



With a Caribbean vibe and American appeal, Puerto Rico is numero uno with travelers from the mainland who can do without the hassles of traveling with passports and visas. Plenty of beaches, bars, city hotels and seaside resorts have earned the US territory kudos as an affordable getaway with deals galore during the summer season. A big hit with foodies, menus are a culinary travelogue of Spanish, African, Caribbean, American and Taino Indian influences. From chefs preparing “nuevo criollo” or island cuisine with a fusion twist to mom-and-pops who ladle stews into big bowls, a variety of eateries showcase the fresh bounty from papayas and plantains to cilantro and coconut.

SNAZZY SAN JUAN

Gourmands rave about Old San Juan Food Tours that offer an un-guidebook culinary pilgrimage through the cobblestone streets of the colonial city. “There is a world of flavor, history and culture waiting to be discovered,” said Mikol Hoffman, manager. “Our tours take our guests to the off-the-beaten path smaller restaurants that serve the best in Puerto Rican cuisine.” www.sanjuanfoodtours.com

Celebrating a big 6-0 this summer, the Pina Colada made its potent debut

on August 15, 1954 at the **Caribe Hilton**, one of Conrad Hilton’s first hotels in the Caribbean, and the largest resort in Puerto Rico with 917 rooms and suites. Across Dos Hermanos Bridge in San Juan, the hotel is also where Bartender Ramon Monchito Marrero spent three months mixing and tasting hundreds of combinations until he hit the jackpot with his blend of white rum, coconut cream and pineapple. Although he never patented his recipe, cocktail counters estimate more than 100 million have been sipped around the world, and are still poured at the Oasis Bar. Nightly room rates start at \$99 throughout the summer with a “Spa-tourage” package through December 20, that includes treatments in the Olas Spa and yes, a Pina Colada upon arrival. www.caribehilton.com

A former Carmelite Convent in the heart of the old city, **Hotel El Convento** is an AAA Four-Diamond property, oozing island history at every turn. The oldest member of Historic Hotels of America, this 58-room hotel delights soleil-seekers who covet the rooftop terrace, plunge pool and Jacuzzi with sun loungers. www.elconvento.com

Targeting both the leisure and business market, **Doubletree by Hilton San Juan** has spruced up the YeloSpa with the addition of a zero-gravity massage bed. A

larger relaxation center is open in the adjacent Gallery Plaza with eight treatment rooms and a steam room, ideal for corporate bonding after a day of meetings.

www.sanjuandoubletree.com

CHIC CONDADO

In San Juan’s fashionable Condado neighborhood, **Olive** is one of Puerto Rico’s finest boutique hotels and a member of the 2014 Small Luxury Hotels of the World collection. With just fifteen rooms on four floors, the hotel impresses with extras like cocktails on the rooftop terrace, tea in the garden and dinner at Oliva Dieta Mediterranea, named after the bread, wine and olive oil trilogy of a Mediterranean diet. “We’re a small hotel with many loyal fans, and we offer an experience beyond what many are used to in the bigger hotels and resorts,” said Loisse Herger, owner.

www.oliveboutiquehotel.com

Classic and classy, 248-room beachfront **La Concha** is a retro-urban renaissance resort built in 1958, reimagined for the 21st century, with five on-site eateries including Perla built in a floating seashell, a casino and a million dollar refresh in the Ocean Tower, slated for completion in the fall.

www.laconcharesort.com

One forkful of a pork-filled dumpling capped with shaved truffles will leave you wanting another and another one after that. A rock star on the culinary landscape, Roberto Trevino is a chef on a mission in Budatai, his wildly popular Asian-inspired hot spot. “Enjoying a hotel stay should be complimented with a fabulous dining experience,” he smiles, whirling around his frenetic kitchen. “Eating well is as much a part of a luxury vacation as a five-star hotel and a first class air ticket.”

www.oowtrestaurants.com

LOVE AT FIRST BITE

A culinary rite of passage for die-hards who crave comfort food, mofongo is dense, delicious and definitely not for the less than ravenous. A mashed mound of plantains that is stuffed with seafood, meat or vegetables, the traditional dish is as Puerto Rican as a minty mojito on a hot afternoon. In a big pink



Double Tree San Juan pool

Casa Lola Mofongo
Photo credit M. Reffes

house in Condado, Chef Nelson Rosario does mofongo proud at Casa Lola where he ups the ante with a side of organic arugula and a dab of the piquant house pepper sauce (ask for it and use sparingly).

www.casalolarerestaurant.com

Named after the Chef, Santaella is a few steps from Santurce's Farmer's Market on Calle Canals in San Juan. Impressing hipsters and wannabe gourmards, Chef Jose Santaella whips up crescent-shaped turnovers called empanadillas and for the daring; rulos de morcillas are blood sausages on doughnut dough, cut into small pieces and fried to perfection.

www.santaellapr.com

Nothing starts a day finer than a breakfast of chocolate at the Casa Cortes Choco Bar. The largest chocolate-makers in the Caribbean, the Cortes family has been producing the sweet stuff for eight decades using the beans grown on the island. Choco-themed treats include grilled cheese con chocolate on brioche bread and an artistic tray of chocolate in a shot glass, churros for dipping (deep-fried Spanish donut) and dark chocolate and cheddar for a burst of color.

www.casacortespr.com

OUT AND ABOUT

On the first Sunday of the month, Ventana al Mar in Condado morphs into the Mercado Urbano where farmers set up shop under big white tents. It's pure Puerto Rican with vendors selling fruits, vegetables, sausages on the barbecue and just about everything else grown on the island. Cooled by offshore breezes, locals demonstrate their salsa moves to shoppers who may want to learn a step or two. **www.puertoricodaytrips.com/condado-mercado-urbano**

An hour south of San Juan, high in the Cayey mountains, "La Ruta del Lechon," the pork highway, leads to the small town of Guavate where lechoneras, or restaurants that specialize in whole roasted suckling pig, line both sides of the road. No-frills with names like El Rancho Original and El Mojitos, pork is piled high on paper plates (ask for a crackle or two of the delectably fatty skin) with starchy sides like yucca, boiled bananas and other root veggies of the day. It's the best meal deal on the highway at \$7.50 a plate. Weekends are crowded with street parties, coolers of Presidente beer and seniors selling lottery tickets, and where the road ends at the Carite Forest Reserve, vendors hawk honey, spices and made-in-Puerto Rico souvenirs.

www.seepuertorico.com



Original Recipe for the Pina Colada
(Courtesy: www.caribehilton.com)

2 ounces white rum
1 ounce coconut cream
1 ounce heavy cream
6 ounces fresh pineapple juice
1/2 cup of crushed ice

Add the rum, cream of coconut, cream and pineapple juice in a blender. Add the ice and blend until smooth. Serve in a tall glass. Garnish with a pineapple wedge and a maraschino cherry.

