

WHY YOU HAVEN'T HEARD OF PUERTO VIEJO, COSTA RICA

By Amy Morton

The Caribbean coast of Costa Rica was accessible only by train until 1987, when the Guápiles Highway was built. Before that, this isolated region was inhabited mostly by Jamaicans and other islanders whose families had come to work the banana plantations. Today Afro-Caribbean culture remains dominant, tourism is relatively new, and prices are still cheap, *mon*.

LOTS OF RAIN BUT ONLY A TRICKLE OF DEVELOPMENT. The Caribbean lowlands are marked by mangrove thickets, inland marshes, and jungle that stretches to the sea. Unlike the Pacific coast, there is no “dry season.” Sudden bursts of warm rain punctuate the day—every day—like a faucet turning on and off again. But the good news is that clothes dry almost instantly, and there is no “high season” of high prices. When hotel rates on the Pacific skyrocket from December through April, save your money and drive three hours east from San Jose to the refreshingly undeveloped “other coast.” Only three towns dot the 125-mile coast stretching from the border of Nicaragua to the tip of Panama, and the jewel is the sleepy village of Puerto Viejo. There are no major resorts, and even better, no mosquitoes—the latter a near miracle.

HIGH TIMES IN THE LOWLANDS. Puerto Viejo is home to a heavy surf break named Salsa Brava—which translates “Angry Sauce”—and a fascinating cultural mélange of English-speaking blacks, Spanglish-speaking Costa Ricans (or “Ticos”), and expats speaking with every possible accent. What everyone shares, though, is a genial demeanor that is as relaxed as the soft reggae music that spills out of open windows and doors. Surfers paddle out in the mornings, dreadlocked Rastafarians play soccer in the streets, and friendly *sodas*—casual restaurants located within homes—serve up inexpensive Creole and Tico dishes in harmonious tandem. For the best local cuisine, head to **Maxi's** in nearby Manzanillo for lobster (\$9) or the fresh catch of the day (\$6), often cooked in a spicy coconut sauce. Later, tap your toes to live music at **El Loco Natural**, or mingle with new friends at a **Stanford's**, a seaside bar and disco with tables on the beach and a festive array of candles embedded in the sand, sheathed with banana leaves. The balmy wind may blow off the water, but the cheer never goes out.

SLEEPING UNDER THE JUNGLE CANOPY. At **La Costa de Papito**, just south of town, eight bungalows (ranging from \$31-\$56/night) are discreetly hidden in a five-acre tropical garden. Butterflies flit past to rest on bright red heliconia flowers, and a footbridge leads over a small creek to two of the bungalows. Inside zebra-print bedding and colorfully tiled bathrooms offer splashes of style while a high-speed ceiling fan provides modern comfort. But the covered veranda is the place to be during a rain shower. Wait it out with a nap in the hammock, inhaling the wet, earthy aromas and listening to the waves crashing at Playa Cocles, the white sand beach across the road. Don't be startled if a coconut occasionally thuds onto the roof. In the morning, breakfast will arrive on your porch for just \$5. Listen to the birds' chorus as you sip your carambola juice, made from the pulpy center of the star fruit. (*La Costa de Papito*, <http://greencoast.com/papito.htm>; 10% discount single occupancy)