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# I. THE COUNTRY

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## Location and Geography

Puerto Rico is the easternmost island of the Greater Antilles and lies on the same latitude as Jamaica, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The island is slightly smaller than Jamaica, measuring 152 km in length (east to west) by 56 km in width, with a total area of 8 897 km<sup>2</sup> (2 250 000 acres).

Like all of the larger Caribbean islands, Puerto Rico was formed volcanically, and rugged mountains, the remains of volcanoes that have been long inactive, cover the interior of the island. The highest peaks (some reaching over 1 200 m) are found in the south central area.

Fertile coastal plains provide the island with good agricultural lands, the most important of which is a 20 km wide band stretching the full length of the north coast.

## Historical Background

The island of Puerto Rico was discovered by Christopher Columbus on his second voyage to the New World in 1493, and subsequently named San Juan Bautista. The city that then served as the island's only port of entry was named Puerto Rico ("rich port"). In time, these names were reversed, the island being called Puerto Rico, and the port city San Juan. The island was first colonized in 1509 by a group of settlers under the command of Juan Ponce de Leon, a companion of Columbus and the discoverer of Florida. He settled at Caparra, across the bay from the present old San Juan. As the island's first governor, Ponce was hospitably received by the original inhabitants, the Arawaks, but the Indians quickly died off from European diseases against which they had no immunity.

Because of the island's strategic location at the gate of Spain's Latin American empire, it played a crucial role in defending that empire against competing European powers. Although military forts at San Juan were first constructed by the British, the island was never occupied by any European power except Spain. It remained a Spanish dependency until 1898, when it was ceded to the United States at the close of the Spanish-American War under the provisions of the Treaty of Paris.