

Caribbean Travel + Puerto Rico + Old San Juan

# CARIBBEAN *edge* MAGAZINE

[HOME](#) [ACTIVITIES](#) [AIRLINES](#) [CAR RENTAL](#) [CRUISES](#) [HOTELS](#) [REAL ESTATE](#) [RESTAURANTS](#) [REVIEWS](#) [SHOPPING](#) [VILLAS](#) [WEDDINGS](#)

## Puerto Rico

[Welcome to Puerto Rico](#)
[Accommodations](#)
[Activities](#)
[Airlines](#)
[Car Rental](#)
[Cruises](#)
[Old San Juan](#)
[Real Estate](#)
[Restaurants](#)
[Shopping](#)
[Vieques Island](#)
[Weddings](#)
[Yachting](#)


Everything you need  
for a **hassle-free**  
journey

[www.travelsmith.com](http://www.travelsmith.com)

## Puerto Rico Old San Juan

### Old San Juan, new San Juan-take your pick.

**This 7-square-block area of the major city in Puerto Rico is a 465-year old neighborhood that rocks, offering beautifully restored 16th and 17th century buildings along with some of the hottest new restaurants, shops and night spots on the island.**

By K.C. Nash

San Juan has always been a real mixing pot of nationalities, beginning with the native Taino culture and then adding American, Caribbean and European influences as well as a colorful historic past that saw many nations fighting over this piece of the rock. All this has resulted in a city alive with restaurants offering a multitude of cuisines and historical attractions that keep even the hardest traveler intrigued.

One of the primary places to enjoy the culture is Old San Juan, the vibrant historical center of the city. Here you'll find over 400 forts, homes and churches with historic significance mixed with shaded parks, interesting restaurants, lively entertainment and even a spa or two. Land-based visitors can plan a day or two of wandering the streets and visiting the many shops. Cruise passengers can take advantage of the late-evening sailings to explore the culinary wonders and sample the nightlife. For everyone, it's definitely worth a visit.




### History Up and Down the Hills

Old San Juan's history is reflected in its plazas, restored buildings and forts that surround the area. As you walk through the walled city with its blue cobblestoned streets, you get a real feel for how life was lived in the 17th century. A good beginning point is the Castillo de San Felipe del Morro, or El Morro as it is called. This 6-level fortress situated on the furthest western point of the city was completed in 1589 as the major point of defense by the Spanish forces. It stands as the largest fortification in the Caribbean, and has been impressively restored.

From there you walk down the Calle Del Morro to a number of other historical sites in the center part of the city, such as the Catedral de San Juan, a fine example of medieval architecture, the Alcaldia (San Juan City Hall), completed in 1789, and La Fortaleza, which started as a fortress but eventually became the governor's mansion and is still in use as such. The walk ends at the far eastern end at Castillo de San Cristobal, the partner to El Morro in the city's defense plan of the 17th century.

Along the way are beautiful plazas such as Plaza de Colon, which was given its present name in 1893 to honor Christopher Columbus on the 400th anniversary of his discovery of Puerto Rico. Plaza de San Jose, which has a bronze statue of Ponce de Leon in the center, is a favorite meeting place since it is near many of the historic buildings. Among all this history is a


 
[CARIBBEAN \*islands\*](#)
 Jump to: 

-  [print this page](#)
-  [travel specials](#)
-  [add a listing](#)



**UNITED.COM**

Time to  
get away  
and relax?

Check out  
united.com  
Special deals...  
and be there  
this weekend.

[BOOK NOW](#)

relatively new plaza, Plaza del Quinto Centenario, which was opened in 1992 to mark the 500th anniversary of Columbus' discovery. It is impressive because of its huge statue, 40 feet in height, made from black granite and ceramic in a scene symbolizing the early days of American history. Plaza de Armas, the main square, features 100-year-old statues representing the four seasons.

Other buildings of note include two churches, Iglesia de San Jose and Capilla del Cristo. The Church of San Jose was built on land given to the church by Ponce de Leon and is the second oldest church in the Western Hemisphere. The Chapel, a smaller building, was built in the 16th century and has some local lore connected with it.

More contemporary buildings include the Casino of Puerto Rico, built before World War I, the Teatro Tapia built in 1832 and still in use as a theatre, and Centro de Bellas Artes, the fine arts center opened in 1981.

Among the 'don't miss' buildings are the Pablo Casals Museum housing the great maestro's manuscripts, memorabilia and videotapes of concerts, and the Casa Blanca, an historic home which now serves as a museum of 16th, 17th and 18th century history.

For a quality guided tour of these sights, the Legends of Puerto Rico tour company offers many choices. They have a "Legends of San Juan" and "Night Tales in Old San Juan" walking tours that hit many of the highlights described here. Owner Debbie Molina-Ramos has designed the tours to be flexible enough to accommodate cruise visitors as well as those land-based visitors who want to spend the midday on the beach and then come into the city. One of her innovations is the "Hop On Hop Off" tour, which uses a minibus to take groups of 6-10 up and down the narrow hilly streets. "It's designed for those 65 and older, so they can stay in the vehicle or get off and have a place to sit while we discuss the site," she explained. To find out more, see the website at [www.legendsofpr.com](http://www.legendsofpr.com).

### **An Array of Restaurants**

The 7-block area called Old San Juan is a warren of traditional and Nuevo cuisine restaurants. One of the most popular areas is SoFo or South Fortaleza Street (Calle Fortaleza), where a number of new restaurants and bars have converted this formerly quiet area into a bustling hotspot in the evening. Each year they put on the SoFo Culinary Week, where the street and neighboring ones are shut down to traffic, and the area is transformed into a culinary plaza with tables full of food to sample.

You may want to start with breakfast-and everyone will point you in the direction of La Bombonera, a Puerto Rican institution located on Calle San Francisco. This bakery offers authentic mallorcas and other baked treats as well as good, solid meals and great Puerto Rican coffee.

For PR fare, you can go for the traditional at La Mallorquina, the oldest restaurant on the island, located on Calle San Justo. They specialize in authentic fare including Rice & Beans, Arroz con Pollo, Shrimp in Garlic Sauce and Asopao, served in a colonial ambiance. For nouvelle PR cuisine, head to Amadeus Café on Calle San Sebastian at Calle Cristo. To create their featured dishes they combine traditional ingredients like plantains and mango with the expected fare. Another local favorite is Barrachina, which claims to be the home of the Pina Colada. Located on Calle Cristo, it offers many traditional dishes in a lovely indoor/outdoor setting and consistently gets good reviews from visitors-especially those tasting the Pina Coladas. Another well-known café is The Parrot Club, which is credited for starting the whole SoFo gourmet movement and Nuevo Latino cuisine.

Three of the newer restaurants now getting a lot of attention for their originality and great settings are Divino Bocado, and the SoFo favorites DragonFly, Aguaviva and Marmalade. Divino, located on Calle Cruz, is a tapas bar with a selection of hearty Spanish appetizers in a tavern-style setting with live guitar performances. A crazy Chinese-Latin fusion vibe is offered at DragonFly, which has a noodle bar and seating at cabaret-style tables. Aguaviva is a standout because of its beautiful ice-blue décor (including interesting jellyfish-shaped lights), its Latin-spiced seafood entrees, and its oyster and ceviche bar. Marmalade offers a menu filled with American culinary landmarks such as Hudson Valley foie gras, Virginia lamb

and malpeque oysters.

If you travel to the Latin Caribbean and then get a taste for French food, you can get relief at La Chaumiere, a two-story restaurant on Calle Tetuan that will have you swearing you suddenly transported to France. The food is everything you'd hope for with traditional French favorites, and the setting is charming. Another French restaurant popular with young professionals is Trois Cent Onze on Calle Fortaleza, a newcomer to the dining scene in SoFo.

For more unusual cuisine, wander down to Recinto Sur, where you have U.N. type dining going on. There's Yukiyu for sushi and Japanese fare, Transylvania for Romanian cuisine, Hard Rock Café for the all-American entrees, and Royal Thai for the hot and spicy Thai dishes. Other unusual cuisines represented around Old San Juan include Brazilian at Bossanova and Mexican at El Patio Mexicano, both on Calle Fortaleza, and Argentinian at Baires on Plaza del Mercado. And if you are a devoted vegetarian, you can find lots to eat at Gopal on Calle Tetuan.

## Lively Nightlife

If you think the restaurants are varied and interesting, wait until you visit Old San Juan after dark. The bars light up with live entertainment, and the place becomes a rolling party.

Among your first stop should be NoNo's, a double-decker delight on Calle San Sebastian, with a bar and seating area on the first floor, and pool tables and entertainment on the second. Then head over to Calle San Francisco to enjoy the live Latino music and dancing at Nuyorican Café. The atmosphere is called "Bohemian" and the concentration is on new music, with the café selling CDs of the artists who perform there. They also sponsor their own jazz festival.

When you are winding down a little, head to SoFo where the scene happens at Café Tabac. This café-bar doubles as an art gallery, and the atmosphere is sophisticated and lively. Or you can stop at The Gallery Café, known as one of the most successful clubs in Old San Juan with the younger crowd. The modern décor and lighting plus the contemporary music gives this dance club a great setting.

If all you care about is dancing, visit Club Flow, the trendy disco on Avenue Ponce de Leon at the eastern end of Old San Juan. The music runs the gamut from pop to hip hop, rock and roll and funk. Local bands play every night.

Another interesting night time happening is Noche de Galeria, an Old San Juan event held the first Tuesday of every month from 8 p.m. until early morning. The galleries along Calle de Cristo and Calle Fortaleza open their doors and people wander through the streets looking at the latest exhibitions, sipping wine offered by the galleries, and then hitting the bars.

## Shopping & Services

There's a little piece of heaven in Old San Juan for those who love to shop, and it's called Calle del Cristo, or the Cristo. Along this magical street you'll find an abundance of outlet stores from such high-end retailers as Dooney & Bourke, Coach, Polo Ralph Lauren, and Speedo. In addition there is Chopard Boutique for decorative art and jewelry and Galeria Fossil Arte with exhibits of real fossils represented in paintings, sculptures and lithographs by artist Radames Rivera. Don't miss Boveda, a creative boutique with unique fine jewelry, artwork and clothing. For tastes of the Caribbean to take home, visit Sunny Caribbee for hot sauces, coffees, candles and rum cakes. The Centro Nacional De Artes Populares y Artesanias showcases the best of local arts and crafts from Puerto Rican artists and craftsmen.

Although San Juan is not a duty-free port, you still see some savings because there is no sales tax assessed.

And if all this shopping, eating and dancing has you a little twisted in knots, make an appointment at the Secrets of Eden Spa on Recinto Sur for a Quartz Energy or Chakra Balancing treatment. Owner Alexandra Quiles, who

is a Doctor of Natural Medicine as well as an instructor in massage therapy, says these are the two most requested treatments. She and her staff also offer massages of all types, including hot stone, deep tissue and lymphatic drainage, along with a long list of natural body treatments, facials, manicures and pedicures. They welcome walk-ins, and are open from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Saturday, and from 7 to 9 p.m. for VIP services.

[www.secretsofedenspa.com](http://www.secretsofedenspa.com)

## Where to Stay

If you want to stay close to Old San Juan, which is a good central location for the rest of the island, several hotels are based here.

Hotel El Convento was a former Carmelite convent (as you can tell by the name), and has been beautifully restored and is now a member of the Historic Hotels of America and Small Luxury Hotels of the World. The 58 rooms are furnished with period furniture to capture the historical sense and have many modern luxury appointments. The hotel also offers a pool, Jacuzzi, fitness center, in-room Internet access, and a beach club in Isla Verde for its guests. Location: 100 Calle Cristo, Old San Juan.

[www.elconvento.com](http://www.elconvento.com)

Right in the heart of Old San Juan on Calle Fortaleza is Hotel Milano, a straightforward hotel with 30 basic rooms and reasonable rates. Its main selling points are the central location and the value. Location: 307 Calle Fortaleza, Old San Juan. [www.hotelmilanopr.com](http://www.hotelmilanopr.com)

The Sheraton Old San Juan Hotel and Casino is a favorite for pre- and post-cruise visitors since it is located near the port dock and has reasonable prices. It's also popular because of the casino and the rooms with views to the bay and the city. The restaurant on site, Fogata Latino Bar and Grill, is well regarded. Location: 100 Brumbaugh Street, Old San Juan.

[www.sheratonoldsanjuan.com](http://www.sheratonoldsanjuan.com)

To get yourself in a proper Old San Juan mood, stay at The Gallery Inn, a quirky, unusual hotel that occupies a collection of small 300-year old homes. The 22 guest rooms scattered throughout the site are furnished with antiques, Tempur-Pedic mattresses, and a wealth of artwork created by the hotel owner Jan D'Esopo. Some rooms have views to the sea and some are very small, and you need to specify if you must have a window in your room because not all have them. Location: 204-206 Nozagaray, Old San Juan.

[www.thegalleryinn.com](http://www.thegalleryinn.com)