



Coastal Living – November 2010

currents **viewfinder**

Viva Vieques!

Experience close encounters with giant sea stars, bask on sunny beaches, and soak up local culture on this little-known island near Puerto Rico

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1 Hunt sea stars and gather sea glass.

Tread through the clear, shallow surf to see these spiny five-armed friends. They usually hang out in groups, so they're easy to spot. Between Green Beach and Mosquito Pier, you may find sea stars as large as Frisbees! Visit Playa Grande for pieces of worn-smooth blue, green, and amber glass to take home as souvenirs, but leave the sea stars where you find them. >>

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The chic fire pit at the new W Retreat & Spa is a peaceful hangout by the water.



Rum punch at Bill's Restaurant in Esperanza.

2 Pick a side at the new W Retreat & Spa. In March, it opened with an innovative idea: Choose your side of the hotel. The left is soothing and quiet, with adults-only beach access. Or check in on the right side, with its upbeat island tunes and deluxe, see-and-be-seen pool.

Tip: Before hitting the beach, let the W fix an Escape Kit for two that includes chair rental, an umbrella, and a picnic (\$45).

3 Beach-hop three ways. The beaches on Vieques have distinctive personalities. Visit Blue Beach for calm, gentle surf that's best for snorkeling. Red Beach is the most popular spot for people-watching, socializing, and unobstructed views of the vast sea. Enjoy romantic scenery at the small, crescent-shaped Secret Beach, which is protected by dramatic rocks and a quiet cove.

4 Drive the coast worry-free. Vieques has few roads, so no matter how directionally challenged you are, any wrong turn easily can be corrected. The rugged terrain gets bumpy, so rent a Jeep. Tip: Do not leave anything valuable in your car, and place a local newspaper on the dash to help deter break-ins.

5 Sip rum overlooking the harbor. At the waterfront Bill's Restaurant, order a sweet rum punch (the best on the island), garnished with star fruit, alongside the grilled mahi wrap stuffed with succulent plantain chutney and drizzled with cilantro aioli.

6 Get sweet on an old ruin. Explore the 19th-century remains of the Playa Grande Sugar Mill—closed in the 1940s. It stands as a reminder of the area's once-thriving sugar industry. Photo op: Pose under the curved redbrick entry surrounded by bright green foliage. >

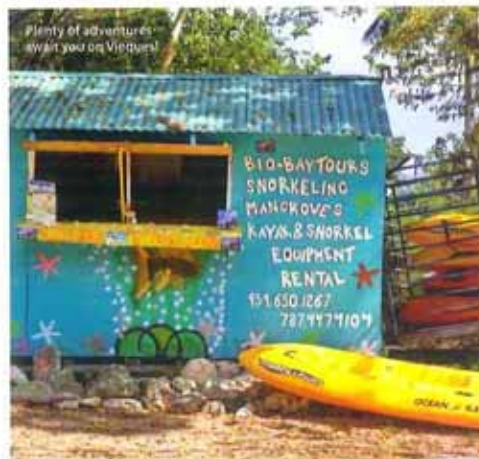
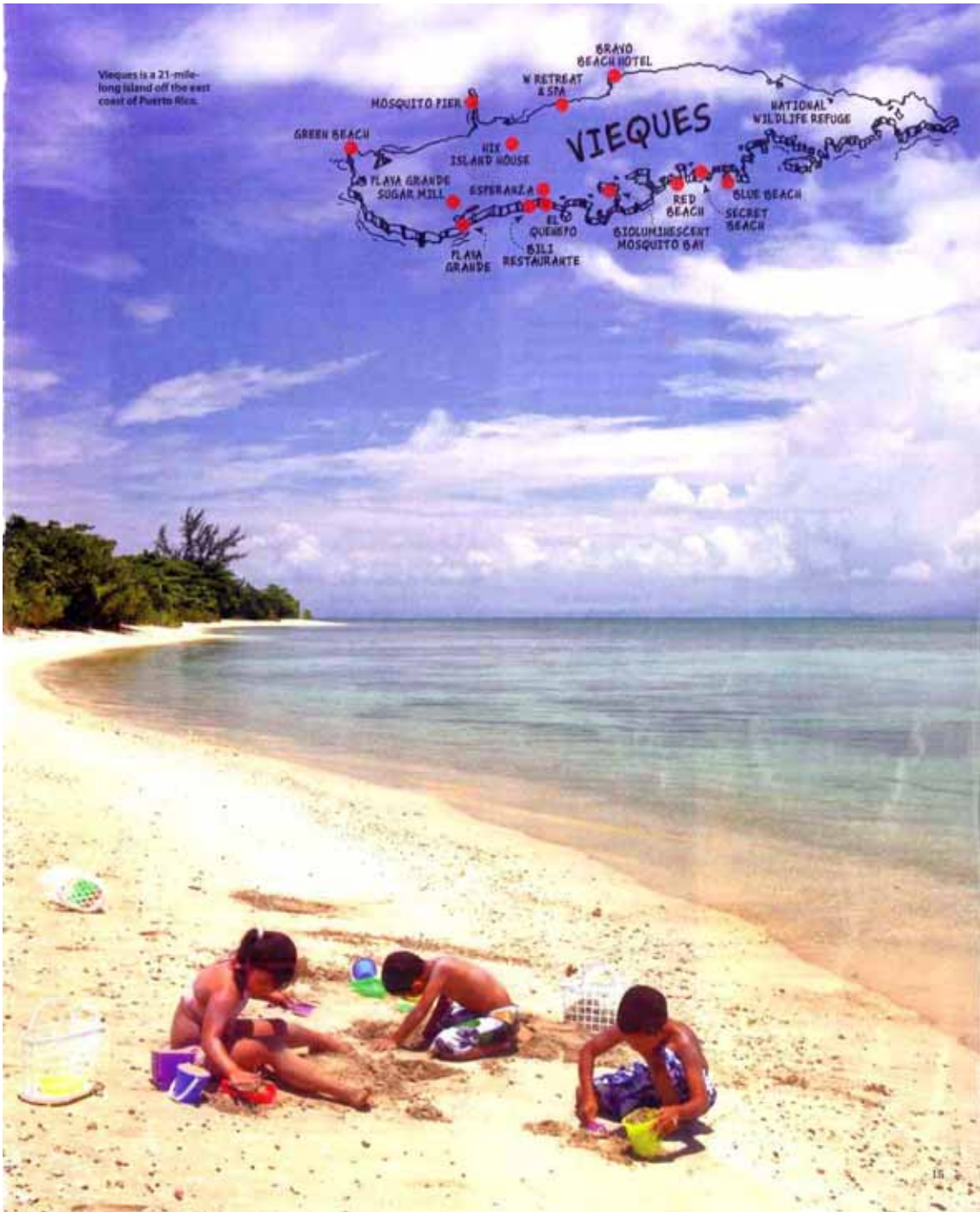


ILLUSTRATION: MATT CAHENA

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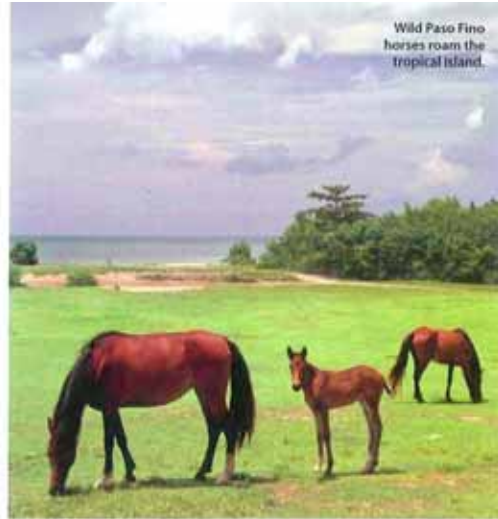


Beach access at Bravo Beach Hotel

7 Saddle up shoreside. Ride horseback on the beach on a trained Paso Fino horse (\$65 for two hours) with Esperanza Riding Co. Or, if you just want to catch a glimpse of these stunning animals, wild Paso Fino horses can be found grazing ocean-side or galloping through tropical brush in the National Wildlife Refuge.

8 Lighten up in one of the world's brightest bioluminescent bays. Scoop the water into your hands as you kayak or swim—it's like a thousand twinkling stars energizing your skin. Moving through microscopic organisms (called dinoflagellates) in this protected bay causes them no harm; it merely triggers a strong blue glow best seen on a moonless evening. Try the two-hour bio-bay night tour (\$30) with Abe's Snorkeling.

9 Enjoy dinner by candlelight. In the seaside town of Esperanza, El Quenepo serves a breezy candlelit dinner under the trees for which this spot was named. The menu features



Wild Paso Fino horses roam the tropical island.

locally grown organic produce and locally caught fish. Nightly specials are up to the chef; try the sweet Caribbean spiny lobster if it's available.

10 Experience eco-architecture. Check in to the Hix Island House, located on 13 acres of natural refuge. Tall grasses, almond trees, palms, butterflies, and birds punctuate the no phone/television atmosphere here. The Zenlike minimalist lofts are designed to be one with nature: Outdoor showers and

private open-air terraces are part of the design to reduce carbon footprint. Or check out the Bravo Beach Hotel, a small bohemian resort overlooking Culebra Island. Formerly a private hacienda, the property has been revamped with tropical gardens, verandas, and luxurious handcrafted beds. Stay for breakfast: Locally grown fruit, warm baked breads, Viequense honey, and freshly made yogurts alongside a piping-hot carafe of Puerto Rican coffee are a delicious start to your day.

VIEQUES VISITORS GUIDE

GETTING THERE
Vieques Air Link;
888/901-9247 or viequesairlink.com.

STAY
Bravo Beach Hotel, North Shore Road 1; 787/741-1128 or bravobeachhotel.com. Hix Island House, State Road 995; 787/741-2302 or hixislandhouse.com. W Retreat & Spa, Vieques Island, State Road 200, km 3.2; 787/741-4100 or whotels.com.

EAT
Bibi Restaurante, 144 Calle Flamboyán; 787/741-1382. El Quenepo, 148 Calle Flamboyán; 787/741-1215. Next Course, Route 201; 787/741-1028.

EXPLORE
Abe's Snorkeling & Bio-Bay Tours; 787/741-2134 or abessnorkeling.com. Esperanza Riding Co.; 787/435-0073 or naturalvieques.com. Maritza Car Rental; 787/741-0078.



Pull straight up to paradise.