

# A Tropical Getaway in Puerto Rico That's Also a Bargain

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TO get an idea why [Culebra](#) is an ideal [Caribbean](#) getaway for the bargain-savvy, look no further than the ferry that makes the hour-long trip there from mainland [Puerto Rico](#). It costs \$2.25.

## [Culebra Island, Puerto Rico](#)

On most other Caribbean islands, about all \$2.25 will get you is one of those palm tree magnets with your name on it.

As new resorts and high-end developments continue their march across the Caribbean, it is getting ever harder to find a place that hasn't priced out travelers on a budget. But Culebra, a tiny island halfway between [St. Thomas](#) and Puerto Rico, still clings hard to its peaceful origins. It's the kind of place where Carnival and Royal Caribbean don't visit, the Four Seasons can't be found, and you really have to work hard to spend more than \$200 a night on a hotel room.

It is still often bypassed for its more tourist-trodden neighbors like [Vieques](#) or the [United States Virgin Islands](#), about 15 miles away. Yet it has all the elements of a great tropical getaway: year-round temperatures in the 80s, a beach for every day of the week and accessibility. Since it's a United States territory — it's part of Puerto Rico — you don't need a passport to get there.

Direct flights to [San Juan](#) from New York — priced from around \$250 for travel next month — make the island cheaper to get to than some cities in the continental United States.

From San Juan, it is about an hour's drive to Fajardo in the northeastern corner of Puerto Rico, where the ferry departs for Culebra. What you'll see when you step off the ferry is one of the Caribbean's last true backwaters.

Residents, who call themselves Culebrense, still ride horses to get around, and the local supermarket has just one cash register. A sign tacked to a handicraft vendor's cart that reads "Open Some Days/Closed Others" pretty much sums up the island's free-spirited ethos.

Because there are no high-priced mega-resorts there, prices on Culebra are not wildly inflated. In the high season, the more expensive rooms run between \$100 and \$200 a night. Eating is not quite so inexpensive, a result of having to import food from mainland Puerto Rico. But dinner can easily be had for about \$20 a person. And with the money saved on lodging and recreation

— all the [beaches](#) are free, and excursions like day sails or [snorkeling](#) trips can be arranged for a modest price — overpaying for a mahi mahi filet isn't the end of the world.

Even if you fly instead of taking the \$2.25 ferry, getting there is not expensive. A ticket from San Juan on a local airline like Air Flamenco or Vieques Air Link is about \$32 one way.

But just because developers have left Culebra alone so far doesn't mean the Culebrense aren't slightly anxious about what the future might hold for their island. On a recent Saturday, a small [cruise](#) ship pulled into the harbor and caused quite a stir.

“That was really disgusting,” said Laurie Knowlton, a 47-year-old transplant from [New Jersey](#) who has lived on Culebra for a decade. She fell in love with the island in the 1970s, when she was vacationing with her parents. Back then, most of the roads were still dirt, and tourists were few and far between. After trying her hand at a number of odd jobs like folding laundry and making her own hot sauce, she now publishes a local guidebook and runs [gotoculebra.com](#), a Web site that offers information about visiting the island.

“That's the beauty of Culebra,” she said, smiling as she sat at the bar at Mamacita's hotel and restaurant and pondered the unhurried pace of the island, which has only about 2,000 year-round residents. “We're not a place that has cruise ships, night life.”

Some development has come to Culebra over the years — albeit slowly. But a new \$45 million, 164-unit development on the harbor and an expansion of one of the island's biggest hotels are making some locals uneasy.

“We don't want big hotels. We don't want big things,” said George Peña, who is known as [Guilin](#), a 56-year-old captain who grew up on Culebra and makes his living taking tourists out for day trips on his boat.

A little bit of development on Culebra is inevitable and good for the island's economy, he said. And the more tourists, of course, the better it is for his business. “Culebra has to grow a little bit,” he said.

Getting aboard a boat like Mr. Peña's may well be the best way of experiencing Culebra, which is about seven miles long and three and a half miles wide. This, too, can be done relatively inexpensively. Mr. Peña charged a friend and me \$150 for the entire day — a fraction of what you would pay for a chartered boat on St. Thomas. Snorkeling gear, which we rented from a local hardware store, was only \$10.

A boat is the only way to reach the beach on Culebrita, a small, uninhabited island off Culebra. On the weekends, it can be jammed with day-trippers from mainland Puerto Rico. But in the middle of the week or in the off-season, you could very likely have the entire half-mile crescent to yourself. And a boat is the easiest way to reach Carlos Rosario Beach, a small, isolated patch of sand on Culebra's northwest side.

Flamenco Beach on the north side is widely regarded as one of the most beautiful beaches in the Caribbean. In a remote corner on the eastern end of the island lies the very private and very pristine Zoni Beach.

The hotels on Culebra are small bed-and-breakfast-type inns where, after a day, the entire hotel staff knows your name. Just don't expect them to approach anything with a sense of urgency. At our hotel, the Club Seabourne, we learned that after we went to the front desk looking for someone to call us a taxi. Instead of a person, we found a note with the phone numbers of a few taxi drivers.

And the Seabourne is considered one of the island's upscale hotels. Even so, our room was just over \$200 a night.

If the Caribbean sets its watch by "island time," Culebra could have its own time zone — island time with a half-hour delay.

Lisa Mena, 46, a housekeeper at Club Seabourne, has lived on the island for 21 years. After visiting her grandmother, who grew up on Culebra, Ms. Mena was smitten. So she flew back to New Jersey, gave her boss two weeks' notice and moved. At times, she said, she still finds herself laughing at how slowly things seem to move on Culebra.

"This is super slow. It took me a year, maybe two, to get used to it," she said with a faint Jersey accent.

The little inconveniences of life on Culebra, like having to take the ferry to Fajardo to shop for clothes or the constant crowing of roosters, have grown on her. They're part of the island's charm, she said. Does she ever think about moving back? "No. N-O."