

Hello, Puerto Rico

FAST FACT

As Puerto Rico is a US territory, visitors from the UK need an Esta to enter the country

This new kid on the block is quite a catch, writes Jo Cooke

Look at a map of the Caribbean and Puerto Rico seems to be playing piggy in the middle.

Sandwiched between budget beauty the Dominican Republic, and exclusive yachty haven the British Virgin Islands, you don't hear so much about Puerto Rico, but that's all about to change.

This former Spanish colony and US territory is firmly back on the market thanks to twice-weekly direct flights from the UK with Norwegian.

In just over eight hours, clients can find themselves sampling some old-world charm, a vibrant arts scene, unspoilt beaches and

incredible natural attractions. Puerto Rico is certain to take both Caribbean regulars and newbies by surprise.

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CARIBBEAN PUERTO RICO DESTINATIONS



→ for a bit of West Indian winter sun, and swapping their dark, damp commute for a cocktail under a swaying palm just got more affordable.

Funway offers seven nights' B&B at the Verdanza Hotel, from £1,140 for a Poolside King Room. The price includes return flights with Norwegian from Gatwick departing January 11, 2017. funwayagents.co.uk

ITC Luxury Travel offers seven nights' room-only at St Regis Bahia Beach Resort, from £2,969 for a Superior Garden View Room. The price includes Norwegian flights from Gatwick and private transfers departing in December. itcluxurytravel.co.uk

Funway has a guided Scenic Horseback Riding tour from San Juan starting at £86 for four hours, suitable for all levels of ability, and including hotel pick-up.

Renting a car is also worth recommending to those who like to explore independently. The roads are good, sights are well-signposted and the petrol is cheap.

▶ SEE: WHAT SHE'S MADE OF

The fourth-largest island in the Caribbean, Puerto Rico has rainforest and rivers, miles of unblemished beaches, vintage architecture and three bioluminescent lagoons.

These rare pockets of water are home to marine microorganisms, dinoflagellates, that appear to glow in the dark. The most accessible is in the town of Fajardo on the northeast coast. Here you can take a sunset or night-time kayaking trip out through mangrove channels to the Laguna Grande. As you disturb the water with your paddles the dinoflagellates begin to glow, surrounding your kayak in a halo of green-blue light.

A few miles to the west you'll find another natural high, the 29,000-acre rainforest reserve El Yunque National Forest. For a dose of nature in a hurry



Beaches

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→ sign up for a zip-line through the lower slopes.

If you're feeling more laid-back, just follow the reserve's winding road to a waterfall, then a viewing tower that rises above the mass of treetops to reveal the coastline. For active types a short, undulating path cuts through jungly, tropical foliage to La Mina waterfall where you can take a shockingly cool dip in the pool beneath the cascade.

Alternatively, embark on a three-hour hike to El Yunque Peak, over 1,000 metres above sea level. The smart visitors' centre with its orientation video, trail maps and wildlife guides is also worth a look.

However, if holidaying is all about the beach for your clients, they've come to the right place. Isla Verde, the main resort area of greater San Juan, has a broad

and lengthy stretch of sand backed by a range of brand-name hotels and familiar US chain restaurants.

Then there is the glorious Pinones beach: it extends for miles and is fringed by a thicket of palms and sea grape trees. A favourite weekend spot for Puerto Ricans, some sections are rugged with breaking waves, and others are protected by offshore rock pools that create sheltered shallows.

The road behind Pinones is dotted with casual dining options that sell fast food, local style. Try the barbecued chicken skewers, ceviche, and the fried meat, fish or cheese-stuffed pastries.

Close to San Juan old town, meanwhile, is the bustling and cosmopolitan Playa Escambron, where the town's folk come to snorkel, scuba dive, surf, jog,



ABOVE: El Yunque waterfall

RIGHT: El Convento, Old San Juan



cycle, play ball games or walk their dogs on the grassy lawns. If you want to soak up the local vibe this is the place to hang out, and as an added bonus there's a great view of the fort and city wall from the white sand bay.

▶ **STAY: CLOSE AT HAND**

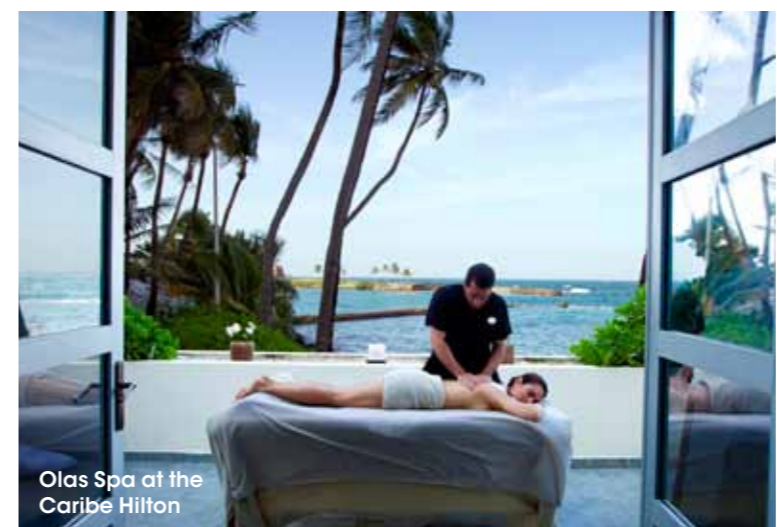
If you book clients into the main resort area, which huddles around Isla Verde beach, they can be at their hotel just 10 minutes after leaving Luis Muñoz Marín airport. Accommodation here includes an Intercontinental, a Ritz-Carlton and a Marriott.

It's about a further 15 minutes to San Juan's old town. The delightful maze that makes up this part of the capital is all cobbled streets lined with period architecture and an eclectic mix of restaurants and bars - some contemporary, some traditional.

Diverse sounds ooze from their doorways: jazz, classical piano and DJs spinning infectious salsa and merengue beats that will soon have you rotating your hips alongside the locals.

If clients want to stay in the heart of the action rather than at the beach there's a Sheraton and Small Luxury Hotel, El Convento. A path that follows the city walls is perfect for an evening stroll leading you along the waterfront to Fort San Felipe Del Morro to watch the sunset.

The Caribe Hilton also has an enviable location, within walking distance of the old town and neighbours Playa Escambron. For those who prefer a luxurious, out-of-the-way retreat, the St Regis Bahia Beach Resort can oblige. It's to the east of San Juan near El Yunque and offers a butler service for those who book suites. **TV**



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