

TOURISM

Unofficial web sites available to help visitors plan vacations

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Although the Puerto Rico Tourism Company will not launch its interactive web site until next month, potential visitors to the island will have no lack of resources online to plan their trip.

The Tourism Company will be throwing its hat into the ring by launching an interactive, \$200,000 web site (<http://www.prtourism.com>) on Dec. 15, which offers electronic postcards and virtual tours.

But there already are many unofficial sites offering pictures, information on tourist attractions, electronic postcards, recipes and other sights and sounds of Puerto Rico.

One such site is Escape to Puerto Rico (<http://escape.topuertorico.com>), operated by an organization known as, logically, Escape to Puerto Rico.

The Escape page offers Puerto Rico E-cards, an electronic postcard site that allows users to send pictures of different Puerto Rico sights and attractions, along with a brief message, to friends via e-mail.

Escape also challenges users to the Coquí Quiz, with multiple choice questions regarding the history of Puerto Rico.

A very complete listing of hotels, along with photos of some properties, is available at Where to Stay in Puerto Rico (<http://www.where2stay.com/islands/islands/puertorico.html>).

Tourists looking for the best food on the island can consult Puerto Rico Let's Dine (<http://www.letsdine.com>), which lists restaurants and *miesones gastronómicos*, which carry the Tourism Company seal of approval. If they want to work off all those rich meals, they can go on the Puerto Rico Dance Tour (<http://www.puertoricodancetour.com>).

The Puerto Rico Hotel and Tourism Association (<http://www.prhta.org>), is online and offers an A-to-Z listing of its members and includes nearly 50 links to hotels, *paradores*, restaurants, tour operator, car rental companies and other related sites.

The Puerto Rico Convention Bureau has information for meeting planners at its page (www.discoverpuertorico.com/prcb).

On top of that, more and more hotels are going online, and the airlines and travel services have been online for the last few years.

Puerto Rico Internet Corp. (<http://gaia.gutierrez.com>) sponsors a tourism page (www.turismopr.com), although it hopes to guide tourists mostly through its search engine, Wepa!. Wepa! (<http://www.wepa.com>) focuses on finding sites originating from and related to Puerto Rico.

"Every hotel [and tourist attraction] will eventually have a web page, and it will be easier for us to provide links to it from Wepa!," said Carlos Gutiérrez, of Puerto Rico Internet Corp.

Gutiérrez said roughly 70 percent of island hotels are on the Web, either themselves or through parent companies.

Travel planning on the Web has been big business, not only for hotels, but for virtual agents such as Travelocity (<http://www.travelocity.com>) and Microsoft's Expedia (<http://www.expedia.com>). Expedia has reported \$12 million in profits for the month of January, and Travelocity has reported up to \$3 million per week for the same month.

It is expected that the travel industry will account for 35 percent of online sales by the year 2002, according Datamonitor, making it the single largest category of products sold over the Internet in the next century.

There also are many web sites related to the island that are not sponsored by hotel, government, industry or others looking to do business. Some pages promote



Puerto Rico as a labor of love.

One such site, Welcome to Puerto Rico, is by Magaly Rivera, who began her web page (<http://welcome.topuertorico.org>) as a geography class project in 1995 at the University of Puerto Rico in Ponce. Born in Río Piedras and with family now in Coamo, Rivera, 28, lives in Illinois and works as a web developer.

The page offers tourist information, photographs and a profile on all 78 municipalities — and even Mona Island — that offers information on where to stay, eat, see and do.

Welcome also has recipes, history and culture relat-

ing to the island.

When she began the page in 1995, Rivera said the only site with information on Puerto Rico that she found was one Hewlett-Packard has for its local facilities. Even though she already has received her A for the class project, Rivera said she has other motivations for keeping it going.

"I would say [my motivation is] the people who send messages telling me to keep it up, and the joy that it caused, and knowing that I have created something that no other organizations or individuals have been able to create," Rivera said.