

Escape

August 2010
Trip Description #7

TO THE ISLES • GREECE/VENICE & PUERTO RICO

Puerto Rico... Where nature and history intersect

We told you in an earlier trip description how much there is to do at the El Conquistador Resort on your **ESCAPE TO THE ISLES** trip. But there's much more to Puerto Rico—and luckily, most of sights and wonders will be nearby.

There are three main attractions that will vie for your interest: the El Yunque National Forest, which contains a fabulous tropical rain forest; the Bioluminescent Bay, which is almost beyond description; and Old San Juan, the historic colonial section of Puerto Rico's capital, San Juan.

El Yunque National Forest



El Yunque National Forest, located on the slopes of the beautiful Sierra le Luquillo Mountains

Just a short drive from the El Con lies the El Yunque National Forest and the island's rain forest. El Yunque is considered an excellent choice for a rain forest because it is a very gentle forest and there are no poisonous snakes!

The forest is located on the slopes of the Sierra de Luquillo Mountains in Puerto Rico, and encompasses 28,000 acres of land, making it the largest block of public land on the island of Puerto Rico. El Toro, the highest mountain peak in the forest, rises 3,537 feet, creating its own weather system. Some areas receive over 200 inches of rain a year! Enjoy the many waterfalls the forest has to offer.

The forest hosts a number of unique plants and animal species, such as the endangered Puerto Rican Parrot (very rarely seen) and the Coquis indigenous tree frogs. You will see trees you've never seen before, some with leaves bigger than you are. You will also hear many birds singing as you walk the trails.

The El Yunque National Forest is managed by the U.S. Forest Service, which maintains an extensive network of hiking trails. Little gazebos serve as picnic facilities, with two of them next to a rushing stream.



El Yunque Falls is one of many falls in the El Yunque National Forest

Bioluminescent Bay

Located just a short kayak trip from the El Con is the town of Fajardo, which is the site of a bioluminescent bay. You can walk from the hotel and take a kayak to the bay, which you'll want to do at night to see it light up!

The luminescence is caused by micro-organisms (dinoflagellates), which glow whenever the water is disturbed, leaving a trail of neon blue. A combination of factors creates the necessary conditions for bioluminescence: red mangrove trees surround the water (the organisms feed off the dead leaves); a complete lack of modern development around the bay; the water is cool enough and deep enough; and a small channel to the ocean keeps the micro-organisms in the bay.

The bioluminescent dinoflagellates are one-celled micro-organisms that burst into light when they feel pressure against their cell walls. Although swimming is not permitted in the bay, the kayaks and their paddles will cause the light bursts to go off. Considering that there are 700,000 dinoflagellates per cubic foot of water, the effect is spectacular!



The illuminated Bioluminescent Bay



The streets of Old San Juan

Old San Juan

Originally built as a military stronghold, Old San Juan is the only walled city in the Caribbean (outside the city, the encompassing metropolitan area is referred to as San Juan). Old San Juan overflows with historical sites dating back to the early 1500s.

Its 7-square-block area has evolved into a charming residential and commercial district. The streets here are paved with cobbles of adoquine, a blue stone cast from furnace slag; they were brought over a ballast on Spanish ships and time and moisture have lent them their characteristic color. The city includes more than 400 carefully restored 16th- and 17th-century Spanish colonial buildings.

At the time of construction in 1630, Old San Juan's walls contained four doors providing entrance into the city. Since many sections of the walls have been torn down, only one of those doors remains: the San Juan Gate, which was the traditional entrance to Old San Juan. Located on the city's south side, no visit to the city is complete without a stop at this historic door. Many residents in Old San Juan have paid homage to the door by painting the entrances to their homes in a colorful style.

Other Activities

That list includes:

- Zip lining
- ATVing
- Snorkeling tour on the catamaran
- Deep-sea fishing
- Windsurfing
- Scuba diving
- Horseback riding on Palomino Island

And don't forget: The hotel also includes its own water park. The **Coqui Water Park** features a 25,000-plus square foot main pool deck, a speed slide, a kids slide and a lazy river, among other amenities. Water park passes are included for Auto-Owners travelers.

The El Con also features **The Arthur Hills Golf Course**; a private marina that includes jet skis, tennis courts and outdoor pools; a fitness spa; and a casino that is open from 4 p.m.-midnight.

ESCAPE TO THE ISLES: Start planning for your trip today!

Next issue: **Greek Cruise activities**