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Resilience and exuberance in Puerto Rico

The island hopes to bounce back from the pandemic to hit record visitor numbers this year but it remains little known beyond the US

Ruaridh Nicoll 4 HOURS AGO



The night boat cuts fast across a pitch-black sea and arcs into a narrow mouthed bay. Captain Cachi douses all but the navigation lights and heaves-to not far from the mangrove shore. He orders me overboard and I tumble in.

It's as if I have climbed up into the night sky. I am swimming through stars, diving through nebulas. I plunge faster until, like the Enterprise, I hit warp speed. Galaxies pass. I stop, clap and sparks fly.

Finally I float to the sea's warm surface. I am not far from La Parguera on the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico, in a bioluminescent bay where dinoflagellate plankton gather and thrive. The sea, it seems, is as incandescent as the people who inhabit this land.

The moment my flight from Florida touches the tarmac of San Juan's Luis Muñoz Marín airport all the passengers start whooping. "I don't know why we always do that," says my neighbour. Lin-Manuel Miranda, the genius behind *Hamilton: the Musical*, once explained: "I clap every time a plane lands and so do most Puerto Ricans," he said. "That's like our thing. I love it. We cheated gravity and we're alive."

Puerto Rico is emerging as one of the strongest recovery stories in the travel industry. Year-to-date accommodation bookings are down only 13 per cent on 2019, which was a record year, and the tourist board says it sees potential for 2021 to set a new record for visitor numbers. Data from online travel agent Priceline shows Puerto Rico as the fourth most popular flight destination among US travellers in the second quarter of 2021.



Calle San Sebastián in Old San Juan, site of an annual festival

Yet even in pre-Covid times almost all the tourists were from the United States — of which Puerto Rico is effectively a colony. Only about two per cent of arriving visitors come here from Europe, odd for the Caribbean. For many in the wider world, the island conjures little more than some half-remembered choruses from *West Side Story*, but its cultural impact on the US has been out of all proportion to its mere 100 by 35 miles.

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In recent years, Puerto Rico and its diaspora have offered up not just Miranda, but J-Lo, Marc Anthony and Bad Bunny. That's music. In politics there is AOC, New York congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Let's not even start on baseball.

I've longed to visit since working in a bar in Brooklyn where half my clientele were Puerto Rican. Reading Jorge Duany's *Puerto Rico* before arriving, I discover that despite its wild and beautiful coastline, warm seas, and perfect beaches (Flamenco, on the satellite island of Culebra, is among the finest I've ever seen), Puerto Ricans, long put upon by outsiders (first Spain then the US), look inland for their soul.

So, after picking up wheels from Charlie Car Rental, I head for the hills. I want to find the children of the Jíbaro, the venerated early settlers who scratched a living in bare feet and straw hats, machetes at hand.



'Flamenco beach, on the satellite island of Culebra, is among the finest I've ever seen' © Alamy

My fellow road users suggest there's been a change of accessories. I'm joined by a Mad Max medley of vehicles: trucks with the snarling grills, super-sprung dune buggies and hatchbacks pumping music with all the power of mobile nightclubs.



The road narrows and switchbacks upwards. Before long I am traversing the spines of ridges where houses, veranda skirted, perch on the tops. It's fearless architecture given the troubles Puerto Rico has faced in recent times. Hurricane Maria hit in 2017, killing an estimated 3,000. Then came earthquakes.

Near Orocovis, a local company, Toroverde, has created the world's second longest zipwire (the longest one, also by them, is in UAE). I strap in. Many Jíbaros were Corsicans who arrived in the early 1800s and now, as I arrow downwards, I can see why they felt at home among the ravines and sharp edges — at least until the wind blessedly pushes my Covid mask over my eyes.



The world's second longest zipwire at Toroverde Adventure Park in Orocovis stretches for about 1.5 miles © Johnny De Los Santos

Back in the car, I drop down the island's southern slopes and stop at Hacienda Jacana, in the hills above Adjuntas. Jonathan Pérez Marín bought the farm in 2015 "in the interest of being self-sustaining". He has bananas, guavas, papaya, chickens, dogs, beautiful horses and tanks full of tilapia.

"After the hurricane we focused on quality coffee," he says, making me an espresso from his single-source Latitude 18, roasting the beans in front of me. They used to say of the island's crop that it's the coffee of kings and popes, which seems fair.

When I suggest he's a hipster *Jíbaro*, he smiles kindly. In truth he's an example of *resiliencia*, a buzzword after the hurricane and the US's widely criticised response to it, and now gaining a new currency.

Everyone I meet has been affected by Maria. On the western edge of the island, I fly-fish with Francisco Rosario, a guide with an international reputation. His bookings fell to nothing in the wake of the storm, and he turned in his boat licence rather than pay its \$7,000 a year insurance. Instead we paddle-board among the mangroves, casting into the gaps for tarpon and spooking huge iguanas so they tumble into the water.

There is a lot of American clutter to Puerto Rico. The highway encircling the island is atherosclerotic with car dealerships. Charm returns only when I pull off at the Royal Isabela resort, the creation of Stanley and Charles Pasarell. Charles was the US's top ranked tennis player in 1967.

At first Royal Isabela seems like a standard high-end golf destination. The main house resembles a sugar mill, like those in Barbados or Antigua, and from its central courtyard, you can gaze through a door to a perfectly framed ponytail palm. Beyond, the green of fairways give on to the bleach-scoured cobalt of the Atlantic Ocean.

But then I play, and it becomes like a sci-fi version of golf. There are tees that require drives over chasms that fall 100 feet to the unruly ocean, the trade winds the player's only friend. From cliff-top greens I look down to where vast rollers crash against reefs, whitewater flooding a deserted golden beach to reach the sun-dappled dunes.

The resort's 20 casitas are set against a slope with views to the blue horizon. They are big and comfortable and have outdoor Jacuzzis and large terraces (and are a steal at \$325 per night). Dinner of local snapper is prepared by Jeremie Cruz, who opens a bottle of red and tells me about the vegetable and fruit farm he has created on the edge of the course.



The Condado Vanderbilt resort in the capital San Juan © Magda Biernat

I continue to the capital, San Juan, a journey of a little over an hour. As the city builds, resorts appear along the coast — party places like the Fairmont, with interlocking pools, sun cabanas, and its fresh bistro Caña. Or the Condado Vanderbilt, with a star-studded history and a truly spectacular French restaurant, 1919.

Here is where the Miami-fication of the Caribbean is most apparent, and it draws vast numbers of American holidaymakers. People wander about wearing very little, heading to the shops, or mall-style bars, or to the beach. Later they might head to the new El Distrito, a vast entertainment complex across town.

The authorities are doing their best to mitigate the dangers of people flying in. Everyone needs a PCR test and afterwards a daily email asks for symptoms. Unlike in Miami, distancing, temperature-taking, mask wearing and hand-sanitising are all enforced by a nervous population.



Looking towards the Castillo San Felipe del Morro, which guards the entrance to San Juan Bay

I keep going into the old town. It's on an islet at the mouth of the bay, a colonial city of pastel-washed houses packed tight to provide shade. Its tip is the Morro, a vast fortress.

From Columbus' first visit in 1493, this was the first port of call for Spanish ships riding the trade winds west. Captains would round the fortress and drop anchor off a tiny beach, climb a short path and give thanks at the cathedral, the second oldest in the Americas.

The Palacio Provincial is next door. It opened in January, the first significant new hotel in Old San Juan in two decades. It is a beautifully proportioned building from the early 1800s, that once played host to Infanta Eulalia on her way to the world fair in Chicago in 1893, five years before the US took Puerto Rico from Spain by force.

Now the cloisters that surround two central courtyards give on to cool, calm rooms. There is a pool on the roof which looks out over the bay, to where smart yachts pass and Bacardi makes rum on the opposite shore.



The Palacio Provincial, dating from the early 1800s, opened in January

Breakfasting in the courtyard, I meet the only other Brit I see in three weeks. On hearing my accent, a bull head swivels like a gun turret on a Union Jack buff. It's the UK's honorary consul, Tony Phillips, and we become friends.

With the sun rising, I explore the old town with Pablo Garcíá Smith of Spoon Experience. It's less a tour than a detour, in that we're forever dropping into cafés, bars and restaurants.

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We drop by El Convento, an extraordinary hotel in itself. The convent was founded in 1642 by Doña Ana, its first Mother Superior, a young widow rich enough to surround herself with nunnish friends. We explore the many crevices of La Factoria, regularly listed as one of the best bars in the world. The main room retains the

name of a previous establishment on its wall: *Hijos de Borinquen*.

Borinquen, meaning “noble”, was how the indigenous Arawak called their island. Their *hijos* (children) are the few — less than five per cent — who still believe in full independence from the US. Pablo tells me his mother is one: “This is where she'd meet other independence activists.” Not long ago he discovered the family had an FBI file.

Currently the island's 3.2m inhabitants have US passports but no vote in Congress. At a referendum last November, Puerto Ricans voted to become a US state; a bill for full statehood was introduced in the US Congress in March, only to be talked down by Chuck Schumer, the US Senate majority leader. He says the referendum — 53 per cent to 47 per cent — wasn't emphatic enough and attacked the island as a tax haven. Few expect a change soon.

It seems that for the moment Puerto Rico will continue to survive through its force of character. I turn up for a walking tour in the second city of Ponce. Melina Aguilar Colón (who had introduced me to the coffee farmer Jonathan) is my guide.

We don't walk far. By the city's historic fire station, painted red and black like some Knight Errant's tent, we fall in with a crowd of undertakers, widows and fiends. I find myself in the back of a big pick-up truck and cops on big Harleys are roaring past to shut off the streets ahead.



A 'vejigante', or a costumed reveler, in the carnival of Ponce, Puerto Rico's second city © Alamy

A vast sound system leads our 35-car convoy. It turns out to be the last day of Ponce's carnival, and Melina, now transformed into a pink demon — a *vejigante* — has decided I should be part of it.

Residents emerge from their homes, and begin to dance. As the evening grows darker, the barrios become more far-flung, and, in truth, more sketchy. I turn to see two men with the long, moustachioed faces of Sergio Leone gunslingers gazing up at me, cold eyed.

I wave my tiny Ponce flag, and mutter to Melina: "This wasn't the tour I was expecting." The men suddenly grin and my demon guide laughs. "To be honest," she says, looking round. "I'm no longer sure where we are."

Details

Ruaridh Nicoll was a guest of [Discover Puerto Rico](#), staying at the [Palacio Provincial](#) (doubles from \$195), [El Convento](#) (\$149), [Royal Isabela](#) (\$325) and [St Regis Bahia Beach Resort](#) (\$599). The tour of Old San Juan was run by [Spoon](#), Ponce and Hacienda Jacana by [Isla Carib](#), and the bioluminescent bay by [Paradise Tours](#). [British Airways](#) offers return flights to San Juan via Miami from £498 return.

Puerto Rico is currently open to most tourists but, like the mainland US, not those from a list of countries that includes EU members, the UK, China, India, Brazil and South Africa. All arriving travellers must show a negative coronavirus test, even if they have been vaccinated. There is currently a curfew between midnight and 5am; restaurants, museums and hotel pools are limited to operating at no more than 30 per cent of their capacity. See discoverpuertorico.com for more. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is currently advising against travel to Puerto Rico, and recommends US residents delay all domestic travel until they are vaccinated