



A view of the neighborhood of La Perla where the video "Suavecito" was recorded in San Juan. — AFP photos



A woman walks up the stairs in the neighborhood of La Perla.



Jose Vazquez (right) takes a photo of his wife Ana Soto in the neighborhood of La Perla.

# Tourists seeking 'Despacito' discover Puerto Rico's La Perla

## 'I totally came for the tourist video'



A man reads a newspaper in the neighborhood of La Perla.



A man takes a selfie with his friends in the neighborhood of La Perla.



A man walks down the stairs in the neighborhood of La Perla.



A woman touches the water of a makeshift pool in the neighborhood of La Perla.

Something unusual is happening in La Perla, a poor barrio clinging to a steep hillside between Old San Juan and the sea where the video for the pop hit "Despacito" was filmed. "The gringos are coming!" Outsiders were afraid to venture in before, but since Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee's megahit, tourists from all over the world are descending on the narrow streets that wind among La Perla's brightly colored houses. "Despacito?" they inquire.

And the barrio's residents obligingly point out the locations where the video was filmed: the rocks facing the sea where Fonsi sings the refrain, the sea wall where ex-Miss Universe Zuleyka Rivera strolls, the little plaza where men play dominoes-the tables and chairs just as they were in the video. With the video on the verge of becoming the most watched on YouTube (2.9 billion visits since January, fast approaching the 2.98 billion record held by Wiz Khalifa's "See You Again"), a barrio once burdened with a bad reputation is now a tourist hot spot.

"I totally came for the tourist video," said Jennifer Adams, a 28-year-old middle school teacher from North Carolina. "I've seen the music video many times and I knew where I needed to go, I got pictures, I tried to dance." As for Rivera's sexy walk by the sea, she laughed and said, "I tried." Her goal now is to learn the song's lyrics so she can sing it in karaoke. Meanwhile, a Swedish woman took pictures of herself in front of Luis's rocks and a Moroccan tourist ambled along "Despacito coast"-as the area around the sea wall has come to be known in tourist brochures. In a recent interview, Fonsi marveled at the song's impact on the non-Spanish speaking public. "The language doesn't matter," he said. "What's important is the flavor, the rhythm, the music."

### 'No monster here'

The video's director, Carlos Perez, said Fonsi and Daddy Yankee "had a very clear vision of what they wanted." "The key words were culture, sensuality, color and dance. What we did in essence was to go film in a barrio that had the qualities that supported what we wanted to do," Perez said. "But the evolution of La Perla begins and ends in La Perla." In fact, residents' efforts to improve their barrio are independent of "Despacito." The song's success is a welcome coincidence that "fell from the sky," said community board president Yashira Gomez.

Old San Juan, with its cobbled streets and colonial buildings, sits on a hill on a walled peninsula. The little houses that make up La Perla are clustered on the other side of the wall, where the sea crashes against the rocks. Its residents have fought tooth and nail to preserve it, and artists like Calle 13, Ismael Rivera and Ruben Blades have dedicated songs to it. With 1,600 inhabitants, it is one of the poorest communities in



A woman takes photos of her two daughters in the neighborhood of La Perla.

San Juan. Drug trafficking largely drives its economy, with the government trying in vain to clear it.

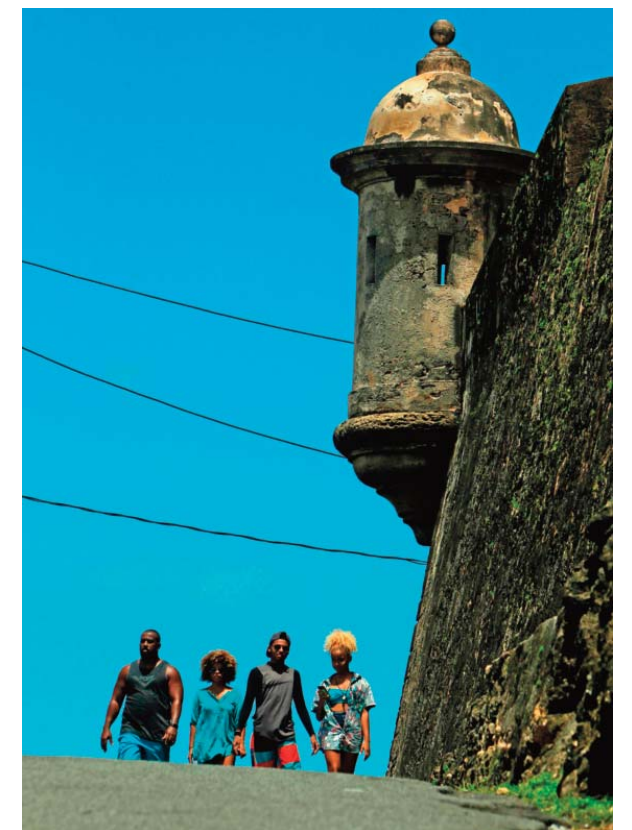
On Yelp, reviewers comment on the dangers outsiders risk going there. "Please don't go there! It is NOT SAFE!" wrote user Gaby G in a three-year-old posting. But that is changing thanks to the efforts of the community, which set up a communal baker, cultivated two vegetable gardens and raised \$80,000 from private donors to paint 402 houses in vivid colors this year. "They always said it was a dangerous barrio because we've been saddled with a history that wasn't the best," said Gomez. "But now you can go in and see that nothing will happen. There is no monster here, no bogeyman, nobody is going to kill you, nobody is going to mug you."

As she spoke, the community board's vice president, Lourdes Lopez, showed a group of tourists around. Later, she explained that the community's next project is to set up a small business offering guided tours. "We take them through the whole community, showing them the most historic things, because we have more history to offer," Lopez said.

### Brand recognition

Hotel occupancy in May rose nine percent compared to the same month last year, but there are still no overall figures to confirm the impression that tourist visits are up, said Jose Izquierdo, executive director of the government's Puerto Rico Tourism Company. Puerto Rico hosted 1.7 million tourists in 2015, six percent of its total GDP, according to the US Senate Finance Committee. But even when official figures are available, statistics won't say how many specifically came for the "Despacito" experience. A bump could also be attributable to the end of last year's Zika crisis.

But Izquierdo is sure that "Despacito" enhanced the island's brand recognition. "All the elements are in place for Puerto Rico to top the list for travelers seeking a Caribbean destination," he told AFP. And that is good news for the US territory, which has been hard hit by a financial crisis that resulted in bankruptcy in May. Marwan Badran, Hotels.com's manager for Latin America, said online searches for hotel rooms in Puerto Rico shot up 45 percent this year. "We often see spikes upwards for locations of hit movies or TV series and celebrity weddings," he said. "Puerto Rico is no different now that Despacito has become the world's most streamed song in history." — AFP



A group of people walk by a 17th Century Spanish Fortress stone walls between El Morro and the fort San Cristobal in the neighborhood of La Perla where the video "Suavecito" was recorded.

## Italian poster for 'Casablanca' attracts \$478,000 at auction

The only known surviving Italian issue poster for the classic movie "Casablanca" has sold for \$478,000 in Dallas at a public auction of vintage movie posters. The firm Heritage Auctions says the price ties a record for the highest amount paid for a movie poster at a public auction. The 1946 Italian poster - four years after the Oscar-winning movie was made and first shown in the US - measures 55.5 inches (1,409.7 millimeters) by 78.25 inches (1,987.55 millimeters).

It previously was owned by a collector in London. Auction spokesman Eric Bradley says the buyer Saturday chose to remain anonymous. Bradley said Sunday the price equaled the record amount paid in 2014 for a poster for "London After Midnight," a 1927 silent movie where Lon Chaney played a vampire. — AP



Humphrey Bogart's son Stephen Bogart and Ingrid Bergman's daughter Pia Lindstrom attend the press conference for the 60th Anniversary of 'Casablanca' gala tribute screening and DVD release event at Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center in New York. — AFP

## THRILL-SEEKING NEWLYWEDS TAKE THE PLUNGE ON ROLLER COASTER

A thrill-seeking Rhode Island couple has taken the plunge at a Massachusetts amusement park, screaming, "I do," as they plummeted 20 stories on a roller coaster. Ashley Schiller and Thom Marchetti, of North Kingstown, were married this month on a Superman-themed roller coaster at Six Flags New England in Agawam. Immediately after the ride was over, they got back on and did it again, with a second batch of wedding guests in tow. The groom's queasiness prevented a third trip.

Schiller is a lifelong amusement park enthusiast who once had her parents buy thick-soled shoes to meet height requirements. She tells The Providence Journal she had dreamed of the moment since she was 8-years-old. For their honeymoon, the couple visited another Six Flags, near Washington, DC. — AP