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FEATURES

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ROCKY MOUNTAIN MASTER Delfina Darquier (below and on cover), Beaver Creek's most-requested instructor

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIAN BAILEY





A Nuyorican
rediscovers her heritage
on a journey to her
ancestors' home.

Mi Historia



FAMILY MATTERS The author's family, including her great-grandparents (second and third from left) and her father as a baby.

Mi Puerto Rico

By Marie Elena Martinez
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHANE LUITJENS • HAND LETTERING BY TED KADIN



MY BURGUNDY SUZUKI RENTAL SHAKES WITH FRIGHT AS THE SPEEDOMETER inches past 70 mph. Curled up on the passenger seat is a worn piece of paper upon which my father had scrawled my great-grandparents' names: MARIA AND LUÍS RIVERA. As the dense La Sierra de Cayey mountain range fades in my rearview, five giant, bright-red letters—P-O-N-C-E—come into focus in front of me. Ponce has always loomed large in my imagination: It was the birthplace of my paternal grandparents. It has taken me 30 years to get here. I can't help but speed.

Though I have visited the island many times, I have no understanding of the Puerto Rico that locals experience, the one away from the glossy strips of San Juan. From the time I was 10, my sister and I accompanied our father to the island on alternate weekends, staying in a lavish suite on the Condado Plaza Hotel & Casino's 10th floor, ordering enough butterscotch sundaes and On Demand movies to last us until morning. To us, Puerto Rico meant brightly lit casinos and satellite locations of New York restaurants. An adventure meant sneaking past sleepy guards to play the slots. At the time, my father was looking to escape the loneliness of divorce and be a big shot at the blackjack tables, and my sister and I were happy to oblige him.

Back home in Long Island, NY, I was never privy to my heritage—and never referred to myself as a Nuyorican (a New Yorker of Puerto Rican descent). My grandmother, a poor, single Puerto Rican immigrant, took minimum-wage jobs to support my father; determined to avoid stereotype, she remarried an Italian and fiercely embraced his traditions. I never tasted her rice and beans, but she made a killer eggplant parmesan. It wasn't until I was in college that I learned she spoke fluent Spanish.



My father followed her lead. He, too, married an Italian. References to our Puerto Rican roots were taboo in the house. I ran with fair-skinned blondes named Jennifer, Lauren and Jessica; hung up on phone solicitors that addressed me in Spanish; made dinner reservations under "Martin;" and refused minority college scholarships.

Everything changed on a 2005 trip through Central and South America. I met and became lasting friends with Latinos who were proud of their cultures, and promised myself that I would return to Puerto Rico and seek out the things I had missed: cuisine, history, language and a setting more engaging than a 10th-floor suite. Five years later, disobeying traffic laws, I am making good on that promise. Over the course of a week, using San Juan as a base, I plan on covering a lot of the island, relying on locals' advice to guide me. Needless to say, I'm eager to see what I'll find.

FOUNDED IN 1692 BY PONCE DE LEÓN'S

great-grandson, and known in Puerto Rico as the "Pearl of the South," Ponce is the island's second largest city. Downtown in the historic *Plaza de las Delicias*, the light blue Cathedral of our Lady of Guadalupe shimmers after a morning rain—but my eye is drawn to the red-and-black striped, century-old firehouse, *Parque de Bombas*, a whimsical-looking counterpoint to the cityscape of San Juan on the other side of the island. Like many Latin plazas, Ponce's is a hub of activity, and

it isn't long before someone is able to direct me to my first port of call: *El Archivo Histórico de Ponce*, home to documents dating back to 1812 covering Ponce's 31 barrios.

I brush off my dusty Spanish—nervous as I am about conjugations and irregular verbs—and enlist the help of Gladys Tormes, the archive's director. A head of cropped

REDISCOVERING ROOTS (left) The author (on right) with her father and sister on a visit to Puerto Rico in 1991; (opposite) Calle San Justo in Old San Juan



white curls frames Gladys' wrinkled face, and her brown eyes go warm as I explain the reason for my visit. "Don't worry, we will find them," she assures me. For hours, we comb through books until we find what we are looking for: a handwritten record of Maria and Luís Rivera filed under "Barrio Anón"—the name of the neighborhood in which they lived—in the 1897 Census.

The sloping script of the entry makes me giddy. I touch my finger to the page, tracing the handwriting. Just a week ago, I didn't know my great-grandparents' names. Now, a fire is lit inside me. I want to experience their Puerto Rico—starting with lunch.

"Look for *comida criolla* signs,"

As I look, I wonder on what streets my great-grandparents used to stroll.



Gladys advises, directing me around the corner. Translated as "creole cooking," she tells me it's a cuisine born of Puerto Rico's early mixing pot of Taíno Indians, Spanish settlers and African slaves.

With its dusty floors, worn tablecloths and sparse lighting, the three-room Cesar's Criolla Comida isn't exactly the Russian Tea Room. A man emerges from behind a backroom curtain to take my order, and 10 minutes later, a massive plate arrives with instructions to be careful with the hot sauce. I'm blown away. The adobo-spiced chicken is succulent, the rice and beans fiery, with flecks of caramelized onion barely visible to the eye, but commanding on the tongue. It's simple yet delicious; the kind of meal I imagine my great-grandparents ate regularly. And at \$4.35, it's a bargain to boot.

RAIN BEATS DOWN ON MY

umbrella as I navigate my way

through Ponce using a soggy map that I picked up at the visitor's center. I admire a mix of neoclassical, colonial and Art Deco architecture with beautiful pastel facades. I peek around corners and into doorways, and at each turn, ponceños wave at me, inviting me to ask questions.

A traffic cop who teases me for jaywalking directs me up winding streets to Cruceta del Vigía, a 100-foot cross and observation tower. There, I look north to Barrio Anón, home to the island's highest



HERITAGE HUNT
(clockwise from left) Cruceta del Vigía; dancing at the Nuyorican Cafe in San Juan; Gladys Tormes at the historical archive in Ponce



peak, Cerro del Punta.

Unfortunately, Barrio Anón's elevation, along with its shoddy roads, makes getting there impossible because of the weather. As disheartened as I am that I've come this far to my ancestors' hometown only to be thwarted by Mother Nature, I'm grateful for the vendor's suggestion: Cruceta del Vigía offers the best vantage point of the barrio, and as I look, I wonder on what streets my great-grandparents used to stroll.

Though I traversed Ponce by myself, the guidance of locals was invaluable, so I call Kenny, a family friend who lives 20 miles south of San Juan in Caguas, for more tips. We decide to meet for lunch the next day east of San Juan in Piñones.

AT THE REEF, A CASUAL RESTAURANT with a relaxed vibe where the Atlantic crashes beyond wooden decks, Kenny and I order Medalla beers and look out on pedestrian paths, palm-shaded beaches and *pinchos* (snack) stands peddling decadent fried treats like *bacalaitos* (cod fritters), *tostones* (fried plantains) and crab *empanadillas* (little empanadas).

"On the weekends, Piñones really gets going," Kenny says in his staccato Spanglish. "The locals come here to get their fill of authentic food, drink a little, catch a seat by the beach and, you know... hang out."

When the waitress finally arrives with our snacks—Puerto Rico, I am discovering, moves at its own pace, especially outside of San Juan—Kenny rubs his somewhat overgrown belly. "You'll love this stuff," he says. And I do. The crisp, greasy outsides of the *alcapurrias* (meat-stuffed fritters) and *pastelillos de chapin* (empanadas with local whitefish) offset the moist, meaty insides. Add a kick of bootleg spice, and I'm hooked.

Trusting Kenny's judgment, I

explain that I want to see more of the "real" Puerto Rico. "That's easy," he says. "The most beautiful place in Puerto Rico is Isabela."

When our meal is over, I jump back into the Suzuki and head west toward Porta del Sol, a beach-filled region that lives up to its name of "Doorway to the Sun." As Kenny had instructed, in two hours, I look for "Cacique Rock." An eerie, jagged cliff that resembles Taíno Chief Mabodomaca's powerful face, it announces that you have arrived at Puerto Rico's version of Eden. Miles of dunes protect desolate stretches of sand along the shore. Scattered seaside restaurants and *paradores*—small, locally owned lodgings that meet government standards—abound along Isabela's laidback Jobos Beach, known for its surfing. I drive along the coastline for about an hour, windows down, breathing in the salty air. Craving some sand between my toes, I duck into Cheers Beach Lounge and join the people watching surfers wrestle the tide. It seems that Puerto Ricans, like visitors, appreciate the best part about being on an island: the coast. One such local, a floppy haired man with a big smile named Jaime, buys me a drink. When I explain that I usually stick to San Juan on visits here, he balks.

"Why would you stay in the city when you have this?" he asks. Looking around at the scenery while a lively, easygoing crowd fills the restaurant with laughter, I can't deny he has a point.

I RETURN TO WHAT IS NOW CALLED the Conrad San Juan Condado Plaza on my last night. The décor has changed, but the building feels familiar. I dine at native Chef Wilo Benet's casual Varita, which pays tribute to Puerto Rican cooking with his takes on *almojabanas* (rice-flour fritters), *sorulllos* (fried corn sticks) and *mofongo* (mashed plantains). I wish I had been introduced to such delicacies as a kid—recipes handed



TASTE OF THE ISLAND Green plantain *mofongo* from Chef Wilo Benet's restaurant Varita

down on creased index cards from my grandmother—and I explain this to Benet. "I have just the thing," he says before disappearing for a moment. When he returns, he hands me a thick Puerto Rican cookbook. "This might be a good beginning."

After dinner, my next and last stop is the Nuyorican Café. Here, I enjoy a couple of drinks, salsa to the sounds of El Comborican band, and take a cursory lesson in *bomba*—a traditional dance that involves lots of hip action—from a talented dancer named Rolando.

"I'm a Martinez, too," Rolando tells me between songs. "Maybe we're cousins," he laughs, before turning serious. "You know, I have family in New York; I don't know much about them."

"Sounds like it's high time for a trip, Rolando," I answer. ●

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