



# San Juan

POP 389,000

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## Best Places to Eat

- ➔ José Enrique (p78)
- ➔ Santaella (p79)
- ➔ Kasalta's (p79)
- ➔ Carli's Café Fine Bistro & Piano (p75)
- ➔ Marmalade (p77)

## Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Hotel El Convento (p71)
- ➔ La Concha (p72)
- ➔ Casablanca Hotel (p70)
- ➔ Andalucía Guest House (p73)

## 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 old town was inaugurated almost a century before the Mayflower laid anchor in present-day Massachusetts, and is now a historic wonderland that juxtaposes historical authenticity with pulsating modern energy.

Beyond its timeworn 15ft-thick walls, San Juan is far more than a collection of well-polished colonial artifacts – it's also a mosaic of ever-evolving neighborhoods such as Santurce, which has a raw vitality fueled by galleries, superb restaurants and a bar scene that takes over the streets at night.

And then there are the beaches. Silky ribbons of sand line San Juan's northern edge from swanky Condado to resort-filled Isla Verde. You can land at the airport and be out splashing in the azure waters an hour later.

## When to Go

Winter is the most popular time to visit San Juan as the frozen masses from colder climes come to thaw out. Old San Juan's streets fill with cruise-ship passengers, and bookings are essential at the hottest hotels and restaurants. The boisterous street party of Fiesta de la Calle San Sebastián in mid-January is a high point, especially for locals.

At other times of the year, San Juan is much quieter, even though the beaches remain alluring year-round. From April to October you'll find plenty of deals and diminished crowds.

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

When the Spaniards arrived with their colonization plans in the early 1500s, San Juan was merely a deserted spit of land dominated by dramatic headlands and strong trade winds.

However, their low-land outposts encountered constant Indian attacks and mosquito-borne malaria, so in 1521 the colonists retreated to the rocky outcrop and christened it Puerto Rico (Rich Port). A few years later a Spanish cartographer accidentally transposed Puerto Rico with San Juan Bautista – the name the Spaniards had given to the whole island – and the name change stuck.

The gigantic fortress, El Morro, with its 140ft ramparts, soon rose above the ocean cliffs, and the Catholic Church built 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.

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

WWII brought 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 after the island gained commonwealth status in 1951, to take advantage of tax breaks. Foreign and US banks arrived en masse, the first high-rise buildings went up, and tourist zones took shape along the beachfront of the burgeoning city.

The unchecked growth was a nightmare for city planners, who struggled to provide services, roads and housing. By the 1980s, unemployment was rampant and crime 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 500-year anniversary of Columbus' 'discovery' of the Americas gave city leaders the impetus to restore Old San Juan.

The new millennium has brought several successful projects such as the super-efficient Tren Urbano (metro) that opened in 2005, a convention center in Miramar, and a series of redeveloped hotels in Condado.

Of late, San Juan has been hit hard by Puerto Rico's economic upheaval. Tourism is now more important than ever to the local economy.

## Sights

Most of San Juan's major attractions, including museums and art galleries, are in Old San Juan. Beaches dominate the appeal of Condado, Ocean Park and Isla Verde (as they should), while Santurce offers buzzy, gritty delights. Be aware that most museums are closed on Mondays.

## Old San Juan

Old San Juan is a colorful kaleidoscope of life, music, legend and history and would stand out as an unmissable sight anywhere, let alone on an island as small as Puerto Rico.

Somnolent secrets and beautiful surprises await everywhere. From the blue-toned, cobblestoned streets to the spectacle of over 400 historically listed buildings to the stunning views from old walls, there is a plethora of visual treats great and small.

Add to this the quarter's sensuous yet subtle mood swings: tranquil at dawn, languid during the midday heat, romantic at dusk and positively ebullient after dark.

Mixing ancient with modern, San Juan has embraced the present in the same way it has embraced every era that has gone before – with confidence, innovation and a palpable *joie de vivre*.

Far from being just another drop-off point on a busy cruise-ship itinerary, this is a city that lives for itself, never selling itself out to tourism: listen to the creaking rocking chairs on Calle de Sol, the clatter of dominoes in a local cafe or spontaneous African drumming echoing around Plaza de Armas. Prepare to be surprised, entranced and delighted – use our walking tour on p64 to help you explore.

## ★ El Morro

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(Fuerte San Felipe del Morro; Map p52; ☎ 787-729-7423; [www.nps.gov/saju](http://www.nps.gov/saju); Calle del Morro; adult/child \$3/free; ☀ 9am-6pm) The star of Old San Juan, El Morro juts aggressively over bold headlands, glowering across the Atlantic at would-be conquerors. The 140ft walls (some