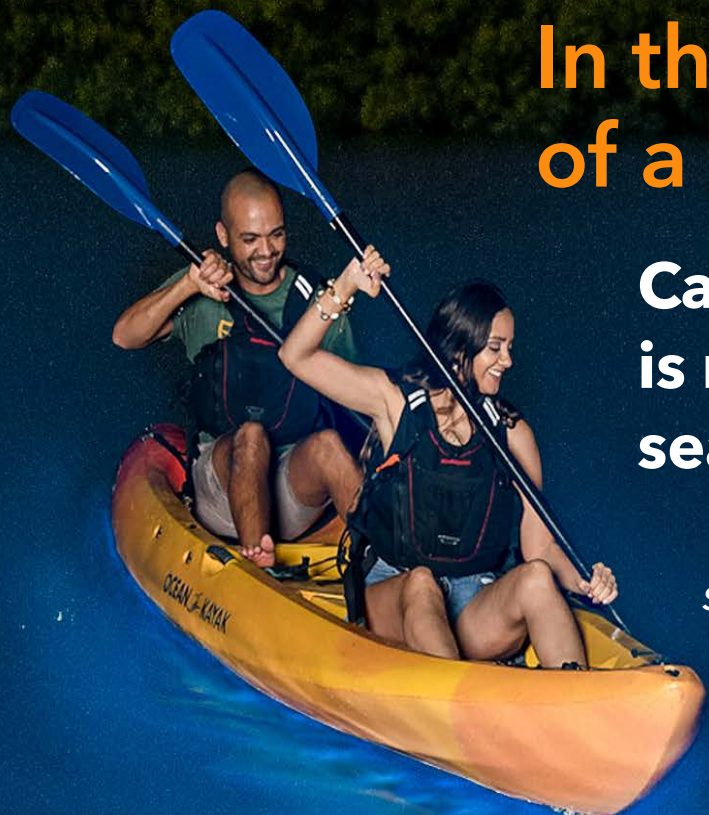




Puerto Rico is quickly becoming the destination of choice for tourists interested in the environment. When they arrive on the island, one of the most fascinating things to greet them are the remarkable bio bays, the natural phenomenon that glow in the dark when disturbed by hands or boat paddles.

Puerto Rico
Glows
In the aftermath
of a global crisis
Caribbean beauty
is more than just
sea, sun and sand

STORY BY MARC ATCHISON



*Eco tourists
experience
island's
inner beauty*

SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO – Most people come to this rocky archipelago that rises out of the Caribbean Sea east of the Dominican Republic to sun themselves on its pristine beaches.

Some even take a tour through historic Old San Juan and soak up a bit of Puerto Rico's romantic 500-year history.

The majority, though, never get to see the inner beauty of this magical island that is one of the most environmentally-friendly places on Earth, featuring some unique natural wonders.

For instance, did you know that Puerto Rico boasts the world's largest subtropical dry forest – Guánica State Forest?

Or that the island's El Yunque is the only tropical rainforest in the U.S. national forest system?

Are you aware that Puerto Rico has stunning pink salt flats, three of the world's five bio bays (unique water areas that glow at night) and the longest zipline in the Americas?

Puerto Rico's bio bays are the real crowd pleasers, though. The most popular is located in Mosquito Bay, but the others, Laguna Grande and La Parguera, are just as fascinating.

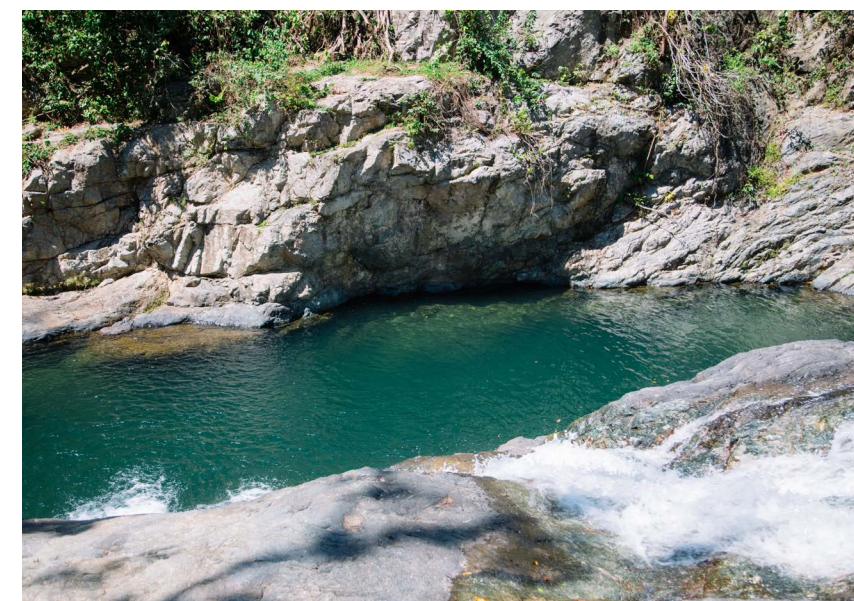
For the uninitiated, the bioluminescence of a bio bay is caused by single-celled microorganisms called dinoflagellates. These microorganisms glow briefly, usually in a blue-green colour, whenever they are disturbed.

This means that every splash and every movement in the water causes the dinoflagellates to light up the water



While it may be the pristine beaches and historic sites, like Castillo San Felipe del Morro, above, that lures people to Puerto Rico, it's the island's natural wonders that really leaves visitors impressed. The island has an amazing collection of parks, like Charco El Ataud, which is blessed with many waterfalls and natural pools where locals and tourists come together on sunny days.

PHOTOS BY BIGSTOCK
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DISCOVER PUERTO RICO



around you, giving the bay its distinctive glow.

A night-time bio bay canoe adventure is truly magical – the wonder of seeing the water glow in the dark usually produces a lot of childish laughter.

UN-protected Guánica State Forest was designated a forest reserve in 1919 and is considered the best preserved subtropical forest, and the best example of a dry forest, in the Caribbean.

Another popular eco attraction is Charco El Mango, a swimming hole that's well-known to locals and is never over crowded, like most of the resort beaches. The pool's turquoise waters are fed by the many waterfalls that dominate this mountainous region of the island.

Puerto Rico is catering to eco tourists in the hopes that the new tourism revenue they generate will help the island recover from the avalanche of problems it's endured over the past decade:

- Multiple national debt crises,
- Government scandal and collapse,
- Devastating hurricanes – two in 2017 alone that killed over 3,000 inhabitants and left another 130,000 homeless,



View of Old San Juan from the guard boxes on the ancient city wall.

- And the loss of over 2,000 lives to COVID-19.

Despite all the adversity they've faced, though, Puerto Ricans remain optimistic about a quick recovery post-pandemic.

And why not? Prior to the pandemic coming ashore, the island was one of the hottest destinations in the Caribbean, attracting 3.7 million visitors in 2019, an increase of 28.3 per cent over the previous year. As well, the island was in the midst of a building boom prior to COVID-19, with new hotels, resorts and championship golf courses springing up everywhere. In fact, four of Puerto Rico's courses – TPC Dorado Beach, The St. Regis Bahia Beach, Royal Isabela and the Hyatt Regency Grand Reserve layout – are now ranked among the "Top 50" in the Caribbean by influential *Golfweek* magazine.

Tourism is vital to Puerto Rico's economy – the sector contributes roughly 6.5 per cent of the island's GDP and impacts over 86,000 jobs. So every attempt is being made by local officials to make sure travel here post-pandemic is safe.

While some snowbirds started trickling



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Old fortresses still stand guard over the remarkable city that looks out on the Caribbean Sea.



Puerto Rico's art galleries are full of vibrant paintings from many different eras.



The pastel-coloured homes of Old San Juan look like they've jumped off the pages of a fairytale.

back this past winter, the flood gates are sure to open once airlines in Canada and the U.S. resume regular service to this fascinating island that rocks to a Latin beat.

In addition to the eco wonders that abound here, Puerto Rico's historical and cultural attractions provide visitors with plenty to do.

The island's rich history, which dates back to 430BC, long before Christopher Columbus' arrival in 1493, is now safely guarded in the 70-plus museums scattered about this tropical paradise.

The museums and galleries showcase colourful art and historic treasures of the people who have called this island home – Spanish, Africans and the Taino, the Indigenous people who greeted Columbus when he first arrived.

The most popular art galleries in San Juan are Galería Botello and the Obra Galería. Their walls are adorned with some creative local and regional works.

The art scene here even spills out into the streets, with the walls of Old San Juan decorated with remarkable murals that together form one of the best public art displays in the world.

The blend of cultures here also results in some incredible local cuisine – may I suggest the best in the Caribbean – and the only thing hotter than the culinary scene in Puerto Rico is the weather.

Creative island chefs employ a strict farm-to-table philosophy and the colourful dishes they produce have few equals. Local treats like Tostones (a plantain dish), Arroz Con Gandules (a national favourite made with rice, pigeon peas, olives, capers, tomato sauce and seasoning), and Alcapurrias (fritters made with yucca and plantains) are washed down with lots of rum – Puerto Rico, after all, is the largest producer of the spirit in the U.S.

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P.R. GOLF IS PAR-FECT

Puerto Rico has become a golfer's paradise in recent years, thanks to the addition of many championship courses. Four of those courses, TPC Dorado Beach, East Course, St. Regis Bahia Beach, Royal Isabella Links Course and Hyatt Regency Grand Reserve, are now considered among the best in the Caribbean. Here's some other courses we recommend you play:

Costa Caribe (27 holes)
Fort Buchanan (9)
Wyndham Grand Rio Mar (36)
Rio Bayamon (18)
Caguas Real (18)
Deportivo del Oeste (18)
Palmas Athletic Club (36)
Punta Borinquen (18)
El Legado (18)
El Conquistador (18)

For more information on Puerto Rico, go to <http://www.DiscoverPuertoRico.com>

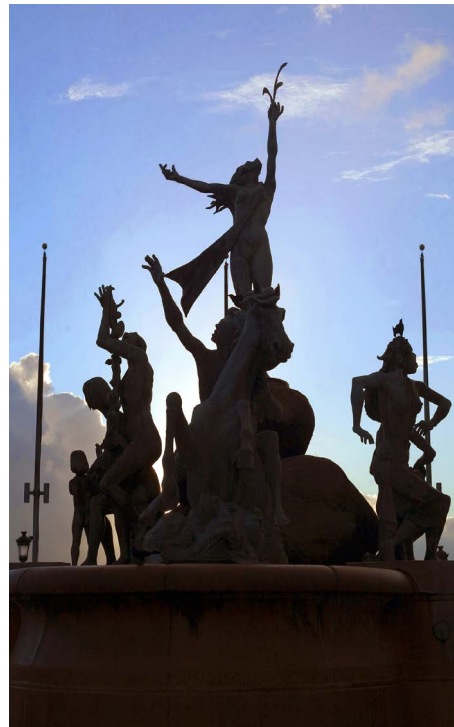
The fairways at stunning Royal Isabella drop off into the azure Caribbean Sea surf.

perb dining options, but for my money the most imaginative chefs work in the restaurants gathered along Calle de le Fortaleza, the historic street located in Old San Juan. Here, spicy Caribbean flavours and international culinary techniques combine to create delightfully inventive fusion dishes. Also known as Restaurant Row or SoFo, Calle de le Fortaleza is where the island's biannual culinary festival is held.

Strolling through Old San Juan (Viejo San Juan), is like walking through the pages of a history book. At every turn, you're greeted by stately European-style buildings wrapped in Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque skins, and colourful Colonial homes that remind you you're still in the Caribbean.

The most visited historic sites in Old San Juan are its massive fortresses – El Morro and Castillo de San Cristobal – whose cannons, ramparts and layered defences still stand silent sentry centuries after they were first erected.

Walking along what remains of the six-metre-thick city wall – cir-



Among the many monuments in Old San Juan, La Rogativa, above, impresses the most.

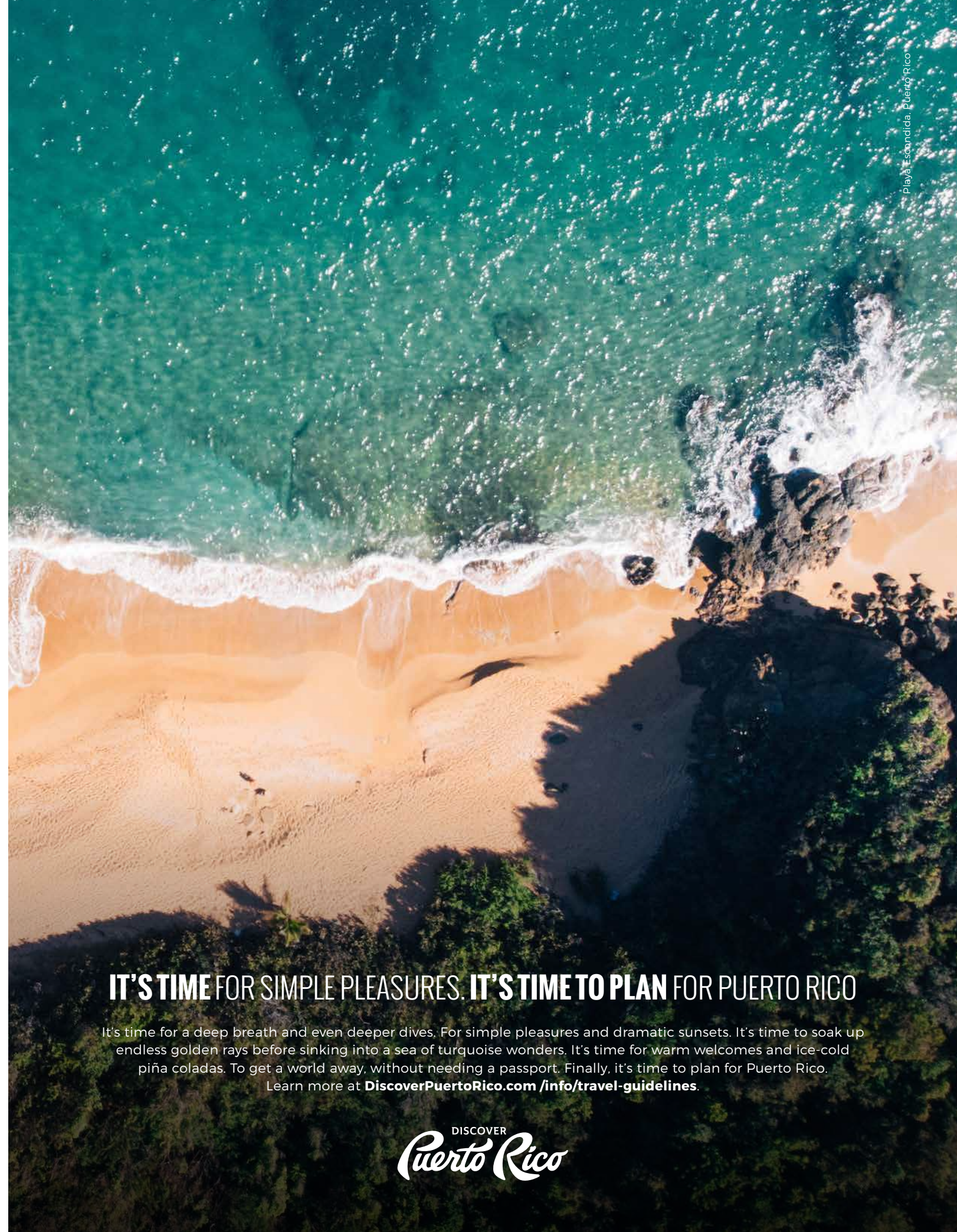
ca 1539 – that once encircled the old town, and ducking into the unmanned sentry boxes (garitas), that are precariously located above rocky ledges, is what visitors love to experience.

Besides the aforementioned fortresses, the San Juan National Historical Site – a UNESCO World Heritage Site, as well – also comprises of Fuerte San Juan de la Cruz (a fort also known as El Cañuelo) and the impressive San Juan Gate.

Other things I like to do in Old San Juan are:

- Take a walk along Paseo La Princesa, the broad promenade that stretches from the city's ancient docks to the lovely Raíces Fountain, at sunset to watch the glowing orb slowly dip into the tranquil Caribbean Sea,
- Visit the home of Ponce de León, La Casa Blanca, where the man who went searching for the Fountain of Youth once lived,
- Marvel at the city's regal statues, like La Rogativa, the massive monument erected near San Juan Gate to commemorate the repelling of a British attack on the city,
- And I even try my hand at salsa dancing, which many tourists like to do when they visit Puerto Rico.

With so much to do in Puerto Rico, you may not have time to work on your tan. •



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