once had Hollywood celebrities and world Royalty flocking to spend the night. As of 2014, the Condado Vanderbilt is back. The new property exudes plenty of old glamour in the public areas, while rooms have a crisp, modern look. The sea views from the private balconies – the hotel straddles an isthmus between Old San Juan and its outer neighbourhoods – might well occupy you until the hour of complimentary wine and hors d’oeuvres. The 1919 restaurant in the hotel is now undeniably among the most glamorous places to eat in the city.

El Blok (elblok.com), on the island of Vieques, is an architecturally innovative building that gently mocks the tropical modernist style that inundated these islands in the Fifties. This curved-corner, white concrete structure is inspired by coral reef. The way that light filters into the rooms, achieved through external Moorish-style lattices and coupled with the sublime sea views, is particularly appealing. After sleeping on 300 thread-count sheets guests can gravitate to the bar (hewn from a single almond tree) before working up an appetite for El Blok’s most anticipated feature: the Placita restaurant. Here, stylishly simple contemporary Puerto Rican cuisine is prepared by one of the island’s brightest young chefs, James Beard Award-nominated Jose Enrique. Signature dishes include a Creole panzanella salad, rotisserie pork and a Caribbean Scotch egg.



The Ritz Carlton Reserve Dorado Beach

San Juan is where to wine and dine those you wish to impress. Colonial buildings, narrow cobbled streets and the sea lapping a mere stone's throw away all contribute to its atmosphere. Yet Franco Seccarelli, the chef behind perhaps the best Old San Juan restaurant, Il Perugino, has just moved his enterprise out of the Old Town south, to the Hato Ray district. The ornate décor of Il Nuovo Perugino – “waves” of wood panelling flow around the dining area – sets the tone. Highlights are the sommelier service and the wine list, which is one of Puerto Rico's greatest selections.

Some just keep doing what they have done successfully for years. Patio del Nispero resides within Old San Juan's most romantic hotel, the 17th-century Hotel El Convento (elconvento.com). There is no better courtyard than this at which to enjoy breakfast. Meanwhile, San Juan haute cuisine is best sampled at long-standing Marmalade (marmaladepr.com) where particularly good scallop, lobster shrimp and sea bass dishes are complemented by one of the most imaginative vegetarian menus in town.

Outside the Old Town in the Condado neighbourhood, Puerto Rico's best-known celebrity chef Wilo Benet has been at the helm of Pikayo (wilobenet.com/pikayo) in the Condado Plaza Hilton since 1990. It's a plush eating experience and refreshingly faithful to the comida criolla (creole cuisine) that Puerto Ricans have been feasting on for centuries.

Where the island's most exciting attractions lie, so follow its best sleeping and eating possibilities. In the surfing mecca of Rincón awaits one of the Caribbean's most luxurious boutique hotels and restaurants, the Horned Dorset Primavera (horneddorset.com). The Toro Verde Adventure park,

with some of the best ziplines in the Americas, sits high in the island's central mountains alongside a prime spot for classic Puerto Rican food, Toroverde (toroverdepr.com). Up in the plantations producing coffee once preferred over any other by European dignitaries, one former hacienda's estate has been converted into the wellness escape, Casa Grande Mountain Retreat (hotelcasagrande.com).

There might come a time when other types of travellers revolt over Puerto Rico's dearth of wallet-friendly holidays. But the chances are, they'll go elsewhere, leaving the island to continue on its trajectory towards becoming a wholly luxury escape.

B&B craze

The B&B concept has only just caught on in Puerto Rico, but there are already some top exponents of the art.

On one of Old San Juan's prettiest streets, within a sunny yellow 18th-century former National Guard's residence, Casa Sol B&B (casasolbnb.com) provides guests with service every bit as attentive as a 5-star hotel (the owner has 20 years' experience working at the Hilton to draw upon). The five haughty colonial rooms here were finished only in late 2013. With lofty ceilings and antique furniture, they lead onto an inviting internal patio where breakfasts tailored to your tastes are served.

El Yunque, southeast of Puerto Rico, is the USA's only tropical rainforest, and the Rainforest Inn (rainforestinn.com) is secreted within. It's an arrestingly exquisite eco-lodge where sumptuous accommodation is provided either in the 2-person chalet or in the ultimate seclusion of the vast 5-person villa, a mile away from the main house in the trees. Fresh flowers enliven the rooms daily, and a gourmet breakfast is served. The inn also keeps a list of the diverse birdlife spotted in the vicinity: this is one of the Caribbean's best bird-watching locales.

Rincón's role model where B&B's are concerned is Tres Sirenas B&B (tressirenas.com), down a dead-end lane on the edge of town with only a lonely beach and the crashing waves beyond. The rooms look out on terraces by the jewel of a pool – your front-row pew not only on the ocean but also for sampling some of Puerto Rico's most original breakfasts (wild mushroom, spinach and goat's cheese frittata, for example) alternating daily. Yoga, surfing and deep-sea fishing trips are arranged.

Getting there

To San Juan's Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport, Frankfurt has weekly direct flights on Saturdays with Condor (condor.com) and Madrid offers direct flights on Thursdays and Sundays with AirEuropa (aireuropa.com). Otherwise, the most straightforward connection from the UK is to fly from London Heathrow to New York's JFK airport with British Airways, (ba.com) then continue to San Juan with American Airlines (aa.com).

Getting around

A taxi from the airport to Old San Juan should cost \$19 (£12), plus \$1 per bag. Puerto Rico's public transport system is diabolical, so if you want to travel outside of San Juan, renting a car is necessary. Thrifty, Hertz, Avis, Budget and Sixt have offices at the airport.

More information

seepuertorico.com; discoveramerica.com