

October 23, 2005

Next Stop

Vieques: Treasuring an Island's Rough Edges

By CHRISTIAN L. WRIGHT

A YEAR ago, Vieques was at a crossroads: Left turn, it would have been on its way to becoming a bit like [Key West](#) before the trinket shops and theme bars eclipsed its bohemian allure. Right turn, it would have headed in the direction of St. Bart's - a tropical playground where the painfully chic take their Hermès towels and their diamond watches to the beach.

But a year later, it's still Vieques, an island six miles off the southeastern coast of [Puerto Rico](#), just 21 miles long and 4 miles wide, with two small towns, lots of cows and horses roaming free and a broad stubborn streak. For many reasons - its rough-and-tumble terrain and its willfully unambitious culture among them - the sleepy, enchanted island is highly resistant to change.

Twenty years ago, the [Toronto](#)-based architect John Hix and his wife, Neeva Gayle, were casting about for a place to go on vacation that was undeveloped and had no air-conditioning. At a party, Ms. Hix got talking to a fellow guest who had just come back from Vieques. "Like everyone else," Mr. Hix recalled recently, "we said, 'What's that?'" But they decided to go anyway. Immediately smitten by the island, the couple bought property there in 1989 and built a stunning concrete house for themselves.

They have since expanded and turned it into Hix Island House, a very cool, eco-minded hotel that has collected accolades, from a couple of pages in the book "Hip Hotels: Beach" to Wallpaper's assessment: "perfect Caribbean hideout." Such coverage alone might have brought a stampede of hipsters, and with them more hotels, improved roads, nightclubs and, who knows, maybe a casino. But all these years later, said Mr. Hix, "Vieques hasn't changed that much."

Visitor Information

How To Get There

American Airlines (www.aa.com) and other major carriers fly directly from many American cities to San Juan International Airport in [Puerto Rico](#). A Web search in October for travel in December found prices starting around \$202 round trip from Kennedy Airport. From San Juan, a few small airlines serve Vieques. Vieques Air Link, (888) 901-9247, flies three times a day for \$150 round trip. The flight takes about 20 minutes.

Where To Stay

Hix Island House, (787) 741-2302, www.hixislandhouse.com. A compound of four concrete buildings with loft apartments rather than rooms. Each has a kitchen stocked with breakfast provisions. In the high season, rates start at \$220.

Where To Eat

Tropical Baby, 340 Antonio G Mallado, Isabel Segunda, (787) 608-4261. In a tiny kitchen, Baby Llenza - a native Puerto Rican and a classically trained chef - whips up very fresh fish dishes featuring smoked tuna, langoustines, scallops and baby octopus. Dinner for two, with appetizers, entrees and a bottle of wine costs about \$75.

Uva, 359 Antonio G Mallabo, Isabel Segunda, (787) 741-2050. Dinner is served in a lively violet, orange and green dining room, and the recipes fuse Mediterranean, Caribbean and Asian ideas. There's a lobster martini with fried plantains and avocado-sake salsa. Dinner including two starters, two main courses, dessert and wine costs \$200.

What To Do

Bioluminescent Bays, (787) 741-0720, www.biobay.com, contain a concentration of single-celled organisms - dinoflagellates - that create a blue-green light underwater. During an evening boat tour, you get to swim with them for \$30 a person.

La Dulce Vida Mountain Bike and Adventure Company, on the Web at www.bikevieques.com, offers customized tours of the island on state-of-the-art mountain bikes. A nature ride that starts at 8 a.m. and ends around 12:30 p.m. costs \$65 a person and includes a bike, gear, snacks and fluids.

[Copyright 2005 The New York Times Company](#)