

The Bold Decoder



(Clockwise from above) "Casa Estrecha" (Narrow House), old San Juan; Hotel La Concha; murals in Santurce; the Palacio Provincial rooftop. (Opposite) Poolside at Fairmont El San Juan; Dreamcatcher Hotel.

Photography: Courtesy of the City of San Juan

# SALUD, SAN JUAN

With a thriving café society, great food, engaging history and a gorgeous strip of beaches, San Juan delivers on so many levels.

BY DOUG WALLACE

**C**ENTURIES-OLD FORTS anchor one of the Caribbean's coolest and oldest towns, one filled with pastel colours, blue cobblestones, a lively nightlife and blissful, balmy afternoons.

Welcome to San Juan, your new favourite getaway. This safe and hospitable city is more than back up to speed, coming a long way since the havoc of not one but two hurricanes. Now, the whole of Puerto Rico is its old, salsa-fuelled self, the territory kinship with the United States lending an icing of familiarity.

San Juan's proximity to the huge marina at Fajardo and the El Yunque National Forest lets you stay in town yet still be close enough to ample watersports and incredibly scenic hiking – giving you the best of both worlds.

## WHERE TO STAY

Within Old Town or along the city's string of tranquil beaches, the range of accommodations in San Juan suits a variety of tastes and budgets.

### SMART DIGS IN OLD TOWN

Stately but never stuffy, the Palacio Provincial was once a government building, its history woven into a sophisticated and high-ceilinged hideaway. A striking, modern library separates two calm courtyards and a rooftop pool leaves you to your own little world.

📍 [palacioprovincial.com](http://palacioprovincial.com)

### BOHO-CHIC IN OCEAN PARK

Dreamers Welcome offers retro-flavoured accommodation via a 19-room boutique Dreamcatcher Hotel plus 40 high-design, self-check-in holiday apartments, most of them clustered within the city's gated Ocean Park community. Homespun vintage accents and vegetarian menus rule, and the beach is a short walk away. 📍 [dreamerswelcome.com](http://dreamerswelcome.com)

### HIP WITH THE CONDADO CROWD

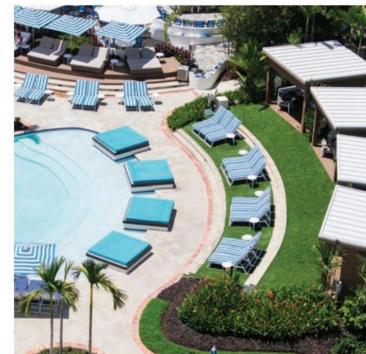
An upscale, cool-kid aura permeates the 96-room Condado Ocean Club, delivering stylish, luxe vibes. The infinity pool

overlooking the golden sand of Condado Beach has a beach-club feel, complete with azure-accented alcoves and little bar carts for rosé-soaked afternoons.

📍 [condadooceanclub.com](http://condadooceanclub.com)

### LUXE LIVING IN ISLA VERDE

Close to the airport, the Morris Lapidus-designed Fairmont El San Juan is a solid classic. If only the walls could talk. Airy, contemporary rooms are polished and pretty, while a dozen bars and restaurants help you fuel the furnace. 📍 [elsanjuanhotel.com](http://elsanjuanhotel.com)



## WHERE TO EAT

The range of gastronomy in this town covers a lot of ground – from traditional comfort food to innovative small-plate snacks to sophisticated fine dining.

### SIMPLE HEART-AND-SOUL FOOD

The Cuban-Puerto Rican menu at Ropa Vieja Grill is a hit with the locals as well as the hungry guests in the adjacent Condado hotels. Garlic up your night with the classic mofongo, one of the most delicious national dishes. The front patio offers the best people-watching. [ropaviejagrill.com](http://ropaviejagrill.com)

### CARIBBEAN-ASIAN FUSION

The Asian-inspired Raya by Mario Pagán on the main floor of the tony O:LV 55 Hotel is a scintillating mix of flavours from Korea, Japan, Thailand and Vietnam amid dizzying tiled flooring and elegant moss green furnishings. Sake- and whiskey-infused cocktails start your night off right. [olvhotel.com/restaurants](http://olvhotel.com/restaurants)

### CASUAL FOOD-TRUCK COOKIN'

Diners feel like they've stumbled into a country fair in the middle of the city at Lote 23, an outdoor food court in the Santurce



Tuna Poko Pegaño from Raya by Mario Pagán; (below left) empanadas from Los Proceres, Lote 23; cocktails at Casita de Ronés.

neighbourhood. Simple picnic tables are ringed with kiosks whipping up mofongo, fried chicken, fish tacos, pizza, burgers and cocktails, too. [lote23.com](http://lote23.com)

### BRUNCH WITH A TWIST

Named after the Audrey Hepburn movie, Sabrina Brunch & Bistro Bar is a little plant-filled enclave on the high street near Ocean Park. Expect healthful, creative Caribbean dishes and fresh seafood, plus a mean burger and fries. Brunch is big.

### A SAN JUAN RITE OF PASSAGE

El Hamburger has been flipping burgers up the road from Escambron Beach since the 1960s, pleasing everyone from surfers to famous singers. Slap-dash service is welcoming, fast and fun. Have the sweet potato fries.

## WHERE TO DRINK

From molecular mixology to the dive-bar shots, the culture of drinking throughout the city leaves no stone unturned.

### HANG OUT ON THE STRIP

The home of the \$5 mojito, El Cafetín is an icon of the Calle San Sebastian bar strip in

Old San Juan, almost like the thermometer of the street. Chaotic but friendly, it's a great starting point for tequila front-end loading before a night of dancing. The sidewalk is where the action is.

### FIND FOUR BARS IN ONE

Well-known as a backdrop for the "Despacito" music video, La Factoria is a dimly lit labyrinth of fun also on San Sebastian. Beyond the graffiti-filled walls of the front bar are five more bars, a maze of people and different styles of music. Stick around for live salsa at midnight on the weekend. [10defacto.com](http://10defacto.com)

### HEAD TO THE MARKET HANGOUT

La Placita de Santurce is a square of bars and food kiosks ringing an iconic food market, coming alive after dark. The trick here is to bar-hop through the different chinchorros – inexpensive bar/café. If you don't know how to salsa, you soon will.

### SHAKE IT UP TROPICAL-STYLE

Just around the corner from La Placita sits Jungle Bird. The tropical atmosphere comes complete with bamboo furnishings, tons of plants and sexy yellow and red neon. They take their made-from-scratch cocktails just as seriously as the delicious small plates.



(Clockwise, from left) A guide from the Spoon Experience food tour; El Hilo Rojo/The Red Thread mural, Arroyo; El Yunque Rainforest.

## WHAT TO DO AND SEE

Everything in this vibrant city has an engaging story that goes along with it. Let the tales unravel from the historic forts to the hills of the cloud forest.

### STEP BACK IN TIME

Founded by the Spanish in 1521, the Castillo San Felipe del Morro – a.k.a. El Morro – is one of the oldest fortifications in North America and a great place to begin your San Juan history lesson. Save time for weaving around the ornate graves of the adjacent Santa Maria Magdalena de Pazzi Cemetery. Your ticket to El Morro also gets you into nearby Castillo San Cristóbal.

### OGLE THE STREET ART

The Art Walk PR is a must-do walking tour of the colourful murals of La Calle Cerra in Santurce. Works from local and international artists line the storefronts, side walls and alleyways, revealing interesting details about the neighbourhood's past. Side-steps into various art spaces flesh out the fun. [theartwalkpr.com](http://theartwalkpr.com)

### LET THE FOOD TELL THE STORY

The excellent Spoon Experience food tour covers a lot of gastronomic ground – revealing the history, music, art and architecture of the city and the whole island. Expert guides relate the background of the island through its food, with stops fitting in everything from coffee to cafés to cocktails. [thespoonexperience.com](http://thespoonexperience.com)

### FIND ROOM FOR RUM

The 1880 founder of San Juan's oldest rum distillery used to carry a little barrel of his product around under his arm, giving prospective buyers a taste. Ron del Barrilito continues to thrive, offering tours of the hacienda and mixology classes. [rondelbarrilito.com](http://rondelbarrilito.com)

### GET OUT OF DODGE

The eco-paradise that is El Yunque Rainforest is an hour away by car, with plenty of fresh air, amazing scenery and sparkling rivers across 12,000 hectares. Puerto Rico also has not one but two bioluminescent bays, where microscopic algae produce an ethereal glow at night when your kayak paddle hits the water. [discoverpuertorico.com](http://discoverpuertorico.com)



Photography: Courtney Q. The Brands; Discover Puerto Rico

