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Puerto Rico: new resorts and fresh horizons

Caribbean island and exotic US territory, Puerto Rico is luring tourists with tropical weather, ceaseless festivals, and a new swathe of high-end resorts and restaurants.



An inviting Caribbean climate and exceptional hospitality industry are drawing more tourists to Puerto Rico Photo: John Hartung / Alamy

By Richard Grant

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Why Puerto Rico? I put the question to Eric Christensen , the developer hired by Ritz-Carlton to create an ultra-premium Reserve property here at Dorado Beach, on the north coast of the Caribbean

island which last month voted in favour of becoming America's 51st state. He was shuttling around the site in a golf cart, calm and relaxed given that the grand opening was only a month away, and there were still bulldozers churning up mud and a thousand things left to do.

"Well, obviously we've got an incredible location here, and that was a major draw, but Puerto Rico has a lot of advantages for us," said Christensen. "It's accessible through a good international airport and, being a US territory, has infrastructure that works. A lot of people speak English and genuinely welcome tourists. On some of the smaller, poorer Caribbean islands, service can be problematic – but that's not an issue here. There's a tradition of great service."

The real clincher was that the Puerto Rican government guaranteed the loan for the first phase of the \$1.2 billion (£750 million) Dorado Beach development, as part of a big new push into the luxury travel market. For many decades, tourism on the island was geared towards budget-conscious Americans who wanted beaches, casinos and the same franchise restaurant chains they knew from back home. Those tourists are still coming, but in the past few years, five-star resorts have been opening all over the island, and Dorado Beach will undoubtedly be the jewel in the crown. Already, says Christensen, Ricky Martin has bought one of the adjoining residences, and A-list celebrities whom he isn't prepared to name are scrambling over each other to book retreats and weddings at Su Casa, a restored 1920s hacienda in the secluded heart of the resort that can be rented for \$30,000 a night.

In style and flavour, all the new luxury developments borrow to some extent from Puerto Rico's cultural heritage, a mélange of Latin American, Afro-Caribbean and North American influences, famous for hospitality, rum cocktails, old colonial architecture, vibrant nightlife and a great love of celebration. There are 21 bank-closing national holidays in the Puerto Rican calendar, and most of the 70-odd towns on the island also have festivals honouring their patron saints, plus carnivals. Here, you are never more than a few days away from a street party.

"Life is short and the most important thing is to enjoy yourself," said the driver who picked me up at the airport. "We love to get together with our families, put on our best clothes and celebrate. We have a plantain festival, an orange festival, festivals for tomatoes, flowers, cocoa, coffee and even for a small fish called the ceti."



The Festival of San Sebastian in Old San Juan. Image: Alamy

Driving through the capital San Juan, you pass American chain stores, Spanish-language billboards and artworks celebrating the Taino Indians, the original inhabitants of the island. Their universe was upended when the Spanish arrived at the end of the 15th century, inadvertently introducing smallpox to the island, along with Christianity and subjugation. The Taino population was decimated by the new disease, and the survivors forced to work on sugar plantations alongside African slaves. This mixing together of Spanish, Native American and African bloodlines forms the basic stock of the Puerto Rican people, and following the Spanish-American war of 1898, they were all declared United States citizens.

The North American influence is most vivid in the Condado district of San Juan. A high-rise strip of hotels and condominium towers, between a lagoon and the Atlantic, it looks and feels like Miami. At street level, luxury boutiques are interspersed with bars, casinos, restaurants and souvenir shops. Kayakers in the lagoon swirl up phosphorescence with their paddles at night.

It used to be that eating in Puerto Rico was a choice between classic American fare and the native cuisine, which is tasty but perhaps over-dependent on pork, fish and plantains fried together in various ways. But as I discovered at Perla, the flagship restaurant of a chic new hotel called La Concha, those days are now gone. Under a domed ceiling scalloped like a clamshell, I ate the most exquisite fennel-dusted scallops with truffled white bean stew, and one of the best filet mignon I've tasted. The 4,000-strong wine list came loaded into an iPad, and a few bottles cost upwards of \$3,000.



Luxury is nothing new in Puerto Rico. The Vanderbilt family, railroad tycoons from New York, opened the island's first high-end hotel in Condado in 1919 . For the past eight years, it has been in the process of refurbishment and restoration, and the grand entrance lobby, two bars and restaurant are now open to the public, although the rooms aren't finished yet. The chef, Juan José Cuevas , has worked in two three-starred Michelin restaurants in Spain, and he cooked me a lunch I will never forget, wonderfully fresh and light and inventive, incorporating native herbs I had never tasted before.

Just a few miles from Condado, and bearing no resemblance to it whatsoever, is Old San Juan, the walled and fortified city that the Spanish started building in 1508, and defended for many centuries against pirates and attacks by the British, French and Dutch. Wandering its cobbled streets and leafy plazas, admiring the big heavy doors, ornate balconies and shady inner courtyards, I felt glad that the Arabs had occupied southern Spain for 800 years and influenced its architecture so profoundly. Here was the Moorish Andalusian style transplanted into the New World, executed with grace and harmony, and beautifully restored over the past three decades. Parrots and hummingbirds flit through the plazas, gigantic bougainvilleas spill over whitewashed stone walls, and a small army of cats keeps down the rodent population.



The sun rises over Santa Maria Magdalena de Pazzis cemetery in old San Juan. Image: Brian Janssen / Alamy

For elegance and charm, there is no better place to stay in Puerto Rico than Hotel El Convento, a restored 17th-century convent on the same plaza as the cathedral. You enter through studded wooden doors 20ft high and cross a marbled floor to an interior courtyard shaded by a 300-year-old tree. The staff are welcoming and attentive, and complimentary wine and cheese are served at sunset on an open-air terrace with views across the city and bay.

I could quite happily have spent a month there, getting to know the many cafes, tapas joints, salsa and reggaeton clubs, art galleries and museums of Old San Juan, and perhaps sinking into cocktail-sodden dissolution like Johnny Depp's character in *The Rum Diary*.

But I had an appointment at the Ritz-Carlton Reserve at Dorado Beach, perhaps the most eagerly awaited hotel opening in the Americas, if not the western hemisphere.

I arrived in the midst of a PGA tournament, on one of the four adjoining Robert Trent Jones golf courses, and was immediately whisked away in Eric Christensen's golf cart. "The people who can afford to stay here are the most difficult in the world to impress, and luxury alone is not going to do it," he said. "So what we've tried to do is to create a place so rich in detail, history and narrative, that they get caught up in it and keep coming back for more."



A room at the Ritz-Carlton Reserve at Dorado Beach

I was expecting something fantastically opulent with huge gold lions, but the aesthetic at Dorado Beach is clean, simple, airy and close to nature —a celebration of this extraordinarily beautiful beach and the magnificent old trees on the shore. Laurance Rockefeller built one of the world's first eco-resorts on this site in the 1950s, and Christensen's team has taken that legacy as inspiration. "We went to extraordinary lengths to avoid cutting down trees, which drove our construction guys crazy," he said. "Instead, we built around the trees."

At the entrance is an immense fig tree, shaped like something out of a fairy tale, and hung with 30 lanterns. The reception is open-air and the whole design aims to dissolve the lines between inside and outside. Rooms have doors that slide all the way back into the walls and disappear. Each has a private pool and an outdoor shower. There is no bar in the bar, dissolving that barrier too. Instead, cocktails will be made and explained at the guest tables. The chef, José Andrés, described by Christensen as a "mad genius", will be creating his magic in the dining room, rather than behind closed doors in the kitchen.

The spa is designed to look 100 years old, and in some areas has a steampunk look, with Victorian-industrial light fixtures and an apothecary that will be full of medicinal plants in big glass jars. Botanists and plant healers will be on hand to prescribe treatments, and you can climb up into a treehouse for a massage. Nothing here can be bought in a shop, or ordered from a supplier. The furniture and fixtures are all specially designed and built by artisans in Bali and Thailand, lending a subtle Asian undercurrent to the design.

Walking through Dorado Beach is more like being in a giant art installation than a hotel resort. What

you marvel at most is the creativity involved, and the fact that Ritz-Carlton gave it so much leeway. The property is also an object lesson in sustainability. It has a silver Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certificate, hard to achieve in a luxury resort. Developers used recycled materials, installed state-of-the-art energy-saving technologies, and built a wind- and solar-powered facility, with all its systems exposed. It is here that Jean-Michel Cousteau, the environmentalist son of Jacques Cousteau, will run a children's camp. "He'll teach them underwater photography, take them night snorkelling, and show them how to process photographs and how a green building works," says Christensen.

I get the feeling that Dorado Beach was a satisfying project to work on. "Oh, absolutely," Christensen agrees. "I did Euro Disney, which was fantastic, but this has been something else. To bring together the most creative people in the industry, and to give them almost free rein in a place like this — that's the most fun I can imagine."

WEXAS Travel is offering seven nights in Puerto Rico from £1,599 per person, room only, based on two sharing a superior room at Hotel El Convento. The price includes return flights, seven days' car hire and insurance. Trailfinders is including Puerto Rico in its 2013 programme, with five-night holidays available from £899.

The Details

Ritz-Carlton Reserve's Dorado Beach: Opened on December 12, 2012, the former Rockefeller estate in Puerto Rico has rooms available from about £1,000 per night – if you can get a reservation. **Hotel El Convento:** This landmark treasure in the heart of Old San Juan is gorgeously decorated with Spanish antiques and tapestries. Gloria Vanderbilt is a frequent guest, and visiting heads of state often stay in the marbled presidential suite. Rooms from £112 per night.

The Ritz-Carlton San Juan: This property offers a more classic interpretation of luxury than its sister property in Dorado Beach: opulent rooms, stone lions around the pool, a private beach, extensive spa facilities and two first-rate restaurants. Rooms from £249.

La Concha: Located in Condado, this award-winning beach hotel has a chic, fashionable feel with club music pulsing in the lobby, and a late-night cocktail scene. Rooms from £149.