

April 2002

Through a combination of mechanical problems and luggage delays, it took 13 and ½ hours from when we left our house until we reached our hotel in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The car we picked up from National at the airport was the most dented, scraped and scratched rental car I've ever driven. I should have immediately recognized this as an omen of what was to come.

Finding the hotel on this island with 3.5 million residents was difficult because the locals don't seem to believe in road signs or addresses, and the people who draw maps are largely incompetent. I was exasperated. This is some of the worst driving I've seen anywhere. Turn signals go unused, stopping to chat with your friends is OK anywhere (including moving traffic lanes), drivers cut off people seemingly unaware that they might be sharing the road with someone else and they roar around blind turns on narrow mountain roads. The accident toll is high and we saw at least one ambulance with their flashing lights on each of the ten days of our visit. I should add that drivers would not pull over or even get out of the way for an ambulance. Not a day went by when someone didn't open the door on their parked car in front of me. Unpredictable is probably the best way to describe Puerto Rican drivers. Most of the cars on the road are old and well dented, but the Puerto Ricans seem very mechanically inclined and keep them running for a very long time.

We visited some of the vestiges of Spanish Colonialism in Old San Juan and Ponce. There were some old forts, interesting town squares, small museums and colonial architecture. Ponce has a first-rate art museum. I still felt uncomfortable, because most of the houses had windows, doors and yards covered with iron bars. While I understand that the high crime rate makes them necessary, how could you get out in a fire? There were some interesting churches, but most of them were locked.

We headed out of town to the Ruta Panorámica; a set of poorly marked narrow mountain roads through the mountains in the center of the 100-mile long island. The scenery was great, but there were a few problems. The miradores (viewpoints) were kept locked up behind bars that seemed to open only at certain times on certain days. It was important to keep looking at the beautiful views in the distance, because from up close the roads were littered with garbage. There were Coors Light beer cans strewn everywhere offering strong evidence of the popularity of drinking and driving and leaving us wondering about the inebriated drivers with whom we shared the road. There was trash of every sort including old appliances, furniture and several dirty diapers. Many Puerto Rican parents just fling the old "disposable" diaper out the car window after changing their baby. I am not exaggerating when I state that we saw a discarded Coors Light can every 50 to 100 feet along the Ruta Panorámica.

Most of the hotel and store clerks spoke fluent English and were very welcoming, but we decided one evening to wander off the tourist track to meet some of the locals in their own backyards. We visited a small, "quaint" roadside bar near one of our hotels. It was a rich, cultural experience. The ice-cold beers were only a dollar, and the bartender spoke fluent English. She had a couple of drunks working for her cleaning up the parking lot. Their pay seemed to be the right to purchase a shot of Bacardi for fifty cents

every 15 minutes or so. I enjoyed a half English, half Spanish conversation with them and bought them a round. They downed their plastic shot glasses and flung them into the parking lot they'd just finished cleaning. I've read about "rummies" in Hemingway novels, but this was my first experience up close.

Puerto Rico enjoys perfect weather. The highs were in the 80's each day and the temperature only varies by a few degrees year-round. We hiked and climbed in several beautiful State and National Parks. The trails were relatively clean and the views from the hilltops were great. We didn't much care for the cultural side of the island, but the natural side is excellent. Some of the beaches were great, others trashed. We played golf one day at a closed Air Force base and visited the world's largest radio telescope at Arecibo. Our best hike was to a large cave deep in the forest where we were alone to admire the stalactites and stalagmites.

The 15-mile ferry ride to the offshore island of Culebra takes a little over an hour and only costs \$2. The beaches were nice, but we had to arrive over an hour early at the dock to buy tickets and it took another half hour to get frisked and searched with drug-sniffing dogs upon arrival, so we paid twenty dollars to fly home.

On Easter Sunday we flew from the coastal city of Fajardo to the nearby island of Vieques. We enjoyed a seven-mile hike across the island as we were starting to learn to ignore the Coors Light cans lining the road like runway lights. We had lunch at a wonderful beachfront restaurant. On the way back to the airport we passed by the US Navy's Camp Garcia. Until recently, Vieques was a practice bombing range for Navy pilots. They've stopped that, but now the locals are protesting the Navy practicing beach invasions. The news trucks were there filming the protesters for the 6 o'clock news. At the airport we were told to get on one airplane for our return flight with six other passengers. Unfortunately, this plane was going to San Juan and not Fajardo, and we didn't find out until we had flown past Fajardo. Apparently, someone in the office making the passenger manifests had screwed up and it took an hour for them to figure out the solution to this problem was to fly us to Fajardo. This left us shaking our head at the level of organizational skills. But the people seemed happy and content. There were few beggars. There are many small factories and Puerto Rico enjoys the highest standard of living in the Caribbean. Most people were smiling and well fed.

I struggled writing this report because the impressions I developed of the Puerto Ricans are not particularly flattering. We had quite a conversation with a Park Ranger we met after hiking to a tower where he was fire-spotting. He's visited the mainland US and agreed that the Puerto Ricans were terrible drivers and some of the worst litterbugs anywhere. But he hastened to add that when Puerto Ricans travel, they know better and properly discard their garbage and drive more cautiously. This just left me more mystified about how it could be culturally acceptable to spoil your home territory, but act more responsibly elsewhere. I offer no explanation. Some Puerto Ricans are supporting a political movement promoting Puerto Rican independence from the United States. That would be just fine with me.

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