

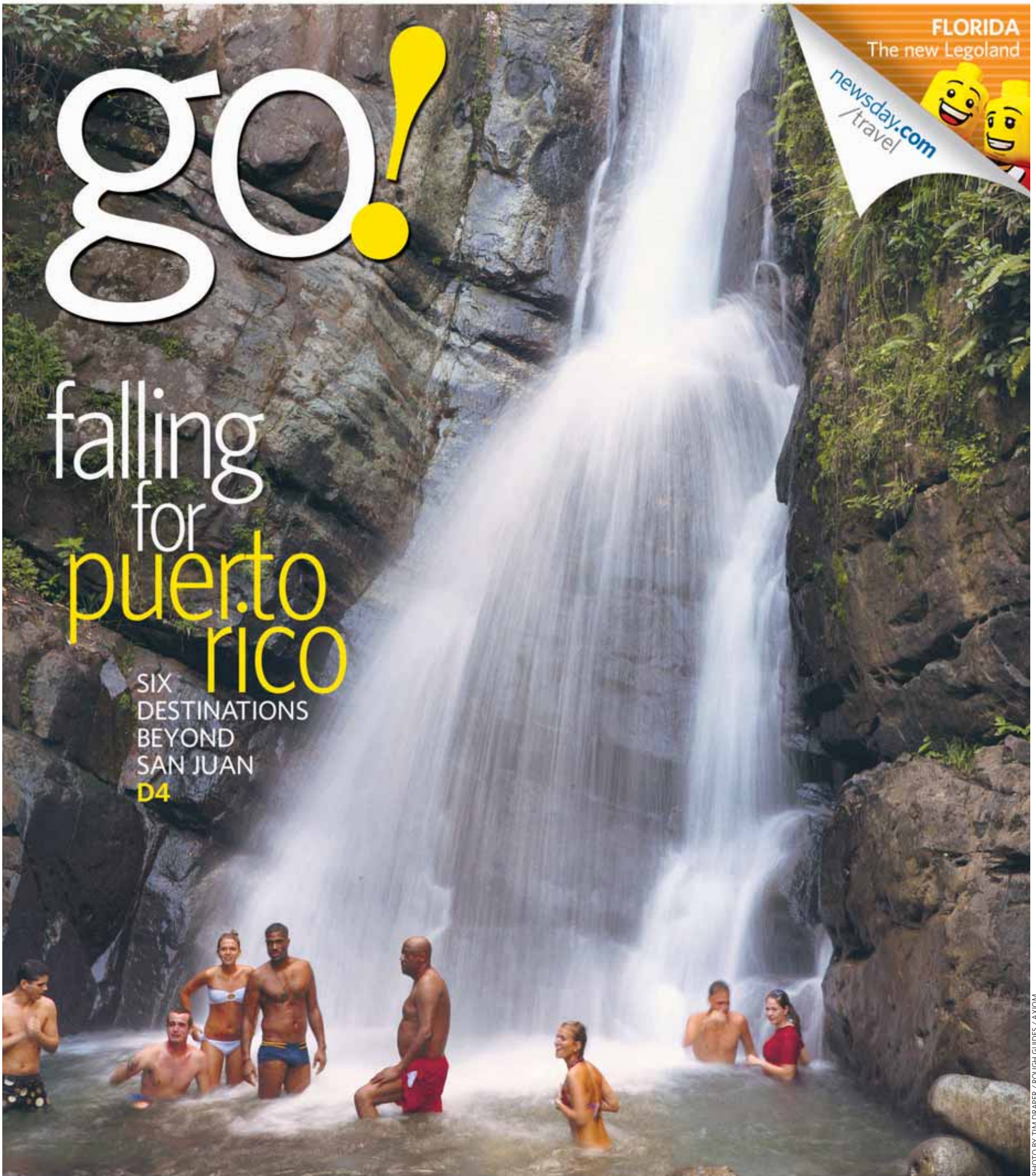
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BEYOND SAN JUAN

Hot spots outside Puerto Rico's capital

BY MARIE ELENA MARTINEZ
Special to Newsday

Puerto Rico, one of the most popular islands in the Caribbean, is usually associated with the bustling energy of San Juan. But outside the illustrious capital, along 300 miles of sun-drenched coast, there's a rich cultural history and unadulterated paradise awaiting the more adventurous.

ON THE COVER
The cold and clear waters refresh inside El Yunque rain forest.

In these places, you're guaranteed not only the best in sand and sea, but off-the-beaten path experiences, awesome natural beauty, friendly local flavor and great eats. On your next trip to Puerto Rico, check out of San Juan and head west to Porta del Sol, down to the Southern Coast or east to Rio Grande.

Porta del Sol RINCÓN

Jutting out from the western mainland, and frequented by surfers, couples and families alike, laid-back Rincón is Puerto Rico's surfing capital. With direct flights from New York to nearby Aguadilla airport,

this town — a maze of unmarked, hilly streets hugging the shore — first garnered attention during the 1968 World Surfing Championship at Domes Beach. Today, serious boarders hit Tres Palmas Beach, which sees swells up to 35 feet high, while crowded Maria's Beach caters to the less experienced. **Rincón Surf School** offers full-day lessons for \$95, including equipment and transportation (rinconsurfschool.com).

Don't surf? There's plenty of swimming beaches like Balneario, Corcega and Los Almendros, and the Punta Higuera Lighthouse is a perfect locale for spotting whales (the season runs December through March). For aquatic adventurers,



Tambo is a beachfront watering hole in Rincón, famous for nightlife.

Desecheo Island, just off the coast, offers excellent underwater opportunities. Protected by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, visibility around this uninhabited island often exceeds 100 feet. **Taino Divers** offers

snorkeling (\$95) and dives (\$129) that include a light (tainodivers.com).

Famous for its nightlife, out New Year's Eve party is Rincón's ultimate watering hole and has been repeatedly named one of the world's best beaches. **Condé Nast Traveler** and **+ Leisure** (besidethepoint.com) are just two. If you're looking to spend the night, there are accommodations for all budgets, but the **Horne Primavera**, a Relais & Chateau property and home to Renée Aaron, is one of the poshest in the Caribbean (hornedivers.com; rates from \$360).

ISABELA

When visitors spot the whale, it resembles the head of Inca. **Ric Chief Cacique Mab**



PUERTA DEL SOL PHOTO

The Rincón Lighthouse on Puerto Rico's western coast; left, cabanas line a pool at the St. Regis Bahia Beach Resort, 30 minutes from San Juan.



PUERTA DEL SOL PHOTO

Bicyclists at Villas del Mar in Isabela, in western Puerto Rico

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on the corner of PR-2 and Route 113, they've reached Isabela. Here, protective dunes shroud isolated sand, and low-key seafood shacks and *paradores*, or locally owned guesthouses, dot the landscape. Not as famous as Rincón, northwest Isabela is a lesser-traveled paradise adored for killer sunsets and uninterrupted solitude. Isabela, too, has hosted two World Surfing Championships, but more recently it welcomed the Ripcurl Pro Search 2010, and the Encanto World Series, a bodyboarding contest with 250 athletes from 26 countries.

In Isabela, everyone's first stop is popular Jobs Beach, a surf spot during the September-March season with swimming year round. Pose for photos atop Pozo de Jacinto, a natural blowhole strad-

...dling the swirling ocean below, then hit **Pedro's Pescado** (pedrospescado.com), a takeout sushi joint that sells some of the island's best catch. While you wait for your rolls to be made, grab a beach blanket, some Medalla beer and find a spot to watch the surfers brave the waves.

Exploring Isabela's jagged seascape by horseback or ATV is a different way to soak up the view. **Tropical Trail Rides** offer both. Two-hour horseback rides are \$45 (ages 6 and older); ATV tours are \$75 for drivers (must be 16 with driver's license) and \$45 for passengers (tropicaltrailrides.com). When it's time to rest, locate Montones Beach, a tranquil swimming spot that fronts the pastel-colored

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Beyond San Juan

ISLAND from D5

wood cabins at the **Parador Villas del Mar Hau** (hauhotelvillas.com; rates from \$150), while down the road, airy one- to three-bedroom villas with dramatic canopy beds can be had at the exclusive **Villa Montaña** (villamontana.com; rates from \$200).

The Southern Coast

PONCE

Puerto Rico's second-largest city, founded in 1692 by Ponce de León's great-grandson, Ponce is known as the "Pearl of the South" and overlooks the Caribbean Sea. In the historic Plaza Las Delicias, stroll past the light blue Catedral de Nuestra Señora de la Guadalupe, then duck into the red-and-black-striped century-old firehouse, Parque de Bombas — one of Puerto Rico's most photographed sites. Built in 1882, today it traces the history of Ponce's fire brigade and is great for kids, who get a kick out of the antique fire truck on the main level. From here, take one of Ponce's *chuchus*, or free trolleys, to La Cruceta El Vigía and climb the towering 100-foot concrete cross for sweeping views of the city below.

This rival to San Juan is known for its friendly locals, or *ponceños*, its museums and its restored neoclassical residences. Next to La Cruceta is **Castillo Serrallés**, a Spanish-style villa

built in the 1930s for Ponce's wealthiest family, a former sugar baron and maker of Don Q rum. (Admission \$8.50; \$12.80 includes visit to La Cruceta El Vigía, castilloserralles.org; closed Mondays). While outside Ponce, sample a cup of serious Puerto Rican coffee at **Hacienda Buena Vista**, a former plantation lovingly restored by the Puerto Rican Conservation Trust (call ahead to arrange a tour; 787-722-5882; \$7.50).

The **Museo de Arte de Ponce** — one of the Caribbean's finest — is not to be missed. Designed by Edward Durell Stone of MoMA fame, it reopened last year after a major renovation and features more than 3,000 works by Puerto Rican and European masters (museoarte.ponce.org; adults \$6; kids under 12 and seniors, \$3). Put down roots in the center of town at the **Hotel Melia** (hotelmeliapr.com; rates from \$100), which houses the city's best restaurant, and try to visit during Ponce Carnival, the 154th weeklong pre-Lent festival that begins Feb. 15. Featuring a rainbow of celebratory costumes, elaborate *vejigante* (mischief-making) masks supposedly scare sinners into repenting.

Rio Grande

BAHIA BEACH

The big news coming out of Rio Grande, the territory due east of San Juan, centers on the new **St. Regis Bahia Beach Resort**, which opened last November. Emphasizing the



Parque de Bombas, on Ponce's main square, doubles as a fire museum and a visitor's center.



A leaf works well as an umbrella in El Yunque rain forest.

natural beauty of the region, the resort occupies two miles of private beach and has the Caribbean's first certified Gold Audubon bird sanctuary. A hydroponic garden produces fruits, vegetables, herbs and spices used in treatments at the massive spa and in the kitchen of Fern, its Jean-Georges Vongerichten restaurant. Plantation-style buildings house luxury accommodations, and guests are encouraged to explore with nature walks, bird-watching and kayaking tours. An oceanfront Robert Trent Jones Jr. golf course rounds out the amenities (stregisbahia.beach.com; rates from \$579).

LUQUILLO

For families looking to keep the kids occupied, it's all about the water-based activity on Luquillo Beach. Just east of El Yunque rain forest, this hot

spot is popular with both locals and travelers for pursuits ranging from jet skiing to parasailing. Luquillo is loved for its 60-plus roadside food kiosks, selling everything from beer and burgers to ceviches and fresh fish, as well as *pinchos*, or traditional fried snacks. A favorite is Kiosk No. 12, **El Jefe** (eljefeburger.com), where the stuffed green chili and jalapeño burger is a standby. Kiosk No. 21, **Ay Bonito!** (aybonitogrill.com) specializes in grilled fish and unbeatable mojitos.

EL YUNQUE

A new 7 Natural Wonders of the World contender, El Yunque rain forest is one of Puerto Rico's gems. Rising to 3,624 feet, the 28,000-acre forest reserve — the oldest in the Western Hemisphere, and the only tropical rain forest in the United States — is a green

panorama glistening with dew. It's here that the island's only navigable river, Río Espíritu Santo, flows, protected by 250 native trees. Hear the collective calls of the indigenous *coquí*s, or tree frogs, and try to spot one of the camouflaged *cotorra*, the island's endangered green parrot, as you make your way through trails abuzz with insect, lizard and bird species. El Yunque sees more than 200 inches of rainfall a year, and the 13 trails, most less than a mile, are well-kept and easily navigable. Bring a bathing suit and water shoes on a hike up Big Tree Trail (easy) or La Mina Falls Trail (advanced) to La Mina waterfalls.

El Portal Rainforest Center at the north entrance (adults, \$4; kids under 15, free) offers guidance and maps for those seeking to go it alone, while **Eco Action Tours**, one of many rain forest operators, has guided excursions that include hiking, swimming and nature study (ecoactiontours.com; \$58, half-day). National Forest Service Rangers offer first-come, first-served one-hour tours from the Palo Colorado ranger's station, 10:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. (\$5 adults, younger than 12 and seniors, \$3).

Stay the night at the most eco-friendly hotel in Puerto Rico, **Wyndham Rio Mar** (wyndhamriomar.com). The 500-acre resort features a casino, golf courses and spa. Through Dec. 23, when travelers go to Facebook and follow on Twitter, they can snag 20-percent-off rates from \$120 (rate code: DISED).

IF YOU GO

American Airlines and Jet Blue offer 3½-hour direct flights to San Juan. Jet Blue and United offer direct flights to Aguadilla, the jump-off point for Rincón and Isabela. For flights in mid-December, both routes are currently pricing in the mid-\$300s, round-trip.

Driving in Puerto Rico is scenic and cost-effective — most rental companies have airport counters with rates as low as \$30 a day. From San Juan, Rio Grande is a 45-minute drive east along Route 3, while Ponce is a two-hour drive south on Route 52. Isabela and Rincón are 15 to 25 minutes from Aguadilla airport by car or taxi.