



La isla del Encanto

(The Island of Charm)



Hyatt Regency Puerto Rico

Discover Puerto Rico for Tropical Golf, Beauty, Food and Culture

Roughly the size of Connecticut, Puerto Rico is an American Territory that is a travel friendly destination for U.S. citizens. No passport is required to enter, it's the air hub of the Caribbean, and the people are welcoming and largely bilingual.

There are 18 golf courses located throughout the Island, including 11 in or near the San Juan area, with 10 of them amenities of resorts. The courses are diverse yet complementary, offering a variety of choices depending on your preferences. Trophy courses? Check. Non-resort courses that illuminate some of the municipalities outside San Juan. Check. Courses where college and professional players compete? Check. There are options for everyone – different terrain types, ocean or mountain views, price points, and more.

Located roughly 70 miles east of the Dominican Republic and 40 miles west of the British and the US Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico is in the northeastern Caribbean Sea. The capital city of San Juan is home to Old San Juan, a charming place where history and contemporary conveniences coalesce to provide visitors with the best of both worlds.

For beach lovers, there are nearly 720 miles of stunning beaches to explore. The archipelago is a nature wonderland – home to islands, bioluminescent bays, and El Yunque, the only tropical rainforest in the U.S. National Forest Service.

This was not my first visit to Puerto

Rico. About 10 years ago, my wife and I flew into Luis Munoz Marin International Airport (SJU) to catch a Southern Caribbean Cruise. On that visit, we explored Old San Juan, and the 500-year-old fort named Castillo San Felipe del Morro. Were astounded by the beauty of the fortress's architecture and its design ingenuity.

We always said we would be back to Puerto Rico. Now I'm asking myself why we waited so long. Following is how our return visit itinerary played out.

Arrival Day

To enter Puerto Rico, one can arrive on the West Coast or through SJU, the primary airport on the Northeast Coast. It takes 2.5 hours to drive from San Juan to the West Coast, less to go from the north to south coast. Many daily direct flights arrive at both airports, particularly ones from the southeast and Eastern U.S. Seaboard. Currently one must provide proof of a negative COVID-19 test result that was obtained



Golf Central • Volume 21, Issue 8

within 72 hours before landing. Puerto Rico has been a beacon for responsible tourism since the pandemic began. It works hard to ensure the safety of visitors and residents, and recently allowed non-essential travel again.

Hyatt Regency Grand Reserve Puerto Rico, a luxury resort in Rio Grande about 30 minutes from SJU, was our home base. The Hyatt Regency – and its Championship Course designed by Tom Kite – is home to the Puerto Rico Open, the PGA TOUR event that took place during the week we visited. There is a second 18-hole course there as well, the International Course, also “authored” by Kite.

Arriving on Monday, we capped our day with a scrumptious dinner at the Hyatt Regency's Prime 787, a fine-dining experience that offers fresh-caught seafood and prime meats. There are more



Puerto Rico Open Pro-Am

than 4,000 restaurants in Puerto Rico, and their flavors and ambiance abound.

Day Two

After a restful night in the Hyatt Regency's wonderful comfortable and well-designed rooms, our first day of golf commenced the next morning at



Hyatt Regency Puerto Rico

TPC Dorado



12th Tee - Puerto Rico PGA Tour ProAm

The St. Regis Bahia Beach. An 18-hole championship layout, the course there is rated as one of the finest in the Caribbean, Mexico, Central America and the Atlantic Islands (source: Golfweek's “50 Best Courses You Can Play” in those destinations). Created by golf architect Robert Trent Jones, Jr., the immaculate layout offers an enthralling tropical experience.

The St. Regis Bahia Beach Golf Course and the namesake resort are proud of their Audubon International Gold Signature Sanctuary status, bestowed for the luxury property's eco-sensitive best practices.

A course where elegance and unspoiled natural beauty coexist in harmony, The St. Regis Bahia Golf Course is a must-play experience. Be ready for shot making at its finest. Well placed shots are crucial at Bahia Beach. Carved from maritime forest, with strategic use of bunkers, fairways are tight. As it was explained by Director of Golf Alberto Rios, PGA, “If you miss the fairway – don't go in looking for your ball.” Let's just say it's





TPC Dorado

tropically dense if you send balls wide of the rough.

We ate an outdoor lunch at Seagrapes, with ocean views and a caressing Island breeze. Then we toured the property and learned about lodging options, other restaurants, the spa, and activities that can be explored at the amenity-rich resort.

Day Three

On Wednesday morning we had the thrill of playing in the Puerto Rico Open's Pro-Am. Teeing it up with PGA TOUR members makes for an unforgettable round of golf. The "Inside the Ropes" experience was very intimidating at first, yet it became very relaxing due to how nice the professionals were to us. We know we were there to play!

The Championship Course at Hyatt Regency's Grand Reserve Golf Club has more open fairways than at The St. Regis Bahia Beach – more like what you would expect from a coastal island golf course. But it gave us all we could handle, thanks to the clever routing and ever-present trade winds that blow northeast and come from the west coast of Africa.

The Hyatt Regency Grand Reserve's website says it best: "Where champions play and families never get bored." Pools, lazy river, pickleball and tennis courts, an ocean side setting, spa, restaurants, and more keep things lively.

The Championship Course at Hyatt Regency Grand Reserve

We doubled up on golf during Day Two, heading to Wyndham Grand Rio Mar Golf & Beach Resort for an afternoon resort tour, followed by Pina Colada – a drink originated on the Island – and nine more holes.

Like Hyatt Regency, Rio Mar Golf and Beach Club offers two 18-hole championship golf courses. The Ocean Course was designed by Tom and George Fazio, and the River Course by Greg Norman. They are different as their names suggest, yet they're complementary through their diversity. The hole variety ensures things never getting boring or repetitive.

The golf courses are managed by Troon Golf, and the entire property is surrounded by scenic mountains, the

Mameyes River, El Yunque Rainforest, and the Atlantic Ocean. The clubhouse was renovated in the past two years and includes a wonderful locker room, restaurant, and bar and grill.

We ate at two Rio Mar restaurants – at Roots Coastal Kitchen in the resort proper, and Iguana's Cocina Puertorriqueña at the golf clubhouse complex. The gastronomic delights included octopus, mofongo, and other Puerto Rican flavored delights. We ate so much at these dinners that it was easy to forego breakfast the next morning. One have to be able to bend over to put a tee in the ground after all.

Day Four

TPC Dorado Beach is the golf amenity at Dorado Beach Resort and Club. There is also a Ritz-Carlton Reserve on the expansive property, one of six worldwide (and the only Ritz-Carlton Reserve in the Western Hemisphere). TPC Dorado Beach is a spectacular test of your playing ability and your ability to focus.

There are two 18-hole playing options there – the Sugarcane Course and the iconic East Course. We played the East Course designed by Robert Trent Jones, Sr. that opened in 1958 and was renovated by his son Robert Trent Jones, Jr.

Trent Jones Jr. lengthened the course, which now stretches to a formidable 7,200 yards, with many of the holes playing into the strong Caribbean trade winds. Greens were completely reshaped to match original features and planted with Champions Bermuda, creating incredibly fast and smooth putts. Bunkers were reshaped and filled with native beach sand.

I can attest to the speed of the greens. They were fast, even with the Bermuda grain. The bunker sand was a little difficult to deal with from my perspective, different from what I'm used to. But like my dad would say, "If you are going to hit



St Regis Bahia Beach Golf Club

St Regis Bahia Beach Golf Club

it in there, get used to it. Or just take in a pail and shovel and enjoy it."

I struggled to focus on the golf at Dorado Beach because of its incredible beauty. First, you play directly along the ocean and the crashing waves on the first hole. Then you make your way to the higher inland portion of the golf course. From there you can see no less than nine fairways and greens below. You conclude your round with more oceanside holes. What a beautiful location!

A third course and a J.W. Marriott Hotel are planned to come online in the next two years at Dorado Beach, meaning more great playing and lodging options at the resort founded by Laurence Rockefeller. The famous American financier, philanthropist, and conservationist was Puerto Rico golf legend Chi Chi Rodriguez' benefactor. Speaking of great Puerto Rico golfers, Island native Rafa Campos competed in the Puerto Rico Open while we were there, finishing in third place, his highest finish yet as a PGA TOUR member.

Puerto Rico sequel?

Will I return? Absolutely. And it won't take as many years.

Consider this: Puerto Rico has been through so much in the past three years with Hurricane Maria in 2017, then earthquakes, and now the pandemic. As intensely challenging as that has been, the great irony is that virtually everything has been refreshed and reinvigorated. So many of the resorts and hotels have been renovated. I didn't see anything showing that those natural disasters occurred. Nothing. So rest assured that everything is clean and safe for your arrival. There has not been a better time to visit Puerto Rico.

If you do visit, here are some facts and things to do when you aren't on the golf course.



First tee at PGA Tour ProAm

El Yunque is the only tropical Rainforest in the US Forest Service. I have seen pictures of a beautiful waterfall to visit via a walking trail inside the Rainforest. I heard that the walk is one mile from the parking area and downhill . . . which means a one mile walk back uphill (think about that before your adventure). We are all-in for this adventure.

Puerto Rico has the brightest Bioluminescent Bay in the world. There are only five Bioluminescent Bays in the world and three of them are in Puerto Rico.

The Pina Colada was invented in San Juan. Okay. I have already experienced that one. But it was so good that it is something I'll enjoy again. 🚩



Wyndham Puerto Rico Lobby



Rio Mar Country Club River Course



Champions course Hyatt Regency