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## Song of the Rainforest

*Tropical delights make Las Casitas a unique American destination.*



As our van sped toward mountainous El Yunque rainforest, our tour guide introduced himself with a heavy Puerto Rican accent.

“English is not my first language,” he says. “So if you don’t understand something, you let me know. OK?”

“My name is Edween,” he says.

“Edwin?” I asked, reading his nametag.

“Yes, EdwEEEn,” he says, drawing out the vowel. But you’ll never remember that. You can call me tour guide.”

We met Edwin at 9 a.m. in the lobby of Puerto Rico’s El Conquistador resort. As thin as his pencil mustache, Edwin vibrated with energy and peppered us with facts about the rainforest during our 45-minute drive.

*As guests at the exclusive Las Casitas enclave adjacent to El Conquistador, you have full access to all the amenities of the larger resort, including the casino, an 18-hole Arthur Hills golf course, 26,000-square-foot Golden Door Spa, private island, 17 shops and 18 bars and restaurants.*

El Yunque (or El JOONkay, as Edwin pronounced it) is the only rainforest in the United States, and the landscaping around our room made us curious to see it first hand. The grounds were lush with ferns and palms with orchids attached to their trunks, all meant to invoke the rainforest. At night, the air resonated with the sound of the island's tiny tree frog, the coqui, whose musical double-noted chirp ("Co-qui? Co-qui?") made them sound as though they were calling each other.

Our room was located in Las Casitas, a small, exclusive enclave adjacent to El Conquistador. As guests, we had full access to all the amenities of the larger resort, including the casino (the backdrop for a scene in the original "Goldfinger" movie), 18-hole Arthur Hills golf course, 26,000-square-foot Golden Door Spa, private island, 17 shops and 18 bars and restaurants.

When we wanted action, we could call for a golf cart to ferry us to our destination. When we wanted peace and quiet, we headed back to Las Casitas where we could soak in an infinity pool that blended seamlessly with the sea. Our casita was lovely, attractively furnished and perched on a 300-foot bluff

overlooking the Sapphire Gin-blue confluence of the Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea. From our balcony, red-tailed hawks floated by at eye level while we watched the high-speed ferry shuttle guests to the resort-owned Palomino Island. We also enjoyed the comfort of in-room check-in and 24-hour butler service to oversee everything from making reservations to stocking the fridge.

We had already pampered ourselves with a couple's massage at the Spa and dined at the resort's hottest restaurant, the Strip House, a playful steakhouse decked out in red with suggestive black and white prints from the 1920s. Now we were ready for a little adventure. So we signed up for an expedition with GSI Tour Services, which provides guided rainforest tours to resort guests.

The rainforest encompasses nearly eight square miles of protected land under the management of the U.S. Forest Service. The 100 billion gallons of rain it produces annually make up the island's water source. It's also home to the rare Puerto Rican parrot.

If I had imagined bushwhacking through a thick tangle of



expected wild, exotic things, and there were some, like the wide-leafed weathervane trees and aerial species, including orchids and bromeliads. But the rainforest also contained things I've planted in my yard, like hibiscus bushes and impatiens. I never imagined domesticated garden flowers in the wild, but here they were in profuse glory.

On a moss-covered hiking trail, Edwin bounced along ahead of us, pointing out the rainforest's wonders with child-like wonder, as though he were seeing them for the first time. "Check it out!" he'd suddenly cry. "That's the craziest thing I've ever heard of!"

Turning over an ordinary looking oak leaf, Edwin pointed out a Spencer orchid, no bigger than a fingernail clipping, with a tiny dot of red at the center.

"That's incredible!"

A little farther down the trail, Edwin spotted a joke he had rigged for a previous tour. Hairy "legs" from the fruit of a weathervane tree poked out from under a leaf, making it look like a tarantula. Sometimes, Edwin admitted, he added a little feather for effect. Then he demonstrated by placing a small feather at the edge of the leaf.

"It's like a leetle joke," he says. "Sometimes I do a crazy plant contest. That would've been a good one."

Edwin turned everything into a contest.

"The tarantula wasp looks desperately for spiders," he says. "Who you going to root for?" Did we think we could tell if a flower was fragrant just by looking at it? Which did we think was more advanced, the walking stick or the winged walking stick? Who did we like for the camouflage contest?

As we once again neared our van, Edwin continued to turn over leaves looking for the elusive green snail. Finally, he found one.

"Check it out!" he cries. "The green snail is one of the most incredible animals I've ever seen. This guy is invisible. This is the one I like in the camouflage contest against the walking stick."

Back at El Conquistador, we regretted that we didn't have time to take advantage of everything the resort offered. We only briefly visited Palomino Island, with its many water sports options. We didn't take advantage of the pristine snorkeling off the Isle de Culebra, and tours of the nearby bioluminescent bay were full. We vowed to try all these things, when we came back. And by that time, the new convention center and water park would be open.

But at that moment, we were happy to see our surroundings with new eyes. The resort's landscape was, in fact, a more manicured version of the original, and now we could identify everything. There were the sierra palms with their hanging orchids, the hibiscus, the ferns, the impatiens. "Check it out!" we cried.

That night, on our way back to the Strip House, we listened to the song of the coquis with the wonder of a child. ☺

steamy vegetation, my first surprise was how much El Yunque resembled any other national park. It looked downright tame, with a two-lane highway (Route 191) that ran up the center, paved hiking trails and a well-stocked visitor center. The rainforest contains 13 hiking trails and four observations towers, three of them built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. There are also man-made pools, though swimming is now banned, rain shelters and an old mine.

My second surprise was how many plants I recognized. I

## STRATOS Details

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