

# History

Puerto Rico occupies a crux position in the history of the American continent. Colonized by Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de León in 1508, the island contains the oldest European-founded settlement under US jurisdiction. Long before Sir Walter Raleigh and the Pilgrim Fathers had tested the waters of the tempestuous Atlantic, the first granite ramparts of El Morro fort in Old San Juan had been chiseled deftly into place. Nearly 500 years later, they're still there.

As countless historical writers have noted, Puerto Rico is flavored with contrast and contradiction, a blending of cultures and nations that is highly eclectic and not easy to pigeonhole. While technically a US commonwealth, some natives still feel that the island should be a full-blown American state, others an independent nation, and still more, a compromise solution that is neither of the above. Then there is the exotic cultural breakdown: the caustic blending of ancient Taíno with brutally exploited Africans into a historical melting pot that contained Spanish, French, Cuban, Dominican and even Lebanese elements. What you're left with is the essence of modern Puerto Rico, a proud Caribbean nation with a distinctly Latin temperament that also happens to be good friends with the USA.

## TAÍNO CULTURE

The Taíno were an Arawakan Indian group who inhabited Puerto Rico and the other Greater Antilles (Cuba, Hispaniola and Jamaica) at the time of Columbus' arrival in 1493. Arawaks had first started settling on the island around AD 700, following a gradual migration north from the Orinoco River delta in present-day Venezuela, and by the year 1000 a distinctive Taíno culture had begun to emerge based on agriculture, fishing, hunting and the production of cassava bread. Taíno believed in a complex religious cosmology and lived in small, round wooden huts called *bohios* where they smoked *cohibas* (cigars) and slept in *hamacas* (hammocks). They called their newly adopted island Borinquen (Land of the Noble Lord) and practiced basic crafts such as pottery, basket weaving and wood carving. The native society was relatively democratic and organized around a system of *caciques* (chiefs). Below the *caciques* was a rank of medicine men, subchiefs and, below them, the workers. At the time of Ponce de León's arrival in 1508, the chief of all chiefs was a *cacique* called Agüeybana who presided over Borinquen's largest settlement sited on the Guayanilla River near present-day Guánica.

For leisure, the Taíno built several ceremonial ball parks where they played a soccer-like game with a rubber ball between opposing teams of 10 to 30 players. Winning was supposed to ensure good health and a favorable

Read a quick but refreshingly succinct overview of Puerto Rican history in five easy-to-decipher chapters on [www.solboricua.com](http://www.solboricua.com).

*The Taínos: The Rise and Decline of the People Who Greeted Columbus*, by Irving Rouse, offers a whole book's worth of information on a topic that usually only gets a couple of paragraphs.

*Juan Ponce de Leon and the Spanish Discovery of Puerto Rico and Florida*, by Robert H Fuson, sheds some light on the man who founded modern Puerto Rico.

## TIMELINE

2000 BC

Punto Ferro Man, a native from the Ortoiroid culture that had migrated north from the Orinoco basin in present-day Venezuela, lives on the island of Vieques.

430–250 BC

The Ortoiroids are gradually displaced by the Saladoids, a horticultural people skilled in the art of pottery. Saladoids spoke an Awarak Indian language and laid the early building blocks for a singular Caribbean culture.

1000

The Taíno – who arrived in a second migratory wave from the Orinoco River basin – emerge as the island's dominant culture; they name the island Boriken, meaning 'the Great Land of the Valiant and Noble Lord'.

## JUAN PONCE DE LEÓN

Soldier, sailor, governor, dreamer and politician, the life story of Juan Ponce de León reads like a *Who's Who* of late-15th- and early-16th-century maritime exploration. Aside from founding the Spanish colony of Puerto Rico in 1508, this daring, yet often short-sighted, Spanish adventurer partook in Columbus' second trans-Atlantic voyage, charted large tracts of the Bahamas, discovered the existence of the Gulf Stream, and was the first recorded European to set foot in what is now known as Florida.

Born in Valladolid, Spain, in 1460, de León served his military apprenticeship fighting against the Moors during the Christian reconquest of Granada in 1492. The following year he arrived in the New World on Columbus' second expedition and settled on the island of Hispaniola where he was proclaimed deputy governor of the province of Higüey after ruthlessly suppressing a native revolt. Following Columbus' death in 1506, the Spanish crown asked de León to lead the colonization of Borinquen, an island first explored by Columbus in 1493. De León landed on the south coast in 1508 with five ships and 200 people and established the first settlement in Caparra, a few miles inland from present-day San Juan.

Despite initially currying favor with the native Taino Indians, the Spaniard's relationship with his new neighbors quickly deteriorated. After being made governor of Puerto Rico in 1509, de León ruthlessly exploited the Taino in his avaricious search for gold, and his position and reputation gradually suffered as a result. Finally in 1512, after much legal wrangling, the explorer was removed from his governor's post in favor of Columbus' son, Diego, before being given title to explore the lands north of Cuba.

De León set sail with three ships in 1513, and tracked north in search of the legendary healing waters of the fountain of youth. According to the natives of Borinquen, the waters were hidden in a place known as Bimini (in the Bahamas), but de León, after circumnavigating the archipelago, elected to divert northwest and, in the process, inadvertently 'discovered' Florida.

After several forays along Florida's coast (which de León thought was an island), the explorer returned to Puerto Rico via Cuba and Guadalupe in 1515 and stayed there for the next six years. In 1521 de León organized another trip to Florida with two ships and 200 people. This time they landed on the west coast of Florida near the Caloosahatchee River but were quickly beaten back by Calusa Indians. Wounded in the thigh by a poisoned arrow, de León was shipped back to Havana where he died in July 1521. His remains were returned to Puerto Rico where they are interred in the Catedral de San Juan (p94).

harvest. At Tibes near Ponce in the south, and at Caguana near Utuadu in the north, archaeologists have discovered and preserved these impressive courts that were marked by rows of massive stone blocks. Here, native rituals were practiced – tribal events that brought the communities together and kept the collective spiritual and social memory alive. Drums made from hollow trunks, as well as maracas and *güiros*, provided the percussive accompaniment – instruments that still fill the sounds of Puerto Rican traditional and popular music today.

Approximately 100 years before the arrival of the Spanish, Taino culture was challenged by the Caribs, a fierce and warlike tribe from South America who raided Taino villages in search of slaves and fodder for their cannibalistic rites. The simmering tensions that developed between the Taino and Caribs were still very much in evidence when Ponce de León took possession of the island in 1508 and was probably misinterpreted by the Spanish as Taino aggression. In reality the Taino were a friendly, sedentary people who put up little initial resistance to the new colonizers and ultimately paid a huge price.

Testimonies vary as to how many Taino inhabited Borinquen at the time of the Spanish invasion, though most anthropologists place the number between 20,000 and 50,000. In 1515 – after nearly a decade of maltreatment, a failed rebellion, disease and virtual slavery – only about 4000 remained. Thirty years later, a Spanish bishop put the number at 60. Some historians have claimed that a small group of Taino escaped the 16th-century genocide and hid in Puerto Rico's central mountains where they survived until the early 19th century, but the claims have no proof and are impossible to substantiate.

While Taino blood may have all but disappeared in modern Puerto Rico, the native traditions live on. Puerto Rican Spanish is dotted with traditional native words such as yucca (a root vegetable), iguana, *manati* (manatee – a sea mammal), maracas and *Ceiba* (Puerto Rico's national tree); and some terms have even found their way into modern English: think *huracan* for hurricane and *hamaca* for hammock. Musically, the Taino contributed the maracas and the *güiro* to modern percussion, while gastronomically their heavy use of root vegetables has found its way into traditional *comida criolla* (Puerto Rican cuisine).

## THE INVADERS

In the golden age of piracy, Puerto Rico was revered by booty-seeking buccaneers like no other Spanish port. Everyone from daring British dandy Francis Drake to common cutthroats such as Blackbeard tried their luck against San Juan's formidable defenses. Few were successful.

One of the colony's earliest invaders, Francis Drake first arrived in Puerto Rico in 1595 in pursuit of a stricken Spanish galleon – holding two million gold ducats – that had taken shelter in San Juan harbor. While the plucky Brit may have singed the king of Spain's beard in Cádiz a decade earlier, the Spaniards quickly got their own back in Puerto Rico when they fired a cannonball into Drake's cabin, killing two of his men, and – allegedly – shooting the great explorer's stool from underneath him. Drake, who had initiated his attack by burning a dozen Spanish frigates in the harbor, was forced to make a hasty retreat and left the island empty-handed. He died the following year of dysentery in Panama.

On a stinging revenge mission, San Juan was attacked by the British navy again three years later under the command of the third earl of Cumberland.

Get the lowdown on San Juan's historic forts on the US National Park Service official website at [www.nps.gov/saju](http://www.nps.gov/saju).

Alexander O'Reilly was an Irish-born Spanish Field Marshal who became known as the 'Father of the Puerto Rican Militia' for his military training methods and crucial work to strengthen San Juan's beleaguered forts in the 1760s.

The first black person to arrive in Puerto Rico was Juan Garrido, a conquistador allied to Juan Ponce de León. He first set foot on the island in 1509.

1493

On November 19, during his second voyage to the New World, Christopher Columbus lands in Puerto Rico somewhere on the west coast. He christens the island *San Juan Bautista* in honor of St John the Baptist.

1508

Juan Ponce de León leads Spanish colonists to Puerto Rico in search of gold. He establishes the island's first colony – Caparra – in the north on swampy land close to San Juan harbor.

1509

Ponce de León is named the first governor of San Juan Bautista (Puerto Rico) after the Spanish authorities refuse to grant Columbus' son, Diego, rights to the lands discovered by his (recently deceased) father.

1511

Subjected to brutal exploitation by the Spanish, the Taino stage their first unsuccessful revolt against their new overlords. Ponce de León is subsequently replaced as governor in favor of Diego Columbus.

1513

Following the decimation of the local Indian population through disease and outright slaughter, the first West African slaves arrive on the island to work in the new economy.

1521

The city of San Juan is founded in its present site and the island changes its name from San Juan Bautista to Puerto Rico.