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In Puerto Rico, the kids are all right

By John Briley, Published: October 19

I see her as I step out from among the sea grape trees and onto the golden sands: tanned, blond and bikini-clad, she is walking toward me. And she possesses the one characteristic I'm yearning to see in a woman on the beach: a little kid.

I'm in Rincon, on the west coast of [Puerto Rico](#), with my 3-year-old son, Kai — just the two of us, for six days — and my best hope for doing anything besides parenting lies in other people's children. If I can find playmates for Kai, I might sneak in [a surf session](#), a jog or more than a paragraph of uninterrupted reading.

Hey, I'm all for parenting. But does every vacation with a kid need to be defined by the antecedent "family"? My hope is to balance some of what I want to do with some of Kai's demands, just as I would with any friend with an unnatural affection for rubber dinosaurs and sand-castle construction. I'm doubling down by traveling without my wife, who couldn't break away from work for this trip. My main rule: no resort day care (too easy).

After a three-hour drive from [San Juan](#), we pull into Rincon, which tumbles from a blunt, hilly peninsula into the sea. The town's beaches are renowned for surfing, although those on the sheltered southern side are often glassily calm even when swell is pumping just around the bend.

It takes me a while to orient myself: The main plaza is a few blocks from the coast, and many beaches are separated by winding roads that snake uphill. But most eventually merge with Route 413, which runs along a ridge smattered with surf-themed shops, inns and restaurants.

Along one crooked road we find our lodging, the Boarding House, a pleasant guesthouse in an otherwise residential neighborhood. It's also a surf school, with boards piled in the driveway. Before even finding our room, we ascend to the rooftop deck for a view of lush forest cascading to the sea, which looks to be a long walk away.

But we set out along a narrow road that ends at bikini-girl-and-her-son beach, known properly as Pools.

"This is Robert," the blonde says, patting her son's head. "We've met another family with a boy named Kai! He's 5."

Her name is Michelle, and she's from Ventura, Calif. Along with her boyfriend, Rob, 6-year-old



Robert and her friend Jessica, she's renting a stately pink house right on the beach. The cove is idyllic in appearance, but it isn't Rincon's best surf break, plus the rocky waters discourage kid swimming.

Then, as if reading a script from the vacation gods, Michelle says, "We've been taking turns surfing and watching the kids. If you want to join us, we usually head out around 9."

Kai and I walk across a street overhung with tropical vegetation and dine at a thatch-roofed cafe and hotel (also called Pools), where the portions are small but the rum punch is redemptive. The bonus is the adjacent swimming pool, which occupies Kai and a few other kids while I have my second uninterrupted adult conversation of the afternoon with an entrepreneur from San Juan and his wife. Not bad for Day 1.

I carry Kai most of the way back up the steep road to our guesthouse, but it's happy work. The yodels of coqui frogs ride on a dusk breeze, the smell of nectar drips from the trees and my weary boy lays his head on my shoulder. We are both dead asleep by 7:30 p.m.

A father-son day

In the sparkling morning sunshine, we open the door to our efficiency to find a cat, possibly stray, which Kai immediately befriends. As I pack for our day — stegosaurus, triceratops, T. rex (and maybe sunscreen?) — boy pulls tail, cat bites boy, crying ensues, prompting soothing laced with genuine worry (bleeding wound!) and the eventual evaporation of 45 precious vacation minutes. All this, mind you, before coffee.

Next up is a strident campaign for a screening of "Curious George II: Follow That Monkey" on the iPad, which culminates in my buying the movie on iTunes so that we can take it mobile, vs. relying on WiFi to stream it over Netflix. (If you're baffled by that sentence, I am so envious.)

To really check out the town and beaches, we have to drive. We stop on Route 413 at the Banana Dang coffeehouse, a Rincon icon with a laid-back vibe. The coffee is wonderfully strong, and I need the boost when Kai pitches a tantrum after spilling the last two ounces of his smoothie. The only consolation is to buy another one, of which he takes one sip before declaring that he's done.

By the time we arrive at Pools beach, Michelle and crew are gone. But there's a Puerto Rican girl about Kai's age and her dad, who sits on a shaded rock making cellphone calls while the kids play around a tide pool. Somewhere, parents are surfing while boys frolic, but I can't in good conscience shove my kid back into the car for a wild goose chase. I unfurl a towel and a New Yorker magazine and settle in.

I decide that this will be a Kai day, a wise move given that Kai had long ago decided the same thing. For lunch we drive up the hill to the El Batey grill, an outdoor counter where chef Carla grills a juicy chicken kebab as we gaze down to the white-capped sea and the rocky silhouette of Desecheo, an uninhabited island 13 miles offshore. Carla says that she regularly spots whales from here during the winter migration.

Our reverie is broken by a rumbling cavalcade of motorcycles, then a pickup loaded with surfboards and finally a dude on a long skateboard, in a focused crouch, pointing straight down the precipitous road. It's all part of Rincon's proudly burnished surf town vibe, spiced with a defiant Puerto Rican edge.

"We don't want to be a state," Sonia Berrios tells me as I browse through her tropical boutique, Caribbean Casuals, sandwiched between a surf shop and an open-air bar at Maria's, the town's

main surf break. “We are a commonwealth. Once you become a state, you give up all your culture and language. Who would want all that?”

As I struggle for an answer, a clothing carousel starts to shudder, not from seismic action but because my son has crawled under the hanging beachwear and is shaking the rack. Sonia is not amused, so I drop to the dusty floor to retrieve the cackling Kai.

We drive south through bucolic fields that rise from the sea into forested hills. Unimpressed by the horses grazing in the billowing grass, Kai asks whether real dinosaurs live here. When I shrug — who can say for sure? — he christens the fields Dino Land.

Smack in the middle of Dino Land, an unmarked dirt track brings us to the best father-son beach we will find. Gently curving and backed by a line of trees, the beach features indented stone formations, worn smooth by the relentless sea, that slope into the clear water like a staircase for very peculiar feet.

We release a crocodile, a tiger and a pachycephalosaurus into a sand pit, drawing a couple of boys over for drive-by play, but nothing lasting enough to allow me the long swim I am craving.

We eventually hit the water together — Kai hugging my head while I struggle to avoid drowning — before repairing to the lone on-site structure, a little lunch shack, where we chow empanadas at a communal picnic table.

Rincon is peppered with spots like this beach, natural beauty left largely natural, with a hint of a rough edge (theft from cars is a minor issue in many of the rutted dirt parking lots) and from what I can tell, locals and visitors are happy to leave the luxury to more snooty Caribbean destinations.

The exception is the far southern edge of town, where the hills flatten out and a string of larger resorts bulge onto the beach. We burn half a day here, playing on a thin, sloping strip of sand in front of the Villa Cofresi resort before poaching a swim in the hotel’s pools.

This isn’t my scene — wrist-banded tourists crowd the bar, hammering cocktails from plastic cups and chattering over blaring tunes — but Kai makes a quick friend of a 4-year-old Puerto Rican boy, and they entertain themselves while the kid’s single mom lofts pointed questions about my marital status and vacation ambitions.

I never get around to stocking our fridge, save for five beers and random leftovers, so we eat out. Our best dinners are at a street-side bar called La Cambija, the Spanish word for the old water tower that stands across the road. The seafood arrives daily and is listed on a chalkboard menu. The grouper kebabs, tuna seviche, beers and succulent fresh watermelon juice conspire with lively regulars, including a brick of a bulldog named Spartacus, to make this our favorite nightspot.

A quest realized

On Day 4 we finally link up with the surfing families on Maria’s Beach. Aside from a shelf of toe-stubbing rock at the water’s edge, it’s a sweet setup: ample shade, room for the kids to play, surfboard rentals and a bar/restaurant across the parking lot.

Shoulder-high rollers break over a reef about 100 yards offshore. The women are surfing and, after a few minutes of pleasantries, the other Kai’s dad, Cameron, offers to watch the kids while I head out.

This is the pinnacle of my quest, and yet when it comes time to leave my child with someone

I've known only a few hours, I hesitate. I amble over to the board rental guy. Yes, he says, totally safe break, perfect conditions today. Take a board. Pay when you return. No stress, man.

I walk back. My Kai ignores my questions — Food? Drink? Pee? Okay if dad goes surfing? — so I shrug at Cameron, tell him to wave his arms like a maniac in case of emergency, and head out.

It's a solid session, and between the swells, I can see Cam from the distance, his non-flailing arms suggesting that all is well. When I return, my Kai hardly notices.

"Your kid is pretty chill," Cameron reports. "We never could have left ours at that age. He would have freaked out."

As the kids climb in a tangle of branches, playfully chased by a surprisingly dexterous dog, I think, "Doubtful." The scene before me — a mellow dad, a trio of shirtless, sandy boys and the sun reclining into its oceanic hammock — is the epitome of community. I'd wager that Cam's Kai at age 3 would have found the same familiar ease that mine did on this day. This mushy musing is quickly nudged aside by another thought: "Why did I come back in? I could have milked another hour of surfing out of this."

I head off to buy beers and ginger ales.

The next day, the other Kai and his family head home, and the swell fades. We run into Michelle, Jessica and the Roberts at the smooth-stone beach, but there's no pressure to take shifts: We hang out, share stories, dip into the calm sea and play with our kids.

Happily.

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