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Destination: **PUERTO RICO**

Look Ma, it's raining iguanas!

Eco-adventure in the Puerto Rico rain forest is fun and educational

By **KATE POCOCK** -- Special to Sun Media

Families were sunbathing and splashing around the pool at the Westin Rio Mar Beach resort in Puerto Rico when suddenly, a large iguana fell about 10 metres from the sky and landed poolside, kerplunk, on the concrete.

Apparently, these native critters sometimes sleep up in the palm trees. This one must have fallen out of bed. Everyone waited to see if he was destined to sleep in his own Westin heavenly bed -- for real. But no. Stunned for a moment, he shook himself off and scurried into the bushes.

Dozens of iguanas of all sizes roam this oceanside property much to the delight of guests. In fact, every morning at 11, there's a live iguana encounter.

A staff member leads guests to a bridge, claps his hands as a lunch bell and lets the kids throw lettuce down to the reptiles on the riverbank below.

It's no surprise that this property offers close up encounters with the dinosaur-like iguanas, birds and the chirp of the tiny tree frog because just minutes away is the largest and most accessible rain forest in the entire U.S. National Forest System.



In addition to close-up encounters with wildlife, the resort offers children's activities and a family package. -- Kate Pocock photos

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About an hours drive east of San Juan and almost at the back door of the resort, this 11.3 hectares forest is worth a day of exploration. Known officially as the Caribbean National Forest, its more interesting name is El Yunque.

Legend has it that Yukiyu, the god of powerful forces, protected Puerto Rico from assaults by the nasty god Huracan (Hurricane) in the form of a rain forest mountain.

Just what exactly is a rain forest your kids might wonder? It's a forest that grows in constantly wet conditions. Sometimes the sun filters through the ferns and foliage, but then without warning the rain descends to make it even more lush, humid, misty and magical.

As one of our group said, "It's like a Honey I Shrunk the Kids experience." The plants are so big, the trees so tall and the forest so vast that anyone feels like a miniature person.



IGUANAS MAKE regular appearances around the grounds at the Westin Rio Mar in Puerto Rico.

Before you set out to explore this vast "forest of clouds," stop at the El Portal Rain Forest Center, an impressive treehouse-like museum at the entrance.

Rare parrot

Ask about the English language showings of the film about the forest and the rare Puerto Rican parrot that lives there.

You might also want to take advantage of one of the Forest Adventure Tours where a guide will lead one-hour walks to

point out the "Live and Die" plant -- touch it and the plant shrinks instantly -- or a large breadfruit hanging from a tree, the plant that inspired the voyage of The Bounty for Captain Bligh and his mutinous crew.

On one outing, a guide showed us the river rocks that when wet, acted like paint brushes. We had a blast painting red, brown and black stripes all over us like the Taino native peoples used to do to ward off insects and evil spirits.

An easy hike for kids is down the Big Tree Trail to the La Mina Falls, where you can have a cool dip in the splashing water. It should take about an hour round trip.

Because this misty place, a United Nations World Biosphere Reserve, receives about 635 cm of rain each year (resulting in more than 100 billion gallons of precipitation), bring rain gear and rubber-soled shoes for the kids. The limestone paths, even though embedded with stones, can be wet and slippery.

For more information, call 787-888-5646 or visit fs.fed.us/r8/caribbean/special.htm. To hear forest sounds of birds or the chirp of the tiny tree frog coqui, visit <http://welcome.topuertorico.org/reference/yunque.html>.

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