

CRUISING PUERTO RICO'S SOUTH COAST

by Joan Conover

The southern coastline of Puerto Rico is an ignored cruising ground, or so it seems from the coverage in major cruising guides. My husband, Greg, and I cruised aboard our Morgan 511, *Growthiger*, from the west coast beach village of Boquerón with its northern bay, the city of Cabo Rojo and Marina Pescadería, to the historic grandeur of Ponce, to our midway stopping point, Salinas, to the island of Vieques plus Culebra — it was like a return to our past experiences of early cruising.

The South Coast Lifestyle

Southern Puerto Rico has maintained a proud lifestyle that takes you back in time. The many harbors started as and still are fishing villages, with very good local seafood found everywhere. There are myriad finger-food bars, such as Sal Pa Dentro in Salinas, where local specialties, as well as beers and tropical drinks and music, are served late into the evening. We found the traditional "grouper fingers", empanadas of octopus and regional fish, and an absolutely wonderful *muro* — a white fish with amazing flavor.

On weekends, the people focus on their children and family members. The people you meet along the southern coastline are living a life they are happy with, with family and friends; it's a lifestyle reminiscent of the 1960s. Sundays are family days; you'll find groups at the beach or public parks flying kites and enjoying picnics. Friday night is "dress up" night, and the outfits are amazing: formal attire, long dresses, jewelry, and perfect makeup and hair. Be sure to have at least one outfit to shine in!

The cruising lifestyle is also "back in time", to an era before charter boats and internet distractions.

The low-lying southern coastline area is similar to The Bahamas in many ways, with sandy cays, protected waterways behind coral and sand dunes, with quiet



Above: Salinas Harbor is a changing boatscape of transients mixed with longtime liveaboards

Below: Puerto Rico's south coast, showing Ponce, Caja de Muertos, Salinas and Bahía de Jobos: 'It was like a return to the past'

anchorages. However, unlike the Bahamas, the elevation inland rises up to protective mountains running east and west along the center of the island. These mountains offer not only destinations for wonderful day trips (rainforests and other ecosystems are in easy driving distances), but also cause weather and wind changes that smart cruisers can use to transit west to east along the coastline. The diurnal wind patterns offer the opportunity to sail eastward against the prevailing winds.

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Most of Puerto Rico's south coast features anchorages protected by coral reefs, mangroves and small private cays. The reefs and mangroves protect an amazing waterway system of small coves and bays that are suitable for overnight or day stops. Sailing behind the reefs, in protected waters, cruisers can tuck into small coves and take advantage of a sparsely populated shoreline.

The mangrove habitat is swarming with large tarpons and even larger manatees. Not only are the mangroves a hatchery for fish, but also lobsters are found all through the underwater grasslands of the bays. Puerto Ricans are proud of and protect their environment: when we visited in April 2016 there were three environmental efforts underway for turtle, forestry and manatee conservation near Salinas alone.



Puerto Rico is a land of contrasts in geography and in industry. In the smaller southern towns such as Salinas, most local businesses are still separated into their functions — a separate family run bakery and so on. However, in nearby large town areas near Salinas or Ponce, within taxi range, we found Walmarts, as well as Home Depots, McDonalds — all the products of a modern USA. From the old-time ambience of the south-coast lifestyle, it's a short drive to modern-day America on the major interstate highway leading directly to San Juan and the upscale, big-city living found there in the Old City.

Sailing Against the Trades

Located between the Mona Passage, with its strong southerly currents, and the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico has west and east coastlines with strong current flows. East of Puerto Rico, south-trending currents sweeping from the open Atlantic join



Above: The crews of Sans Cles and Growthiger share nav notes on a beach-bar napkin

Left: Snack time! Tasty bites and cold beers rule at Sal Pa Dentro

with the west-flowing currents of the Leeward Islands and can make easting a challenge, even with perfect wind conditions.

The southernmost tip of Puerto Rico needs to be respected as a "cape". Photos of this landmark show it to be similar to Portugal's Cape Finisterre. Follow guidebook advice on times and weather patterns that support rounding this land feature.

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Locals make the eastward passage along Puerto Rico's south coast and the protected side of Vieques in the evening and nighttime, taking advantage of mountain downslope (katabatic) winds and the diurnal wind patterns affecting the prevailing trades. Local knowledge also provided us an insight on ways to utilize the winds, tides and currents to travel against the trades towards the Virgin Islands.

On traveling west to east, SSCA Station Host Janso Lassus and Chris Parker of the Marine Weather Center both mentioned diurnal winds and staying close to the southern coastline because of currents, gaining the benefit of the mountain winds at night. By close, they mean very close, just outside shoal and reef areas, in safe depths.

To sail west to east back to the US Virgin Islands, we followed the local guidance and waypoints, staying just outside the reefs in over 20 feet of water. This kept us away from the local fishery pots, and out of the west-setting currents found off the southern coast of Puerto Rico. Some currents run as high as 1.5 knots. (There is a small circular current area to the south and west end of Puerto Rico; be aware if you get counter-current as you navigate that area.) Once to the tip of southern Vieques, it's easy to head north to Cubebra, or south.

Locals know to depart from Salinas via the Boca del Infierno/Bahía de Jobos area in later afternoon, if necessary for tides and winds; cruisers can anchor just to the north and west of the cut in good holding near the northern shore line. Leaving Salinas at 3:00PM, we took the Boca del Infierno cut, and then sailed close in along the southern coast to the eastern tip of Vieques and onward to St. Croix, arriving at dawn in Christiansted harbor.

Cruising the southern coastline, long-time cruisers of more than 20 years' experience, the Klumbs on their Morgan Out Island, S/V Orion, sail day hops from Culebra to Punta Arenas (a.k.a. Green Beach) on Vieques to Puerto Patillas on the southern coast mainland (be careful: this is a complicated anchorage with reefs, and having local knowledge is a good idea), to Salinas, onward to Coffin Island and Ponce, and then back. Sue Klumb says, "Punta Arenas, located on the west coast of Vieques, is an excellent stopover when sailing from Puerto Rico to Culebra or the USVI. Punta Arenas is a peaceful anchorage with good holding in sand for a short stop."

Bahía de Boquerón

On the southwest tip of Puerto Rico, Boquerón is a large harbor with a fishing heritage. This is the most popular western port for vessels heading north or south from Puerto Rico on the east side of the Mona Passage. It's well traveled, with lots of cruisers anchoring here, and well described in Frank Virgintino's Puerto Rico cruising guide (see footnote).

This is not a port of entry; crew will have to travel to Mayaguez to check in. The holding is okay; note that this is an old harbor which has old fish traps and more on the seafloor. A marina, Club Náutico de Boquerón, has fuel and water but very shallow depths. Contact the marina before attempting entry. On any entry to the harbor or exit, carefully follow charts and guides: reefs and rocks make difficult passages on the western side of Puerto Rico.

Boquerón has loud music and an active nightlife!

Just to the north of Boquerón, find a second harbor, with a mid-sized marina, Marina Pescadería. SSCA Cruising Station Host José Mendez, says, "Draft is not

problem at all. The bay has anywhere from 12 to 18 feet on the entrance channel and the marina has at least nine feet on all three docks at the end." Vessels of up to eight foot draft are seen in this harbor, just to the north of Boquerón. They offer full services, with fuel and water.



Bahía de Ponce

Ponce, the second largest city in Puerto Rico and the key city on the southern coast, is an excellent stop for cruisers. It offers boat services, provisioning, inexpensive slips in the Ponce marina, an easy-in-and-out fuel dock with a T-head tie-up, an anchorage (rolly at times), plus nearby Isla Caja de Muertos (Coffin Island) for alternative anchoring in settled weather.

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Sue Klumb says, "Anchorage is not very good in the harbor, but can be done. Better to get a dock at the Ponce Yacht and Fishing Club (PYFC) if possible. PYFC is a private club, but they will accommodate transients and offer a special weekly rate, which allows partial use of the facilities including showers, laundry, and dinghy dock. Arrangements for hauling out and having work done at PYFC need to be coordinated with the club's management beforehand. Friendly warning: It is loud in Ponce anchorage and PYFC, because the boardwalk, La Guancha, is right next to it and music at full power and dancing is enjoyed by all who go there, especially on the weekends."

Ponce has the Old World flavor of Spanish colonial Puerto Rico as well as cultural events and good shopping areas. Sue adds, "Ponce has an old inner city, a spectacular Museum of Art, a huge indoor mall with upscale department stores including Macy's, and numerous fine dining restaurants as well as casual ones. There are two Super Walmarts, a Sam's Club, Pueblo Supermarket, Marshall's, TJMax, Burlington — you name it! In other words, good shopping and eating!"

Salinas, Bahía de Jobos

Midway along the coastline, in the Bahía de Jobos area, Salinas offers very protected natural anchorage. It is known as a hurricane hole, and nearby mangrove swamps are opened for public access for boats to go into and tie up to the mangroves.

In the entry channel we found ten to 11 feet of water. Entering the harbor for his first time, Hank Schmidt of Offshore Passage Opportunities had no issues with his Swan, which draws eight feet, and tied up stern to at the Salinas Marina. We found 11 to 12 feet of water at the Marina de Salinas docks.

With vessels coming in for a day or so of rest and provisioning, then heading out on their next leg of the passage, the harbor is a changing boatscape of transients mixed with longtime liveaboards. Boats are anchored or on private moorings in the harbor. In the harbor, as all along the southern coast, night-time winds die to zero around 6:00PM, building again after 8:30AM, so make sure you take those winds into consideration if choosing a spot to anchor. The fuel dock is not easy to access; sailboat cruisers should expect to jerry-jug diesel fuel unless they have good bowthrusters, a short turn radius for right angles, and the ability to back out through several angles.

Marina de Salinas offers a monthly package to allow cruisers access to their facilities, laundry, swimming pool, WiFi and more. Anchoring is, of course, free!

Cruisers are very welcome in Salinas; visitors find a family friendly community that seems like a piece of Spain tucked into a corner of Puerto Rico. Most everyone is bilingual, but the favorite is definitely Spanish! The nights in Salinas are filled with Latin music sounds, but not usually noisy.

All over the area are excellent small family-run restaurants and tapas bars. On Sundays, Mexican Train dominoes are played almost everywhere. Cruisers are welcome to join in, and many expats will offer advice on playing techniques. They are serious about their dominos and their beers!

There is barbecue on Friday nights at the Marina snack bar. The El Dorado Restaurant is next door to the marina, for a more formal dining experience. Walking towards the beach to the west you can find a lovely little bakery with "Cuban" sandwiches for snacks. Just look for an open sign and walk in, no reservations required.

A casual cruisers' bar, Sal Pa Dentro, operated by SSCA Cruising Hosts Janso (Gene) Lassus, Anna and little Yorkie Diego, is just outside the marina gates. Sal Pa

Dentro is on the water (tame tarpons beg for snacks), has a dinghy dock, and is designed with the boating community in mind: "sin zapatos, sin camisa, sin problema." The restaurant was rebuilt following a 2015 fire and Janso has been collecting boat burgees again, as the old facility was covered floor to ceiling with boat flags. The restaurant offers the most amazing homemade finger foods! Live music is provided on holidays, or "just because". The colorful local ferry stops by at the Sal Pa Dentro dock on its way around the Bahía de Jobos mangrove area as well as on its way to the oceanside bar beloved by locals.



"Sailors welcome!" SSCA station hosts Janso and Anna with Offshore Passage Opportunities' burgees

Hank Schmitt adds, "Salinas is centrally located to rent a car and tour the island. The crew of *Avocation* visited the Camay Caves, the waterfalls in the rainforests, the food kiosks in Loquillo and the Bacardi Rum Factory. We look forward to visiting again."

Next month: Vieques and Culebra.

For the best current guide to sailing Puerto Rico, including chart information, waypoints and location-specific details, go to Frank Virgintino's www.freecruisingguides.com and download the Puerto Rico guide (2015). He utilizes the advice of many local experts, such as Tom Cordero, for an excellent publication. There are so many aspects of the western Puerto Rico coastline, it would require an entire article; the same for the eastern coast with its many marinas and quality sailing areas near Fajardo. Virgintino's guide goes into great detail about both east and west sides of the island. — JC

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