



Puerto Rico offers music, food, beaches, shopping, rainforests and more, and American travelers can visit them all without a passport. Nicole Pensiero, for South Jersey Times

TRAVEL

Mojitos, tree frogs and beaches

How I spent a 3-night getaway in Puerto Rico

Nicole Pensiero For South Jersey Times

The first time I visited Puerto Rico — years before Hurricane Maria walloped the island in September 2017 — I was enchanted by its beautiful beaches and historic landmarks. I knew one day I’d “get back there,” as the saying goes.

Over the past nearly two years, Puerto Rico has worked diligently to rebuild its economy and infrastructure — along with its tourism industry, with many beachfront hotels heavily damaged by the hurricane. I realized that a return visit to the island would be a good way to support its comeback efforts, by supporting its economy.

We set our sights on one of its most iconic hotels, San Juan’s Caribe Hilton, which reopened this spring after a \$150 million renovation brought on by extensive hurricane damage. This 70-year-old property — one of the Caribbean’s most famous — has hosted movie stars and regular sun-seekers alike for decades; it’s even said to be the place where one of the world’s most popular cocktails was invented.

Our planned visit was set for August, only a month after massive street protests forced the resignation of Puerto Rico Gov. Ricardo Rossello. We weren’t sure what the vibe would be on the island, which is a U.S. territory, but everywhere we went, we were met by friendly residents, eager to talk with us about their hopes for Puerto Rico’s future.

Our late-summer, three-night getaway ended up being a welcome respite from the relentless heat and rain at home (yes, it was sunnier and cooler in the Caribbean), as well as a chance to relax and recharge. A less than three-and-a-half hour direct flight from Philadelphia, American travelers don’t need a passport to travel to Puerto Rico, nor will they deal with the hassle of customs.

A little history: Originally captured by Christopher Columbus for Spain in 1493, Puerto Rico — the Caribbean’s fourth largest island — remained a Spanish colony until 1898, when it was claimed by the U.S. in the Spanish-American War. While its 3.2 million inhabitants are U.S. citizens, four centuries under Spain’s control have permanently influenced both the island’s culture and its physical landscape. In fact, you’ll still find numerous public buildings, forts and churches in Old San Juan that were built during Spanish colonial rule.

We arrived at our hotel, located on a peninsula-shaped 17 beachfront acres, after

a 15-minute ride from the airport. With numerous swimming pools, a swim-up bar, two hot tubs, and private beach with hammocks, it’s an ideal island retreat. The sweeping view of the property from our hotel balcony was one we never tired of. We spent our first afternoon relaxing by the pool, then enjoyed dinner at Lola’s, the Caribe Hilton’s Puerto Rican food eatery. We set off our first morning to enjoy a three-hour food walking tour of Old San Juan.

FOOD TOUR

A three-hour walking food tour of Old San Juan included an opportunity to mash your own plantains to make mofongo, a popular main dish in Puerto Rico.

The Flavors of San Juan tour offers both delicious food to sample, as well as insights into Puerto Rico’s 475-year-old history and architecture. We sampled ham and cheese croissants at Cafe Cuatro Sombras; passion fruit popsicles from Señor Paleta; and mojitos and do-it-yourself mofongo at the Parrot of Old San Juan, among other stops.

Less than a 10-minute ride from the newer part of the city (it was a \$4 Uber fare for us), Old San Juan is a wonderful, and colorful, step back in time. Considered the Caribbean’s finest example of Spanish colonial architecture, we were as enamored with its cobblestone streets and pastel-colored buildings as we were with the culinary tastings.

In fact, we returned to Old San Juan on our last full day to more fully explore its many boutiques and gift shops — and especially enjoyed watching kite flying on the open land next to the beautiful Castillo San Felipe del Morro, a 16th-century fort that’s a designated World Heritage Site.

Back at the Caribe Hilton, I decided to pamper myself with a treatment at the hotel’s spa. I opted for a relaxing eucalyptus scrub/wrap. That evening, drawn to the sound of salsa music, we wandered across the street from our hotel to the Paseo Caribe, a new shopping and dining venue that features free, live entertainment every weekend. We caught a combination salsa/rap band, whose high-energy show was capped off with a fireworks display.

The Caribe Hilton offers live music in its popular indoor-outdoor lobby bar, Caribar. The hotel’s open-air lobby has a large display that tells its history and growth, from its original 300 rooms to the now 650-plus.



There is another lobby display, too, honoring bartender Ramon “Monchito” Marrero, whom Hilton claims invented the sweet and frothy piña colada in 1954. Marrero served his creation at the hotel for 35 years until his retirement in 1989, and his original recipe is easily found via a Google search.

POOL PUERTO RICO

The views of the Caribbean Sea and the Caribe Hilton’s pools are especially enticing when viewed from a balcony.

Along with an array of restaurants at the Caribe Hilton — featuring everything from Italian to Caribbean fare — there’s also a Starbucks onsite. Another nice touch is the fruited ice water provided every day in the lobby; there are two chatty, colorful parrots nearby that are also attention-getters.

If you have a few extra days in San Juan, be sure to visit El Yunque National Forest, a lush, 28,000-acre reserve about 35 miles outside the city. The only tropical rainforest in the U.S. National Forest System, El Yunque is home to hundreds of tropical plant species and countless animals and birds. There is even a waterfall you can stand under.

Along with its amazing scenery, there you’ll hear the sound of Puerto Rico’s tiny, hard-to-spot coqui tree frogs (which are something of a national mascot, found on everything from refrigerator magnets to coffee cups).

Nicole Pensiero is a South Jersey-based freelance travel writer and a member of the North American Travel Journalists Association.

The Caribe Hilton claims to be the birthplace of the popular piña colada so associated with the islands. The bartending team still follows the original recipe. Courtesy photo