

# West Coast



'Go West, surfer dude,' was the unofficial mantra for a whole generation of '60s wave-riders who ran out of untrammelled Californian coastline to colonize. Intuitively, they switched south to a utopia not too far removed from the golden sands that they had left behind. Puerto Rico's west coast is a paradisiacal amalgam of crashing surf, sultry fishing villages and psychedelic sunsets. Its pièce de résistance is Rincón, a tropical surfin' safari that throws grizzled expats among wacky locals in a laid-back town that was once immortalized in a song by the Beach Boys.

Collectively rebranded and renamed, Puerto Rico's 'Wild West' now goes under the rather anodyne pseudonym of Porta del Sol (Gateway to the Sun), a tourist-company invention that does little justice to its diverse scenery and colorful heritage. San Juan – although only two hours' drive to the east – is a distant memory out here in a grandiose land of stormy shorelines and blinking lighthouses where resorts are low-key and deep-fried cod fritters from a Caribbean food shack are considered a cordon bleu meal.

Even the region's biggest city Mayagüez retains a proud and slightly bolshie sense of independence, stoked perhaps by the belief that Columbus allegedly hit these shores first. Adding authenticity to myth is San Germán, the island's second-oldest city with colonial relics to rival anything in Mexico, and Boquerón, one of the commonwealth's most down-to-earth fishing villages with an atmosphere that is more Montego Bay than South Beach.

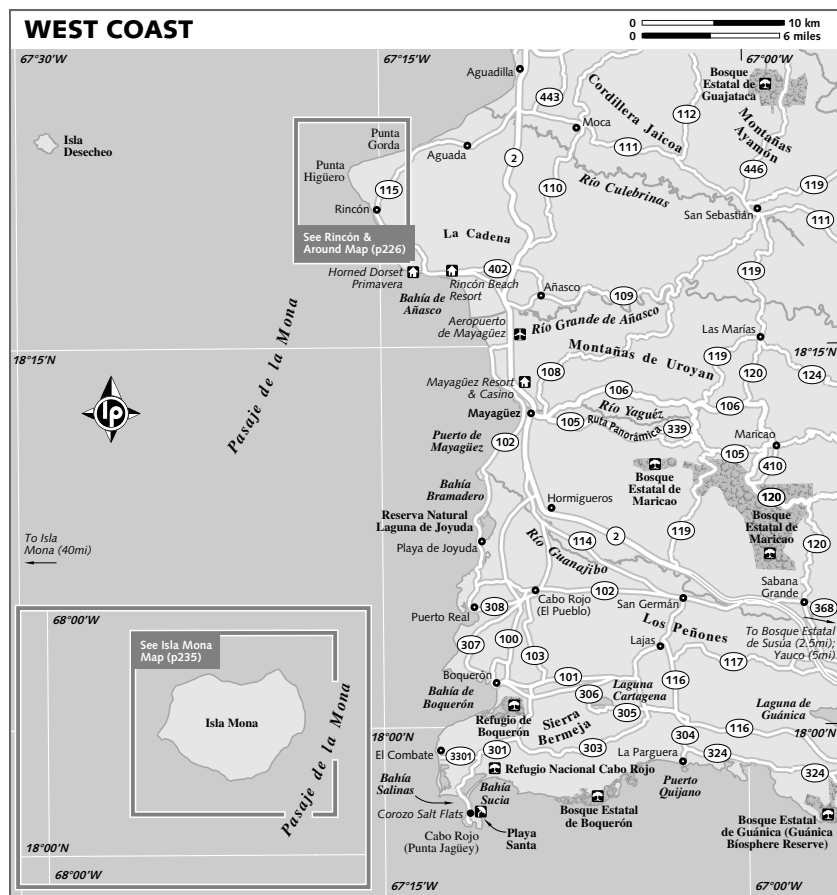
The southwest also has nature, a compact triangle of land around the Cabo Rojo lighthouse that falls outside Puerto Rico's main road grid and defies conventional island ecology with its prickly cacti and eerie salt flats.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- 'Taking the tube' and 'walking the nose' with a posse of multitalented, multinational surfers in **Rincón** (p228)
- Bargaining at myriad seafood stalls along Calle José de Diego in downbeat **Boquerón** (p213)
- Contemplating the well-preserved architectural artifacts of colonial **San Germán** (p217)
- Climbing an observation tower to spy abundant birdlife at the **Corozo Salt Flats** (p211)
- Experiencing the animated but subtle local vibe in lovingly restored Plaza Colón in **Mayagüez** (p221)
- Braving rough seas to visit the 'Galápagos of Puerto Rico' on **Isla Mona** (p234)



■ POPULATION: 400,000



## History

The consensus is that Columbus first arrived in Puerto Rico in November 1493 and docked somewhere off the west coast (though there is some dispute as to actually *where*). Fifteen years later he was followed by Juan Ponce de León who landed near Cabo Rojo before heading off north to found the settlement of Caparra. San Germán, the island's second-oldest city, was founded near Mayagüez in 1511 and moved to its present site in 1573. More recently, the west has spawned many great liberal thinkers including Dr Ramón Emeterio Betances, the inspiration behind the revolutionary Grito de Lares (p35) in 1868. The details of this abortive rebellion were fine-tuned in a series of safe houses on the outskirts of Mayagüez.

## Climate

The west coast of Puerto Rico is pleasantly hot all year round. Late in the summer and early in the fall rains get heavy. Otherwise, it's sunny, breezy and around 80°F nearly every day.

## Territorial Parks & Reserves

The 4775-acre Bosque Estatal de Boquerón is split into eight different segments spread around the Cabo Rojo area. The two of most interest to travelers are the Refugio de Boquerón (p214) with its mangrove wetlands and excellent bird-watching opportunities, and the Reserva Natural Laguna de Joyuda (p217) which plays host to numerous species of waterfowl. Close by, the Refugio

Nacional Cabo Rojo (p212) is another bird-watchers haven with trails, a visitor's center and guided hikes.

In the foothills of the Central Mountains further east the 3300-acre Bosque Estatal de Susúa (p219) exhibits an interesting blend of dry forest and tropical jungle.

## Getting There & Around

The west is easily accessed by Hwy 2, the island's nominal ring road – although it's not as fast as the newer toll roads further east. Públicos serve most of the main towns, with Mayagüez acting as the regional hub. You can fly direct from the US into Aguadilla airport 30 minutes northeast of Rincón. Mayagüez also has its own airport (flights from San Juan and the US Virgin Islands only). The area around Cabo Rojo southwest of Hwy 2 is ideal for cycling.

## CABO ROJO

Cabo Rojo (Red Cape) is the name of both a small administrative town, 8 miles west of San Germán, and the wider municipality that surrounds it. To add to the confusion, it is also the name used to describe the rugged coastline that constitutes Puerto Rico's extreme southwestern tip. Characterized by rust-red limestone cliffs that fall precipitously away into the ocean, the region is dominated by the Faro de Cabo Rojo (Red Cape Lighthouse), which sits atop a wild and windswept promontory surrounded by coastal mangroves, dry cacti and crystalline salt pans.

Busy Hwy 2 cuts inland west of Yauco, leaving this rather isolated corner of the island refreshingly untrammelled and unspoiled. There's an extensive patchwork of wildlife refuges here along with a quiet network of country roads that make for excellent cycling. Closer to the lighthouse you'll find trails, extensive salt pans and the bejeweled but little-known Playuela Beach. In-the-know locals will tell you in surreptitious whispers that this is one of the island's best stretches of sand.

The Cabo Rojo municipality incorporates the settlements of Boquerón, El Combate, Playa de Joyuda and Cabo Rojo (El Pueblo), which lies 10 miles north of the eponymous cape. There's little to see in the town today aside from a small museum dedicated to local heroes such as Dr Ramón Emeterio Betances,

the father of Puerto Rico's independence movement, and Roberto Confresí, a once notorious local pirate. The best selection of accommodations lie in Boquerón and the best restaurants in Joyuda.

## Information

The Porta del Sol branch of the **Puerto Rico Tourism Company** (PRTC; ☎ 787-255-1560; www.gotopuertorico.com; La Campana Bldg, Muñoz Rivera; ☎ 8am-4pm) is located in Cabo Rojo (El Pueblo).

## Sights & Activities

### MUSEO DE LOS PROCERES

If you've got a half hour to kill in the town of Cabo Rojo and have more than a passing interest in Puerto Rican history, this small **museum** (☎ 787-255-1560; Rte 312 Km 0.5; admission free; ☎ 7am-4pm Tue-Fri, 8am-4:30pm Sat) can enlighten you on local painting, indigenous Taino culture and the life and times of various 19th-century liberal luminaries such as native-born Ramón Emeterio Betances.

### COROZO SALT FLATS, PUNTA JAGÜEY & PLAYA SANTA

For a serene drive through undeveloped coastal plain or a cycling adventure, approach Cabo Rojo from La Parguera (p205) via Hwy 304, Hwy 305 and Hwy 303. Then follow Hwy 301 south until it turns to dirt, where you'll traverse a spit of sand between Bahía Salinas (Salt Bay) and the aptly named Bahía Sucia (Dirty Bay).

Vast salt flats surround this narrow peninsula, especially to the east; humans have been gathering salt here since AD 700. When the first Spaniards arrived, they quickly took over the evaporation pools used by the Taino to collect salt and expanded the business, making it a sustaining force in the local economy until efficient sugarcane farming arrived in the 18th century.

At the Corozo Salt Flats you'll see pools of evaporating brine and mounds of salt waiting to be shipped to market alongside the dirt road as you head south toward the headland of Punta Jagüey, where scrub forest sets in and the land rises to the steep limestone cliffs. Go to the end of the road and park on the left near the crescent beach known as Playa Santa. Although this is not a designated camping area, Puerto Ricans have been pitching tents on Playa Santa for years. Swimming is safe, but salty.