

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE DECEMBER 4, 2011 | BOSTONGLOBE.COM/TRAVEL



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
A beachfront resort in the small fishing village of Las Terrenas, on a northern peninsula of the island of Hispaniola.



BAHAMAS
Open-air marine habitat, a casino, child-friendliness, and ocean themes on Paradise Island, one of 700 islands in the country's archipelago.



ANTIGUA
Splurge all-inclusively on a Wellness Week, yoga, rain forest hike, healthy cooking, and more that makes the seaside shimmer with allure.

YOUR PLACE IN THE SUN

What's the deal? Winter. What can you do? Look for a package with blue seas, blue skies

BY NECÉE REGIS | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Leaves fall. Temperatures drop. Snow swirls and our thoughts drift to the warm turquoise waters and bright blue skies of the Caribbean. With more than 7,000 islands, reefs, islets, and cays, not to mention Mexico's Yucatan coast, it's hard to decide where to go. And once you pick an island, so many choices remain: All-inclusive or not? Child-friendly or swinging for singles? Mega-resort or secluded hideaway?

Here is a selection of destinations offering packages and deals at various price points. Rates are based on queries for accommodations in mid-January.

Consult websites to check for newly posted specials, and don't forget to pack your passport along with the sunscreen.

ATLANTIS, PARADISE ISLAND, BAHAMAS

If you are looking for a resort with affordable rates that likes children, you might want to consider this ocean-themed destination in the Bahamas. The myriad lodging and dining choices are built around what might be the largest open-air marine habitat in the world: a 140-acre water park of fresh and salt-water lagoons with nine water slides, 11 pools, a mile-long river tubing adventure, and habitats that are home to more than 50,000 marine animals. There are more than a dozen activities for kids, such as swimming with dolphins at Dolphin Cay, the resort's interaction and education center. Adult activities in-

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PUERTO RICO

Beyond San Juan, bounties to see, eat, and soak in

By Marie Elena Martinez
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

This commonwealth has long been associated with its busy capital, San Juan, a grid of trendy restaurants and souvenir shops teeming with cruise ship tourists. But what few travelers know is that due east of the city tranquil places such as Río Grande and Luquillo — which meet the foothills of El Yunque rain forest — and such offshore treats as Vieques and Culebra offer a bounty of gorgeous beaches, a growing number of restaurants, beautiful golf courses, and authentic experiences. In these spots, Puerto Rico defines “island time.”

RÍO GRANDE

On arrival at Luis Muñoz Airport, forgo the shuttle to San Juan's luxury hotels, rent a car, and take PR-26 until it connects to Route 3, the main road to all points east. After about 20 miles, you hit Río Grande. Here, Puerto Rico's only navigable river, Espiritu Santo, winds through El Yunque rain forest to meet the ocean on the grounds of the year-old St. Regis Bahia Beach Resort. Set on a former coconut plantation, the eco-friendly property's tropically designed Robert Trent Jones Jr. golf course is one way to spend a morning.

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MARIE ELENA MARTINEZ FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Jorge Acevedo's artist studio, gallery, and home on Culebra.

INSIDE

Guana Island offers nothing to do, and in private. **M2**

Off **Belize**, a little cay you can eat, play, sleep on. **M3**



ROSEWOOD MAYAKOBA

EXPLORE NEW ENGLAND

Curious cocktails and microbrews are the buzz in **Maine**. **M6**

Wright's museum-caliber house in **New Hampshire**. **M6**



JONATHAN LEVITT

The blues down here are winter's antidote

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clude snorkel and scuba diving, yacht and fishing charters, golf, tennis, rock climbing, a spa, a casino, nightclubs, and theater. Recent online specials featured the fourth night free plus a \$250 airfare credit. Rooms start at \$199. 888-877-7525, www.atlantis.com

MAGDALENA GRAND BEACH RESORT, TOBAGO

Home to the hemisphere's oldest forest preserve, with lush vegetation and cascading waterfalls, Tobago is the perfect ecotourism destination. Open since last month, the 200-room Magdalena is the island's newest and largest full-service resort. Bring your binoculars for birding, as this 20-acre estate offers nature trails and canopy walks through a virgin mangrove forest. Located along a 2½-mile stretch of beach, you can also swim, sail, and surf. There's a pool with cabana beds, and golfers will enjoy an 18-hole PGA-designed championship course. Dining options include al fresco poolside tables, Caribbean fusion cuisine, and casual cafes. Rates start at \$270. To celebrate the opening, the resort is offering 15 percent off rates from Jan. 5-April 14. 868-660-8800, www.magdalenaresort.com

THE SANDS AT GRACE BAY, TURKS AND CAICOS

Only 80 minutes by air from Miami, this family-friendly resort attracts diving and snorkeling aficionados drawn to one of the longest barrier reefs in the world. The resort can arrange other water activities. Nestled in a lush tropical six-acre property along the white sands of Grace Bay Beach, the place exudes the gracious hospitality you would expect in a secluded, Caribbean plantation setting. The 114-room resort has a spa, a beachfront restaurant, and a series of pools. Check out their "5th Night Free" special, offered Jan. 3 through Feb. 12. Rates from \$285. 877-777-2637, www.thesandstc.com

CURTAIN BLUFF RESORT, ANTIGUA

Sometimes you just want to splurge. For 50 years, this 72-room resort has been offering a luxurious platform for indulgence. Though the price might seem high at first glance (from \$795), the good news is this rate is all-inclusive. What's included? To start, all meals and beverages (with room service and mini-bar items), plus a long list of such ac-



The Hyatt Regency Curacao Golf Resort, Spa, and Marina and, below, the Golden Rock Inn's cottages on Nevis.

tivities as scuba diving, sailing, snorkeling, water skiing, deep-sea fishing, tennis, squash, yoga, and kayaking. A winter special, Wellness Week (Jan. 12-16), starts the New Year on a healthy note. For \$735 a night, daily fitness activities include a rain forest hike, Beach Boot Camp, Pilates, yoga, stretch, aqua aerobics, a personal training session, healthy cooking class, and choice of daily spa treatment. 888-289-9898, www.curtainbluff.com

HYATT REGENCY CURAÇAO GOLF RESORT, SPA AND MARINA, CURAÇAO

There is something for everyone at this full-service Dutch resort. Situated on 27 acres between the Caribbean Sea and Spanish Water Bay, this 350-room Hyatt boasts of white sand beaches, water views on three sides, three outdoor pools, and other amenities you would expect at a luxury property, like a spa and an 18-hole Pete Dye-designed championship golf course. A camp offers educational and fun activities from 9 to 9 for children ages 3 to 12. Rates from \$299. Reserve before Dec. 20 to take advantage of the Three for Free offer: Stay three nights and get the fourth night free, plus a full American breakfast for the entire family and a room upgrade. 800-55-HYATT, curacao.hyatt.com

MALECÓN HOUSE, VIEQUES

If mega-hotels are not your thing, consider this 10-room inn situated on the Malecón, a picturesque boardwalk in the seaside village of Esperanza. Called the "Little Sister" of nearby Puer-



to Rico, Vieques is a sparsely populated, quiet haven. The modern, spacious rooms have air conditioning and some offer balconies with views of the bay. There is a pool, sunbathing deck, and gardens. It's an easy stroll to bio-bay tours, shopping boutiques, cafes, and restaurants. Popular island activities include snorkeling, scuba diving, sailing, and horseback riding. Winter prices from \$175. 787-741-0663, www.maleconhouse.com

MOUNT CINNAMON, GRENADA

One way to find and compare specials is through websites that represent multiple properties. We found Mount Cinnamon, a colorful boutique resort on Grenada, through Elite Island Resorts. Prices usually start at \$900 to stay at this resort with 21 deluxe villas located on a lush hillside overlooking two miles of the white-sand Grand Anse Beach, but a 30 percent savings reduces the cost to \$630. A dozen more hotels on the site, on seven other

islands, offer similar deals at various price points. This property has a small spa, tennis courts, gym, swimming pool, and beach volleyball court, and can arrange excursions for diving, boating, rain forest hiking, and rum distillery tours. 800-858-4618, www.eliteislandresorts.com/grenada/mtcinnamon/index.html

BALCONES DEL ATLÁNTICO, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

You will find low-key luxury at this newly opened beachfront resort located in the small fishing village of Las Terrenas on a northern peninsula in the Dominican Republic. Each of the 86 two- and three-bedroom villa suites features hand-carved furniture and polished coral and granite tile. Enjoy meals three times a day at Porto, an open-air restaurant facing the white-sand beach. At sunset, cocktail hour is enhanced with roaring fire pits and music. Activities include sailing, snorkeling, kite surfing, whale watching, and rain forest

tours. A winter special, "Three for FREE!" offers one free night (based on four-night minimum), a \$50 resort credit, and hydration backpack. Rates start at \$375. 866-614-7625, balconesdelatlantico.rockresorts.com

SONESTA GREAT BAY BEACH RESORT & CASINO, ST. MARTIN

With a casino, three swimming pools, three restaurants, four bars, a spa, water sports, tennis, and nightly entertainment, this resort is like a cruise ship on land. Overlooking Great Bay Harbor, this 257-room beachfront resort also boasts an activity center with water aerobics, volleyball, scuba diving, shuffleboard, and more. For those who want a taste of the island's small shopping, dining and entertainment district, it's a short walk to the Dutch capital of Philipsburg. Sonesta rewards those who plan ahead, offering 15 to 25 percent savings on 60- to 120-day advance purchases. Rates start at \$135 for mountain view and \$205 for an ocean view. 800-SONESTA, www.sonesta.com/greatbay

FAIRMONT MAYAKOBA, PLAYA DEL CARMEN

Located along a stretch of Mexico's Caribbean coast known as Riviera Maya, this 47-acre property combines the best of the jungle and the sea. A network of waterways winds through tropical forest, mangroves, and lagoons, connecting the main building with a series of villas. Get from one place to another with a covered canal boat service, or use a network of well-marked nature trails, bicycles, and staff-driven electric golf carts. This

beachfront property has five freshwater pools, a spa, boat tours, bird-watching tours, a full-service discovery and adventure club for children ages 4 to 12, and an 18-hole, par-72 golf course designed by Greg Norman. The Appetite for Luxury package (starting at \$429) offers unlimited food and beverages at participating restaurants, and for a limited time, 30 percent off regular rates. 800-540-6088, www.fairmont.com/mayakoba

QUEEN'S GARDENS RESORT, SABA

For a truly peaceful getaway, journey to the tiny island of Saba (5 square miles), a lush rain forest mountain surrounded by pristine coral reefs said to be a paradise for scuba enthusiasts. Saba's population of about 1,600 is spread over four villages: The Bottom, Windwardside, Hell's Gate, and St. Johns. Perched 1,200 feet above the capital city (The Bottom), this 12-suite luxury resort is the place to be pampered after a day of diving and snorkeling. On-site activities include a swimming pool, fitness room, yoga, and cooking classes. The hotel can arrange sunset cruises, guided hiking, and other island tours. A diving package (four days of double tank diving) averages \$392 a night for two guests, for a seven-night stay. Non-package room rates from \$250. 011-599-416-3494, queensaba.com

GOLDEN ROCK INN, NEVIS

An island of simple pleasures, Nevis is eight miles long by six miles wide with a 3,000-foot dormant volcano at its center. Many inns on the island are renovated 19th-century sugar mills, as is this 100-acre restored plantation set on a lush hillside below Nevis Peak. Eleven brightly painted cottages offer views across the sea to Antigua and Montserrat, or stay in the two-floor suite inside a stone sugar mill. Well-marked, easy hiking trails traverse the property, which also offers access to the "Source Trail," a rigorous hike through the rain forest to a waterfall atop the mountain. With its 50-foot, spring-fed swimming pool, a small restaurant, in-house massages, private yoga classes, and breathtaking views, it's a tropic aerie where one can unwind. Rates from \$260; with breakfast \$296. 869-469-3346, www.golddenrock.com

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Kayak, hike, eat, dance after sunset, feel far from San Juan

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Or hike through one of two bird sanctuaries. Calls of the indigenous coqui frogs create a soothing soundtrack, and Fern, an upscale restaurant by Jean Georges Vongerichten, adds to the draw of Bahia Beach.

If the St. Regis is budget-busting, head to the Río Mar, a family-friendly Wyndham property with less fuss. Either way, don't miss a day trip to El Yunque, the only tropical forest in the US National Forest System, with 28,000 acres and an elevation of 3,624 feet. Park rangers offer first-come, first-served guided tours daily from 11 a.m. for \$5 from Palo Colorado Information Center. Local tour operators such as Dragonfly Adventures feature half- and full-day itineraries. When hunger calls, try Muralla, just past La Coca Falls, for some authentic arroz con pollo — a steal at less than \$5.

LUQUILLO

Travel another 10 miles past Río Grande and you reach Luquillo, the "Sun Capital" of Puerto Rico. This seaside town boasts one of the island's most beloved beaches, Balneario La Monserrate (\$4 parking), an ideal choice for families with its brightly colored lifeguard stations. Tour operators offer everything from chair rental to kayaking to jet skiing along the moon-shaped stretch of sand. Just off the beach is a string of popular roadside food kiosks. Once dominated by fried Puerto Rican fare and riddled with crime, the shacks have become a go-to foodie destination selling everything from pastelillos (empanadas) to 2-pound lobsters. My favorites are El Jefe (#12), a tin-roofed shack known



MARIE ELENA MARTINEZ FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The view from the top of the old lighthouse on Culebrita.

for its stuffed jalapeño burger and loaded fries, Tapas 13 (#13) for fiery Shrimp El Diablo, and Ceviche Hut (#38) for Peruvian ceviches and killer pisco sours. La Parrilla (#2) churns out huge stuffed lobsters and flame-grilled steaks by the dozen.

VIEQUES

Reached by a quick 10-minute flight from eastern Ceiba airport or a somewhat unreliable ferry, and harboring an array of alabaster beaches, crystalline waters, and a glowing bioluminescent bay, Vieques has seen its fair share of tourism since the US Navy left the island in 2003. Puerto Rico's "it" destination, the swank W Retreat & Spa, has sunk roots on the quiet shores here, though such spots as the orange-hued Casa de Amistad in Isabel Segunda or hilltop Hacienda Tamarindo near Esperanza might feel more authentic. The food scene in Vieques is thriving; roadside Puerto Rican stalwart El Resuelve, high-end El Quenepo,

and newcomer Next Course are full nightly, but it's San Juan native Rebecca Betancourt's Restaurante Conuco in Isabel Segunda that's the real deal, with upscale takes on classic dishes like mofongo, sorullitos, and tostones piled high with fresh fish.

It's hard not to stumble onto a beach in Vieques. Each is unique, and everyone has a preference. Secret Beach, reached by a dirt path, is for lovers, while expansive Blue Beach is for complete escape. Western Green Beach attracts snorkelers searching for coral treasure, while palm-lined Sun Bay, quiet during the week save for the wild horses grazing nearby, is the local favorite on weekends and the only beach equipped with facilities such as restrooms and food stalls. Most accommodations offer beach chairs and coolers for guest use, so swing past the Sol Food truck on Route 997, load up on sandwiches or pinchos (Puerto Rican skewers), don some SPF, and settle down for some serious rays.

If you go . . .

What to do

El Yunque Rainforest Tour

Luquillo
787-889-7430
www.dragonflyadventurespr.com
Guided rain forest tours begin at \$59 per person.

Puerto Mosquito Bio-Bay Kayak Tour

787-741-2134
www.abessnorkeling.com
Two-hour Bio-Bay tours: Adults \$30, children ages 4-11 \$15.

Culebra Divers

4 Calle Pedro Marquez, Culebra
787-742-0803
www.culebradivers.com
One- and two-tank dives, \$70-\$98. Equipment rental \$15.

Where to stay

St. Regis Bahia Beach Resort
State Road 187, Río Grande
787-809-8000
www.stregisbahiaibeach.com
A 139-room luxury hotel featuring 35 butler-equipped suites. Rates from \$569.

W Retreat & Spa — Vieques Island

State Road 200

787-741-4100
www.vieques.com
Oceanfront resort with oversized rooms. Rates from \$419.

Club Seabourne

Fulladoza Bay, Culebra
787-742-3169
www.clubseabourne.com
Twelve rooms featuring 8 villas with terraces from \$185.

Where to eat

El Jefe Burger Shack
Route 3, Luquillo Kiosks #12
787-615-0896
elfefeburger.com
Casual spot for lunch and dinner. Burgers \$7.95-\$11.95.

Restaurante Conuco

110 Luis Munoz Rivera, Vieques
787-741-2500
www.restauranteconuco.com
Upscale twists on Puerto Rican classics. Entrees \$12.95-\$20.95.

Susie's

Off Calle Escudero, Culebra
787-742-0574
www.susiesculebra.com
Seafood-centered menu in a waterside setting. Entrees \$18-\$24.

Vieques by night is all about kayaking in Puerto Mosquito, one of the most concentrated biobays in the world. Minuscule dinoflagellates emit energy in the form of neon light when their waters are disturbed, and on local boy Abe's kayaking tour, the dark bay glows in wondrous display as oars skim the still surface. After visiting the bay, head to Esperanza town, a bohemian strip on the island's south side. Hit Duffy's for

a beer in the company of mainlanders or La Nasa, a local joint that explodes in salsa and merengue dancing until the wee hours.

CULEBRA

From Vieques (or Ceiba airport), another 10-minute flight or spotty ferry deposits you on this tiny island, which seems to be stuck in a simpler time, when the Internet, iPhones, and the general chaos of daily life were

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