

# Cultural Close-up: Puerto Viejo

Christopher P. Baker

Costa Ricans tend to be an industrious lot, prone to rising at dawn to kick-start their work day with strong brews of fresh-picked local coffee. Life along **Costa Rica's Caribbean coast**, however, is lived at an easier pace. What few villages lie along the sandy shores are laid-back places. During the late 19th century, English-speaking Jamaicans arrived to build the **Atlantic Railroad** and work the banana plantations, infusing the local dialect with lilting patois, the local cuisine with West Indian spices and the lifestyle with a bit more chill. Now things are stirring, thanks to a hip new vibe centred on **Puerto Viejo**, where chic boutique hotels, restaurants and lounge bars are sprouting like mushrooms on a rainforest log.

## Caribbean Calm

To catch a Rastafarian vibe, walk Puerto Viejo's grid of funky dirt lanes (only the main drag is paved) lined with gingerbread-trimmed houses painted in tropical ice-cream pastels. Stop at Puerto Viejo's main beach, where fishing boats are drawn up on the sand and local fishers mend nets beneath coconut palms. Pick up handmade jewellery of coral and shells at an informal street market along the beach and take a tour of **Chocorart**, a hillside cacao farm near **Playa Chiquita**, to learn all about cacao production from the bean to the chocolate bar. Need more? Pamper yourself with a decadent chocolate body rub and cacao butter massage at **Pure Jungle Spa**.

## Wave Action

Legendary among die-hard surfers is the wild storm-generated wave called the **Salsa Brava** (best experienced in November and December). The narrow coastal strip is lined with surf-washed beaches – golden, white, even black – that unfurl south to the Panamanian border. The beach break at **Playa Cocles** is a great place to learn to surf, courtesy of the more than a dozen surf shops in town.

## It's Natural

Mother Nature gets star billing around Puerto Viejo. For a primer on tropical fruits and plants, head to **Finca la Isla Botanical Garden**. Trails lead through



the rainforest where toucans, sloths and monkeys are frequently spotted. Next, rent a bicycle and ride south to the **Jaguar Rescue Centre** at Playa Chiquita to get a close-up of critters from howler monkeys to venomous snakes. See them in the wild at **Gandoca-Manzanillo National Wildlife Refuge**, which protects tropical rainforest, mangroves, wetlands and the nation's largest coral reef. Marine turtles crawl ashore to lay their eggs, and manatees and *tucuxi* dolphins swim in freshwater lagoons.

## Local Eats

Locals swear by **Bread & Chocolate**, where you can sit on an open wooden deck and enjoy cinnamon oatmeal pancakes, crispy sautéed potatoes with jerk barbecue sauce and brownie sundaes. For a taste of local Caribbean fare (such as 'rundown' – spiced fish stew simmered in coconut milk), head

to **Jammin'**, a roadside restaurant with tree-trunk stools, Bob Marley posters and chill reggae beats. After sundown head south to **Punta Cocles**, where ebullient Italian expat Ilario Giannoni conjures up divine Italian dishes at **La Pecora Nera**, one of Costa Rica's hottest restaurants outside **San José**.

## After Hours

Puerto Viejo has an infamously wicked nightlife, so don't plan on getting to bed early. Warm up at **Tex-Mex**, a rustic open-air bar serving oversized mojitos and orgasmic cocktails, plus three-times-nightly Hollywood movies screened al fresco. Check out the sophisticated **Baba Yaga** lounge or, next door, **Oshi's Lounge**, an intimate bar with live calypso. The late-night party spills onto the beach at **Johnny's Place**, where torches and even the occasional beach bonfire draw patrons to this main dance bar. ▣