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Totally Loose and Laid-Back On Puerto Rico's Vieques
By Lisa Mullenneaux

Looking for Margaritaville? It's seven miles off the east coast of Puerto Rico, a short hop by prop plane from San Juan or an hour's ferry ride from the village of Fajardo.

It's called Vieques, a slip of an island, where paso fino (fine-gait) horses run wild, cattle graze on fertile hillsides and only a few gringos, white egrets and sandpipers populate the mile-long beaches and mangrove lagoons.

I knew I was on to something when even close friends were reluctant to share Vieques, so priceless is a Caribbean vacation without high-rise resorts, casinos and cruise ships. Like the few footloose Americans I met in my four days here, I wanted to "bump noses" with an angelfish. I wanted to watch a magenta sunset from a villa fragrant with frangipani. And then I wanted to taste lobster and let a chorus of coqui (tree frogs) sing me to sleep. I didn't want much; serenity would do.

Having only a short time to explore the 21-mile-long Vieques, I chose the quickest way to get there. Manuel Portela, my pilot for the 25-minute flight from San Juan's Isla Grande Airport, briefed me on the island's history and attractions, most of which are natural.

Mosquito Bay on the south shore, for example, is one of the few remaining bioluminescent bays in the world. Its narrow entrance to the sea creates a delicate balance of fresh water and sea water favored by microorganisms called dinoflagellates. Dinoflagellates release energy in a burst of light when disturbed by any movement. To swim among them is to understand why scientists named them "whirling fire."

Like the microorganisms, hundreds of species of flora and fauna are protected on Vieques because the U.S. Navy owns two-thirds of the island and actively discourages commercial development. According to local historian Elizabeth Langhorn, "The land area exposed to live ordnance, weapons testing, troop training and

the storage of ammo has become virtually a wildlife reserve. Turtles, birds, fish and such [seem to be] less sensitive to shelling than to the tourist development that afflicts other Caribbean islands."

The Navy stores its ammunition on the western third of Vieques and runs a training base on the eastern side. Residents who live in between protest its maneuvers and weapons testing, but they also benefit from access to its beaches, land for cattle grazing, reforestation and road building.

There are no signs of fighter planes or artillery blasts as my taxi (publico) climbs the lush hills between Isabel Segunda Airport and the seaside town of Esperanza. Before the Navy bought 21,000 acres from local landowners in 1941, sugar plantations boomed here. Now small farms with chickens and cattle dot the landscape. On the highway, you're more likely to meet up with a herd of goats than a tour bus.

There are perhaps 40 other Americans who've come to soak up sun and guava juice in Esperanza this early December. Within 24 hours we will all know each other -- at least by sight. Janet and Harry Washburn, owners of the Trade Winds Guesthouse, are the first of many expatriates I'll meet during my stay.

New Englanders gone native, the Washburns show me a variety of rooms before I settle on a small apartment with queen-size bed, shower, fridge and air conditioning for \$ 60 a night. Compliments of the house is a salamander I name Jo-Jo. "We've never needed to advertise," says Janet. "Our publicity is word-of-mouth." Convenient for guests is the Trade Winds' restaurant as well as choice snorkeling on the reefs that front the hotel.

Wasting no time, I sign up with Gil and Dave Jones's Solimar Divers for a kayak tour of the famous "bio" bay. We leave at 6 p.m. in a pickup -- towing the kayaks -- and follow a rutted road to Mosquito Bay. The night is clear with a crescent moon -- perfect viewing conditions -- as we slide onto our plastic pontoons and paddle out into the darkness.

Tiny diamonds illuminate the water beneath our boats with a blue-green radiance. Anything that touches the water glows.

Timidly, we ease off our pontoons into the warm, brackish water with phosphorescent splashes. Fish skitter across the water, and occasionally someone spots the outline of a ray gliding below the surface. I plunge a fist into the water, and sparks flash from my fingertips.

The next morning I meet my nocturnal companions, Frank and Sue from Philadelphia, over coffee. "Nothing I'd read about the beauty of Mosquito Bay prepared me for it," admits Sue. "But then everything about Vieques surprises us. The laid-back lifestyle reminds us of Key West in the off-season. Yesterday we rented a jeep -- \$ 40 for 24 hours. We wanted to snorkel on Green Beach."

Though magnificent beaches are within walking distance of the Trade Winds, a car is useful for visiting Navy-owned beaches, Mount Pirata, the Brown Pelican Nest Habitat at Cayo Coneja or Isabel Segunda, the island's largest town. The Navy beaches -- Red, Blue and Green -- are all gorgeous and virtually empty.

I walk about two miles to Sun Bay, where municipal authorities maintain picnic tables, a bath house, campground and parking lot. Even at midday I'm one of only four swimmers on the crescent-shaped beach, which is shaded by coconut palms and almond trees. In fact, park attendants -- who try to keep busy scooping palm fronds into jeeps -- outnumber bathers.

At the eastern end of Sun Bay is a trail through a mangrove forest to Media Luna (Half Moon) and Navio beaches. "Lord of the Flies" was filmed on Media Luna in 1963, and I waded out 100 yards or more in the still water before moving on to Navio, where the surf makes for exciting swimming and exploring of cliffside caves and a sinkhole called Devil's Eye.

Back in Esperanza, I run into Dave Jones at the Bananas Cafe and ask why he decided to form a dive shop with his brother on Vieques two years ago.

"Gil had been here with the Navy and always wanted to return. But first he had to convince me. I had a successful computer graphics business in Atlanta then. To tell the truth, I don't miss the three-piece suit and the business meetings."

Jim Hazlett is one of Jones's customers, an avid scuba diver who found it much cheaper to get certified in Vieques than in Manhattan. "I've made several trips to this island," says Hazlett. "The most memorable was the time I stayed at the Casa during a tropical heat wave."

The "Casa" is the Casa del Frances Inn, a turn-of-the-century plantation house owned by Vieques' most colorful expatriate, Irving Greenblatt. Greenblatt was about to sell his Boston-based business and retire in 1979 when, as he puts it, "a friend called and solved my midlife crisis. 'You've got to buy this seedy hotel I'm staying at,' she insisted. I couldn't even find Vieques on a map."

The Casa is still seedy -- tiles are cracked, birds nest in light fixtures, sheets don't match -- but deliberately so. And anyone who's ever eaten fresh grouper on the veranda listening to Irvingisms -- "It's been my experience that guests who have no vice are quite boring" -- rarely complains. If they do complain, they run the risk of being blackballed. "Currently, the list of people who can't come back totals about 180," says Greenblatt.

The most striking thing about Irving's domain is its atmosphere -- half Somerset Maugham, half Tennessee Williams. As I enter the lobby, barely tamed jungle crawls up a two-story atrium. Dinner is served on a white-columned veranda that overlooks a large pool, and beyond it, in a thicket of mango, coconut and banana trees, is a thatched, and very active, bar.

Manager Frank Celeste fills me in on Vieques' history while he mixes my pina colada. It seems the Taino Indians, who first settled the island, called it "Bieques" or "small island"; Columbus, who sighted it on his second voyage, named it "Graciosa" for its beauty; and the Spanish called Vieques and its sister Culebra "the Useless Islands" because they could find no gold here.

But the conquistadors were wrong; Vieques is a rare gem for those of us looking to escape life in the fast lane.

On my return flight to San Juan, Portela is again my pilot and chatty host. As the plane passes over Puerto Rico's northeast coast, he points to a colossal Moorish-style complex. "El Conquistador," he says, "is Puerto Rico's newest resort. Golf, tennis, boating, gambling. It has anything you could want."

I peer over the right wing at the terra-cotta roofs, Spanish fountains, plazas and swimming pools, knowing I'll never be tempted to spend money there. The funky little island of Vieques has spoiled me forever.