

THE CARIBBEAN



NO REASON TO BE BORED: The jagged coastline of Rincón, Puerto Rico, and challenging waves make for exciting days and nights. For refreshment, try the Tamboo Tavern at Beside the Pointe. Staff photo illustration; photos courtesy www.rinconpr.com

Those who surf, and those who don't, come in waves to beautiful Rincón.

A swell time

BY MARIE C. FRANKLIN
THE BOSTON GLOBE

RINCÓN, PUERTO RICO • A massive wave breaks off Sandy Beach, carrying surfers by palm-shaded guest houses, sea-side bars and grills, and thickets of bougainvillea. At noon, the March sun is hot and this splendid stretch of beach is nearly empty as I gaze at the stream of summer types gliding by on their boards.

"Why do surfers come to Rincón?" says Jeff Yost, repeating my question as we stand by a collection of vintage surfboards in his Rincón Surf Museum. "Because it's tropical, it's warm, there are many different surf breaks, and it's a lot closer than Hawaii."

Though I am not a surfer, I had felt comfortable riding the waves on my boogie board

that afternoon. Now, at dusk at the Vista Vacation Resort, the coqui frogs serenade from below the balcony of our self-catering apartment and my mood is light.

It's great to be back in Puerto Rico, where the sea is bathtub warm, and the landscape a dazzling aquamarine. English is spoken here, the dollar is legal tender, and vacationing is a bargain.

I often meet Caribbean travelers who say the only sight they have seen in Puerto Rico is the Luis Muñoz Airport in San Juan. Yet in the same time — roughly two hours — that it takes to board another plane and fly from San Juan to St. John, Anguilla, St. Martin or the Dominican Republic, they could drive to Rincón. En route from the airport to this westernmost corner of Puerto Rico, you have the feeling of being at the end of the Earth as you approach the point of the peninsula.

Rincón is everything the Caribbean ought to be: palm-shaded beaches, fabulous sunsets, friendly people and a quiet little town. The vegetation is rough, the terrain rugged and there is an eclectic mix of local and expatriate cultures. As a destination, it offers tranquillity as well as action, with opportunities to hike and bike by the sea, ride horses through the hills, and snorkel and dive among the coral reefs on Desecheo or Mona islands. Nighttime options include relaxed dining, dancing to reggae music, or gambling in the casinos in nearby Mayaguez.

My family decided on Rincón for its accessibility and the appeal of its secluded beach town. We would have time to chill. Our daughters would have stretches of uncrowded beaches for tanning, with a steady stream of surfers an added amenity. Rincón's surfing has attracted a relaxed breed of tourist and kept prices reasonable for everyone.

Most of the folks we meet have vacationed in Rincón before, enticed by value as much as by the surfing and beaches. There are mainly couples and families staying at Vista Vacation Resort, which consists of two hillside buildings of studios, one- and two-bedroom apartments, and a small swimming pool. Just beyond Vista, high in

the hills of Barrio Puntas, Rincón Surf and Board, a budget accommodation, caters to surfers. On the other end of the spectrum is Horned Dorset Primavera, a five-star boutique hotel featuring rooms, suites and villas, many with private pools. A Relais & Chateaux property, it sits on seven acres at the edge of a very pretty beach and is one of the most elegant hotels in Puerto Rico. Most Rincón accommodations fall in the midlevel category of quaint guesthouses, inns and condominiums or self-catering apartments.

With limited options for public transportation, we rented a car. But even in downtown Rincón, where four streets offering supermarkets, dive shops, drugstores and a few tourist shops crisscross, parking is not a problem.

Much of the tourist action occurs at Sandy Beach. A rustic beachcomber setting, it offers a handful of good restaurants serving grilled fish and meats as well as local fare. The Tamboo Tavern hosts live music on the weekends and a daily happy hour.

Punta Higuera Light House is a perfect place to watch a sunset or to shop in an eco-friendly gift shop. Built in 1892 by Spaniards to mark the island's westernmost point, the lighthouse stands in the middle of a beautiful park overlooking the surfing at Domes and Indicator beaches. In March, the park was the site of *Contra el Viento* ("Against the Wind"), a bicycle festival that brought hundreds of cyclists hoping to qualify for international races.

The Rincón Surf Museum offers a more sedate view of the sport. Built by Yost, who, along with his wife, Cathy Beck, owns and operates Vista Resort, the museum exhibits more than 100 boards from the '50s and '60s. Many were shaped by Dick Brewer, whom Yost describes as "the most famous surfboard shaper in the world." Housed in the back of the complex, the museum is open when Yost isn't busy with other commitments, but he is happy to guide people by appointment.

In light of how much Rincón has to offer — beauty, reasonably priced accommodations, and water sports — it is a perfect destination for a relaxed vacation.

IF YOU GO: RINCÓN, PUERTO RICO

Getting there: Rincón is about two hours by car from the San Juan Airport, where rental cars are available. You can also fly to Aguadilla or Mayaguez, both about 25 minutes from Rincón.

Activities: The Punta Higuera Light House area has been restored into a beautifully landscaped park overlooking the surfing at Domes and Indicator beaches. It's a perfect spot to watch spectacular sunsets and for viewing humpback whales off the coast, January to March.

Desecheo and Mona Islands — Twelve miles west of Rincón, Desecheo Island is a federal wildlife reserve. Uninhabited Mona Island is 40 miles offshore. Desecheo Dive Shop offers guided day trips to both islands for diving, snorkeling and nature adventures.

Lodging: Casa Islena, Sandy Beach Road, 787-823-1525, www.casaislena.com. Beautifully restored oceanfront guesthouse with its own restaurant and small bar. Island motif and pool. Double rooms range from \$105 to \$155 a night.



Beside the Pointe, Sandy Beach Road, 787-823-8550, www.besidethepointe.com. Small guesthouse on the beach, casual accommodations and studio apartments. Rates start at \$45 a person, double occupancy.

Rincón Surf and Board Guesthouse, Barrio Puntas, 787-823-0610, www.surfandboard.com. Casual guesthouse serving a mostly surfer crowd with rooms \$45-\$65 a night, apartments \$55-\$175 a night, and a dormitory \$15 a night.

Vista Vacation Resort, Vista Nuclear Street, Barrio Puntas, 787-823-3673, www.vistapr.com. Air-conditioned, self-catering apartments with fabulous views. Pool, cable TV, BBQ. In-season rates: studio \$95; one bedroom \$110; two bedrooms \$185.

Eating: Lazy Parrot Restaurant and Bar, Road 413, Barrio Puntas, www.lazyparrot.com. Dinner only in a beautifully landscaped open-air dining room features specials of fish, steaks, pasta, BBQ and vegetarian dishes; entrees \$10-\$17.

Tamboo Tavern at Beside the Pointe, Sandy Beach Road. Lunch and dinner daily, 11:30 a.m.-11 p.m.; weekend reggae bands under a thatched roof dining room. Salads, sandwiches, and entrees, \$3-\$12.

Casa Islena Inn Grill and Bar, Sandy Beach Road, Barrio Puntas. Breakfast, lunch only; salads and lunch plates, \$5-\$13.

Information: Puerto Rico Tourism Company at 800-866-7827 or at www.gotopuertorico.com. — MARIE C. FRANKLIN