

¡BIENVENIDOS! WELCOME to Puerto Rico!

Tropical beaches – we have those!
Year round sunshine – we have that!
Warm climate – definitely!

Although these are absolutely true, there are many other aspects of island living that USCG personnel and spouses do not often consider before transferring to the islands. This document will help to address any questions you may have. Over the last several years members and spouses have compiled the following information, much of it from lessons learned, in order to help future USCG members and families more easily transition to life in the Caribbean.

This guide will help you with everything from health care, bringing pets to PR, where to shop, local driving, etc.

Basic Facts about Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico is 100 miles long by 35 miles wide. Close to 4 million people live on the “Island of Enchantment,” with more than a million in the greater San Juan metropolitan area alone.

It is a vibrant, modern, multicultural society, one that has been molded by Spanish, African, Indian, and U.S. influences. The local currency is the U.S. dollar and no visas/passports are required to enter Puerto Rico from the United States. Mail service is the US Postal Service.

The climate is as close to perfect as it can get, averaging 83°F (22.7°C) in the winter and 85°F (29.4°C) in the summer (not counting the heat index). In other words, it’s always summer! The trade winds cool the coastal towns and the temperature decreases as you ascend into the mountains. Although the outside temperature is warm, it is advised to carry a light sweater with you if you are going to a restaurant, doctor’s office, or hospital. The air conditioning can make it quite chilly! PR is in the Atlantic Time Zone and does not observe Daylight Savings Time.

Getting around in Puerto Rico

GPS on cell phones or a car unit is a must have. Many addresses in PR will not work but finding a close point of interest will assist in getting you pointed in the right direction.

Driving in Puerto Rico

This may seem like a daunting task at first, but you can drive safely here if you know what to expect. The culture of driving in PR is different. The first thing you must always remember is to drive defensively at all times, look around and understand that people are going to pull out in front of you. Also prepare to see people driving in a variety of places other than on the road... like emergency lanes and medians.

Watch out for scooters and motorcycles since they will weave between cars & lanes. It can actually be quite entertaining to watch once you get used to it – you'll start to predict who will cut you off before it happens. Try to keep a positive and relaxed attitude, rather than let road rage get the best of you, at least in non-life-threatening situations. Avoid rush hours if at all possible: 7am – 10am and 3pm – 6:30pm. There are no public school buses making traffic more challenging during the drop-off and pick-up times.

Rules of the road are somewhat different as well: it is rare to see someone using a turn signal (unless they have left it on); stop signs appear to be more like yield signs; cars will 'edge' in ahead of you regardless of whether it is your lane and you are in the 'right;' one lane exit ramps become at least 2 lanes (sometimes 3!) when traffic slows or is at a standstill; and you will invariably see road workers closing off lanes (with little warning, sometimes just over a blind hill) to trim the weeds or pressure wash and paint the concrete medians. Never jump a green light, wait and look before going. And in case you didn't notice on the drive from the airport, POTHOLEs are EVERYWHERE and it's normal for cars to swerve into your lane to avoid the potholes in their lane! Be extra cautious during rainstorms since roads tend to flood easily.

Traffic laws in Puerto Rico are very strict and violators may have to pay heavy fines. That said, you may witness many people who disregard the rules. For that reason be extra vigilant and practice good defensive driving. Also, you may ONLY use hands-free cell phones while driving. The fine is \$50.00 if caught using a cell phone (w/o hands-free device).

Always keep a good map in your car, ensure your spare tire is ready to be used (you will get flats here!) and carry some spare change for a random tollbooth in case you get lost. A Spanish-English dictionary or translating app on your cell phone can also be very helpful. You may want to carry some paper & pen so you can ask for a drawn map ('un mapa por favor') if someone is giving you directions.

Maps of the San Juan metro area and island are found at Fort Buchanan (PX cash registers). Keep those Welcome Wagon phone numbers on hand, and ask your new friends/neighbors for their number before you start exploring so you can call if you need help. In the end, try not to get too stressed about driving. You will get lost, we all have. Who knows, you might just be amazed at how many different and wonderful things you'll find along the way.

The main roads in and out of Ponce are PR 52 and PR 2. They are only two lane roads going each direction, so an accident or traffic can bring your car to a standstill. Finding your way around is easy to learn. There are only a few major roads in PR that will take you throughout the entire island.

Out of State License Plates

Keeping out of state license plates means you need to maintain current registration from that state. You will also be required to purchase the ACAA sticker (Agency for the Compensation of Automobile Accidents) similar to No Fault Personal Injury

Protection Insurance in the states. It costs \$35 payable at the Hacienda. These stickers are only good thru July of each year and you must get an ACAA sticker **BEFORE** you pick up your car at the VPC. Ask your sponsor to assist with this.

Reading road signs

Distances in PR are in kilometers, but speed limit signs are in miles per hour. Road signs are not always visible, try to use landmarks to remember locations at first.

Getting gas

The same type of gas is sold here, but by liter - not gallon. When getting gas you cannot pay at the pump, you must pay inside before pumping. Fort Buchanan is one of the few places you can pay at the pump and gas prices are per gallon. If you want to try some Spanish you can say \$10 on pump five (diez en cinco).

Auto Expreso toll tags

If you don't want to carry change and will be driving on toll roads a lot, you can purchase a pass to avoid 'Cash' lanes. Most toll booths here are exact change only. Apply online at www.autoexpreso.com, but you will need to provide a credit card for automatic refill of the tag. There is a one-time setup fee per tag and you choose an amount (\$10, \$20, etc) to be deposited on the tags. Once you complete the setup you should receive your tag in the mail within 3 days. You can also purchase tags at the toll offices, toll booths, a Texaco station, or by phone (888-688-1010). Be aware that there are still a few tolls around PR not set up to accept the express tag and you will have to pay manually like everyone else.

Reporting In

Travel Plans

Plan to fly in to Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport in San Juan. Your sponsor will meet you at the airport. The first day will be spent at Sector San Juan completing check-ins, travel claim, and medical, so plan on booking a hotel in San Juan for the first couple of nights. After check-ins are complete, make your way to RIO Ponce to visit your new office!

If you prefer, a small airport is located in Ponce. Mercedita Airport is home to 2 airlines: JetBlue and Etihad Airlines. Flights out of the airport are typically at night.

Traveling with Pets

The cost of transporting your pet is not covered by the government. Keep your receipt; you can claim the cost on your taxes. Pets do not need to be quarantined when coming into Puerto Rico. Most airlines require a health certificate within 10 days of your flight for pets flown in cargo. All requirements can be found on the

airlines website. When you book your ticket let the airline know that you will be traveling with a pet. Only so many pets are allowed per flight. Smaller dogs and cats can fly in cabin under the seat for a fee. Make sure to check your airlines website for the correct size carrying case for your pet. Flying your pet as cargo is tricky. Pets can only fly cargo in certain temperatures which makes it tricky when transferring during the summer months. So you will have to plan accordingly.

Government Travel Charge Card

Every member needs to have a government travel charge card. This card will be needed for your move to Puerto Rico. You will be using the card for your food and hotel during your TLA period. If you do not have a card I strongly encourage you to get one ASAP. Travel claims may take some time to be processed. Make sure you can pay back your GTCC even if you don't get your travel claim money back in time.

TLA with dependents

Members reporting overseas receive up to 60 days of TLA. The TLA rates for San Juan are \$195.00 per night for lodging and \$128.00 per day for food. The TLA rates for Ponce are \$149.00 per night for lodging and \$89.00 per day for food. If the member has more than one dependent, the member will receive a higher per diem rate. For each child over the age of 12 the per diem is raised by 35% and for each child under the age of 12 the per diem is raised by 25%. In order to receive the full per diem amount the member must be staying with at least one of their dependents.

Single or unaccompanied TLA rates

If the member is single or has no dependents with them they will only receive 65% of the per diem rate.

Fees not covered by TLA

TLA will not cover parking or pet fees. Members moving to Puerto Rico, St. Croix, or St. Thomas are not authorized rental cars. Plan to ship your car accordingly.

TLA Claims

TLA claims are made every 10 days, no less, in the Admin office. Member must bring a copy of their PCS orders and an itemized hotel receipt in order to process their claim. Receiving funds from TLA claims can take a month or more.

Remember you cannot be on OHA and TLA at the same time. Your TLA stops the day your lease starts.

Helpful military transfer websites

<http://www.defensetravel.dod.mil/site/ohaCalc.cfm> OHA Calculator

<http://www.defensetravel.dod.mil/site/colaCalc.cfm> COLA Calculator

<http://www.defensetravel.dod.mil/site/perdiemCalc.cfm> Per Diem/TLA rates

Hotels in San Juan

Double Tree- www.sanjuandoubletree.com 787-721-1200

Rate of \$195.00 which includes:

- Compact rental car
- Complimentary Full breakfast
- Complimentary Self Parking
- Warm Chocolate chip cookie at check-in
- 24 hour business center
- Microwave and Refrigerator in all rooms
- Room safe
- Complimentary Wireless high-speed internet
- Pool & workout center
- * Enter Corporate ID # 0560036630

Hampton Inn- www.hamptoninn.hilton.com/san_juan 787-791-8777

Rate of \$195.00

- Two room Suite
- \$0 resort fee
- Intermediate car rental
- Free daily "On the House" breakfast
- Fitness Center
- Business center
- Free wired and/or Wireless internet throughout the hotel.

El San Juan Resort & Casino- www.elsanjuanhotel.com 787-791-1000

Rate of \$195.00 which includes:

- Daily full American breakfast
- One rum welcome drink
- In-room high speed internet
- Resort Fee
- Hilton Honors point
- Daily \$25 Dinner Voucher at Brother's Jimmy's Restaurant

Sheraton Old San Juan- <http://www.sheratonoldsanjuan.com/>

-Sheraton Old San Juan is walking distance from Sector San Juan.

Sheraton Puerto Rico Hotel & Casino-

<http://www.sheratonpuertoricohotelcasino.com/>

Hotels in San Juan that accept pets

Sheraton Old San Juan-<http://www.sheratonoldsanjuan.com/>

- Accepts pets and is also walking distance to Sector San Juan.
- No cost for pets. No limit on pets.

Sheraton Convention Center- <http://www.sheratonpuertoricohotelcasino.com/>

- The cost for pets is \$25.00 per night per pet.

Petsmart- <http://stores.petsmart.com/Store/Details/2160> 787-774-1370

- In Guaynabo at the San Patricio Plaza. Has a pet hotel and doggie day camp. The rate for the hotel is \$23.00 per night for a suite and \$16.00 for a regular room.

MWR housing- <http://www.uscg.mil/mwr/lodging/bayamonguesthousing.asp>

- RBH has limited guest housing that accepts pets. MWR has 7 houses, 6 of which accept pets.
- Pet fee is a onetime \$100.00 sanitation fee. No limit on pets.

Hotels in Ponce

Hilton Ponce Golf and Casino Resort- <http://www.hiltonponceresort.com/>

787-259-7676

- Just minutes from RIO Ponce
- Pool
- No Pets allowed

Hotel Bélgica- <http://www.hotelbelgica.com> (787) 844-3255

- Pets allowed
- Located downtown Ponce
- Discount given for a long stay
- Free Wi-Fi
- Complimentary Coffee and small breakfast
- Free Parking in safe public covered garage
- Wonderful local owners and management!

Hotel Meliá- <http://meliacenturyhotel.com> (787) 842-0260

- Located downtown Ponce
- Pool

Ponce Plaza Hotel and Casino- <http://www.ponceplazahotelandcasino.com>

(787) 813-5050

- Located downtown Ponce
- Melao Coffee Shop
- Outdoor Pool
- Wireless Connection in all rooms & public areas
- All rooms are non-smoking
- Fitness center

-Covered Parking

Holiday Inn- <http://www.ihg.com/holidayinn> (877) 859-5095

-Scenic Mountain View

-15 min drive to RIO Ponce

Hotels in Ponce that except Pets

-Hotel Bélgica and Hotel Meliá accepts pets

-Local veterinarian offices offer pet boarding:

Juana Diaz Animal Hospital- <http://www.jdanimalhospital.com>

(787) 837-8800

Ponce Animal Hospital-

(787) 842-4269

THINGS TO KNOW IMMEDIATELY UPON ARRIVAL

*** If you are having an emergency situation (fire, medical, police), **CALL 911**, this service works here just like in the states, bilingual operators should be available. If you require further assistance, call the **Sector Command Center 787-289-2041** or **RIO Ponce Duty Phone 787-510-7889**.

******Please keep a record of these phone numbers saved in your cell phone!!!!******

***If you are admitted to the hospital, contact the Duty Health Services Technician (787-360-1613)**. They are here to assist members and/or families with hospitalizations and make sure you are receiving adequate care. Again, please make a note of this number and save it in your cell phone, etc.

To Rent or Not to Rent a car

Car rentals are expensive here (you'll understand why when you see all the dented cars driving around). Just be sure to check if your credit card offers insurance OR consider purchasing the extra insurance from the rental company. Still it can be a good idea to start to get your bearings before your POV arrives. You can reserve a rental before you even get to the island through www.costco.com if you are a Costco member, Enterprise, Charlie cars (www.charliecars.com). Hertz also has a desk at Fort B, (www.hertz.com.pr, 787-793-2693). Be sure to ask for a military discount. Check USAA rental discounts if you're a member. Your sponsor can help you find a ride to pick up the rental.

POV

Once your POV arrives make sure you have current insurance and registration. You can check on the location of your car using www.whereismypov.com or calling the PR Vehicle Processing Center at 787-782-6544. You can get a CG vehicle placard

from Sector San Juan; see YN1 in the SPO at building 126. The ACAA sticker can be purchased at the Hacienda (like the DEPT of MOTOR VEHICLES in the States), which is located on the "LOW Road" in San Juan. Make sure to bring driver's license, proof of insurance, vehicle registration and **\$35.00 cash only**. Your sponsor should be able to direct you to it. Keep in mind, there is a dress code at the Hacienda. You will be sent away if you are in shorts, tank tops, flip flops, etc. (It is usually just easiest to do all your business there in your CG uniform.)

** Please ask your sponsor and/or contact Sector Legal Office (787-729-2370) to find out about **shipping a 2nd vehicle to PR**. Please be aware that the cost to ship the 2nd vehicle is "out of pocket" & BEFORE you ship contact SSJ Legal to ensure you receive accurate information and assistance to avoid paying taxes associated with the 2nd vehicle.**

Set up TRICARE Overseas

-- ASAP-- Fill out your TRICARE overseas form and sign up for a PCM through **Nelida Lazu** 787-729-2334, Beneficiary Service Rep., at Sector San Juan in the medical offices.

Household Goods

You can contact the Transportation Assistant at Sector San Juan, **Mr. Tom Velez at 787-729-2316** for more information about whether your household goods shipment has arrived to the island, when to expect arrival (it usually takes 30-60 days) and arranging delivery. It is wise to touch base with the shipping company often to check the arrival of your household goods.

Getting mail in PR

For mail delivery before you have a place of residence you can have your mail forwarded to the base:

USCG RIO PONCE
Your Name and Rate
41 Calle Bonaire
Ponce, PR 00716

A lot of places will not ship to PR or they charge an arm and a leg. If you have Amazon Prime they will ship to PR for free and rather quickly. If you want to order something online and shipping costs are too high or they won't ship to PR send the package to a family member in the states and have them put it in a USPS flat rate box and ship it to PR. It's the cheapest way to go.

Living on the Economy

No government housing is available in the Ponce area. Electric bills can be quite high and the language barrier can be tough at times. Make sure to get a good landlord and lease. Make sure to bring or email your lease to the lawyer (Mr. Jose Suarez 787-729-2370) at SSJ to look it over before signing. You can look for places on <http://www.clasificadosonline.com> I would recommend getting a realtor to show you around. Make sure that you are located in a safe neighborhood, gated communities are always the best. If you want to live within a 30 min drive to Ponce, check out houses on the outskirts of Ponce, Coto Laurel or Juana Diaz. If you prefer the beach life and don't mind a longer commute, check out the west side of the island near Cabo Rojo.

Two realtors we recommend working with:

Ponce Properties- <http://www.poncepropertiespr.com>

Realtor: Evelyn P. Antommattei (787) 384-1981

Century 21 Ponce- <http://www.century21ponce.com>

Realtor: Carmen Velázquez (787) 510-9153

Child Care and Schooling

The Caribbean School

The Caribbean School is the only accredited English language school recognized by the DOD in Southern Puerto Rico. The DOD will pay the tuition, fees, and mileage for active duty dependents 4 years and older. The Caribbean School offers:

- A written curriculum Pre-K to 12th grade
- State of the art computer instruction facility which includes two laboratories with 25 computers per laboratory.
- Library facilities with increased teaching and research space including expanded book and computer research stations.
- State of the art science facilities which include four up to date laboratories.
- Smart boards in the classrooms.
- The finest school sports pavilions in southern Puerto Rico.
- Spanish learning class.

<http://www.caribbeanschool.org>

The DOD contact for this area is:

Pam Pagan (787) 707-4621

Pam.Pagan@am.dodea.edu

Daycare

Childcare for children under 4 years of age can be supplemented by the Child Care Subsidy Program. The daycare must have a letter of accreditation or have a child care provider's license to qualify for the program.

More information and the application process can be found at:

http://financeweb.gsa.gov/childcare_portal/childcare_coastguard_process

<U:\2014 Child Care Subsidy Program Update.doc>

Medical Care in PR

Disclaimer: If you or one of your family members has a medical condition, PR may not be the place for you.

Military personnel go to Sector San Juan for all medical and dental care and referrals. Dependents will receive a local PCM through the Tricare representative.

No Fluoride in the water in PR

As outlined by the American Dental Association (ADA) guidelines, the SSJ Dental Officer recommends fluoride drops (for infants) or chewable tablets. Both the tablets and the drops require a prescription that can be obtained from the pediatrician or from the dentist. Based on demand, the SSJ Pharmacy may make fluoride available for dependents.

Topical fluoride is also beneficial for teeth that are already present in the mouth. Two main sources of topical fluoride are fluoridated toothpaste and fluoride-containing mouth rinses (ex. ACT) that do not contain alcohol. These can be purchased over the counter at any pharmacy, most grocery stores, and the Commissary.

Auto and Renters Insurance

USAA will insure your auto (very expensive) but will not insure renters if the member is below an E7. If you are not insured with USAA check with your company to make sure that they will insure you while you are stationed in PR. Popular alternatives here are Seguros Multiples <http://www.seguros multiples.com> and Universal Insurance <http://www.universalpr.com>.

Shopping in Ponce

Ponce is the second largest city in Puerto Rico. Most major shopping chains can be found right here in the area. Ponce houses the Plaza del Caribe mall, Caribbean Cinemas, Home Depot, Wal-Mart (Target department stores unfortunately are not located on the island), PetSmart, K-mart, Marshalls, Burlington Coat Factory, Rooms to Go, Toys R Us, Sams Club, Office Depot, Pep Boys, etc.

Major food chains are also available in the area: P.F. Changs, Macaroni Grill, Longhorn, Panda Express, Sizzlers, Pizza Hut, and Chili's. Along with fast food chains at every corner: McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's, Taco Maker, Taco Bell, El Meson, Subway, Church's Chicken, etc.

The local cuisine consists of rice and beans, léchon (pork), carne (meat), pollo (chicken), and lots of plantains. The food here is delicious and you typically get a lot of food for a good price.

Most cell phone companies do work here just fine. T-Mobile, AT&T, Sprint, and Virgin Mobile. Verizon is the exception here and does not work well. Cell phone companies do not charge extra for phone service in Puerto Rico.

Personal Firearms

You may choose to bring personal firearms to Puerto Rico; however, they are NOT authorized to be stored within the SSJ base armory. Obtaining a permit to carry or even own a firearm in Puerto Rico is extremely difficult. If you own firearms we highly recommend that you leave them stateside in a secure location.

Spouse's club

The Spouse's Club located in San Juan would like to extend you a very warm welcome to Puerto Rico. The Spouses Club usually meets once monthly, it is open to ALL USCG active duty spouses. The club plans various community activities such as community clean-ups, wine tasting, holiday events & charitable functions. We encourage everyone to get involved and play an active part in making our community a great place to live. The CG Airsta in Aguadilla also has a spouses club if interested.

Fort Buchanan

Fort Buchanan is the only active U.S. Army installation in Puerto Rico located in the Metropolitan area of San Juan (about an hour and a half drive from Ponce). The MAIN GATE is nearest to the PX/Commissary and Gas Station and is open 24 hours/day. The golf gate/back gate is accessed from Hwy 20 and open 5am to 9pm M-TH. The back gate is closed Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Holidays.

PX – “Exchange” – Department store, also offers check cashing (up to \$300) near customer service.

Commissary – Grocery store (check here first! some items are cheaper than at PX), **closed on Mondays.** There are **NO VISITORS** allowed in the Fort Buchanan commissary.

PXtra – Includes things not found at PX like furniture, appliances, lawn/gardening, rugs, pet items and toys, liquor/beer/wine, propane gas tanks, 5 gallon water jugs & refills.

Gas Station – Located across from Commissary near Main Gate, pay at the pump with credit card, offers oil changes, & you can purchase tires with a lifetime guarantee.

Lending Closet – Fort Buchanan can sometimes lend you household item “packages” to “hold you over” until your household goods arrive. Call them at 787-707-3697 or 787-707-3682 to see what is available for borrowing.

Fort Buchanan Welcome Center – Here you can change/update DEERS info and obtain an ID card by appointment only. Appointments can be made via website:

[https://rapidsappointments.dmdc.osd.mil/\(X\(1\)S\(uoni25jnwha2tgkhz3y1e0bc\)\)/appointment/building.aspx?BuildingId=217&AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1](https://rapidsappointments.dmdc.osd.mil/(X(1)S(uoni25jnwha2tgkhz3y1e0bc))/appointment/building.aspx?BuildingId=217&AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1)

Golf Course - Kids 12 & under golf free!

Bowling Alley

Library – Weekly story time, borrow movies (DVD & VHS), it is also a great resource for music, closed Sundays. Bring copy of military orders to obtain a library card

Veterinary clinic – Mon & Wed 8:30am-2pm / Thurs 8:30am-Noon.

Building 676 787-707-2038

*Pay by cash or check only

Rodriguez Health Clinic - 787-707-2039 - Some prescription medications available (& free!)

Inside the building with the Exchange there is a **Food Court, Barber Shop, Beauty Salon, Hertz Rentals, Optometrist, and a GNC**. There is also a **Car Dealership** next to the Exchange.

EDUCATIONAL & DEVELOPMENTAL INTERVENTION SERVICES (EDIS) – Helps families who have questions/concerns about their child’s development (from birth to age 36 months); EDIS can provide referrals to physical, occupational & speech therapists as well as other specialists. No cost for military families. Families that are in the process of moving to Puerto Rico with children with special needs should contact them to request services. The contact for this program is María de los A. Ortiz, EDIS Program Manager/Occupational Therapist Rodriguez Army Health Clinic Fort Buchanan, 00934 Office: (787) 707-2167/ 2165
<http://www.buchanan.army.mil/edis/home.html>.

Post Chapel - Offers Protestant & Catholic services in English. There is a sign outside chapel with services times.

Automotive Skill Vehicle Center– 787-707-3972
Emissions test, fix flat tires; must wear closed shoes to change your own oil and work on your car. They also provide towing services. (cash/check).

Waterspout – Water park. Military family annual membership is only \$50 (cash/check).

Physical Fitness Center – Ball courts, group exercise classes, indoor cycling, etc.

Child & Youth Services (Youth Sports) *Army Community Services – For current events info at Fort B, download “MWR Caribbean” newsletter:
<http://www.buchanan.army.mil/MWR/default.html>

This document is NOT meant to deal with every possible detail or scenario about life in Puerto Rico. Rather, it is for you to begin to understand and prepare yourself for life in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean. We know that you are going to have many questions and we hope this document has provided the answers to most of them however, we encourage you to contact your **SPONSOR or UNIT OMBUDSMAN for any additional questions or concerns you might have**.

Sincerely,
Coasties and Spouses of RIO Ponce!