

BEACH QUEST

One man, one week, one goal. Find the ultimate strand among the trove of gorgeous beaches on **Vieques and Culebra**.

Story by David Swanson ✨ Photos by Zach Stovall



PLAYA ZONI,
CULEBRA

I navigate my Jeep along an empty **country road**, meandering up and down hills until I hit a dead end next to a pair of houses. The young couple chatting on the **front porch** of the house on the left break their conversation as I pull into their de facto front yard. The girl gives me an appraising look. She knows where I'm headed. "Park next to the Bronco," she calls out, waving toward an **unmarked trailhead**. "It's 30 minutes down, 40 minutes back." I follow the dirt path into the forest and begin a steady descent. **Waist-high grass** wet with dew brushes my legs; last night's spider webs still span the trail. Where the path turns rocky, a **brown snake slithers** into the grass. Where the trail becomes a ravine, a bus-size sinkhole imposes a detour through a **tangle of vines**. The purr of surf beckons in the distance. A hole in the vegetation teases with a **glimpse of rolling sea**. Suddenly the trail opens onto a voluptuous expanse of beach stretching down the coast for nearly half a mile. It's almost noon, and there's **not another soul around** — no footprint in the sand, no building rising on the hillside, no sail punctuating the horizon. I am completely, blissfully alone. I stop, riveted to the spot. **This is the one.**

NO ONE FINDS THE PERFECT BEACH purely by accident. Each of us keeps our own mental checklist: Chaise lounges and bar service at the water? Check. A lively crowd and windsurfers pitching on the waves? Check. Gentle surf and a shady cove? Check.

The strand that calls to me involves the element of discovery, the thrill that comes from exploring a landscape that has been ignored by the guidebooks, the developers and perhaps even the local population. It's the kind of place that — for a few minutes, an hour, a day — I can arrogantly call my own. The safari to such lavish isolation is half the pleasure.

My previous visits to Vieques and Culebra were brief; no safaris allowed. But each inevitable stumble onto a deserted shore left me wanting more, every departure sparked a vow: Get back here, find the ultimate beach.

Amazingly, and despite their reputation for having pristine beaches, these two small isles lolling off the eastern coast of Puerto Rico have yet to taste mass tourism. The bombing ranges of the U.S. Navy kept most of both off-limits to vacationers until 2003, when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service took over and designated the land a national wildlife refuge. With developers helpfully stymied by the government, these shores have remained largely untouched. Virgin territory ripe for my quest.





PLAYA GRANDE,
VIEQUES



The **strand that speaks**
to me is the kind of place
I can **call my own.**

NAVIO BEACH,
VIEQUES

Vieques is the larger of the two, so I opt to tackle it first. But I land in a squall, the forecast promises showers throughout the day, and when I check in at the new W Retreat & Spa, I'm told the boat used to explore remote beaches has wandered onto an offshore reef. It's an inauspicious start. The W is a swank place to be marooned, but as I contemplate the heavy surf rinsing the covelike beaches fronting the resort, I spy the fleet of black rental Jeeps and remember why I'm here.

I pick up a picnic basket from the resort's cafe, climb in my rental and head toward the south coast. I had asked around at the W and been tipped off that Navio is popular with expats, so I decide to check it out, along with three other promising candidates.

Starting at Playa Grande, I work my way east, hitting Sun Bay, Media Luna and Navio in succession. The squall lessens, then fortuitously clears up completely, allowing me to explore each strand. Playa Grande is long and straight, with coarse honey-colored sand; Sun Bay offers bathtub-calm water and a cluster of paso fino horses mowing through the grass that encloses the beach. Following a dirt road from the latter strand, I indulge my bare feet in a walk on talcum-soft sand at the aptly named half-moon of Media Luna, then circle around to Navio, where I find no expats (or anybody else, for that matter) but pearlescent sand and waves ideal for body surfing. All are nice but not what I'm looking for. My tally for the day comes up short: Four great beaches, but no knockouts.

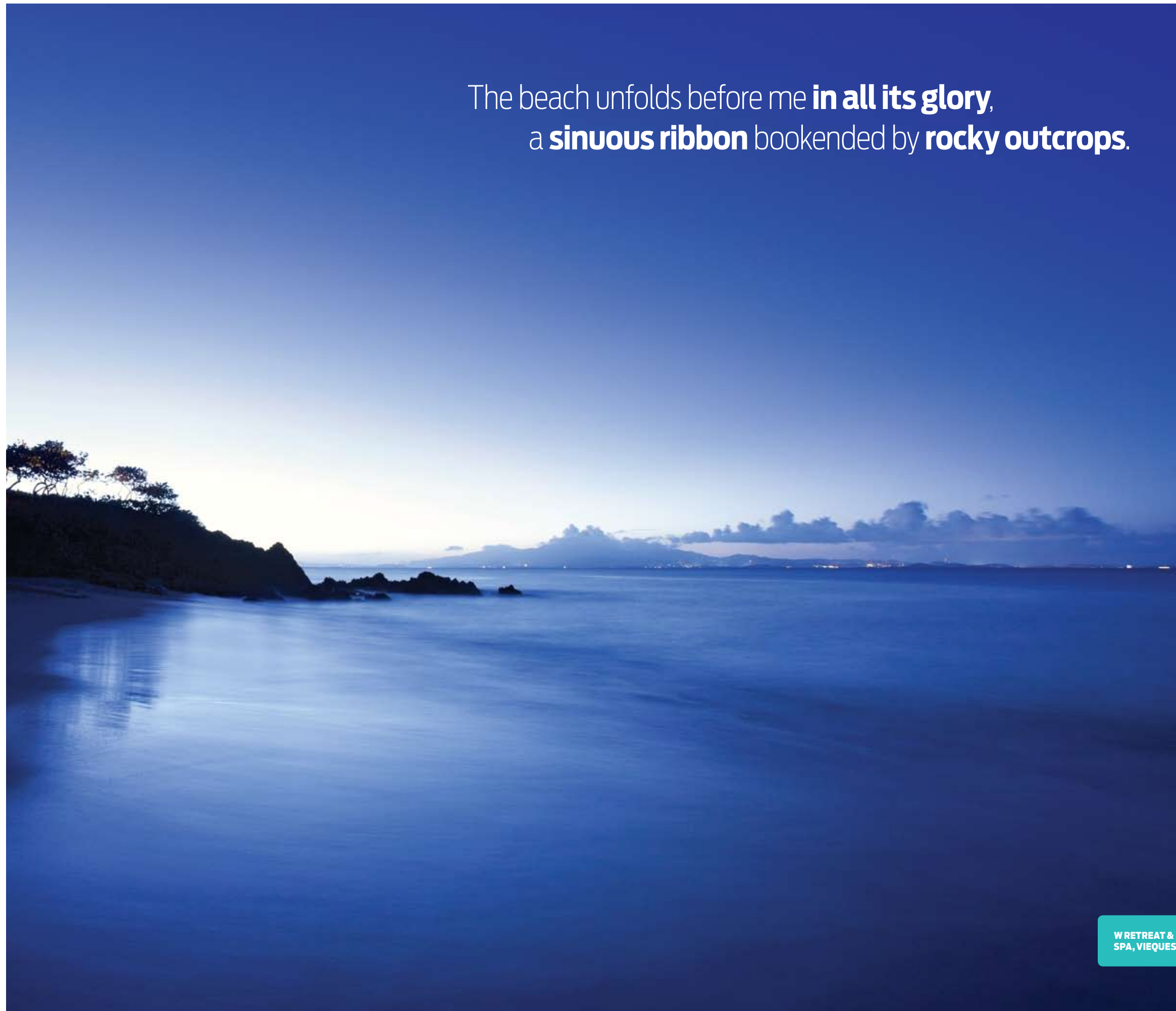
CANVASSING THE MAP I'VE SPREAD across the Jeep's steering wheel, I note that Vieques is almost twice the size of neighboring St. Thomas, USVI. I need to get busy.

My eye keeps returning to the island's east end and its miles upon miles of restricted coastline. I had counted on the W's boat to ferry me there — civilians can access the beaches only by sea, and then no farther inland than the high-water mark — but it's still stuck on a reef. I'm tempted to ignore the warnings about exploring by land, but the fact is that, however pristine Vieques appears, sections are still riddled with munitions.

"They're some of the most beautiful beaches in the eastern Caribbean — and I've seen 'em all," Capt. Bill Barton had told me earlier on the phone. Bill — my plan B after learning of the W boat's fate — runs sail-and-snorkel trips to Bahia Icacos, in the protected zone on the northeast coast, but can't fit me in on short notice. Next trip I'll call him first, but for now I'll have to stick to the beaches more traveled on the southeastern coast.

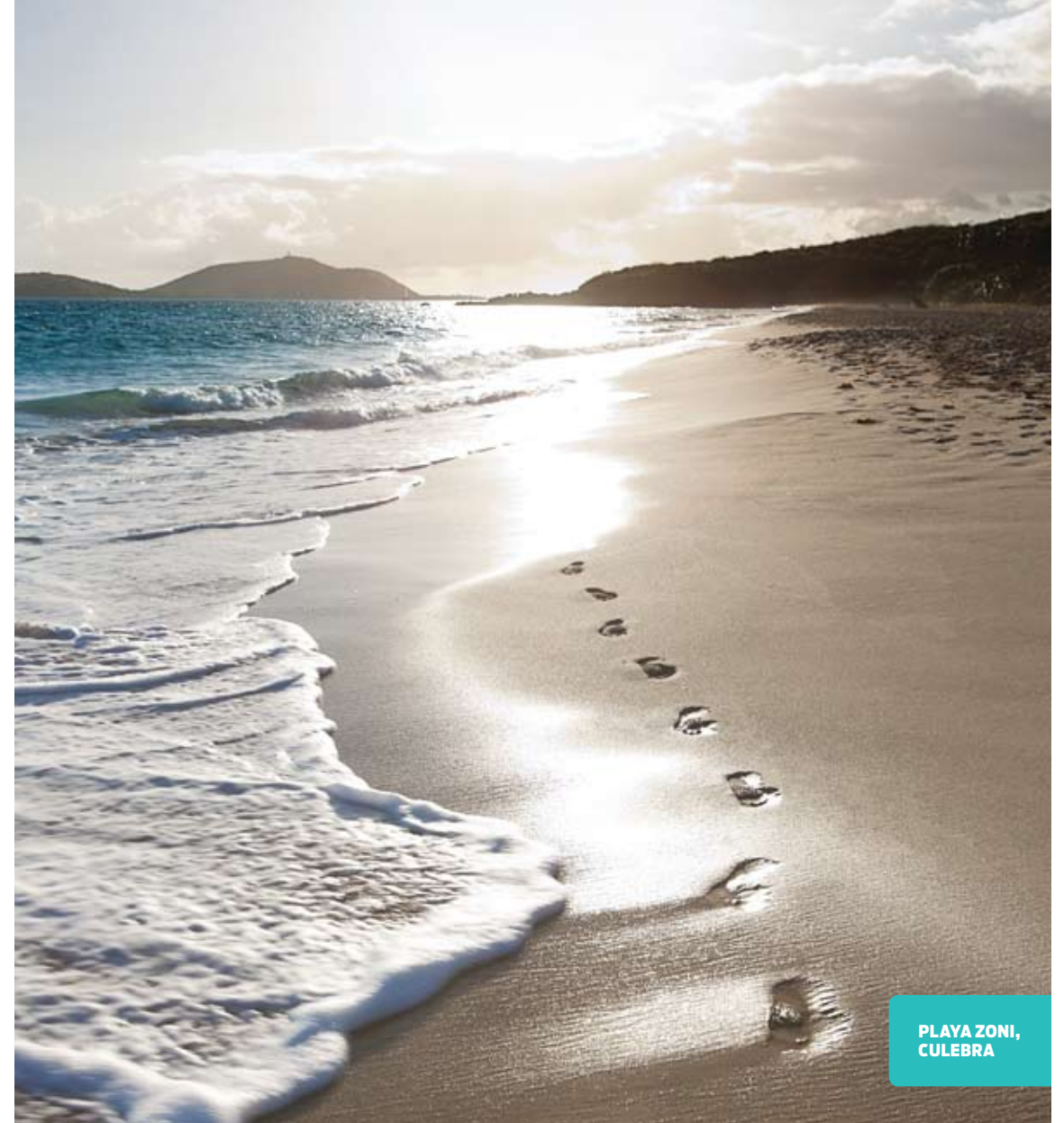
I pull up next to the whimsically decorated Sol Food truck that marks the entrance to the refuge, order water and a pair of *carnitas* tacos to go and head into the Navy's old stamping ground. Two-plus miles and countless speed bumps later, I arrive at Red Beach. It's got the easygoing vibe I'm looking for, and the rocks at the south end have drawn a school of snorkelers, but I'm surprised (and a little disappointed) by how busy it is.

The beach unfolds before me **in all its glory,**
a **sinuous ribbon** bookended by **rocky outcrops.**





PLAYA FLAMENCO,
CULEBRA



PLAYA ZONI,
CULEBRA

The dirt lane to Secret Beach, on the other hand, piques my interest. Overgrown thorn bushes encroach on the road, giving the impression that I've stumbled onto something clandestine. I don't even mind when I miss the unmarked turnoff to the beach and hear the screech of thorns on my rental's shiny new doors. The four cars already parked here tell me I'm not alone, but when I trundle down to the shore, I find my fellow beachgoers are mostly tucked between stands of brush. It's definitely private, a little hedonistic even. I add points for the gentle surf but take away some for the unkempt look of the natural debris littering the waterline. I've found the first contender.

My luck holds on the road east, which parallels Blue Beach. Through gaps in the thickets of sea grapes, I see flashes of glittering sand; from the turnoff, the beach unfolds before me in all its glory, a sinuous ribbon bookended by a pair of rocky outcrops. Kayakers slice through the water toward Isla Chiva, a little cay within swimming distance. One couple wear birthday suits;

another shade their baby from the sun. I don't mind the company. The water is seductively placid, the sand velvety. Blue Beach is a sweet dream. Two for three, not bad. I'm getting closer. And there's still Culebra.

AS THE PLANE DESCENDS, A GLIMPSE out the window reveals tantalizingly isolated reefs in a Windex-blue sea. I'd love to explore them, but that's a safari for another trip.

Culebra's small footprint and lacy coastline remind me of St. Barts, albeit without the chichi touches. Although the military left here before Vieques, the tourism infrastructure remains remarkably simple, consisting mostly of mom and pop inns clustered around the settlement of Dewey. This is where Puerto Ricans come for weekend getaways. Mostly they go to Playa Flamenco, an astonishing semicircle of pillow-soft sand. It's positively Rubenesque in breadth and more than a mile long, so despite its having the largest crowds I've seen on this

trip, there are plenty of open patches to call my own. At the far end, I see the most visible sign yet of the military's legacy: a rusting tank at the water's edge that appears to have become an informal community art project.

The beach is gorgeous and has an almost palpable energy, but with lifeguard stations and an assortment of kiosks offering snacks, drinks and all manner of beach gear for rent, Flamenco is hardly undiscovered.

My map shows a short trail leading from Flamenco to Carlos Rosario. It takes 20 minutes, enough of a hike to create a pleasing sense of remoteness. The sand is patchy above the waterline, but I'm more interested in the reef jutting into the waves. It's denuded close to shore, but farther out I encounter coral gardens and dozens of huge parrotfish darting between caves and ledges. Not my favorite, but a worthy place for a late morning snorkel.

As I make my way to Playa Zoni that afternoon, I'm struck by the realization that, on both Vieques and Culebra, each beach has set the bar a bit higher. With every stroll in the surf, every safari to (or past) a hard-to-find turnoff, every plunge into rolling waves, I've added yet another attribute to my standard of "ideal." I wonder if it's even possible to recognize the ultimate beach in a place known for its abundance of picture-perfect beaches. Still, I think I'll know it when I see it.

Zoni does not disappoint. It's utterly untouched, a long carpet of sand offering the sweet solitude I crave. I stand waist-deep in water, fish inspecting my toes. When the angle of the sun suggests it's close to quitting time, I'm the only one here, and I'm not leaving. Zoni is a find. I would call the competition here and now, but the checklist intrudes — what would it be like on a busy day?

MY LAST NIGHT ON CULEBRA, I venture to Club Seabourne and regale owners Cecilia Rodriguez and Jose Marti with my quest, floating Zoni as my tentative pick. Cecilia agrees, but Jose demurs. "Playa Brava is my favorite," he says.

Wait. I thought Brava was inaccessible except by boat, and my luck with boats has been poor. Jose smiles, then details the route to the unmarked road that leads there, the one that dead-ends next to a pair of houses.

"Then you walk. And when you arrive, you'll see it — so wild and beautiful."

Every great quest, it seems, comes down to the wire. With only a few hours before my flight back to San Juan, I take a chance on Brava. Following Jose's directions, I brave the sinkhole and the snake, sticking close to the path worn through the brush (Culebra has its fair share of unexploded ordnance too). I notice deer tracks running from a lagoon backing the beach. I kick off my shoes and step onto the gingery sand. It's clean and supple, not powder-fine, as some might demand, but ideal to me. I stroll into the surf, without another human soul in view, to enjoy a perfect morning on my ultimate beach. *



PLAYA BRAVA,
CULEBRA