



San Juan

POP 395,000

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Why Go?

Established in 1521, San Juan is the second-oldest European-founded settlement in the Americas and the oldest under US jurisdiction. Shoehorned onto a tiny islet that guards the entrance to San Juan harbor, the atmospheric old town juxtaposes historical authenticity with pulsating modern energy in a seven-square-block grid of streets that was inaugurated almost a century before the *Mayflower* laid anchor in present-day Massachusetts.

Beyond its timeworn 15ft-thick walls, San Juan is far more than a dizzying collection of well-polished colonial artifacts – it's also a mosaic of ever-evolving neighborhoods. There's seen-it-all Condado, where Cuba's 24-hour gambling party got washed up in the early 1960s; tranquil Ocean Park with its gated villas and strategically located B&Bs; gritty Santurce, relaunched with art galleries after a two-decades-long depression; and swanky Isla Verde, awash with luxurious resort hotels and kitsch casinos.

When to Go

There's no shortage of attractive festivals in San Juan, from the revelrous street party of Festival San Sebastián in mid-January to the citywide celebration of its namesake saint on the week preceding June 24. The SoFo Culinary Festival doesn't have fixed dates, but takes place in late fall and mid-summer. In late July, the nearby town of Loíza Aldea hosts its Fiesta de Santiago, a religious and Afro-Caribbean cultural festival renowned for its colorful masks and exceptional music.

From December through to May, the weather is at its best – highs in the mid-80s, lows in the high 70s and little humidity.

History

It's hard to believe that San Juan was once a deserted spit of land dominated only by dramatic headlands and strong trade winds, but such was the picture when the Spaniards first arrived with their colonization plans in the early 1500s.

Unable to stave off constant Indian attacks or mosquito-borne malaria in the lower lands, they retreated to the rocky outcrop in 1521 and christened it Puerto Rico (Rich Port). (A Spanish cartographer accidentally transposed San Juan Bautista – what Spaniards called the island – with 'Puerto Rico' on some maps a few years later, and the name change stuck permanently.)

The gigantic fortress of El Morro, with its 140ft-high ramparts, quickly rose above the ocean cliffs.

The Catholic Church arrived en masse to build a church, a convent and a cathedral. For the next three centuries, San Juan was the primary military and legislative outpost of the Spanish empire in the Caribbean and Central America. But economically it stagnated, unable to prosper from the smuggling that was pervasive elsewhere on the island.

That all changed after the Spanish-American War of 1898. The US annexed the island as a territory and designated San Juan as the primary port. Agricultural goods such as sugar, tobacco and coffee flowed into the city. *Jibaros* (country people) flocked to the shipping terminals for work and old villages like Río Piedras were swallowed up.

WWII brought more capital and development as the US beefed up its military defense of the island and the Caribbean. After the war, the monumental economic initiative called Operation Bootstrap began changing Puerto Rico from an agricultural to a manufacturing-based economy, and hundreds of US factories relocated to San Juan to take advantage of tax breaks after the island gained commonwealth status in 1951. Foreign and US banks arrived en masse, the first high-rise buildings went up and the tourist zones took shape along the beachfront of the burgeoning city.

The unchecked growth surge was a nightmare for city planners, who struggled to provide services, roads and housing. By the 1980s, franchises of US fast-food restaurants were everywhere, but there were few places to get a gourmet meal featuring the island's *comida criolla* (traditional Puerto Rican cuisine). Housing developments blighted much of the area.

Unemployment was rampant, and crime was high. Ironically, Old San Juan was considered the epicenter of all that was wrong with the city. Tourists kept to the overdeveloped beaches of Condado, Isla Verde and Miramar.

In 1992, the world marked the 500-year anniversary of Columbus' 'discovery' of the Americas. That celebration gave city leaders the impetus needed to focus on the historic restoration of Old San Juan. The energy and finesse that characterized that effort waned slightly as the decade ended. However, the

SAN JUAN IN...

Two Days

Find a midrange hotel or apartment in Old San Juan. Explore the historical sights of the colonial quarter and dine along **Calle Fortaleza** before heading to **Latin Roots** or **Nuyorican Café** after dark for mojitos and salsa music. Wander over to **Condado** on day two for some sunbathing or beachside water sports.

Four Days

Add a museum crawl around **Old San Juan** and throw in a visit by ferry to the Bayamón **Bacardí Rum Factory**. Find an ecotour company to run you out to **El Yunque** for a day. Finally, scour the nightclubs of the big hotels in **Condado** and **Isla Verde**, and dine at **Perla** and one of the beautiful restaurants at **Gran Hotel El Convento**.

One Week

Head into the burbs for Santurce's two **art museums** or head further south to the **Jardín Botánico** in Río Piedras. Rent a bike and cycle around **Piñones**. Tour the threatened urban waterways and communities of **Caño Martín Peña**. Round it up by hiring some beach toys on **Playa Isla Verde** or trying your luck at **surfing** or **kitesurfing**.