

JAMLIFE



San Juan, Puerto Rico

THE LIFE OF THE CARIBBEAN PARTY
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Walking along the cobblestone streets of Old San Juan, or San Juan Viejo, for the first time, it's only natural to wonder why you waited this long to visit. Every road is lined with the imposing wooden doorways of colorful homes that date back hundreds of years, while each narrow alleyway seems to lead to a glorious vista of the Caribbean glistening in the sun. Sure, you've heard about the marvels of Puerto Rico before, but how could so much beauty and authentic Latin culture exist so close to home without you ever having experienced it for yourself? That is the question that haunts most Americans on their maiden voyage to the city that is the crown jewel of Puerto Rico.

Red. Yellow. Green. Indigo. A prism of colors unfolds beneath the proud remains of San Juan's San Cristobal and the El Morro forts, which both date back to the 1500s when the territory was known for its vast supplies of gold, thus needed fortresses and walls to protect it from marauders. Today, strangers are only too welcome as tourism has long since supplanted gold as Puerto Rico's main industry. Whatever the season, a festive atmosphere pervades the plazas and boardwalks, with people gathering to take in the open-air markets, art exhibitions, and local performers. Meanwhile, the city is also replete with quiet nooks and seemingly deserted passageways where one can get away and imagine what it was like to have been Ponce de Leon discovering this magical El Dorado for the first time in 1508.

While a map isn't absolutely necessary to explore San Juan Viejo, those who forget their cameras will be cursing the fates once they encounter the town's many photo opportunities. From the beautiful weddings constantly taking place at the Cathedral of San Juan Bautista (the second oldest cathedral in the Western Hemisphere) to the ancient trees that line the sun-splashed boardwalks, the neighborhood is an aesthete's dream in every sense – and that includes the culinary.

Restaurants and sidewalk cafes pepper the avenues of the old town. Those who stop to ask a local for dining recommendations are likely to find themselves pointed in the direction of Raices, "roots" in Spanish. Raices is a favorite with both residents and visitors. As evidenced by the lengthy waiting list and the lines forming outside, this is a restaurant with a serious following. While the décor is so traditional you may think you've wandered into a tourist trap, Raices' mofongo, Puerto Rico's signature dish of mashed plantains, garlic and shrimp, steak, or your choice of meats, will quickly dispel any such notion. For a more upscale dining experience, head down the street to Dragonfly, a Latin-Asian fusion restaurant with plenty of outdoor seating and a distinctly sophisticated, cosmopolitan ambiance.

Those who want to immerse themselves in the energy of Old San Juan would be hard pressed to find lodgings better appointed or





more beautifully situated than the Hotel El Convento. Located by a charming park, just across the street from the San Juan Cathedral, this Spanish Colonial style edifice was a Carmelite convent for centuries before being converted into the 58-room luxury hotel that it is today and is the site of some of San Juan's most exclusive private parties and events. The El Convento also hosts a nightly wine and cheese mixer for its guests.

Of course, while San Juan Viejo is a major attraction, no story about Puerto Rico's capital would be complete without a description of some of its most popular beaches and resort areas. Just a short ride away from Old San Juan lies Isla Verde, the city's exclusive beachfront and resort area, this is where those who flock to San Juan for the sun, sand and surf invariably find themselves stationed. With some of the calmest, most swim-friendly waters in all of Puerto Rico, Isla Verde is the site of such luxurious hotels as the El San Juan and the Ritz Carlton.

No doubt the most scorching hotspot in all of Puerto Rico, the El San Juan Hotel and Casino boasts everything an out-of-towner could ever ask for; bright, modern and cheerfully decorated guest rooms; a sleek, Miami-style pool club and a lively pool scene to match; top notch restaurants like The Palm steakhouse and the more casual, rooftop Brother Jimmy's; several bars, a casino and a nightclub that, combined, seem to draw San Juan in all its entirety to the glitzy El San Juan lobby every Thursday through Saturday night. No two ways about it, when it comes to nightlife, the El San Juan is the hottest ticket in town.

Also popular is Condado, San Juan's other tourist district. While the waters may not be as serene as those found in Isla Verde, this is where the fashionistas go for the city's best designed hotels and the most prestigious shopping. Contoured by names like Cartier, Gucci, Vuitton, Dior and Ferragamo, Condado's main drag gives the long, white-sand

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE PUERTO RICO TOURISM COMPANY









playas of Isla Verde a run for their money as far as local attractions go. Those who decide to stay in this area should head to the La Concha Resort, a veritable masterpiece of Tropical Modernist architecture and design. Drawing a sexy, fun-loving crowd the hotel features a legendary pool scene, a happening lobby bar and what many insist is the best restaurant in all of Puerto Rico – Perla. Located under the famous shell that gave the resort its name, Perla lays claim to that rarest of rare combinations, world-class cuisine with a beautiful view.

Old world charm, big city nightlife, fine dining, and pristine beaches are reason enough to visit San Juan, but as anyone who goes quickly realizes, these are just the beginning of what this thriving city has to offer. From museums and galleries to the El Yunque rainforest, the enticements of San Juan and its surrounding areas are some of the most diverse in the Caribbean, making it the ideal destination for all and sundry. 🍹

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