

# TERRA FIRMA TIME IN WESTERN PUERTO RICO



by Ellen Birrell

ELLEN BIRRELL

Punta Graniquilla. Some of the best beaches include Bahía Sucia, Combate, La Parguera, Boquerón, and Los Pozos.

### Let Terra Firma Time Begin

You can confidently leave your vessel at the excellent new Marina Pescadería in Porta Real (see item in Business Briefs, page 8) for terra firma time.

The towns of Isabela and Rincón straddle Aguadilla in the northwest. In 1968, Rincón made a splash on the international scene when it hosted the World



Above: What's 'cowabunga' in Spanish?  
A paddleboarder rides the surf

Left: Aguadilla not only provides sweet beachfront accommodation, but crew coming from North America can arrive right at Aguadilla Airport

Surfing Championship. Today, the area is reminiscent of southern California beach towns in a time before Orange County was called "OC".

In April, 2012, Jim and I checked into a *parador* in Isabela. It was clean-cut fun — bicycling, beachcombing, people watching and exploring. A large coastal reef creates interesting tide pools and attracts seabirds.

The *parador* system was the brainchild of the Puerto Rico Tourism Company. Two decades ago, to boost awareness for small and mid-sized family-owned lodging properties around Puerto Rico, special promotional considerations were given to a select group of 19 properties of between 15 and 75 units each. More modest than a full-service hotel, the *paradores* must meet certain standards and the owner must live on the property.

For me, having spent the '60s and '70s on the beaches and sailing in the harbors from San Diego to LA, driving coastal roads with surfers unstrapping their boards from their cars, seeing surf shops in every town, I felt at home in Rincón. Passing a young man dismounting his moped and unleashing his surfboard, I thought of my kid brother skateboarding down Harbor View Hills to Big Corona State Beach, surfboard under armpit.

"Yes, officer. Did I do something wrong?" another flashback. At 18, on Pacific Coast Highway, CHP pulled me over while I was riding my friend's moped. "Young lady, don't you think riding that moped in a sun dress is inappropriate?"

We were lucky enough to stay at Parador Villas del Mar Hau; 39 acres of well-maintained facilities, lovely landscaping and open spaces. Located on the stretch of beach just east of Isabela's exciting blowhole, the *parador* summons your best remembrances of family holidays. Boardwalks connect one-story cabins. There are swings, shuffleboard, basketball and tennis courts. *Puertorequeña* matriarchs sweep villa porch after a family meal, children gleefully run on the beach or explore the tide pools.

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**H**aven't had time off the boat lately? Whether taking the Thorny Path from North America into the Eastern Caribbean or sailing north to your Canadian or US roost, or if, as is the case for my partner, Jim, and me, your boat in the Caribbean is home 24/7/365. Puerto Rico's western region, known as Porta del Sol, may be just the right place for some rest and relaxation ashore.

Are limitless plush, urban, trendy new restaurants and bars your passion? Oh. Then don't bother reading further. Though first-rate restaurants and resorts dot the northwest, Porta del Sol is largely laid back, modest, clean and comfortable with mountains, wavy beaches, estuaries and bluffs. Do you like to board-, body-, or SUP-surf, or would like to learn how? Do you even know what SUP stands for? Don't feel bad. When José Rafols, owner of Aquatica Dive & Surf, mentioned it during his *muy rapido* ramble through the offerings of Aquatica, I had to interrupt him: "SUV? You rent SUVs?"

"No," he responded politely. "SUPs. It stands for Stand Up Paddleboards."

### Location and Access

For decades Puerto Rico's "west coast", shall we just say, has catered to local power yachts and commercial vessels. Aguadilla, a town bordering vast Mayaguez Bay, tried in earnest to attract private yachts. They built a jetted marina that met its demise in the winter swell decades ago.

New developments just north of Boquerón and south of Mayaguez in Porta Real now make arrival and roosting attractive. New in 2011, Marina Pescadería located in Porta Real contains 97 slips. Frank Virgintino describes this well in his newly published [www.freecruisingguides.com/puertorico](http://www.freecruisingguides.com/puertorico). Old guidebooks and current legal documents state that you must initially bring your vessel into a port of entry. For Puerto Rico's west coast, that would be Mayaguez. According to marina owner José Méndez, upon request the US Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) is normally willing to drive down from Mayaguez to clear in yachts arriving in Porta Real.

North of Mayaguez is Aguadilla Airport. News flash: JetBlue is opening up additional service to Aguadilla in 2012. The airport is also served by American Airlines and Spirit. Ten years ago, when considering flying family or friends in from the States inexpensively and conveniently to the north edge of the Eastern Caribbean, one would think of San Juan. Now, Aguadilla has come into its own. Airfares rival mighty SJU and convenience trumps it. While big airports like SJU have their place, don't you just love arriving at the small and simple Long Beach, John Wayne or San Diego airports of southern California? Likewise, Aguadilla is small, simple, uncongested. Whether you might need to get off your boat for a trip north or be welcoming crew to join you from outside the region, western Puerto Rico is a winner.

Additionally, fishing spots in southwestern Puerto Rico include El Pichincho, Isla Desecheo, and Isla de Mona. For diving, try La Parguera, Isla Desecheo,

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A man on the point off the main lodge moves between two fishing poles. Men and women snorkel tranquil waters. Surf breaks on the other side of a rocky outcropping.

**It's the Plants, Pups and People**

A typical day: As we await breakfast at the open air restaurant of the main lodge, a knowing pup on the wooden deck blocks our access to the dining area. He seems to be thinking, *Breakfast soon. Possible handouts.*

From our table we see a red, a pink and a blue balloon spring free of their beach tether. Like brave swimmers, they blow westward. Bobbing inside the surf break, amidst powerful swells which boom shoreward, the balloons are unfettered. They gaily float westbound for the point that separates Villas del Mar Hau's beach from Isabela's Blow Hole.

Sprinkled within the whooshing ocean cadence, seabirds squawk and songbirds tweet. Morning sunlight on wave-faces harkens me back to my California roots. Swim trunks, bikinis, surfing. Time off the boat, away from projects, gives us a chance to take a deep breath, reminisce and relax.

Australian pine and sea grapes line the property. Like a Jimi Hendrix hairdo, pruned Australian pines wear an Afro atop their stubbed trunks. Cottages on the coast equal *tranquilidad* and rejuvenation. The same rough-hewn pine used for fencing has been cut and shellacked to make deck tables. There is an understated grandeur here. It's a nature lover's lucky day.

Walking back to our villa we meet two 80ish-year-young women. "Elena," I respond when asked *mi nombre*.

"I love Elena," Austria says. "I had a friend, Elena. She had one hundred years." We were brave women communicating in languages foreign. Uninhibited, we trip over verb conjunction and sentence structure. They embolden me to use my limited Spanish. I learn their names are Juanita and Austria. "Like the country," she instructs me.

"¿Y tu? Where you come from?" Austria asks.

"Sí." I say nervously, "Ur... Yo soy..." (then I take a deep breath because I always botch the pronunciation of the too-many-syllabled word) "*Californiana. Mi esposo*



ELLEN BERBER

Above: Examining the blowhole at Isabela. Time off the boat gives us a chance to take a deep breath'

Below: Diving in the Aguadilla area



JOSE BARROS

es..." (then I couldn't figure out how to turn "Utahn" into Spanish) "*oo-tah.*"

"Ah," Austria and Juanita smile and nod.

"*Conoce montañas de Utah?*"

"Sí. We live near San Juan."

"*Condado o Isla Verde?*" I offer up familiar coastal towns.

"Near Plaza Las Americas," Austria says.

"*Ah, Río Piedras.*"

"¡Sí! ¡Sí!"

We are all enthused that I know of their city.

When I compliment Austria on her red pedicured toenails inside her metallic flip-flops, she says,

"What size are you?"

"Ur. Uh." Yikes, she thinks I like her shoes. I want to say "no, no quiero su zapatos," but think that might be rude.

"Here, here," she's taking off her metallic flip-flops. "I want you to have them."

Distracting her with an embrace and, "*Mucho gusto. Adios. Hasta luego.*" the lovely exchange ended.

Walking west out the gated entry, "Bicycle Path" with an arrow catches our eye. "Let's go!" We find the boardwalk ends abruptly with a 30-meter drop down a steep path. Below, like an Emerald City, luxurious groundcover creeps up to embrace surrounding bushes and trees. I expect to see a Leprechaun dancing a jig on the lightly traveled path. "I guess someone could forge their bike down this," I stand contemplating. Without hesitation, Jim bounds down the loose dirt and rocks to the green wonderland below.

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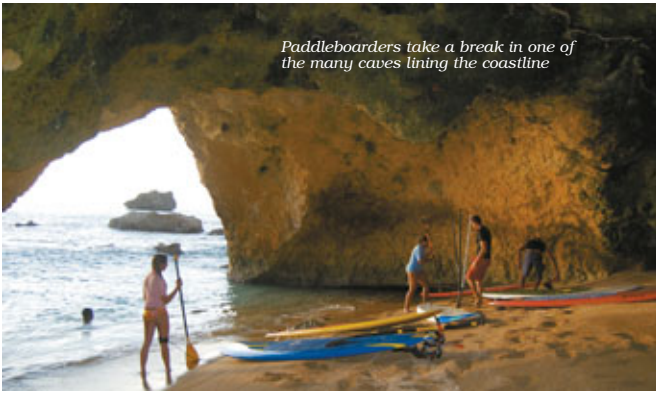
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Paddleboarders take a break in one of the many caves lining the coastline

JOSE RAFOLS

Jibarito, sustainable farming and eco-lodges.

As we left, dropping down out of the mountains our spirits were high, our breathing slow, and our mood *muuy contento*.

Within an hour's drive south, we took in picturesque San Germán and Cabo Rojos. Highway 301 took us out to Cabo Rojo lighthouse and adjacent Playa Sucia area. We enjoyed the walking, biking, and photography of the unique estuaries, sand dunes and bluffs, gold cliffs and dramatic vistas in every direction.

**Hasta Luego**

Staying at the parador in Isabela created that best mix of opportunities for R&R. Nearby, vibrant nightlife at the restaurants, cafés

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**It's the Recreation**

Like José had told us, stand up paddleboarding is king here. Easily available, one can paddleboard on tranquil waters or graduate to exciting paddleboard surfing. Aquatica Dive & Surf in nearby Aguadilla offered dive, surf, stand up paddleboarding and bicycle rentals; individual and group lessons available.

"If it was all about bicycling when Lance Armstrong was winning the Tour de France every year, now the interest has shifted to Stand Up Paddleboarding. It is really hot right now. People love it!" according to José Rafols, owner.

The bicycle paths of the area seem endless. They follow the coastal highway and roam sand dunes.

Located in Rincón, we took Tropical Trailrides' sunset coastal horseback ride. From the well-kept and extensive stables, we passed exquisite Villas Montañas Resort before dropping onto the beach. Reining our horses inland, we rode through a gigantic swale separating homes on a high bluff from the beach below. Then we became engulfed in the shadowy bliss of an enormous almond grove. Poking back onto a remote beach, we eventually reached a rocky point. Dismounting, we had the choice to climb to the top of a bluff for a dramatic coastal view, or a spelunking teaser at a nearby cave.

**It's the Countryside**

A visit to western Puerto Rico wouldn't be complete without the *el campo* experience. The modern twist for your country experience is agritourism. Defined in Wikipedia, "agritourism involves any agriculturally based operation or activity that brings visitors to a farm or ranch."

Off PR 2, Highway 112 winds through emerald vistas surrounded by valleys, cliffs and canyons. After 30 minutes, we took a quarter-mile jog onto Highway 445 and arrived at El Jibarito, a dude ranch of sorts. The staff was friendly and the heavy wooden lodge decorated with paraphernalia of yesteryear was a treat. If you love coffee, *jugo fresca* and wholesome bakery and homemade meal selections, you're in. Juanita demonstrated how they roast and grind local coffee beans.

Dumbo the Elephant. Ha — the elephant-eared cow. We stared down the amazing beast from his pasture's edge. Imported from India to work Puerto Rican fields in the 19th century, these beasts of labor graze lazily in El Jibarito's verdant setting. We explored the pastures and stables, and hiked to three waterfalls.

What were sugar and lime plantations of centuries past are now homes, fields, and, in the case of El

and bars featuring live music and the surf and kiteboarding scene infused plenty of action. We'll remember stumbling onto Crash Boat Beach on a Sunday seeing puertorequeños living it up in their own playful style, and meeting the mayor of Aguadilla.

For a week, Jim and I liberated ourselves from the day-to-day of our floating home.

Back at Marina Pescadería, the owner smiles brightly from his office. José is enthused about the future of his marina and the region. "We are already a popular destination for sport fishing. Cruisers appreciate coming into our bay after crossing the Mona Passage. It is quiet here, welcoming. We're enthused about sailing here, too. We play host to the annual Boqueron to Porta Real Race. It also includes *chalanas*." Chalanas are traditional sailboats that originate from Salinas on the south coast. José was excited to talk about the future. We're excited about returning.

Ellen Birrell enjoys cruising, freelance writing and photography within the Eastern Caribbean. For more, visit [www.boldlygo.us](http://www.boldlygo.us). The account of Boldly Go's 2010 attack by pirates in Venezuela will be aired on The Biography Channel's 'I Survived' July 15th.



ELLEN BIRRELL (2)

Jim enjoys fresh orange juice and locally grown coffee at El Jibarito



JOSE RAFOLS

Above: Bicycling is an effective way to see a lot of western Puerto Rico



Left: Riding horseback on the trail to the sea

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