

San Juan



Take note New York! Modern America started here. Well, almost. Established in 1521, San Juan is the second-oldest European-founded settlement in the Americas (after Santo Domingo) and the oldest under US jurisdiction. Shoehorned onto a tiny islet that guards the entrance to San Juan harbor, the atmospheric 'Old City' 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. Surreal sounds and exotic sights resonate everywhere. A stabbing salsa stanza in sonorous Calle San Sebastián, timid cats scurrying under winking lanterns in shady Plaza San José, and the omnipresent roar of Atlantic breakers battling mercilessly with the sturdy 500-year-old fortifications of El Morro.

Beyond its timeworn 15ft-thick walls, San Juan is far more than a dizzying collection of well-polished colonial artifacts. To get the full take on Puerto Rico's capricious capital, visitors must first run the gamut of its distinct but 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-decade-long depression; and swanky Isla Verde awash with luxurious resort hotels and kitschy casinos.

Choked by bumper-to-bumper traffic and inundated with nearly five million tourists annually, parts of San Juan can leave you wondering if you took a wrong turn at Miami airport in Florida. But the confusion rarely lingers. Cultural borrowing has long been this city's pragmatic hallmark. For every gleaming office block, you'll also stumble upon a colorful Spanish fiesta, an African religious ritual, a delicate native woodcarving and architecture that could easily have been ripped out of Seville, Cartagena, Buenos Aires, or even Paris.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Savoring a night of colonial luxury in the exquisite **Gran Hotel El Convento** (p109)
- Rekindling the spirit of salsa at the culture defining **Nuyorican Café** (p119)
- Enjoying the prized tranquility of **Ocean Park Beach** (p103)
- Getting a feel for the national sporting passion during a hotly contested game of baseball at the **Hiram Bithorn Stadium** (p122)
- Exploring bike paths, beaches, ramshackle restaurants and precarious coastal ecology in down-to-earth **Piñones** (p124)



■ POPULATION: 1.6 MILLION

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.

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 new century has brought several successful urban regeneration projects such as the super-efficient Tren Urbano (metro) that opened in 2005, a space-age convention center situated in the neighborhood of Miramar and a clutch of redeveloped hotels in revitalized Condado.

CLIMATE

San Juan is blessed with strong trade winds that keep mosquitoes at bay and somewhat lessen the sun's vigor.

In the summer months (June to September), the city gets increasingly hot and humid, averaging in the high 80s. Rains come from late September through early November. San Juan isn't hit as hard as the El Yunque area to the east, but gets a good amount of overflow.

December through May the weather is at its best – highs in the mid-80s, lows in the high 70s (sometimes those trade winds will have you reaching for a sweater at night) with little humidity.

ORIENTATION

Starting at the westernmost tip of the city and working east toward the Aeropuerto Internacional de Luis Muñoz Marín (LMM; Map pp86–7), you've got Old San Juan, the tourist center and most visually appealing part of town.

Following the coast, Condado is next, flashy and full of big buildings and hotels along Av Ashford.

Miramar and Santurce, to the west and southeast of Condado, respectively, and set back from the beach, are filled with a mix of middle- and working-class families.

Ocean Park is a private community (with gates) lying along the water between Condado and Isla Verde; its big street is Av McLeary. The final stop in the city is Isla Verde (although, technically speaking, it is in Carolina, a suburb of San Juan). Av Isla Verde is a long stretch of hotels and casinos along a narrow but pretty white beach. Its drawback is the proximity of the airport – large jets thunder overhead every 20 minutes or so for most of the day.

Hato Rey is the name of the business district of high-rise banks and offices that flanks Av Ponce de León, south of Santurce. Further south, beyond Hato Rey, is Río Piedras, home

to the largest campus of the Universidad de Puerto Rico (UPR).

Maps

Travelers will find tourist maps of Old San Juan, Condado and Isla Verde readily available through the tourist information offices run by the Puerto Rico Tourism Company (p88). The standard complimentary map can also be found online at www.travelmaps.com.

If you are driving or want a more complete view of the city, Rand McNally publishes foldout maps of San Juan/Puerto Rico that include a detailed overview of the metro area.

This map is widely available from most bookstores and drugstores in the city's tourist zones for about \$5. See p281 for maps covering other island destinations.

Once you have a map, study it with someone who has good local knowledge

regarding traffic jams, damaged roads and crime (p88).

INFORMATION

Bookstores

Bell, Book & Candle (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-728-5000; 102 Av José de Diego, Condado) Pulls in the vacation crowd and offers a wide range of English titles.

Bookworm (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-722-3344; 1129 Av Ashford, Condado) Gay literature in Spanish and English as well as mainstream picks. Very helpful and friendly staff.

Librería Thekes (Map pp86-7; ☎ 787-765-1539; Plaza Las Américas, 525 Av FD Roosevelt, Hato Rey) Novels, travel books, bios, thrillers and magazines in both English and Spanish.

Emergency

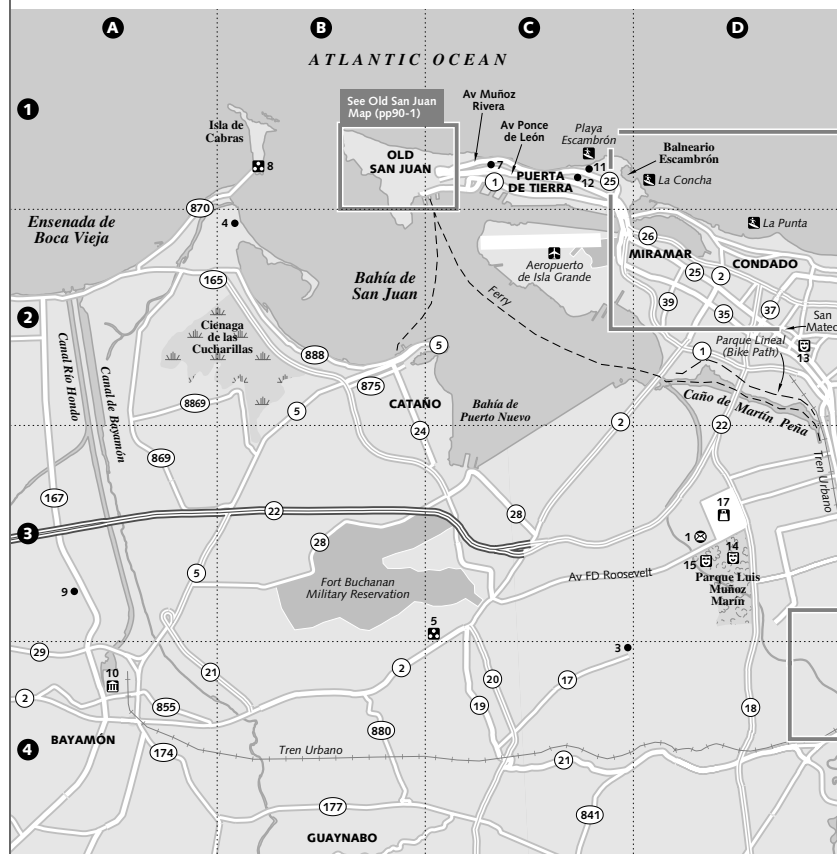
You may find that the telephone directory and tourist publications list nonfunctioning local numbers for emergency services. In *any* kind of emergency, call ☎ 911.

SAN JUAN NEIGHBORHOODS

Metro San Juan, in common with many great cities, is an amalgamation of its neighborhoods, with each area exhibiting its own vicissitudes, atmosphere and charms. Here's a quick rundown of what to expect.

- **Viejo San Juan** The soul of the city and a gastronome's delight, Old San Juan's seven-square-block Unesco World Heritage site is packed with priceless historical relics and equally pricey restaurants.
- **Puerta de Tierra** This thin slither of land that links Old San Juan with the rest of the city is a strange amalgam of tatty housing projects, salubrious parks and one of the best municipal beaches on the island.
- **El Condado** San Juan's original resort strip has recently transformed itself from a tacky tourist zone into a revitalized urban neighborhood replete with designer shops and salubrious parks.
- **Ocean Park** An attractive beachside residential community punctuated by classy B&Bs and a quiet, gay-friendly stretch of beach.
- **Miramar** A leafy residential quarter of eclectic middle-class houses and plush lakeside condos that showcases San Juan's new state-of-the-art convention center.
- **Santurce** The once vital city center suffered from dilapidation in the '80s and '90s, but a fine arts center, myriad nightclubs, and a couple of well-appointed galleries have placed it back in the urban reckoning.
- **Hato Rey** San Juan's mini Wall Street is a dense cluster of glass tower blocks and is home to the island's most prestigious ballpark and the Caribbean's largest shopping mall.
- **Río Piedras** The low-rise academic quarter is, not surprisingly, replete with cheap shops, a thriving market and an exotic botanical garden.
- **Isla Verde** The city's premier hotel strip plays host to a mishmash of craning condo towers and swanky resorts that are big on luxury but short on authenticity.

SAN JUAN



Fire (☎ 787-722-1120, 343-2330)

Hurricane warnings (☎ 787-253-4586)

Isla Verde police (☎ 787-449-9320)

Medical emergencies (☎ 787-754-2550)

Rape crisis hotline (☎ 877-641-2004, 800-981-5721, 787-765-2285)

Río Piedras police (☎ 787-765-6439)

Tourist zone police (☎ 911, 787-726-7020; 📞 24hr) English spoken.

Internet Access

Cybernet Café Condado (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-724-4033; 1128 Av Ashford; 📞 9am-11pm; per hr \$5-6); Isla Verde (Map p101; ☎ 787-791-3138; 5980 Av Isla Verde; 📞 9am-10:30pm; per hr \$5-6)

Diner's Internet (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-724-6276; 311 Tetuán, Old San Juan)

Internet@active (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-289-0345; JA Corretjer; per 15min \$4)

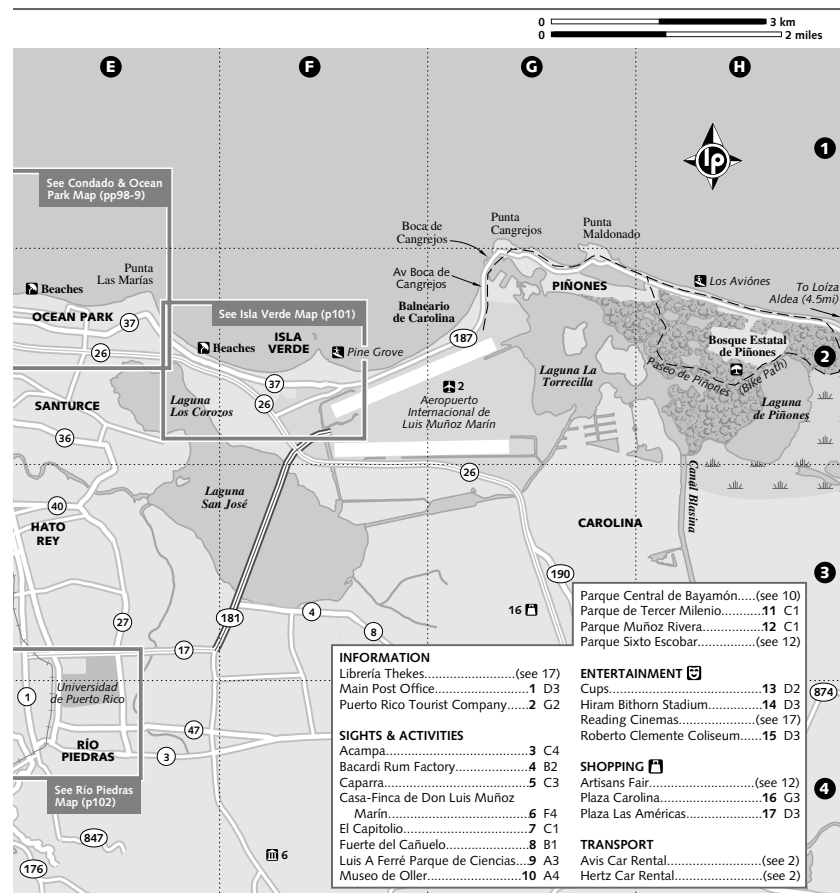
Laundry

La Lavandería (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-717-8585; 201 Sol near Cruz, Old San Juan) This is arguably the laundromat that has the best views in town. Service washes are available.

Laundry Condado Cleaners (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-721-9254; 63 Calle Condado) Promises a fast turnaround, and delivers too.

Medical Services

Ashford Memorial Community Hospital (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-721-2160; 1451 Av Ashford) This is probably the best-equipped and most convenient hospital for travelers to visit.



Walgreens Old San Juan (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-722-6690; cnr Cruz & San Francisco); Condado (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-725-1510; 1130 Av Ashford; 📞 24hr) US drugstore chains including Walgreens are all over the city.

Money

Banco Popular LMM airport (☎ 787-791-0326; Terminal C); Old San Juan (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-725-2635; cnr Tetuán & San Justo) Near the cruise ship piers and Paseo de la Princesa; Condado (Map pp98-9; Av Ashford); Isla Verde (Map p101; Av Isla Verde) Charges only 1% commission to cash traveler's checks.

Post

Greater San Juan has about 20 post offices.
Main Post Office (Map pp86-7; ☎ 787-767-2890; 585 Av FD Roosevelt, Hato Rey; 📞 7:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat) General delivery mail comes here.

Old San Juan Post Office (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-723-1281; 100 Paseo de Colón; 📞 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) The one likely to be most convenient for travelers.

Tourist Information

Puerto Rico Tourism Company (PRTC) distributes information in English and Spanish at two venues in San Juan, the LMM airport and La Casita in Old San Juan.

At the airport, stop at the information counter between Terminals B and C or visit the PRTC's desk on the lower (arrivals) areas of Terminals B and C.

Departamento de Recursos Naturales y Ambientales (DRNA; Department of Natural Resources; Map p102; ☎ 787-999-2200; www.drna.gobierno.pr in Spanish; Rte 8838 Km 6.3, Sector El Cincio, Río Piedras) For information

INFORMATION

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on camping, including reservations and permits, contact this department or visit its office.

Puerto Rico Tourism Company (PRTC; ☎ 800-223-6530, 787-721-2400; www.prtourism.com) LMM airport (Map pp86-7; ☎ 787-791-1014; 🕒 9am-5:30pm); Old San Juan (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-722-1709; La Casita, Calle Comercio & Plaza de la Darsena near Pier 1)

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Safety-wise, San Juan is comparable to any other big city in the mainland US. Though you'll hear stories of robberies, drugs and carjackings, the worst most visitors will face is tripping up over an uneven paving stone on the way back from the local bar. Take all the usual precautions and you'll minimize any risk of trouble.

Don't leave your belongings unguarded on the beach, don't leave your car unlocked and don't wander around after dark in deserted inner-city areas or on unpoliced beaches. Areas to avoid at night include La Perla, Puerta de Tierra, parts of Santurce (especially around Calle Loiza) and the Plaza del Mercado in Río Piedras.

Old San Juan is relatively safe and well policed. However, visitors are not encouraged to enter the picturesque yet poverty-stricken enclave of La Perla (p96) just outside the north wall at any time of day or night without a local escort.

SIGHTS

Most of San Juan's major attractions, including museums and art galleries, are in Old San Juan.

There are a few sights worth visiting in Condado, Santurce and Río Piedras, but schedule serious time for the old town. 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 like a flashing beacon in any country, let alone one as small as Puerto Rico.

Somnolent secrets and beautiful surprises await everywhere. From the blue-toned cobblestoned streets of Calle San Sebastián, to the cutting-edge gastronomic artistry of SoFo, you could spend weeks, even months, here and still only get the smallest taste.

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 21st century in the same way as it embraced every era that went before – with confidence, innovation and a dynamic joie de vivre.

Far from being just another drop off point on a busy cruise ship itinerary, this is a city that still lives: listen to the creaking rocking chairs on Calle de Sol, the clatter of dominos in La Bombonera Café, or the spontaneous African drumming ritual echoing around Plaza de Armas. Pure magic.

COLONIAL FORTS & BUILDINGS

El Morro

A six-level fort with a gray, castellated lighthouse, **El Morro** (Fuerte San Felipe del Morro; San Felipe Fort; Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-729-6960; www.nps.gov/saju/morro.html; adult/child \$3/free; 🕒 9am-5pm Jun-Nov, 9am-6pm Dec-May, free tours at 10am & 2pm in Spanish, 11am & 3pm in English) juts aggressively over Old San Juan's bold headlands, glowering across the Atlantic at would-be conquerors. The 140ft walls (some up to 15ft thick) date back to 1539, and El Morro is said to be the oldest Spanish fort in the New World.

The National Park Service (NPS) maintains this fort and the small military museum on the premises. Displays and videos in Spanish and English document the construction of the fort, which took almost 200 years, as well as El Morro's role in rebuffing the various attacks on the island by the British and the Dutch, and later the US military.

It was declared a Unesco World Heritage site in 1983. The lighthouse on the 6th floor is the island's oldest light station still in use today (although the tower itself dates from 1906).

If you do not join one of the free guided tours, at least try to make the climb up the ramparts to the sentries' walks along the **Sta Barbara Bastion** and **Austria Half-Bastion** for the views of the sea, the bay, Old San Juan, modern San Juan, El Yunque and the island's mountainous spine.

On weekends, the fields leading up to the fort are alive with picnickers, lovers and kite flyers. The scene becomes a kind of impromptu festival with food vendors' carts on the perimeter.

You also gain entry to both El Morro and Fuerte San Cristóbal for \$5.

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** (p116) before heading to **La Rumba** (p120) or **Nuyorican Café** (p119) after dark for mojitos and salsa music. Wander over to **Condado** (p98) on day two for some solitary sunbathing or beachside water sports.

Four Days

Add a gallery crawl around **Old San Juan** (opposite) and throw in a visit to the Bayamón **Bacardí Rum Factory** (p127). Find an ecotour company to run you out to **El Yunque** (p132) for a day. Finally, scour the nightclubs of the big hotels in **Condado** (p110) and **Isla Verde** (p111), or dine in one of the beautiful restaurants at **Gran Hotel El Convento** (p109).

One Week

Head into the 'burbs for Santurce's two new **art museums** (p100) or head further south to the **Museo de Oller** (p129) in Río Piedras. Rent a bike and cycle out to **Piñones** (p124). Hit the beach kiosks for lunch and take in the Friday night *bomba* performances in **Café Búho** (p126). Round it up by hiring some beach toys on Playa Isla Verde or booking a surf lesson on **Playa Escambrón** (p104).

Fuerte San Cristóbal

San Juan's second major fort is **Fuerte San Cristóbal** (San Cristóbal Fort; Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-729-6777; www.nps.gov/saju/sancristobal.html; adult/child \$3/free; 🕒 9am-5pm Jun-Nov, 9am-6pm Dec-May), one of the largest military installations the Spanish built in the Americas. In its prime, San Cristóbal covered 27 acres with a maze of six interconnected forts protecting a central core with 150ft walls, moats, booby-trapped bridges and tunnels.

The fort was constructed to defend Old San Juan against land attacks from the east via Puerta de Tierra. The imaginative design came from the famous Irish mercenary Alejandro O'Reilly and his compatriot Thomas O'Daly (hired by Spain). Construction began in 1634 in response to an attack by the Dutch a decade previously, though the main period of enlargement occurred between 1765 and 1783. Seven acres were lopped off the fort in 1897 to ease congestion in the Old Town, and the following year the Spanish marked Puerto Rico's entry into the Spanish-American War by firing at the battleship USS *Yale* from its cannon battery. The fort became a National Historic site in 1949 and a Unesco World Heritage site in 1983. Facilities include a fascinating museum, a store, military archives, a reproduction of a soldier's barracks and prime city views. There are also regular historical reenactments. You can gain entry to both Fuerte San Cristóbal and El Morro for \$5.

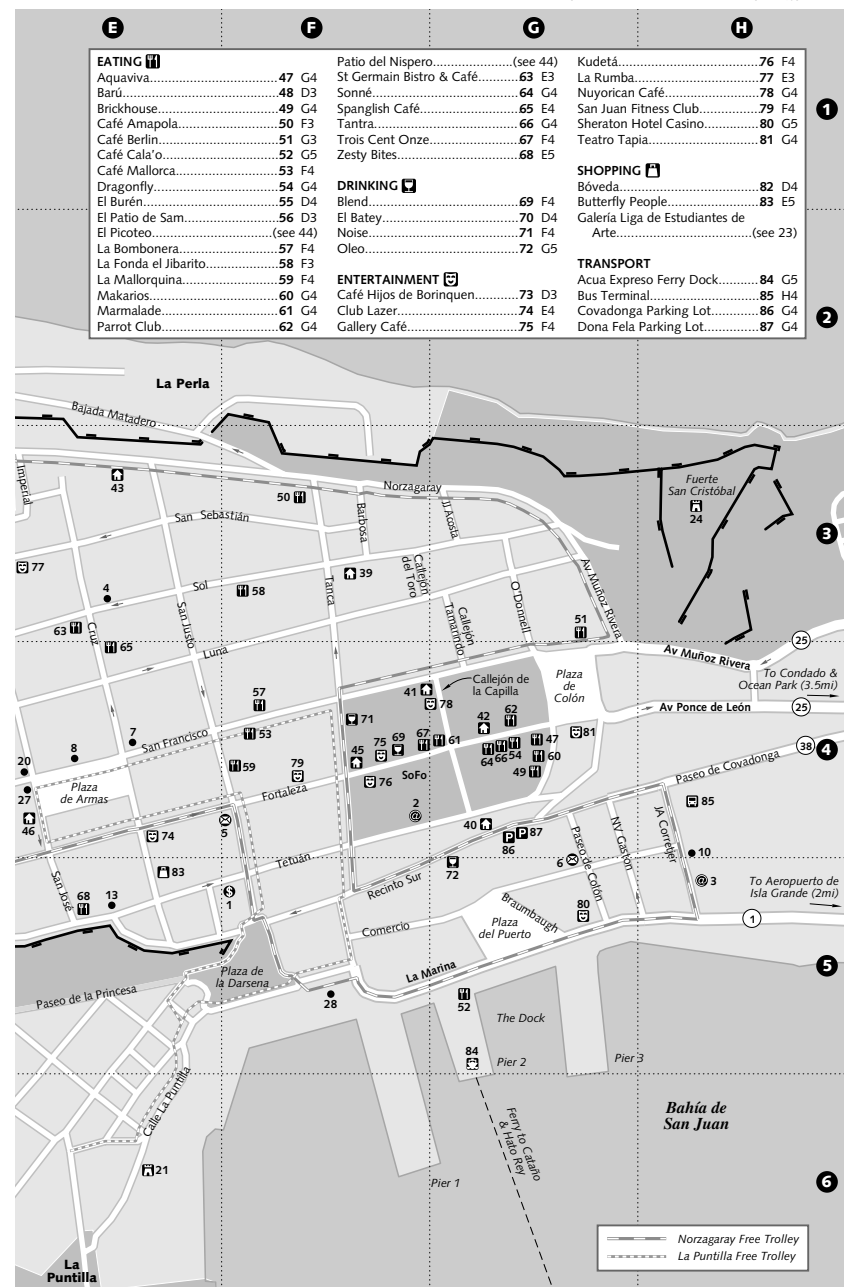
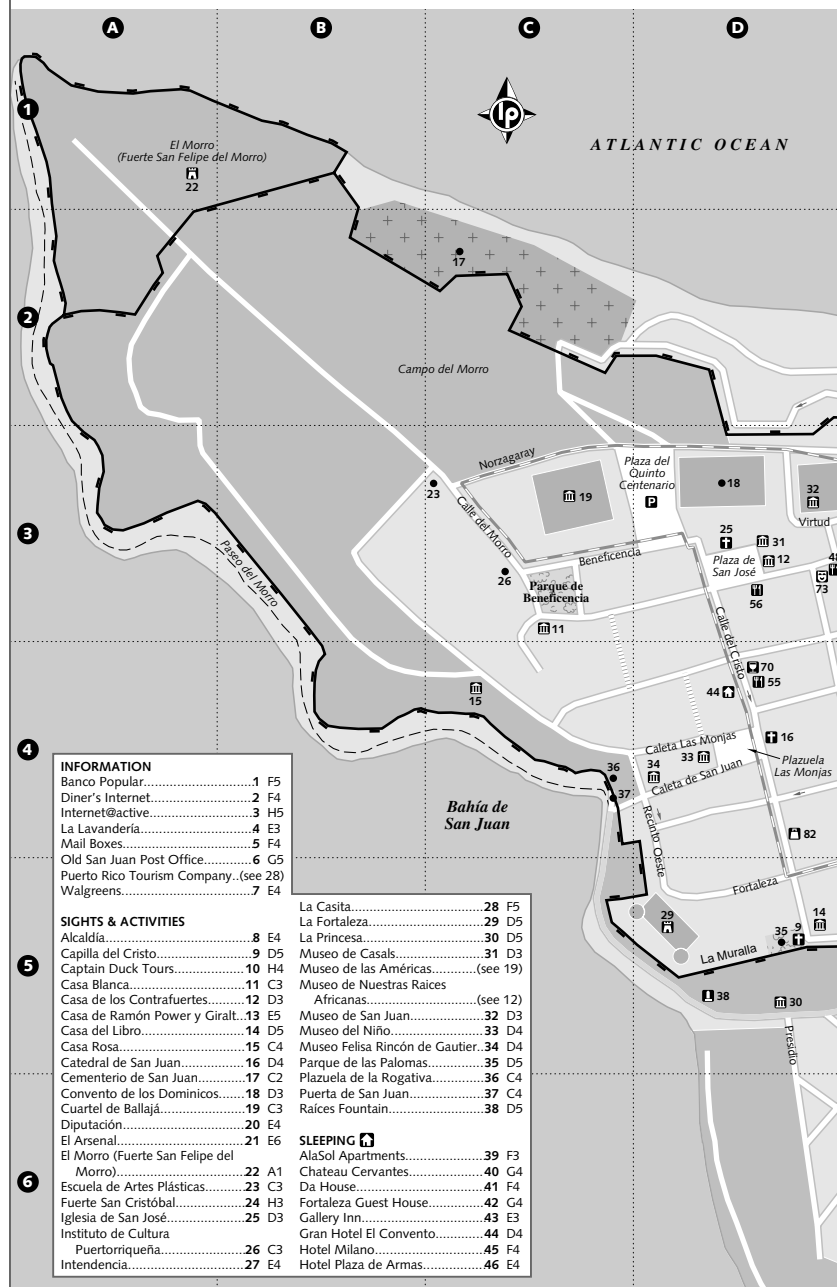
La Fortaleza

A steep climb along Recinto Oeste takes you to the top of the city wall and the guarded iron gates of **La Fortaleza** (The Fortress; Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-721-7000 ext 2211 or 2358; admission free; 🕒 9am-3:30pm Mon-Fri). Also known as El Palacio de Santa Catalina, this imposing building is the oldest executive mansion in continuous use in the western hemisphere, dating from 1533. Once the original fortress for the young colony, La Fortaleza eventually yielded its military pre-eminence to the city's newer and larger forts, and was remodeled and expanded to domicile island governors for more than three centuries. You can join a guided tour that includes the mansion's Moorish gardens, the dungeon and the chapel. Free guided tours generally run on weekdays except holidays; tours in English leave on the hour, in Spanish on the half-hour. Call in advance to make sure the grounds are not closed for a government function.

El Arsenal

On the point of land called La Puntilla is a low, gray fortress with a Romanesque proscenium entrance. This is **El Arsenal** (The Arsenal; Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-724-1877, 787-724-5949; admission free; 🕒 8:30am-4pm Mon-Fri), a former Spanish naval station that was the last place to house Spanish military forces after the US victory in the Spanish-American War. Today, the arsenal is home to the fine- and decorative-arts divisions of

OLD SAN JUAN



the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, and hosts periodic exhibitions in three galleries.

Puerta de San Juan

Spanish ships once anchored in the cove just off these ramparts to unload colonists and supplies, all of which entered the city through a tall red portal known as Puerta de San Juan (San Juan Gate; Map pp90–1). This tunnel through the wall dates from the 1630s. It marks the end of the Paseo de la Princesa, and stands as one of three remaining gates into the old city (the others lead into the cemetery and the enclave of La Perla). Once there were a total of five gates, and the massive wooden doors were closed each night to thwart intruders. Turn right after passing through the gate and you can follow the **Paseo del Morro** northwest, paralleling the city walls for approximately three-quarters of a mile.

La Casita

Looking like a yellow gatehouse, La Casita (Little House; Map pp90–1) greets visitors near the cruise ship docks in 'lower' Old San Juan, in the outskirts of the walled city that rises on the hill to the north. The Department of Agriculture & Commerce built this miniature neoclassical structure with its red-tiled roof in 1937 to serve the needs of the burgeoning port. Today, La Casita is the information center for the PRTC (see p88). Stop here for maps and to check out the weekend craft market. Also look for the food vendors selling icy *piraguas* (delicious snow cones) or taste the local coffee at the old-fashioned hexagonal stand.

La Princesa

Poised against the outside wall of the city is La Princesa (Map pp90–1). Once a harsh jail, the long, gray and white stone structure now houses the main offices of the PRTC (p88) and an **art gallery** (☎ 787-721-2400; admission free; ☎ 9am–4pm Mon–Fri) with welcome air-conditioning and frequently changing shows by first-rate island artists. The bronze statue in front depicts Doña Felisa Gautier, San Juan's revered mayor from 1946 to 1968 (see opposite).

Casa Rosa

The tropical villa in the foreground of the field leading up to El Morro is the Casa Rosa (Pink House; Map pp90–1). Built as a barracks for the Spanish militia in the early 19th century, this house long served as officers' quarters.

The structure has since been restored and now serves as a plush day-care facility for the children of government employees.

Casa Blanca

First constructed in 1521 as a residence for Puerto Rico's pioneering governor, Juan Ponce de León (who died before he could move in), the **Casa Blanca** (White House; Map pp90–1; ☎ 787-724-4102; adult/child \$2/1; ☎ 9am–noon & 1–4:30pm Tue–Sun, guided tours Tue–Fri by appointment) is the oldest continuously occupied house in the western hemisphere. For the first 250 years after its construction it served as the ancestral home for the de León family. In 1779 it was taken over by the Spanish military, then with the change of Puerto Rico's political status in 1898, it provided a base for US military commanders until 1966. Today it is a historic monument containing a museum, secluded grounds, a chain of fountains and an Alhambra-style courtyard. The interior rooms are decked out with artifacts from the 16th to the 20th century. An animated guide can give you a theatrical complementary tour.

Cementerio de San Juan

Sitting just outside the northern fortifications of the old city, the neoclassical chapel in the cemetery (Map pp90–1) provides a focal point among the graves. The colony's earliest citizens are buried here, as well as the famous Puerto Rican freedom fighter Pedro Albizu-Campos. This Harvard-educated chemical engineer, lawyer and politician led the agricultural workers' strikes in 1934 and was at the forefront of the movement for Puerto Rican independence until his arrest and imprisonment in 1936. A number of muggings have occurred here, so be careful.

Casa de Ramón Power y Giralt

Once the residence of a political reformer and Puerto Rico's first representative to the Spanish court, this restored 18th-century **house** (Map pp90–1; ☎ 787-722-5882; 155 Tetuán; admission free; ☎ 9am–5pm Tue–Sat) is now the headquarters of the Conservation Trust of Puerto Rico. The house contains limited exhibits of Taino artifacts along with a small gift shop, and highlights the precarious nature of much of the island's ecology. The staff can be helpful with information about visiting the trust's other island properties.

TOP HISTORICAL HITS

- Fuerte San Cristóbal (p89)
- Casa Blanca (p92)
- Catedral de San Juan (p94)
- Caparra (p129)
- Casa-Finca de Don Luis Muñoz Marín (p102)

Museo de Nuestras Raíces Africanas

Housed in the 18th-century **Casa de los Contrafuertes** (House of Buttresses) on the Plaza de San José, the compact **museum** (Museum of Our African Roots; Map pp90–1; admission \$2; ☎ 8:30am–4:30pm Tue–Sat) displays masks, sculptures, musical instruments, documents and prints that highlight Puerto Rico's connections to West Africa. One exhibit recreates living conditions in a slave ship.

MUSEUMS

Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña

Once a home for the poor, this buff building with green trim, near the intersection with Calle Norzagaray, houses the executive offices of this **institute** (Institute of Puerto Rican Culture; Map pp90–1; ☎ 787-724-0700; www.icp.gobierno.pr; Calle del Morro; admission free; ☎ 9:30am–5pm Tue–Sun). The agency has been shepherding the flowering of the arts and cultural pride on the island since the 1950s. Its plazas, sheltered from the tourist traffic in the streets outside, are pleasantly tranquil.

Cuartel de Ballajá & Museo de las Américas

Built in 1854 as a military barracks, the **cuartel** (Map pp90–1; off Norzagaray) is a three-story edifice with large gates on two ends, ample balconies, a series of arches and a protected central courtyard that served as a plaza and covers a reservoir. It was the last and largest building constructed by the Spaniards in the New World. Facilities included officer quarters, warehouses, kitchens, dining rooms, prison cells and stables. Now its 2nd floor holds the **Museo de las Américas** (Museum of the Americas; ☎ 787-724-5052; admission free; ☎ 10am–4pm Tue–Fri, 11am–5pm Sat & Sun, guided tours 10:30am, 11:30am, 12:30pm & 2pm Tue–Fri) which gives an overview of cultural development in the New World. It features changing exhibitions and Caribbean and European American art, most notably an

impressive *santos* (religious statuettes) collection. Hours for both the barracks and the museum are the same.

Museo de San Juan

Located in a Spanish colonial building at the corner of Calle MacArthur, the **Museo de San Juan** (Map pp90–1; ☎ 787-724-1875; 150 Norzagaray; admission free, donations accepted; ☎ 9am–4pm Tue–Fri, 10am–4pm Sat & Sun) is the definitive take on the city's 500-year history. The well laid-out exhibition showcases pictorial and photographic testimonies from the Caparra ruins to the modern-day shopping malls. There's also a half-hour TV documentary about the history of San Juan (in both Spanish and English).

Museo del Niño

The pink and green building that sits on the edge of a small, shady park houses this **museum** (Children's Museum; Map pp90–1; ☎ 787-722-3791; 150 Calle del Cristo; adult/child \$7/\$5; ☎ 9am–5pm Tue–Fri, 11:30–5:30pm Sat & Sun). Kids love these hands-on exhibits – particular favorites include the short-wave radio display that lets them talk with children in other countries, the miniature town touting the benefits of recycling and a tour through the human heart.

Museo Felisa Rincón de Gautier

This **museum** (Map pp90–1; ☎ 787-723-1897; 51 Caleta de San Juan; admission free; ☎ 9am–4pm Mon–Fri) is an attractive neoclassical town house that was once the long-time home of San Juan's beloved mayor, Doña Felisa. She presided over the growth of her city with personal style and political acumen for more than 20 years during the Operation Bootstrap days of the 1940s, '50s and '60s. This historic home is a monument to the life of an accomplished public servant.

Casa del Libro

Tucked away on a very pretty street is the **Casa del Libro** (House of Books; Map pp90–1; ☎ 787-723-0354; 255 Calle del Cristo; admission free; ☎ 11am–4:30pm Tue–Sat, closed holidays), yet another of the old city's tiny museums. This restored 18th-century town house contains more than 5000 manuscripts and texts that date back 2000 years. The collection includes one of the most respected assemblages of *incunabula* (texts produced prior to 1501) in the Americas, including documents signed by King Ferdinand II and his wife Isabela.

Escuela de Artes Plásticas

The monumental gray-and-white building with a red-roofed rotunda across from El Morro is actually the **Escuela de Artes Plásticas** (Academy of Fine Arts; Map pp90-1; Norzagaray). Built as an insane asylum during the 19th century, this grand building looks more like a seat of government with its symmetrical wings, columns, Romanesque arches, porticos, courtyards and fountains.

Today it is the source of more than a few jokes by contemporary art students about the mad dreams that continue to take shape within its walls. See for yourself when student shows go on display at the end of each academic term, or take a look at the sculpture court on the right-hand side of the building, where students can be seen chipping new images from granite. The courtyard on the left-hand side has a kiosk.

Museo de Casals

On Plaza de San José is the **Museo de Casals** (Casals Museum; Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-723-9185; adult/child \$1/0.50; 🕒 9:30am-5:30pm Tue-Sat). A native of Spain's proud but repressed province of Catalonia, world-famous cellist Pablo Casals moved to his mother's homeland of Puerto Rico in 1956 to protest the dictatorial regime of Francisco Franco in Spain. He quickly established the respected Festival Casals for classical music, which became a principal force in the subsequent flowering of the arts on the island (p54).

If you loved the man, you'll surely love the museum.

CHURCHES

Catedral de San Juan

Although noticeably smaller and more austere than other Spanish churches, the **Catedral de San Juan** (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-722-0861; 153 Calle del Cristo; admission free; 🕒 8am-4pm) nonetheless retains a simple earthy elegance. Founded originally in the 1520s, the first church on this site was destroyed in a hurricane in 1529.

A replacement was constructed in 1540 and, over a period of centuries, it slowly evolved into the Gothic/neoclassical-inspired monument seen today.

Most people come to see the marble tomb of Ponce de León and the body of religious martyr St Pio displayed under glass. However, you can get quite a show here on Saturday afternoons when the limos roll up and bridal

parties requisition the front steps. The main entrance to the cathedral faces a beautiful shaded park replete with antique benches and gnarly trees.

Capilla del Cristo

Over the centuries, tens of thousands of penitents have come to pray for miracles at the **Capilla del Cristo** (Christ's Chapel; Map pp90-1; 🕒 10am-4pm Tue), the tiny outdoor sanctuary adjacent to Parque de las Palomas (Dove Park). One legend claims that the chapel was built to prevent people from falling over the city wall and into the sea. Another claims that citizens constructed the chapel to commemorate a miracle.

As the story goes, a rider participating in a race during the city's San Juan Bautista festivities miraculously survived after his galloping horse carried him down Calle del Cristo, off the top of the wall and into the sea.

Over the years, believers of the fable have left hundreds of little silver ornaments representing parts of the body – called *milagros* (miracles) – on the altar before the statues of the saints as tokens of thanks for being cured of some infirmity.

You can see the chapel any time, but the iron fence across the front is only open during the listed hours.

Iglesia de San José

What it lacks in grandiosity it makes up for in age; the **Iglesia de San José** (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-725-7501; admission free; 🕒 8:30am-4pm Mon-Sat, mass noon Sun) in the Plaza de San José is the second-oldest church in the Americas, after the cathedral in Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. Established in 1523 by Dominicans, this church with its vaulted Gothic ceilings still bears the coat of arms of Juan Ponce de León (whose family worshipped here), a striking carving of the Crucifixion and ornate processional floats. For 350 years, the remains of Ponce de León rested in a crypt here before being moved to the city's cathedral, down the hill. Another relic missing from the chapel is a Flemish carving of the Virgin of Bethlehem, which came to the island during the first few years of the colony and disappeared in the early 1970s.

It's also the final resting place of José Campeche (p47), one of Puerto Rico's most revered artists.

Convento de los Dominicos

Next to the Iglesia de San José is the **Convento de los Dominicos** (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-721-6866; 🕒 9am-5pm Wed-Sun), a Dominican convent which dates from the 16th century. After centuries of use as a convent, the building became a barracks for Spanish troops and was later used as a headquarters for US occupational forces after the Spanish-American War of 1898. It has been restored to its colonial grandeur and houses the arts/crafts/music/book store of the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, as well as a small chapel museum. Cultural events are sometimes held in the patio, and art exhibitions in the galleries.

PARKS & PLAZAS

Plaza de Armas

Follow Calle San Francisco into the heart of the old city and it opens on to the Plaza de Armas (Army Plaza; Map pp90-1). This is the city's nominal 'central' square, laid out in the 16th century with the classic look of plazas from Madrid and Mexico.

In its time, the plaza has served as a military parade ground (hence its name), a vegetable market and a social center. Shade trees, banks of seats, and a couple of old-fashioned coffee booths still make the plaza the destination of choice for couples taking their evening stroll. The beat of a *bomba* drum has also been known to light up an otherwise humdrum evening.

One of the highlights of the plaza is the **Alcaldía** (City Hall; Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-724-7171; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri), which dates from 1789 and has twin turrets resembling those of its counterpart in Madrid. This building houses the office of the mayor of San Juan and is also the site of periodic exhibitions.

At the western end of the plaza, the **Intendencia** (Administration Building; Map pp90-1) and the **Diputación** (Provincial Delegation Building; Map pp90-1) are two other functioning government buildings adding to the charms of the plaza. Both represent 19th-century neoclassical architecture, and come complete with cloisters.

Plazuela de la Rogativa

This tiny gem of a park, the Plazuela de la Rogativa (Small Plaza of the Religious Procession; Map pp90-1), has lovely vistas overlooking the bay and is home to a

whimsical bronze sculpture of the bishop of San Juan and three women bearing torches. According to legend, the candles held by the women who walked through this plaza one night in 1797 tricked British lieutenant Abercromby – who was getting ready to lay siege to San Juan with his 8000 troops and flotilla of more than 50 vessels – into believing that reinforcements were flooding the city from the rest of the island. Fearful of being outnumbered, Abercromby and his fleet withdrew.

Paseo de la Princesa

Emanating a distinctly European flavor, the Paseo de la Princesa (Walkway of the Princess; Map pp90-1) is a 19th-century esplanade situated just outside the city walls. Lined with antique street lamps, shade trees, statues, benches, fruit vendors' carts and street entertainers, this romantic walkway culminates at the magnificent **Raíces Fountain**, a stunning statue/water feature that depicts the island's eclectic Taino, African and Spanish heritage.

The Paseo is an ideal place to indulge in that most refined of Latin pastimes, the evening stroll – an activity best enjoyed at sunset when the breeze blows stiffly off the bay, the fountain shimmers under haunting colored lights and assorted vendors tempt passersby with their sugary *piraguas*.

Plaza de Colón

Tracing its roots back more than a century to the 400-year anniversary of the first Columbus expedition, the Plaza de Colón (Columbus Plaza; Map pp90-1) lies across the street from the lower part of Fuerte San Cristóbal. The city wall on this end of Old San Juan was torn down in 1897, and the plaza, with its statue of the 'Discoverer' atop a pillar, stands on the site of one of the city's original gated entries, Puerta Santiago. Today, the plaza acts as a gateway to much of the traffic entering the city from Av Muñoz Rivera. Buses and taxis congregate on the plaza's south side.

Plaza del Quinto Centenario

It's surprising to find such a modern square shoehorned in among all the architectural antiques, but this small plaza (Map pp90-1) was built in 1992 to honor the 500-year anniversary of Christopher Columbus's first voyage to the Americas. Constructed for a rumored cost of \$10 million and decorated

with a craning totem pole – **El Tótem Telúrico** – of ambiguous significance, the plaza offers great views over El Morro and the ocean and, from a distance, blends in subtly with the surrounding buildings.

Parque de las Palomas

On the lower end of Calle del Cristo, Parque de las Palomas (Pigeon Park; Map pp90–1) is a cobblestone courtyard shaded with trees at the top of the city wall. *Paloma* means ‘dove’ or ‘pigeon’ in Spanish and it’s the latter variety you’ll encounter here, in their hundreds. Some brave souls come here for the view it affords of Bahía de San Juan. Others just turn up to feed the pigeons. (You can buy birdseed from a vendor by the gate.) Devout Christians have long believed that if you feed the birds and one ‘anoints’ you with its pearly droppings, you have been blessed by God. Agnostics prefer to look upon it as just plain old bad luck.

Plaza de San José

Adjacent to the uppermost terrace of the Plaza del Quinto Centenario, where it meets Calle San Sebastián, is the Plaza de San José. This relatively small cobblestone plaza is dominated by a statue of Juan Ponce de León, cast from an English cannon captured in the raid of 1797. The plaza is probably the highest point in this city and serves as a threshold to four cultural sites on its perimeter. The neighborhood around the plaza, on San Sebastián and the intersecting Calle del Cristo, is the original home of the restaurant, bar and café scene that began in Old San Juan more than a decade ago. There are still plenty of places to grab a bite to eat in a shady building or outside in the plaza. See p113 for a description of your options, or just follow your nose. The smells of *sofrito* (an island seasoning), grilled chicken, garlic, fresh dorado and lime permeate the air.

La Perla

Wedge-tightly between the roaring Atlantic surf and San Juan’s thick perimeter walls, the compact neighborhood of La Perla (Map p90-1) marks a rather odd juxtaposition. In truth, this ramshackle hodge-podge of pastel-colored houses and steep, narrow access roads is one of Puerto Rico’s most notorious slums – though, as slums go, it’s remarkably picturesque (at least, from a distance).

The standard advice given out by San Juan tour companies is for tourists to steer

well clear of La Perla, a potentially dangerous *barrio* whose international infamy was cemented in a 1966 nonfiction book called *La Vida* by American anthropologist Oscar Lewis. Lewis detailed the tragic cycle of poverty and prostitution lived out by people growing up in La Perla and won a National Book Award for his efforts, though his views weren’t particularly welcomed by the quarter’s long-suffering residents.

Generally speaking, the cautionary advice on La Perla is pertinent. This is a gritty, high-crime neighborhood with a seemingly incurable drug problem and it would be unwise for a foreigner to wander around. But it’s not all hopelessness.

Hidden among the decrepitude lies a community center, a senior citizen’s home, some abstract murals, and a handful of talented local artists. Then there’s the shabby magnificence of the houses themselves – the turbulent blues, the glinting greens and the foamy browns – that seem pulled right from the ocean.

During the mid-2000s, the Puerto Rican government made regular (unsuccessful) bids to buy out La Perla’s residents and redevelop the area. Recent reports suggest Donald Trump has plans to turn it into a casino/resort.

Puerta de Tierra

Less than 2 miles in length and only one-quarter of a mile broad, this district occupies the lowland, filling the rest of the area that was colonial San Juan. Puerta de Tierra (Map pp86–7) takes its name from its position as the ‘gateway of land’ leading up to the walls of Old San Juan, which was the favored route of land attack by waves of English and Dutch invaders. For centuries, Puerta de Tierra was a slum much like La Perla, although far less picturesque. It was a place where free blacks and multiracial people lived, excluded from the protection of the walled city where the Spaniards and *criollos* (islanders of European descent) postured like European gentry and maneuvered for political favor.

Today, the district is a major driveway for cars entering Old San Juan. There’s a housing project here on the south side, but the north coast is the most dramatic oceanside vista in the metropolitan area. Overlooking the wild spectacle of Balneario Escambrón you’ll find the Romanesque Capitolio, the Fuerte San Gerónimo and the sun-dappled Parque

FEAR & LOATHING IN SAN JUAN

Long before *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and the sharp, stylized prose that gave birth to ‘Gonzo’ journalism, US writer Hunter S Thompson earned a meager living as a scribe for a fledgling Puerto Rican English language weekly called *El Sportivo*, based in San Juan.

Thompson first arrived in the Puerto Rican capital in 1960 on the cusp of an unprecedented tourist boom. With the Americans recently ushered out of Cuba by a belligerent Fidel Castro, the rum party had moved defiantly east as corrupt businessmen and nascent tour companies attempted to recreate the tawdry nightlife and glitzy casinos that had once run rampant in Havana.

Attracted raucously into the melee, Thompson lapped up the louche bars with hungry relish. To finance his Caribbean sojourn he vied for a job with the *San Juan Star*, a newspaper then edited by subsequent Pulitzer Prize winner William Kennedy (author of the novel *Ironweed*) but, after being passed over in favor of more reliable fodder, he set his sights dangerously lower. For the literary world, it was a fortuitous demotion. Money was tight but rum mysteriously abundant in 1960s San Juan and, while many of Thompson’s experiences quickly evaporated in back-to-back drinking binges, the essence of the era was later to emerge rather dramatically in his seminal book, *The Rum Diary*. Published in 1998 (nearly 40 years after it was written), the novel is a thinly veiled account of Thompson’s alcohol-fuelled journalistic exploits as seen through the eyes of Paul Kemp, a struggling freelance writer caught in a Caribbean boomtown that was battling against an incoming tide of rich American tourists. Kemp, rather like Thompson, was a young chancer, eager to make his mark in a city that was getting its first insight into the decadence and depravity of the American Dream. Transfixed and reviled in equal measure, he regularly plied the streets of Old San Juan drinking rum for breakfast and gate-crashing free press parties for lunch.

However, built on precarious foundations, Thompson’s Puerto Rican honeymoon didn’t last. The writer left San Juan nine months after he arrived and made tracks for America’s west coast. His characteristically manic *Rum Diary* scribbles, released 40 years later, offer a rare glimpse of an island at an important turning point in its history and a snapshot of a journalistic genius in the making. Hailed today as a modern classic, the book has been made into a Hollywood movie starring Johnny Depp, due for release in 2009.

Muñoz Rivera. The road is a popular jogging route in the day time but is best negotiated by taxi at night.

FUERTE SAN GERÓNIMO

This half-forgotten fort (Map pp98–9) is situated at the east end of Puerta de Tierra and was completed in 1788 to guard the entrance to the Condado Lagoon. It was barely up and running in 1797 when the British came marching through on their way to San Juan and a short-lived occupation. Restored in 1983, San Gerónimo today is hemmed in by tall modern hotels, but is still worth a closer look. Entered via the walkway behind the Caribe Hilton, the interior of the fort is rarely open, though the exterior walls and ramparts are usually accessible and offer rather fetching views of Condado across the inlet.

EL CAPITOLIO

Sandwiched between Av Muñoz Rivera and Av Ponce de León, just east of Fuerte San Cristóbal, is **El Capitolio** (The Capitol; Map pp86–7;

☎ 787-721-6040; admission free; ☎ 9am–4pm Mon–Fri, tours by appointment only) of the commonwealth. Resembling a smaller, Romanesque version of the US Capitol, the building commands an authoritative position in Puerta de Tierra overlooking the wave-lashed coast. The much-revered constitution of the commonwealth, which moved the island a step closer to its citizens’ dreams of freedom from colonialism in 1951, is on display inside the 80ft rotunda. Regular sessions of the legislature meet inside, while rallies for and against statehood occur outside every time the government calls for an island-wide plebiscite on the issue.

PARQUES MUÑOZ RIVERA & SIXTO ESCOBAR

Spanning half the width of Puerta de Tierra between the Atlantic and Av Ponce de León, this green space, known as Parque Muñoz Rivera (Map pp86–7), dates back over 50 years and injects some much needed breathing space into the surrounding urbanity. It has shade trees, trails, a kid’s playground, and a

'Peace Pavilion,' which sometimes hosts community events. An artisans' fair is held here and at the adjacent **Parque Sixto Escobar** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 787-277-9200) on most weekends.

Parque Sixto Escobar – named for the famed Puerto Rican boxer – was the site of the eighth Pan American Games, held in 1979, and is now home to an Olympic athletics track and the gusty Balneario Escambrón. The park also hosts the annual Heineken Jazz Festival.

Condado

On the cusp of a ritzy rehabilitation, beachfront Condado (Map pp98-9) is swinging once again to the sound of jangling money – and equally clangorous slot machines. In the

1960s, this is where Puerto Rico's explosive tourist boom was first ignited, spearheaded by exiled Cuban businessmen and rum-drunk Americans in search of the next big thing. But, as fashions ebbed and flowed, Condado's moment as the next Miami Beach never quite arrived. Instead, the more refined action edged gradually east to Isla Verde and abandoned Condado became a lonely hearts club for an unsavory crowd of prostitutes, pimps, drug dealers and high rollers crying into their piña colodas.

It was in the '90s that things first started to turn around and by the mid-2000s they had almost come full circle. As mainstream tourism headed east, Condado plugged the gaps, attracting assorted celebrities, gay socialites

and those in search of the odd hotel bargain. Today, dotted in among the new high-rises and condo towers, you'll still find a few old eclectic 1920s villas, along with a handful of pretty parks that serve as spacious windows to the sea. With its traffic-calmed streets and clustered hotels, Condado also retains the kind of relaxed nighttime street scene that Isla Verde lacks.

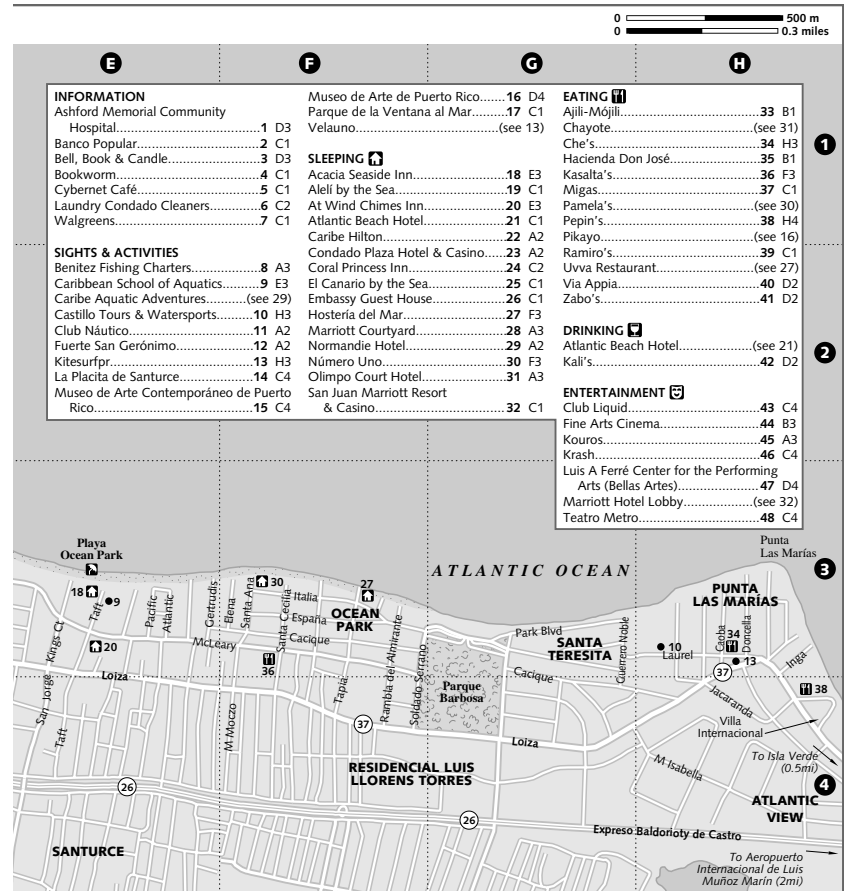
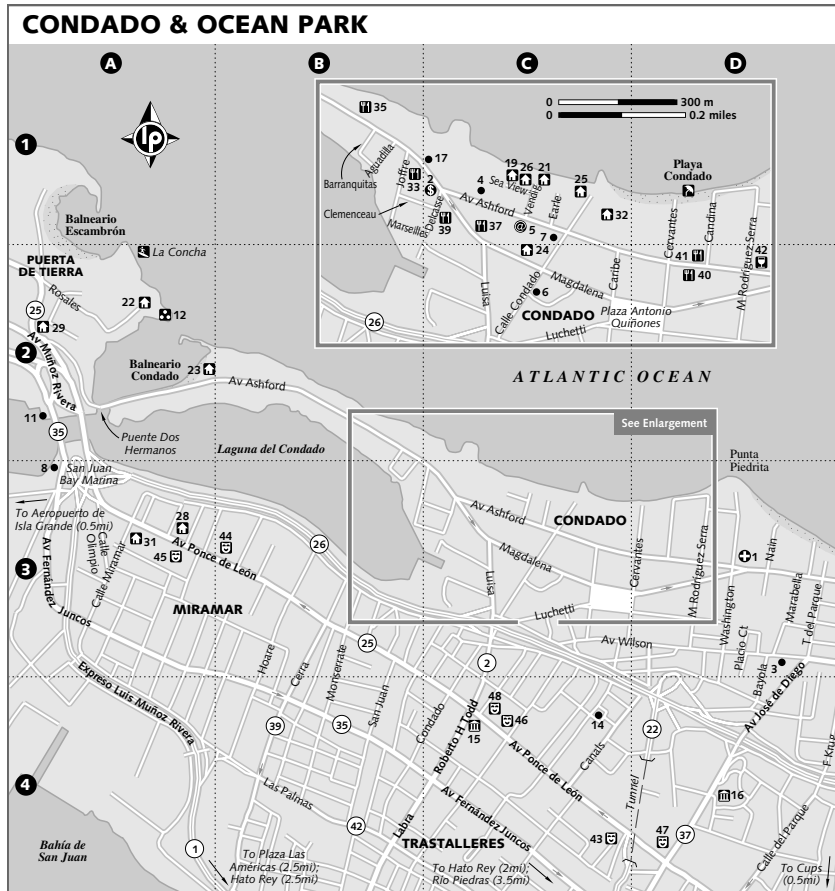
Ocean Park

At the east end of Condado lies Ocean Park (Map pp98-9), with its associated neighborhood of **Punta Las Marias**, a largely residential collection of private homes and beach retreats that include a handful of plush seaside guest-houses. The more tranquil beach here is an

open secret among the 'in' crowd and is great for windsurfing.

Miramar

Tucked behind Condado Lagoon is the upscale neighborhood of Miramar (Map pp98-9), named for its lovely sea views, all but blotted out these days by the trim new condo towers of Condado. Distinguished by its mature tree-lined streets and handful of unusual Prairie School architectural creations (think Frank Lloyd Wright meets Arts & Craft), the area isn't as homogenous as it once was, though the yachts berthed at the **Club Náutico** still gleam like polished diamonds and the spanking new Convention Center drops a few jaws with its outlandish



modernist design. Unless you're accommodated here in a hotel or you're paying a special visit to the Fine Arts cinema, the most you'll probably see of Miramar is from one of its notorious traffic bottlenecks.

Santurce

Santurce is one of San Juan's most important barrios that actually incorporates Condado and Miramar, but is usually used to describe the area south of Expressway 26 and north of Hato Rey. Buried in the heart of the modern city, its fortunes have fluctuated markedly since its founding by a Basque Country Count in the 1870s.

The '40s and '50s were a boom time, when color and life seeped from its energetic streets, spurred on by the buoyancy of Operation Bootstrap. Back then, Santurce was a financial center and a residential quarter of some repute. The nosedive began in the 1970s when the business district headed south to Hato Rey and Santurce suffered a similar fate to many US cities as the upwardly mobile middle-classes left to colonize the new suburbs. Left to fester, abandoned with high crime rates and unsightly graffiti, Santurce has worked hard to turn the corner. Its recent 21st-century renaissance has been spearheaded by new art galleries, a performing arts center and a host of trendy clubs.

MUSEO DE ARTE DE PUERTO RICO

While the Old Town's historic attractions are universally famous, fewer people are aware that San Juan boasts one of the largest and most celebrated art museums in the Caribbean. The **Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico** (MAPR; Map pp86-7; ☎ 787-977-6277, for tours ext 2230 or 2261; www.mapr.org; 299 Av José de Diego, Santurce; adult/child & senior \$6/3; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, 10am-8pm Wed, 11am-6pm Sun) opened in 2000 and rapidly inserted itself as an important nexus in the capital's vibrant cultural life. Housed in a splendid neoclassical building that was once the city's Municipal Hospital, MAPR is located in the city's revived Santurce district and boasts 18 exhibition halls spread over an area of 130,000 sq ft.

But there's far more to this cultural 'tour de force' than just a collection of paintings. Adding distinction to diversity, the facility also boasts a 5-acre sculpture garden, a conservation laboratory, a computer-learning center, a 400-seat theater, a museum

shop and the very highly regarded Pikayo restaurant (p118).

The artistic collection traces paintings, sculptures, posters and carvings from the 17th to the 21st century, chronicling such renowned Puerto Rican artists as José Campeche, Francisco Oller, Nick Quijano and Rafael Ferrer.

Do not miss the opportunity to take a walk through the gardens, where winding paths invite visitors to stroll past 14 sculptures and more than 100,000 plants in a scene reminiscent of Monet's water lilies.

MUSEO DE ARTE CONTEMPORÁNEO DE PUERTO RICO

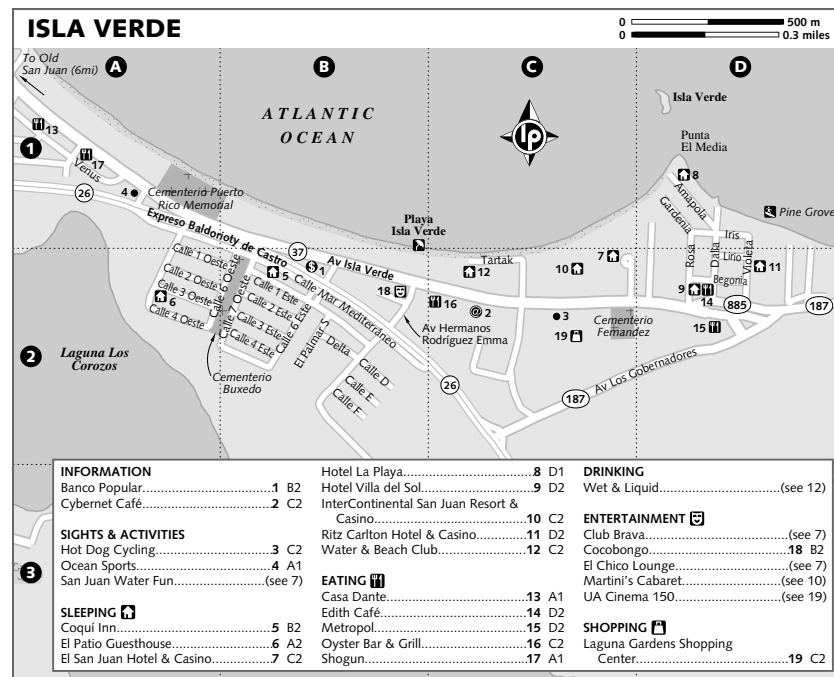
Another recent recipient of the makeover brush, the **Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 787-977-4030; www.museocontemporaneo.org; cnr Av Ponce de León & Roberto H Todd; admission free; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sat, noon-4pm Sun) sits just down the road from the Museo de Arte in a similarly eye-catching classical Georgian building – the former Rafael M Labra school – dating from 1918. The museum displays art from the mid-20th century onwards and showcases artists from Puerto Rico, the Caribbean and Latin America.

Isla Verde

Culturally speaking, modern Isla Verde (Map p101), is about as Puerto Rican as skiing in Aspen. Then again, most people don't arrive here to sample home-cooked *mofongo* (mashed plantains) or run off in search of the island's elusive *jibaros*. Rather, they come for a lavish helping of what the tourist brochures promote: a Cancún-style strip of international hotels and dimly lit casinos that offer an all-inclusive package of sun, sea, sand and escapism. The Puerto Rican part is purely incidental.

Hato Rey

As you head south from Santurce, the urban inquietude of the former business district is replaced by the sleekness of its modern successor. The first signs of the brave new world can be seen at Sagardo Corazon station, a space-age temple to the metro train that is the first stop on San Juan's spanking new Tren Urbano. Welcome to Hato Rey (Map pp86-7), the Caribbean's wannabe Wall Street, a gleaming cluster of glass-sheeted office towers and international banks that reflect not only the crimson afternoon sun but also the lucid



dreams of Puerto Rico's economic miracle. Aside from the ubiquitous financial institutions, Hato Rey's primary attractions revolve around shoppers and sports. Just west of the 'Miracle Mile' business district lies the massive Plaza Las Américas (see p122), the largest mall in the Caribbean, along with two major sports arenas – the Hiram Bithorn Stadium and the Roberto Clemente Coliseum.

Río Piedras

Keep pushing south and the flatness of Hato Rey soon gives way to the leafy uplands of Río Piedras (Map p102). Founded in 1714 and existing as a separate town until 1951, Río Piedras is the home of the renowned University of Puerto Rico and harbors a thriving academic community. You'll find cheap cafés and amply stocked bookshops here as well as a cut-price shopping street (José de Diego), and the island's largest farmers market. The university building itself is set in lush, palm-filled grounds and is distinguished by its signature minaretlike clock tower. This is a great place to hang out, shoot the breeze and start taking up those good Puerto Rican vibrations.

MERCADO DE RÍO PIEDRAS

If you like the smell of fish and oranges, the bustle of people, and trading jests in Spanish as you bargain for a bunch of bananas, this **market** (Paseo de Diego; Map p102; ☎ 9am-6pm) is for you. As much a scene as a place to shop, the market continues the colonial tradition of an indoor market that spills into the streets.

The four long blocks of shops and inexpensive restaurants lining Paseo de Diego and facing the market have been closed to auto traffic, turning the whole area into an outdoor mall. You can shop or just watch as the local citizens negotiate for everything from *chuletas* (pork chops) and *camisas* (shirts) to cassettes featuring Puerto Rican pop-music wonders like Menudo. Shoppers will find the market and stores along Paseo de Diego open from early morning to late evening, Monday to Saturday.

JARDÍN BOTÁNICO

This 75-acre tract of greenery is the site of the **Estación Experimental Agrícola de Puerto Rico** (Experimental Agricultural Station of Puerto Rico; Map p102; ☎ 787-763-4408, 787-767-1710; admission free;



☞ 6am-6pm, closed holidays, tours available), but is open to the public. Hiking trails lead to a lotus lagoon, an orchid garden with more than 30,000 flowers, and a plantation of more than 120 species of palm. The air smells of heliconia blossoms, as well as of nutmeg and cinnamon trees.

One of the reasons the garden is so serene is that it's difficult to find. The entrance is nearly hidden on the south side of the intersection of Hwy 1 and Hwy 847, a walk of about a mile from the center of the UPR campus. Call ahead to book a tour; it can be difficult to get the phone answered.

MUSEO DE ANTROPOLOGÍA, HISTORIA Y ARTE

This small but quite engaging **museum** (Map p102; ☎ 787-764-0000 ext 2452; admission free; ☞ 9am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun) of anthropology, history and art is worth a stop to see examples of the trove of Taíno Indian artifacts unearthed by university scholars in recent digs. In addition, this museum features revolving art shows and offers scholarly perspectives on island history. Finally, visiting the

museum gives travelers a legitimate reason to be snooping around the university campus and opens opportunities for connecting with the students and faculty. The opening hours vary, so call ahead. It lies just inside the entrance to the UPR campus, next to the Biblioteca Lazaro.

CASA-FINCA DE DON LUIS MUÑOZ MARÍN

This house and farm were once home to the godfather of the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD) and the man who shepherded Puerto Rico into commonwealth status – as well as a 20th-century industrialized market economy in the 1950s and '60s. Today, it is a **museum** (Map p102; ☎ 787-755-7979; Hwy 181 Km 1.3; admission \$3; ☞ 10am-2pm Wed-Sun) honoring the memory of this legendary Puerto Rican figure, and it also serves as a venue for concerts and experimental theater. Call for events, and visit if you want to find out more about the pretty astounding political career of Luis Muñoz Marín. Also take a minute to check out the great vegetation and expansive grounds. Look for the house on the east side of Río Piedras.

Beaches

San Juan has some of the best municipal beaches this side of Rio de Janeiro. Starting half a mile or so east of the Old Town, you can go from rustic to swanky and back to rustic all in the space of 7.5 miles.

PUERTA DE TIERRA

Balneario Escambrón (Map pp98-9). Imagine it – a sheltered arc of raked sand, decent surf breaks, plenty of local action and the sight of a 17th-century Spanish fort shimmering in the distance.

But, hang on a minute. Are you really still only a stone's throw from Old San Juan and the busy tourist strip of Condado? Balneario Escambrón is almost too good to be true, which is probably why a lot of people miss it. Perched on the north end of the slither of land that is Puerta de Tierra and abutting majestic Parque del Tercer Milenio, this palm-fringed yet rugged beach just might be one of the best municipal options offered anywhere. Adding convenience to enchantment, there are lifeguards, restrooms, and snack bars on hand along with a large parking lot.

CONDADO

Hemmed in by hotel towers and punctuated by rocky outcrops, Condado's narrow beaches are busier than Ocean Park's but less exclusive than Isla Verde's. Expect splashes of lurid graffiti, boisterous games of volleyball and plenty of crashing Atlantic surf.

The area's official public beach is **Balneario Condado** (Map pp98-9), a small arc of sand, adjacent to the Dos Hermanos bridge, that faces west toward the Fuerte San Gerónimo across the inlet. A line of rocks breaks the water here, meaning that the sea is calm and bathing relatively safe. Lifeguards police the area on weekdays and snack bars are open daily, but bathrooms are few and far between. You can rent beach chairs.

Condado's Atlantic-facing beaches are very popular, especially among families who congregate around the big hotels, and with gay men, who seem to like the stretch of sand in front of Calle Condado. Urban redevelopment is ongoing and a number of salubrious parks – most notably **Parque de la Ventana al Mar** (Window to the Sea; Map pp98-9) – have opened up recently, enhancing both beach views and access.

OCEAN PARK

Ocean Park's (Map pp98-9) lesser fame is its hidden blessing. Fronted by leafy residential streets and embellished by the odd luxury B&B, this wide sweep of fine, diamond dust sand is protected by offshore reefs and caressed by cooling seasonal trade winds. Although largely the preserve of trendy lovers of tranquility, anyone can enjoy the very different ambience here. Just pick a road through the neighborhood's low-rise gated community and follow it toward the water.

PLAYA ISLA VERDE

Resort pluggers will tell you that Playa Isla Verde (Map p101) is the Copacabana of Puerto Rico with its legions of tanned bodies and dexterous beach bums flexing their triceps around the volleyball net. Other more savvy travelers prefer to dodge the extended families and colonizing spring-break hedonists that stake space here and head west to Ocean Park. Whatever your subjective view, this broad mile-long wedge of sand that lies between Punta Las Marias and Piñones is an undeniable beauty. The downside – if there is one – is access. Cutting in front of the towering condos and plush hotels of Av Isla Verde, the beach is completely obscured from the road and, as a result, lacks the inclusive atmosphere of more open municipal beaches.

BALNEARIO DE CAROLINA

Wedged in between the high rise hotel strip of Isla Verde and rustic delights of Piñones, the **Balneario de Carolina** (Map pp86-7; Rte 187; ☞ 8am-6pm) is a fine, clean beach that lacks natural shelter and is positioned a little incongruously right in front of LMM international airport. Equipped with plenty of lifeguards, bathrooms, showers, barbecue pits and rather weird red sculptures, the beach can be pleasantly peaceful in the week if you can ignore the noise from 747s taking off. Parking costs \$3.

ACTIVITIES

Hiking

A favorite store for climbers and hikers in Puerto Rico, **Aventuras Tierra Adentro** (Map p102; ☎ 787-766-0470; www.aventuraspr.com; 268a Av Jesús T Piñero, Río Piedras; day trip \$150; ☞ 10am-6pm Tue-Sat, tours available upon demand) is also a tour operator specializing in rock climbing and rappelling trips to the Río Camuy caves (p245). Guides also take people on trips through Río Tanama

and Angeles Cave, and there's a very good trip for children to Yuyu Cave in the karst region. Novices are welcome – all expeditions begin with a short lesson.

Dividing & Snorkeling

While Puerto Rico is well known for its first-class diving, San Juan is not the best place for it: strong winds often churn up the water. Condado has an easy dive that takes you through a pass between the inner and outer reefs into coral caverns, overhangs, grottoes and tunnels.

Eco-Action Tours (☎ 787-791-7509; www.ecoactiontours.com; tours \$40-130) can do just about any tour imaginable, from rappelling to nature walks. It operates out of a van and comes to you. Check out its website or phone them. The guides are knowledgeable and very accommodating.

Caribe Aquatic Adventures (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-281-8858; 499 Av Muñoz Rivera; snorkel/dive \$50/135) operates out of the Normandie Hotel in Puerta de Tierra, but you needn't be a guest to use the services. This outfit does dives near San Juan, but also further afield around the islands off the coast of Fajardo (Icacos for snorkeling and Palomino and Palominito for diving). Lunch and transportation from San Juan are included in trips to Fajardo. The company's shore dives from the beach behind the hotel are regarded as some of the best in the Caribbean. Cruise passengers love utilizing this place.

Ocean Sports (Map p101; ☎ 787-268-2329; www.osdivers.com; 77 Av Isla Verde) has a dive store in Isla Verde. It can also organize shore dives, deep dives, night dives, wall dives and cavern dives. It has a full service facility that provides Nitrox, Trimix and rebreathers.

Castillo Tours & Watersports (right) offers snorkeling excursions that include equipment, instruction, lunch and transportation.

Kayaking

Ecoquest (☎ 787-6167543; www.ecoquestpr.com) offers a great three-hour trip to Piñones and its adjacent lagoon. The excursion includes information on local flora and fauna, a one-hour kayak on the lagoon and some traditional food from one of the famous local fish restaurants. Prices start at \$69 per person.

Copladet Nature & Adventure Tours (☎ 787-765-8595; www.copladet.com in Spanish) also offers lots of good tours, including kayaking on the Laguna de Piñones (p125).

Fishing

Captain José Castillo of **Castillo Tours & Watersports** (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-791-6195; www.castillotours.com; 2413 Laurel, Punta Las Marías; trips \$65-450) offers deep-sea fishing for blue marlin, wahoo, tuna and mahimahi, as well as snorkeling and sailing excursions.

Benitez Fishing Charters (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-723-2292; San Juan Bay Marina, Miramar) is captained by the celebrated Mike Benitez, who has carried the likes of former US President Jimmy Carter. If you want to trade White House gossip while fishing for dolphin, tuna, wahoo and white and blue marlin, book a space on his deluxe 45' boat for some serious deep-sea fishing. Prices start at \$185 per person for a four-hour excursion.

Surfing, Sailing & Water Sports

San Juan is hardly Rincón in the surfing stakes, but no matter. You'll find the best waves and biggest *surferos* scene east of Isla Verde out towards Piñones and beyond, when the morning and evening breezes glass off a 4ft swell. Popular breaks include Pine Grove, Los Aviónes and La Concha along Hwy 187.

WoW Surfing School (☎ 787-955-6059; www.gosurfpr.com) – WoW stands for Walk on Water – runs full surfing lessons from Playa Escambrón in Puerta de Tierra or Pine Grove on Playa Isla Verde. Lessons include boards, stretching, safety drills, dry land practice and the real thing. Board rentals (\$30 to \$40 per day) are also available.

Velauno (Map p101; ☎ 787-982-0543; www.velauno.com; 2430 Loiza, Punta Las Marías; longboards/windsurfers per day \$35/75) is a great place to start learning how to surf, windsurf or kitesurf. On weekends it rents equipment right from the beach, and there is a discount for rentals longer than a day. Classes in all three disciplines offered.

You can learn how to kitesurf, windsurf or just plain surf at **Kitesurfpr** (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-221-0635; 2434 Loiza, Punta Las Marías).

San Juan Waterfun (Map p101; ☎ 787-643-4510; El San Juan Hotel & Casino, 6063 Av Isla Verde, Isla Verde Beach, Isla Verde) can rent you pretty much anything that floats: banana boats, wave runners, kayaks (\$20 per hour), small catamarans (with captain; \$70 per hour), jet skis, water skis and knee boards. Or get airborne with some parasailing (\$65 per person). It's situated on Playa Isla Verde in front of the El San Juan Hotel.

Castillo Tours & Watersports (opposite) puts together catamaran sailing trips as well as snorkeling and fishing excursions. To rent a small sailboat or powerboat, contact the **Caribbean School of Aquatics** (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-728-6606; 1 Taft, Suite 10f, Condado).

Cycling

Forget the notorious traffic jams; cycling in San Juan can actually be good fun, as long as you know where to go. In fact, it is perfectly feasible to work your way along the safe coastline from Old San Juan out as far as Carolina and the bike paths of Piñones.

In Isla Verde, **Hot Dog Cycling** (Map p101; ☎ 787-791-0776; www.hotdogcycling.com; 5916 Av Isla Verde; ☎ 10am-5pm), situated in the small Plazoleta shopping center, rents excellent 21-speed mountain bikes from \$25 per day. These guys are handily situated near the start of the designated Isla Verde–Piñones bike route. Also ask about their bike tours.

WALKING TOUR

Start with an early morning pick-me-up in **Café Cala'o** (1; p113) next to Pier 2, before heading west to **La Casita** (2; p92), a historic neoclassical gatehouse that acts as the modern HQ for the Puerto Rican Tourist Company. After picking up some informative literature on the sights and sounds that lie ahead, stroll west along the **Paseo de la Princesa** (3; p95), a 19th-century esplanade that tracks alongside the formidable old city walls to the brink of the Bahía de San Juan. As you feel the refreshing Atlantic breeze hit you face-on, you'll spy an imposing bronze sculpture and fountain called **Raíces** (4; p95) that depicts Taíno, European and African figures rising amid a shower of cascading water.

Behind the fountain, follow the Paseo de la Princesa as it cuts northwest along the waterfront with excellent views over San Juan Bay toward the Bacardi Rum factory. You'll see turreted guard towers called *garitas* carved into the thick city walls here, distinctive conical structures that have become symbolic of Puerto Rico and its rich colonial history. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Spanish ships once anchored in the cove just off these ramps to unload colonists and supplies, all of which entered the city through a tall red portal known as **Puerta de San Juan** (5; p92) dating from the 1630s.

Pass through the gate and turn right on Recinto Oeste. This short cobblestone street leads to the guarded iron gates of **La Fortaleza** (6; p89), a one-time fort that today is more redolent of a well-preserved classical palace. After stopping for a guided tour, head back northwest, stopping for a moment to gaze out over the water from the diminutive **Plazuela de la Rogativa** (7; p95).

Follow the leafy Caleta de San Juan up the slope to the beautiful Plazuela Las Monjas (Nun's square) where stray cats sunbathe and romantic couples linger. On the north side is **Gran Hotel El Convento** (8; p109), Puerto Rico's grandest hotel, well worth a casual inspection. To the east lies the **Catedral de San Juan** (9; p94), a relatively austere religious building whose importance is enhanced by its age (dating from 1540) and the fact that the remains of Juan Ponce de León rest inside.

Cut along Luna for a block before heading right down San José. Take a left onto San Francisco, which will bring you to the **Plaza de Armas** (10; p95), a small but important square and the hub of the Old City. If the effects of your first coffee have worn off you can procure excellent top-ups here from one of the traditional booths that decorate the plaza. Drop south one block and continue east along Fortaleza and you'll soon fall upon the urban quietude of **SoFo** (11; p116), Old San Juan's funky restaurant and nightlife quarter that has successfully injected vitality and hipness into the aged colonial core. Fortaleza ends in the **Plaza de Colón** (12; p95), named for the great Genoese explorer and site of the former land entrance to the walled city from Puerta de Tierra. Cut north up Av Muñoz Rivera here and you'll come to **Fuerte San Cristóbal** (13; p89), the old city's other major fortification, which harbors an interesting museum and theatrical military re-enactments.

Walking west along Norzagaray, you can look down at the faded pastel houses of La Perla, San Juan's poorest and most notorious neighborhood, that affronts the fierce and tempestuous Atlantic. Hidden in a former market building to your left is the **Museo de San Juan** (14; p93), which will fill the historical gaps in the story of one of America's oldest colonial settlements. A block or two west the **Plaza del Quinto Centenario** (15; p95), built in 1992 to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' 'discovery' of the New World, blends in seamlessly with

the older neighboring Cuartel de Ballajá. The latter building houses the **Museo de las Américas** (16; p93), a museum of changing exhibits on Caribbean and European art. Across the grass expanses of Campo del Morro the **El Morro** (17; p88) beckons like a brooding sentinel. If you bought a joint ticket from Fuerte San Cristóbal, you'll get in here at a reduced rate.

On your return bypass down Calle del Morro to the **Casa Blanca** (18; p92), the ancestral

home for 250 years of the descendants of Juan Ponce de León and the oldest permanent residence in the Americas.

A stone's throw to the east lies the **Plaza de San José** (19; p96), with its statue of Juan Ponce de León, cast from an English cannon captured in the raid of 1797. More antiquity overlooks the plaza from the north in the shape of the **Iglesia de San José** (20; p94), the second-oldest church in the Americas.

You can cut back to the Puerta de San Juan via a network of steep narrow backstreets punctuated with stone staircases. Exiting the city via the old gate, turn right and follow the mile-long **Paseo del Morro** (21; p92) which hugs the city walls to the far tip of El Morro fort. This stroll is most evocative at the end of the

day as the sun sets over the bay and the dark grey shapes of Cataño are transformed into twinkling lights.

SAN JUAN FOR CHILDREN

Puerto Ricans love children – it doesn't matter who they belong to – and they love family, so traveling with youngsters is rarely a hassle, because the Puerto Ricans are doing it too. There are some hotels that won't take children under a certain age, but they are few. Several museums and hotels offer cheaper rates or discounts for children – don't be afraid to ask. If renting a car, make sure that the rental agency has a child seat for you, and if taking a taxi any long distance, bring one with you. Children should carry some form of ID in case

there's an emergency. You'll rarely encounter any icy or disdainful looks when dining out with your child, but some of the trendier places in Old San Juan, Condado and Isla Verde would be the exception to that rule.

In and around San Juan there are several attractions that children really enjoy. The Museo del Niño (p93) is always a big hit, as is the Luis A Ferré Parque de Ciencias (p129) in Bayamón. Isla Verde is the most child-friendly beach, with safe swimming and plenty of beach toys, or you can always head further east to Luquillo (p138). For some outdoor exercise hit the bike trails of Piñones, or go kayaking on the nearby lagoon (p125).

Captain Duck (p108) does a fun water/land tour in an amphibious bus. Alternatively you can hop on one of Old San Juan's two handy trolleys. For an educational but entertaining delve into Puerto Rican history check out the two splendid forts, El Morro (p88) and San Cristóbal (p89).

Baby sitters are not easily found in San Juan or elsewhere in Puerto Rico. There are no organizations that offer this service, but all the larger hotels have vetted baby sitters on speed dial – usually staff who are happy to make some extra money on the side.

QUIRKY SAN JUAN

Maybe it's San Juan's heterogeneous people that make it quirky, or the silent competition between its neighborhoods that simmers unabashedly beneath the surface. Whatever the reason, here in the crucible of Puerto Rican culture you can expect to encounter oddly delicious food fusions, exotic religious iconography and uncensored alfresco belly dancers all in the same evening.

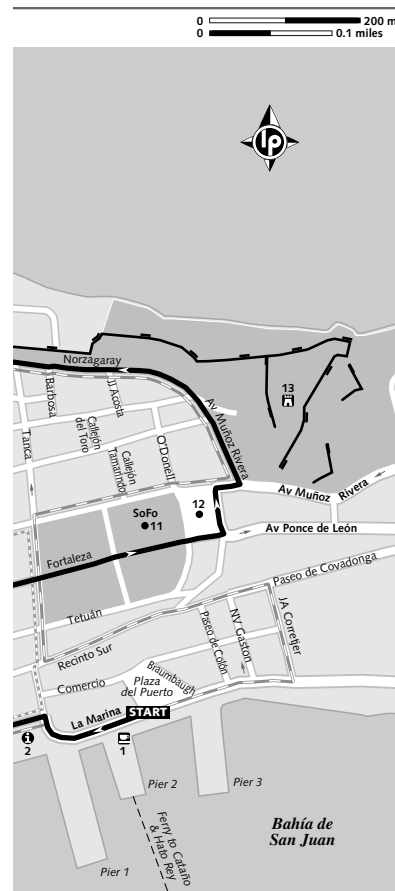
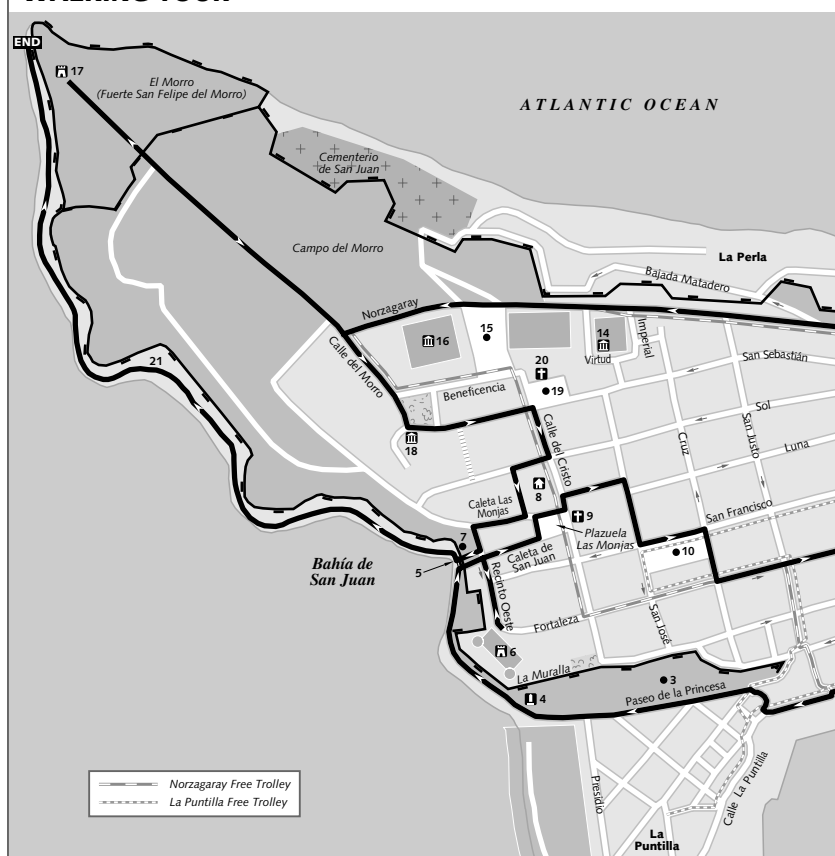
Top of the quirky stages has to be the decidedly odd Fiesta de San Juan Batista (p108), a June festival where devotees walk backwards into the ocean in the middle of the night – apparently for good luck. First prize for the city's quirkiest hotel goes to the Harry Potteresque Gallery Inn (p109) and its quirkiest shop, the entomologist's favorite, Butterfly People (p122). In the restaurant scene, SoFo has plenty of quirky contenders, though the zany Parrot Club (p115) and bordello-like (not literally) Dragonfly (p115) are hard to match. If you harbor a *Dirty Dancing* fantasy, hit El Chico Lounge (p120) for some real bump-n-grind.

WALK FACTS

Distance 3 miles

Duration Three to four hours

WALKING TOUR



TOURS

Debbie Molina-Ramos is a well-respected guide for **Legends of Puerto Rico** (☎ 787-605-9060; www.legendsofpr.com), whose wildly popular 'Night Tales in Old San Juan' tour books up pretty fast. She also does 'Legends of San Juan' (from \$30 to \$35 per person) and many others, including a coffee plantation tour, an eating and drinking tour, and tours to El Yunque. Bus trips are available, as are special discounts for families with children (and child-friendly tours, too), as well as wheelchair-accessible tours (advance booking required). Aside from English and Spanish, tours can be arranged in German, French and Italian.

Captain Duck Tours (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-447-0077; www.captainduck.com; JA Corretjer) operates amphibious bus tours lasting 90 minutes: 45 minutes on land and 45 minutes floating around San Juan harbor, without once having to leave your seat. The tour skirts Old San Juan and Puerta de Tierra and enters the water in Parque Central west of Hato Rey before motoring around the harbor. Tours usually run twice daily at 11am and 1pm except Tuesday. Tickets cost adult/child/senior \$24/17/21.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Aside from Noches de Galerias and Festival San Sebastián, which become more adult-oriented during the evening, all of the following festivals retain a congenial atmosphere that is favorable to families. Unless otherwise noted, information on the following events can be obtained by contacting the PRTC (p88).

Festival Casals Renowned soloists and orchestras come here from all over the world to join the Puerto Rican Symphony Orchestra in giving night after night of virtuoso concerts, primarily at the Luis A Ferré Center for the Performing Arts. Tickets run at around \$40, but there are big discounts for students, children and seniors. Dates vary. Check out www.festcasalspr.gobierno.pr for details.

Noches de Galerias (Gallery Nights) Galleries stay open late on the first Tuesday of the month (February to May, September to December) to showcase special exhibitions and present up-and-coming talent. Enthusiastic art lovers have also turned this into something of a pub crawl, especially along San Sebastián, Plaza de Armas, Calle del Cristo and Plaza San Sebastián. Look for nearby museums like El Arsenal and Museo de las Américas to hold special exhibits for this event.

Festival San Sebastián For a full week in mid-January, the old city's famous party street, San Sabastián, hums with semireligious processions, music, food stalls and

larger-than-ever crowds. During the day, it's folk art and crafts; at night, it's drunken revelry.

Jazz Festival (Late May to early June) Puerto Rico's largest jazz fest, courtesy of Heineken and held from late May to early June, attracts the best Latin jazz artists from all over the Caribbean. The late, great Tito Puente sometimes played here, and Eddie Palmieri still does.

Fiesta de San Juan Bautista Celebration of the patron saint of San Juan and a summer solstice party, Latin style. Staged during the week preceding June 24, the heart of the action – including religious processions, wandering minstrels, fireworks, food stalls, drunken sailors and beauty queens (straight and otherwise) – is in Old San Juan, but the rest of the city gets into the act as well and parties down on the last day of the fiesta at Playa Isla Verde.

Fiesta de Película Screens about 100 new films over one week in October, all of which relate to the Caribbean in some way. Given the number of Puerto Ricans/Nuyoricans making good on the big screen – J Lo, Benicio del Toro, Jimmy Smits (and Raul Julia, who was given a state funeral when he died of cancer in 1994) – this event has been pulling in bigger luminaries each year.

Fiesta Artisanos de Bacardí (Bacardí Artisans Fair; first two Sundays of December) With the feel of a big county fair back in the USA (complete with carnival rides), the fiesta also brings together the largest collection of artisans on the island. As many as 125 crafters show up to compete, display and sell their wares. This is a good place to see an array of folk art, including *santos*, and shop for bargains. The *bomba y plena* singers add a touch of tradition to the whole affair.

Culinary Festival (November) SoFo's alfresco culinary festival is a moveable feast that in recent years has tended to happen during the first week of November. For three nights a two-block wedge of Fortaleza is closed to traffic and commandeered by local restaurateurs who set up their tables in the street and rustle up their best dishes. Live bands drop by, belly dancers entertain the diners and the food is sizzlingly good.

SLEEPING

You'll find ample accommodations in San Juan for every price range except one – budget traveling. Outside of a few affordable guesthouses, it's slim pickings for those watching their money. On the upside, rates for places to stay in San Juan vary significantly (sometimes more than 30%) from season to season. See p273 for details.

Aside from that, San Juan is wide open. Upscale, midscale, boutique or B&B: take your pick. Condado and Ocean Park have the highest concentration of guesthouses and big resort hotels. Isla Verde's got a few ritzy boutique options flanked by mega-resorts, and Old San

Juan's got a handful of historical havens, including the exquisite El Convento, surely the most evocative hotel on the island.

Old San Juan

BUDGET

Fortaleza Guest House (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-721-7112; 361 Fortaleza; r without bathroom per week from \$65) Budget accommodations in Old San Juan are not for the fussy. For this price you get a tiny room with air-con and not a lot else – except for perhaps a few multilegged creatures skittering by (ants, not roaches). Phone ahead as this place books up fast.

MIDRANGE

Da House (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-977-1180; 312 San Francisco, r \$80; ☎ ☎ ☎) Make no mistake; Da House is da place to be. Old San Juan's newest and funkier hotel is also one of its best bargains, with 27 boutique-style rooms kitted out with chic furnishings and decorated with eye-catching contemporary art. Rather uniquely each room is dedicated to a different local artist whose work is displayed within, complete with tantalizing price tags to ponder over. For the musically inclined one of San Juan's best salsa bars, the Nuyorican, is situated downstairs; for the less enamored (or sleep-deprived), the reception staff will ruefully give out ear plugs.

Hotel Plaza de Armas (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-722-9191; www.ihphoteles.com; 202 San José; r \$90-175; ☎ ☎) Location, location, location – but not a lot else. The Plaza de Armas is a rather characterless hotel situated in San Juan's most character-loaded quarter. Run by the Howard Johnson chain, the lobby has some funky modern touches, but upstairs the rooms are worn, the furnishings exhausted, and the lack of windows enough to strike terror into the heart of any visiting claustrophobic.

Hotel Milano (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-729-9050; www.hotelmilano.pr.com; 307 Fortaleza; r incl breakfast \$95-185; ☎ ☎ ☎) Sandwiched into the happening hub of Fortaleza St, the Milano is a safe, reliable, if slightly austere option. Rooms are clean but unexciting, there's wi-fi in the lobby and up on the roof there's an open-to-the-elements restaurant with peek-a-boo views of the harbor. It's a handy and comfortable midrange option within easy staggering distance of some of San Juan's best bars and restaurants.

AlaSol Apartments (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-724-4456; 318 Sol; apt per night/wk \$100/500; ☎ ☎ ☎) These handy one bedroom apartments (three-night

minimum) have to be one of the best bargains in Old San Juan. Located on neighborly Sol with all of the restaurant and museum action a hop, skip and jump away, the traditional but comfortable rooms have a double bed, futon, kitchen, bathroom, living room, phone, TV and – almost unheard of in Old San Juan – a parking space out front. Priceless!

TOP END

Chateau Cervantes (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-724-7722; 329 Recinto Sur; r/ste \$225/975; ☎ ☎ ☎) Twelve rooms on six floors, an intimate decor and a stunning level of all-round opulence, the Cervantes is about as luxurious as Puerto Rico gets. Designed as a boutique hotel of the highest class by local guru, Nono Maldonado, the hotel is hard to find and barely advertises itself from the street – probably because it doesn't need to. Once inside, 'chateau' is definitely the right word in this Parisian-influenced city beauty with its eye-catching art (original, of course) and up-to-the-minute electronic gadgets deftly splashed around rooms that retain a tangible old town feel. Despite its city-center location, privacy is a premium here and the service is refreshingly discreet.

Gallery Inn (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-722-1808; www.thegaleryinn.com; 204-206 Norzagaray; r incl breakfast \$225-325; ☎ ☎ ☎) Get ready to double-take here. This quirky artist-owned hotel will make you feel as if you've wandered inadvertently onto the set of a Harry Potter movie. Showcasing masks, caged birds, trickling water, antiques, paintings and well-thumbed books, the Gallery Inn's cavernous 18th-century compound is the property of local artists Jan D'Sopo and Manuco Gandía (who'll meet guests for a daily 5pm cheese and wine tour). Perched romantically above the Atlantic waves and boasting 23 eclectic and whimsical rooms, it will be like nowhere else you have ever visited. Three hundred years of art, antiques and history stuffed into one building – staggering.

our pick Gran Hotel El Convento (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-723-9020; www.elconvento.com; 100 Calle del Cristo; r \$235-420; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Historic monument, tapas restaurant, meeting place, coffee bar, and evocative colonial building...without a doubt El Convento is Puerto Rico's most complete atmospheric and multifaceted hotel. Built in 1651 as the New World's first Carmelite convent, this sturdy baroque beacon oozes with priceless old world relics and subtle 'Siglo de Oro' charm. Check out

the Goya-esque tapestries in the hallway or the late afternoon tranquility of the enclosed inner courtyard, or wander up onto the roof deck for a plunge in the tiny pool and Jacuzzi that frame sweeping city views over the Cathedral and Old San Juan. El Convento's 58 rooms and six suites are gorgeously decorated with Andalusian tiles, mahogany and thick rugs, plus the service from the bar to the front desk is impeccable. Oh – and there's no casino!

Condado & Ocean Park

BUDGET

Aléi by the Sea (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-725-5313; 1125 Sea View; r \$65-100; (P) ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Condado on the cheap – it's still possible; though judging by the number of cranes and bulldozers that surround this diminutive hotel, it might not be for too much longer. If the Marriot's normally your thing you'll undoubtedly hate this modest nine-room guesthouse positioned right on the beach. If you've just returned from a backpacking trip around Southeast Asia, the delightful surfside terrace and simple but clean rooms will seem like luxury.

Embassy Guest House (Map pp98-9; ☎ 800-468-0615; 1126 Sea View; r \$65-125; (P) ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) A favorite budget spot among gay travelers – although others like it too – the Embassy is a motel-standard crash pad that has so far resisted the glitzy Condado makeover. The rooms show their age a bit, but since the oceanfront location is sublime, it's hardly worth fussing about.

MIDRANGE

At Wind Chimes Inn (Map pp98-9; ☎ 800-946-3244; www.atwindchimesinn.com; 53 Taft; r \$80-155; (P) ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Linked to the nearby Acacia Inn, At Wind Chimes is modeled along the same lines: a Spanish-style villa that mixes intimacy with low-key luxuries. It's a pleasant antidote to the resort feel of Condado's other luxury piles. Prices drop in the off-season, making this even more of a bargain.

Hostería del Mar (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-727-3302; hosteria@caribe.net; 1 Tapia; r \$89-199; (P) ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) If the nearby Número Uno can live up to its priceless premier tag, then the Hostería del Mar has to be a close *número dos*. Sharing an equally desirable beachside location and greeting guests with an artsy water feature and eye-catching antiques, this whitewashed Ocean Park guesthouse is quiet, intimate and definitively Caribbean. There's no pool,

but there is an excellent restaurant (p122) in an enclosed gazebo overlooking the beach. Rooms are furnished with a simple rattan-inspired elegance.

Atlantic Beach Hotel (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-721-6900; www.atlanticbeachhotel.net; 1 Vendig; r \$90-170; ☎ ☎) This place is regularly held up as the nexus of the Caribbean's gay community, though in recent years many visitors have derided it for its dingy rooms and lackluster service – it all depends on your expectations. Wedged up against the beach at the end of one of Condado's tatter streets, the Atlantic certainly has a great ocean side location and, with a buzzing bar scene, rooftop Jacuzzi and famous Sunday drag shows, it's a good place to hang out and meet other gay travelers. The sticking point for many is the rooms, which, though clean, are long past their prime – which was sometime in the early 1980s.

El Canario by the Sea (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-533-2649; www.canariohotels.com; 4 Calle Condado; r \$105-150; ☎ ☎) There are actually three different Canario inns around Condado – agents here at the By the Sea site can assist you in reserving at any one of the properties. Each of the small hotels has 25 to 40 units with cable TV, phone and continental breakfast. You get a quiet, clean, well-lit place.

Acacia Seaside Inn (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-728-0668; 8 Taft; r \$105-185; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) How's this for a makeover! The former Arcade Inn – now more exotically renamed the Acacia – was, until a couple of years ago, a grandiose Spanish colonial-style mansion with a seemingly terminal illness. The recent recipient of a full-on TV-design-show-style renovation, this mini-hotel has transformed itself into a chic smorgasbord of sophistication and style. We're talking funky wall art, a salubrious fern-filled restaurant, and an impossibly luxurious Jacuzzi complete with granite surround and Buddha statue imported from China. *Tranquilo*, man.

Coral Princess Inn (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-977-7700; 1159 Magdalena; r 125-195; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Now we're talking. An independent inn that can compete in the quality stakes with the bigger and plusher opposition. The Coral Princess is a small 25-room boutique hotel that punches way above its weight. Sitting in Condado's midrange bracket, it offers all the luxuries of the fancy resorts – flat-screen TVs, marble floors and original art – but with enough intimacy and Latin flavor to remind you that you're still in Puerto Rico.

Número Uno (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-726-5010; 1 Santa Ana; r \$130-200; (P) ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Pinch yourself – you're still in the middle of San Juan: Ocean Park, to be more precise, the discerning traveler's antidote to Condado and Isla Verde. Hidden behind the walls of a whitewashed 1940s beachfront house, the glowing Número Uno is one of those whispered secrets that gets passed around surreptitiously by word of mouth. Surrounded by palms and topped by a luminous kidney-shaped swimming pool, the property is run by a former New Yorker whose soaring vision has inspired an inn of spiffy rooms, intimate service and one of San Juan's newest culinary legends, Pamela's (p117), an exquisite on-site seafood restaurant. Número Uno? Not far off.

TOP END

Normandie Hotel (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-729-2929; www.normandiepr.com; 499 Av Muñoz Rivera; r \$200-325; (P) ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) A classic example of late art deco-style architecture, the Normandie is characterized by its minimalist front facade, which represents the curved bows of a cruise liner guarding the busy entrance to Puerta de Tierra. Once a haven for scandalous 1950s jet-setters who used to cavort nude in the rear pool, the hotel's contemporary incarnation has fewer accessories but more soul than the neighboring Caribe. The centerpiece is a towering, if austere, open-plan lobby where bemused cruise-liner refugees have replaced the lounge lizards of lore.

Caribe Hilton (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-721-0303; www.hiltoncaribbean.com/sanjuan; Rosales; r \$260-450; (P) ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Situated quite literally at the *puerta* (door) of Puerta de Tierra, the Caribe was the first Hilton hotel outside mainland America. Constructed in 1949 after an architectural competition had chosen a utilitarian modern design drawn up by a local firm, the hotel played host to numerous celebrities throughout the 1950s and '60s. Showing its age a bit of late, the Caribe has undergone some long-awaited renovations though reviews remain mixed. There's good beach access and Old San Juan is a not unpleasant 30-minute walk away.

San Juan Marriott Resort & Casino (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-722 7000; www.marriotthotels.com; 1309 Av Ashford; r \$265-525; (P) ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) The infamous Hotel Dupont Plaza once stood on this site before an arson attack burnt it to the ground, claiming 97 lives, in 1986. Rising in its place a decade

later, Marriot has turned a den of notoriety into a pretty beachfront property, with two pools and 525 units. A lot more personable than other resorts in its class, the Marriott boasts enviably modern rooms, a lavish breakfast buffet and some mean salsa entertainment where even the staff join in.

Condado Plaza Hotel & Casino (Map pp98-9; ☎ 727-721-1000; 999 Av Ashford; r \$300-1350; (P) ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Guarding the entrance to Condado like a sparkling concrete sentinel, the Condado Plaza straddles the thin wedge of land that separates the area's eponymous *laguna* from the Atlantic Ocean. Housed in two concrete towers connected by an overhead walkway above Ashford Av, the hotel offers the best of both worlds with stunning views extending in both directions. A swanky lobby redolent of a designer movie set hints at luxury, and guests in the newly renovated oceanfront rooms generally aren't disappointed. Other highlights include a fitness center, spa, live entertainment, a celebrated Italian restaurant and a lovely arc of raked sand that faces the formidable walls of Fuerte San Gerónimo across the inlet.

Isla Verde

BUDGET

El Patio Guesthouse (Map p101; ☎ 787-726-6298; 87 Calle 3; r \$69-90; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Your average Isla Verde visitor probably wouldn't poke a stick at this place, but in the cheaper price bracket it's not a bad bet – although gamblers will be disappointed to know that there's no casino on-site. A little villa close to the beach and other amenities, it is run by a little old lady who'll bend over backwards to make sure that your rooms are spick and span.

MIDRANGE

Coqui Inn (Map p101; ☎ 787-726-4330; 36 Calle Mar Mediterráneo; r \$89-119; (P) ☎ ☎) Bisected by a major expressway, Isla Verde has its ugly side and you'll get a face full of it here. But location aside, the Coqui Inn – which is an amalgamation of three formerly adjacent hotels: the Mango Inn, the Green Island Inn and Casa Mathiesen – is quite the bargain. Expect clean, modern but simple rooms with kitchenette and plenty of handy extras, such as wi-fi, free coffee/pastries, morning newspapers, cable TV and maid service. Visitors with ear plugs can take comfort in the price and the proximity to the beach – a short walk across a concrete bridge.

GAY & LESBIAN SAN JUAN

Considered to be the most gay-friendly destination in the Caribbean, San Juan has long buried its stereotypical macho image and replaced it with a culture that is remarkable for its tolerance and openness. The beach areas of Condado and Ocean Park are the nexus of the club and cruising scene, but with so many of the capital's hotels and restaurants now run by gay professionals, the finer details of one's sexual preference are usually irrelevant.

One of the oldest gay meeting spots is the Atlantic Beach Hotel (p119) in Condado, though the establishment has been criticized of late – for its declining room standards more than anything – and some travelers have moved on to more mixed spots such as Número Uno (p111) in Ocean Park, the San Juan Marriott Resort & Casino (p111) and the delectable Gran Hotel El Convento (p109) in the heart of the Old City.

For a decent social scene, the beach and bar in front of the Atlantic Beach Hotel is still the best place to meet other gay travelers, though with big new condo developments now enveloping Condado many gay clubs have migrated to grittier Santurce (p120). High energy nightspots to look out for are Krash for men, Cups for women, and Kouros for a good mix of both.

Most dining spots can be considered gay-friendly but perennially popular with the gay community are Parrot Club (p115) in SoFo, Pamela's (p117) inside the Número Uno guesthouse and El Picoteo (p114) in the Gran Hotel El Convento.

Hotel La Playa (Map p101; ☎ 787-791-1115; www.hotelplaya.com; 6 Amapola; r \$95-135) Isla Verde isn't all glitz. At the eastern end of the beach and the bottom end of the quality bracket lies Hotel La Playa which, while living up to its name (it's literally on the beach), probably isn't what your average fun-in-the-sun honeymooner is looking for, but if price is your major determinant and you're not a sucker for cleanliness, give it a whirl. If you're in Isla Verde to get what Isla Verde is famous for, the Ritz Carlton (opposite) is just around the corner.

Hotel Villa del Sol (Map p101; ☎ 787-791-2600; 4 Rosa; r \$100-160; 📍 📺 📺) Up a side street in Isla Verde, the Villa del Sol provides an adequate economical alternative to the larger resorts. Embellished with Spanish colonial architecture and blessed with an attractive pool area, spacious rooms and a popular bar/grill, the hotel gives off a sunny tropical aura without stretching your purse strings.

Water & Beach Club (Map p101; ☎ 787-728-3610; 2 Tartak; r \$150-650; 📍 📺 📺) Breaking the resort ubiquity of Isla Verde, the Water & Beach Club is – along with the Horned Dorset (p232) in Rincón – Puerto Rico's most celebrated 'boutique' hotel. With a reception area straight out of *Architectural Digest* and elevators that sport glassed-in waterfalls, this is probably the closest San Juan comes to emulating South Beach, Florida. The minimalist rooms are artfully designed and benefit from spectacular beach views, and you have close

proximity to two trendy nightspots (p119). There's also a chicer-than-chic swimming pool on the roof.

TOP END

El San Juan Hotel & Casino (Map p101; ☎ 800-468-2818; www.elsanjuanhotel.com; 6063 Av Isla Verde; r \$325-450; 📍 📺 📺) Dimly lit, frigidly air-conditioned and decked out in throwback 1970s furnishings, the lobby of El San Juan is redolent of a Roger Moore-era James Bond movie: you half expect to see the dapper 007 lounging around in his tux at the baccarat table. Instead you get a veritable fashion parade of everyone who is anyone in San Juan prancing in for the legendary nightly entertainment. Renowned for its flashy casino and rollicking nightlife, El San Juan does its best to recreate 'tourist brochure paradise' in among the Isla Verde skyscrapers. If you want decent rooms, unlimited water features, classy restaurants, Starbucks coffee and a heaving nightlife all in one big happy package, this is the place for you.

InterContinental San Juan Resort & Casino (Map p101; ☎ 800-443-2009; www.intercontinental.com; 187 Av Isla Verde; r \$399-539; 📍 📺 📺) Probably the least interesting of Isla Verde's craning tourist piles, the Intercontinental is, nonetheless, opulent with all of the usual gadgets and marketing ploys you'd expect in a well-appointed four star. An expensive refurbishment a few years back was designed to put it on a par with El San Juan next door and, although

the rooms and facilities are spiffy enough, the latter still wins first prize for character and panache.

Ritz Carlton Hotel & Casino (Map p101; ☎ 800-241-3333; www.ritzcarlton.com; 6961 Av Los Gobernadores; r \$400-2500; 📍 📺 📺) Ritz equals posh, so you'd better pack the trendy slacks and bring along a platinum credit card before booking a night here. Decked out in expensive marble and embellished with Alhambra-esque lions that line the path to the swimming pool, this is San Juan at its swankiest and a favorite hangout of visiting celebrities. Rooms are plush, service heavy on the 'yes sirs and madams' and the communal areas shimmer like winning entries in an international design competition. Parceled inside this carefully manicured tropical 'paradise' are a resident spa, numerous eating facilities and yes, that obligatory casino, which incidentally is the largest of its kind in the Caribbean.

Miramar & Río Piedras

While these areas have none of the seaside attractions of Old San Juan, Condado/Ocean Park or Isla Verde, the commercial heart of the city does offer a handful of viable accommodations options.

Olimpio Court Hotel (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-724-0600; 603 Calle Miramar; r \$65-135; 📍 📺) Cocooned in upscale Miramar, the Olimpio isn't as fancy as its location would suggest; but, no matter. This place is all about price, cleanliness and good down-to-earth service. Santurce as well as Condado are within walking distance and Old San Juan is just a short (50c) bus ride away.

Marriott Courtyard (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-721-7400; 801 Av Ponce de León; r \$140-230; 📍 📺 📺) The former Excelsior Hotel was transformed into a Marriott Courtyard in 2006 and gleams thanks to a stellar renovation. A melting pot for business travelers bound for the nearby convention center and cruise passengers heading for the piers, it's a straightforward, upright sort of place with efficient staff and a renowned on-site restaurant (Augustos). Situated in leafy Miramar its location is a toss-up – central to everywhere, but close to nowhere.

EATING

Few would argue that San Juan offers the best eating in the Caribbean. Indeed, there are probably enough cutting edge restaurants here to justify a trip in its own right. The

latest craze is fusion cuisine – expect to see all sorts of creative combinations: Asian-Latino, Puerto Rican-European, Caribbean with a Middle Eastern twist. When in doubt, head to Calle Fortaleza in Old San Juan, the eclectic heart of San Juan's 21st century gastronomic revolution. Most restaurants have vegetarian-friendly dishes, although they may not be billed as 'vegetarian.' Vegans may have a more difficult time as butter and meat renderings are common ingredients. See p58 for further details.

Old San Juan

BUDGET

Café Cala'o (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-724-4607; Pier 2; muffins \$2) It looks just like any other small coffee bar you might roll into in Chicago or Seattle, but in reality Café Cala'o is very different. There are two main reasons for this: the Puerto Rican coffee – which is hand-picked from various small farms in the Central Mountains – is smooth, earthy and not at all bitter, and the people who confection it are trained experts who know as much about coffee as an oenologist knows about wine. The muffins aren't bad either.

Spanglish Café (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-722-2424; 105 Cruz; dishes \$5-10; 📍 lunch & dinner) A homey hole-in-the-wall that does good business with the lunchtime office crowd, Spanglish Café is generally more *Span* than *glish*, so go with a decent phrasebook and get ready to order your \$6 set lunch with a few *por favores* and *muchas gracias*. Try the *fricassée de pollo* (chicken fricassée) or the *pernil asado* (roasted pork) and don't forget to leave a *propina* (tip).

La Bombonera (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-722-0658; 259 San Francisco; mains \$5-10; 📍 8am-4pm) The old-fashioned coffee machine hisses like a steam engine, career waiters in black trousers appear like royal footmen at your table, and a long line of seen-it-all *sanjuaneros* populate the lengthy row of bar stools, catching up on the local breakfast gossip. It shouldn't take you long to work out that La Bombonera is a city institution: it's been around since 1902 and still sells some of the best cakes in town. Come here for breakfast, lunch or an early evening snack attack and soak up the unique Latin ambience over a copy of the *San Juan Star*.

Café Mallorca (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-724-4607; 400 San Francisco; dishes \$5-10; 📍 7am-7pm) If you spent the previous night in Marmalade or some other *haute couture* restaurant/club/fashion parade,

then bring yourself back down to earth with a life-saving coffee and breakfast in this cozy nook on San Francisco. Cheap and simple, the Mallorca is where all-night ravers share pick-me-ups and American journalists sift through their travel notes. Zero pretension, but plenty of warm familiarity.

Zesty Bites (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-721-5436; 151 Tetuán; sandwiches \$5-12; ☎ 7am-5pm; (V)) Could this be the future of Puerto Rican fast food? Let's hope so. Organic salads, artisan yogurts, wraps, granola, oatmeal and the don't-leave-without-tasting-one smoothies are just a few of the healthy but zesty treats on offer here. Positioned in the heart of the historic district, Zesty fills a gap in the market that few others seem to be tackling – ie fresh, delicious food served fast. It's also dog-friendly, kid-friendly, bike-friendly, ecofriendly, computer nerd-friendly, and rather easy on the wallet.

Café Amapola (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-392-9811; 280 Norzagaray; mains \$6-12; ☎ 8am-6pm, closed Thu) Ah the view! Watch crashing surf lash the pastel-colored shantytown of La Perla as you perch on the upstairs terrace at Café Amapola. Welcome to Old San Juan's only oceanfronted eating establishment, an unpretentious café-cum-restaurant that sells memorable homegrown coffee and tasty *criolla*-spiced appetizers. Take a seat bar-side and the waiters will impart a whole host of insider knowledge about where to go and what to see island-wide.

our pick St Germain Bistro & Café (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-725-5830; 156 Sol; dishes \$7-15; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner, closed Mon; (V)) Kudos to the chef for transforming the main course salads – so often the dullest dish on the menu – into something fresh, tasty and filling. Then there's the aromatic Puerto Rican coffee, the delicious *paninis* and the homemade cakes which can only be described as melt-in-your-mouth heavenly. Nestled on the corner of Sol and Cruz, the St Germain is a bright neighborhood place with down-to-earth service, interesting clientele and a distinct European feel. Perfect for breakfast, lunch or a light dinner.

MIDRANGE

La Fonda El Jibarito (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-725-8375; 280 Sol; dishes \$8-22; ☎ 11am-11pm) Welcome to the neighborhood, *hermano*. El Jibarito is the kind of salt-of-the-earth, unpretentious place that you should reserve to sample your first *mofongo* or *arroz con habichuelas* (rice and beans). A

favorite of local families, in-the-know tourists and passing *New York Times* journalists, the meals are simple but hearty with good pork and prawns, or plantains smashed, mashed and fried just about any way you want. Pull up a pew and chow with the locals.

El Picoteo (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-723-9020; 100 Calle del Cristo; tapas \$8-24; ☎ lunch & dinner) One of El Convento's culinary highlights is this terrace tapas bar that could rival anything in Andalusia. Perennial favorites include tortilla, meatballs, garlic prawns, garbanzos and various cheeses. If you're after something more substantial there's also pizza and paella washed down with sangria. Suspended above the hotel's central courtyard the ambience at Picoteo is terrific and, during the afternoon, the canned music is punctuated by the familiar clack of dominoes.

Patio de Nispero (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-723-9020; 100 Calle del Cristo; sandwiches \$9.50-12, platters \$14-24; ☎ lunch) Every great Spanish-colonial hotel has its shady courtyard and the one at El Convento is the home of the deliciously cool Patio de Nispero, so named for the 350-year-old Nispero tree that resides in its midst. You can enjoy breakfast and lunch here or, even better, escape the hot sun-bleached streets to savor a coffee or an icy mojito during the lazy siesta hour.

Café Berlin (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-722-5205; 407 San Francisco; dishes \$10-25; ☎ 10am-10pm Mon-Fri, 8am-10pm Sat & Sun; (V)) You've probably heard about the Taino, the Spanish, the French and the Americans, but the German influence in Puerto Rico is less well documented, unless you wind up sampling sweet pastries on the pleasant terrace here. In a setting that's more Viennese than Caribbean, the Café Berlin serves fresh European-style food with a strong vegetarian/vegan bias. Check out the veggie pizza, the tofu done any which way you want and don't leave without ordering a manjito (a mango-flavored mojito). The sweet Teutonic deserts are positively sinful and the German rye bread is so popular that they fly it on demand over to Culebra.

Barú (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-977-7107; 150 San Sebastián; dishes \$13-30; ☎ 6pm-midnight) Very popular with food lovers and martini drinkers, Barú doubles as a nightspot as well as a trendy restaurant. Dishes include 'yuccafongo' (yucca made like a *mofongo*) with shrimp, beef carpaccio with basil essence or the mahimahi topped with crispy onions.

Makarios (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-723-8653; 361 Tetuán; dishes \$15-20; ☎ noon-midnight) Just when you thought you'd already circumnavigated the culinary globe in Fortaleza St, you move a block south and end up in Lebanon, or Turkey, or is it Greece? Makarios is San Juan's rather boisterous, but authentic, take on Middle Eastern cuisine that shimmies to the rhythms of its resident belly dancers on weekend nights. Arrive with your water pipe (plenty do), tuck into falafel, hummus or delicious lamb kabobs, and ponder the alfresco antics of San Juan's musical youth as they prance and pose outside.

El Patio de Sam (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-723-1149; 102 San Sebastián; dishes \$16-28; ☎ 11:30am-midnight) This legendary Old Town staple overlooks San Juan's oldest square and a statue of Ponce de León, who looks on jealously as drinkers down cheap margaritas and tackle juicy burgers with hungry relish. Part of the San Sebastián nightly music fest, there's glimmering neon on the inner patio along with live Brazilian jazz music at weekends.

Tantra (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-977-8141; 356 Fortaleza; dishes \$18-27; ☎ noon-midnight) For purists, eating Masala Dosa in Puerto Rico is probably about as incongruous as chomping on *mofongo* in Madras, but for those willing to drop the cultural blinkers, Tantra's adventurous 'Indo-Latin fusion' cuisine is actually rather authentic. It helps that the chef's from South India. It also helps that the restaurant's Asian-inspired decor, which places exotic lampshades among carved Buddhas, sets your taste buds traveling inexorably east. The pièce de résistance is the belly dancing that kicks off nightly at nine-ish.

El Burén (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-977-5023; 103 Calle del Cristo; dishes \$18-30; ☎ noon-midnight Tue-Sun, 5:30pm-midnight Mon) If you rate intimacy over elbow room, inhale deeply and pull up one of the 24 chairs at this stylish purple and tangerine bistro. As trendy as it is tiny, El Burén offers an eclectic menu with distinct Puerto Rican flourishes, with food delivered to your table like art on a plate. Check out the lamb, prawns or lobster.

Dragonfly (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-977-3886; 364 Fortaleza; dishes \$20-29; ☎ 5:30-11pm Mon-Wed, 5:30-midnight Thu-Sun) Duck nachos – say no more! Safe in its mantle as the hippest of the hip, Dragonfly is SoFo's most stylish culinary innovator; the G-spot of the Latin-Asian fusion movement that brims nightly with a plethora of self-assured,

well-dressed and, frankly, beautiful people. Presuming you pass the dress inspection on the door and survive the shock of your initial entrance (the place resembles a dark red bordello – all dim lamp shades and decorative mirrors), try following up with a hard-hitting Dragon Punch cocktail before you dive into a menu awash with the wonderful and the plain weird (yes, those duck nachos).

Trois Cent Onze (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-725-7959; 311 Fortaleza; dishes \$20-30; ☎ noon-3pm & 6:30-11:30pm) After putting all his creative energy into his food, French owner Christophe Gourdain presumably couldn't muster up enough energy to think up an original name for his formidable culinary extravaganza: hence Trois Cent Onze (311), the place's numerical address on Fortaleza St. With its well-established French connection, 311 has the words 'elegant,' 'refined' and 'sophisticated' written all over it, conjuring up classy European cuisine without too many of those Latino-fusion makeovers (alas, no *mofongo* with a camembert twist here). Glide into one of the island's most romantic interiors, awash with billowing white curtains, flickering candles and delightful Moorish-Andalusian tiles and order from a menu replete with scallops, duck and foie gras. Not surprisingly, there's a wine list to rival anything in France.

Parrot Club (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-725-7370; 363 Fortaleza; dishes \$20-32; ☎ noon-3pm & 6-11pm) The menu's in Spanglish, the decor's a lurid mix of orange, blue and yellow, and the waitress could quite conceivably be sporting a pink wig. Welcome to the Parrot Club, where Puerto Rican politicians wind down and enamored gringos live it up. Until the Parrot's opening in 1996, the concept of SoFo didn't even exist. But, with its caustic blend of live jazz and tasty 'nuevo Latino' cuisine, this restaurant quickly set new standards and spawned the ultimate in neighborhood chic – an acronym. Now well into its second decade the menu continues to win kudos with its eclectic crabcakes *caribeños*, pan-seared tuna and vegetarian tortes.

TOP END

Sonné (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-721-0136; 385 Fortaleza; dishes \$20-68; ☎ 5pm-midnight) A Latin-fusion steakhouse with mood lighting and background jazz, Sonné is as much SoHo as SoFo which probably accounts for the extortionate prices, including \$68 for a steak. Occupying a prime

LATIN FUSION IN OLD SAN JUAN

While Old San Juan is well known for its historic Spanish forts and atmospheric cobbled plazas, few outsiders arrive expecting to find a clutch of cutting edge gourmet restaurants shoehorned in among the quaint 16th-century facades. But hidden inside one of America's oldest urban quarters, streets that once played host to cutlass-brandishing pirates are now the preserve of knife-wielding chefs. San Juan's culinary nexus is situated in the compact neighborhood of SoFo (an acronym for 'South Fortaleza St'), a trendy but constantly changing strip of funky wine bars and dimly lit restaurants that has sent many a holidaying food critic home happy. Small, cozy and architecturally interesting, these engaging eating establishments are famous for their Latin-fusion cuisine, an eclectic mix of traditional Latin American ingredients such as rice, beans, pork and plantains, blended with more exotic flavors from Asia, Europe and beyond.

A relatively recent phenomenon, SoFo didn't exist until 1996 when the groundbreaking Parrot Club (p115) opened, spearheading a full-on gastronomic revolution. Within a few years, the neighborhood has burgeoned into an internationally renowned restaurant strip that celebrates its own annual culinary festival and has drawn in a plethora of talented chefs from around the globe. OOF Restaurants, owners of the original Parrot Club, have led the way supplementing their initial food foray with two additional eating joints, the Asian-influenced Dragonfly (p115) and the seafood extravaganza, Aquaviva (below). These days you can tour the globe in just two blocks. For South Indian fusion try Tantra (p115), for Puerto Rico with a Lebanese twist visit Makarios (p115), or for up-to-the-minute nouveau cuisine head for Marmalade (below) or Sonn  (p115).

As the new nexus for contemporary Caribbean cuisine, SoFo is a font of experimental food fashions. As a result, different restaurants come and go remarkably quickly. Readers should thus treat this book's eating recommendations as a basic list of ingredients on an ever-evolving menu.

position on Fortaleza, it's one of the newest establishments in the ever-evolving San Juan culinary fest. Word on the street suggests it's a stayer.

La Mallorquina (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-722-3261; 207 San Justo; dishes \$22-35) A must for historically-minded food buffs, or food-minded history buffs, La Mallorquina is the grande dame of Old San Juan eateries: it's been around for 150 years, quite a feat in the musical chairs of Fortaleza St and its surrounds. It's worth a gander, if only to have a drink at the immense slab of mahogany that is the bar. Should the smells from the kitchen tempt you to stay, try the house specialty, *asopao*, a rice broth stewed with all type of herbs, seafood or meat.

Marmalade (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-724-3969; 317 Fortaleza; dishes \$25-39; ☎ 6pm-midnight) With a name liable to dupe over-excited Brits who've been missing out on their early morning toast and marmalade fix, it is somewhat surprising to find that Marmalade doesn't actually serve the stuff at all, except perhaps in a marinade. Promoted as SoFo's latest culinary innovator in a street full of them, this starkly minimalist eating establishment is decked out like the Korova Milk Bar in Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*. Step

inside the trendy interior to sample house specialties such as paella bites or grilled nectarines with Parma ham.

Aquaviva (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-722-0665; 364 Fortaleza; dishes \$30-40; ☎ 6-11pm Mon-Wed, 6pm-midnight Thu-Sat, 4-10pm Sun) Cerviche's the word at Aquaviva, the third of SoFo's trendy restaurant trio and owned by the same company as Dragonfly and the Parrot Club. Designed with an arty water/sea-life theme – all turquoise blues and brilliant whites – the house specialty is seafood, in particular the cerviches, with plenty of patrons rolling in just to savor an appetizer with a pre-dinner cocktail. Often packed to the rafters, Aquaviva was invented with the word 'hip' in mind. Everything from the open-view kitchen to the catwalk clientele is slavishly stylish. But the real test is the food: fresh oysters, calamari filled with shredded beef, and dorado with lightly grilled bell peppers, seasoned with garlic and served with plantains. It has been voted one of the top 75 restaurants in the world.

Condado & Ocean Park

Don't let the prevalence of second-rate hotel restaurants, tourist traps and fast-food chains deter you – there's good eating to be found along this stretch of beach.

BUDGET

Hacienda Don Jos  (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-722-5880; 1025 Av Ashford; dishes \$3-12; ☎ 7am-11pm) Condado on the cheap – it can still be done. Indeed, the Don Jos  is more redolent of a Mexican beach bar than a plush tourist trap. Waves lash against the rocks within spitting distance of your pancakes and huevos rancheros, and busy waitresses shimmy around the tiled tables and colorful murals. If your swanky hotel's all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet has worn you out, drop by here for a little bit of local hospitality.

Kasalta's (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-727-7340; 1966 McLeary; dishes \$4-10; ☎ 6am-10pm) Wake up with a jolt at Kasalta's, a popular early-morning breakfast haunt and the sort of authentic Puerto Rican bakery and diner that you'll find yourself crossing town to visit. Tucked into Ocean Park's residential enclave, the coffee here is as legendary as the sweets that fill a long glass display case and encapsulate everything from Danish pastries to iced buns. Plentiful seating, myriad newspapers and a buzzing local ambience add even more icing to the cake.

Pepin's (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-728-6280; 2479 Av Isla Verde; tapas \$5-13; ☎ lunch & dinner) Once you've got past the rather draconian dress code here – no sandals, singlets, shorts, earrings, hats, or people under 25 – you can join whoever's left at this surprisingly popular tapas bar in the Punta Las Mar as neighborhood, halfway between Isla Verde and Ocean Park. The tapas start at \$5 and there's usually a fair smattering of expats.

Via Appia (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-725-8711; Av Ashford; pizzas \$7-14; ☎ 11am-11pm) The good thing about Condado is that it still retains a smattering of family-run jewels among all the Starbucks and 7-Elevens. Via Appia is one such gem, a no-nonsense Italian restaurant where the pizza is classic and the gentlemanly waiters could quite conceivably have walked off the set of *The Godfather*. Munch on garlic bread or feast on meatballs alfresco, as the multi-lingual m lange of Av Ashford goes strolling by. There's a small store inside where you can stock up on wine or olive oil.

MIDRANGE

Uvva Restaurant (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-727-3302; 1 Tapia; dishes \$12-20; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner; ♻) Almost lost among Ocean Park's whitewashed villas lies one of San Juan's most understated culinary treats: an intimate vegetarian-friendly

restaurant right on the beach. The menu at this eatery in the Hosteria del Mar (p110) changes frequently, but tofu, brown rice and onion dishes with a side salad are always there or thereabouts.

Zab 's (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-725-9494; 14 Candida; dishes \$12-30; ☎ 6-11pm Tue-Sat) Over in condo land, this older colonial-style villa hints at something different. The variations continue inside in an intimate restaurant-cum-bar where trendsetters sup on martinis and gastronomes tuck into creative dishes such as mango and curry rice, and rosemary pork chops with garlic merlot sauce. There's music some nights, everything from Latin jazz to Flamenco.

Migas (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-721-5991; 1400 Magdalena; dishes \$15-35; ☎ 6-11pm Mon-Wed, 6pm-midnight Thu-Sat) A newish boutique restaurant on Magdalena, Migas is high on the list of bar-hopping *sanjuaneros*. Some come for drinks (champagne mainly) and others for the food – miso-glazed salmon, classic French steak frites, spicy duck with orange glaze. Real lounge lizards, meanwhile, arrive just to hang out amid the sleek elegance and fashionable buzz.

Pamela's (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-726-5010; 1 Santa Ana; dishes \$20-30; ☎ noon-10:30pm) Right on the beach and right on the money, Pamela's is encased inside the elegant Numero Uno guesthouse. Diners sup wine and munch on scallops beside a teardrop-shaped swimming pool while the ocean crashes just feet away. The menu specializes in fresh ingredients plucked from the nearby sea – think jalape o-ginger shrimp and seafood chowder – though there are surprise twists with everything from Asian to Puerto Rican influences. The place is tucked away, but that hasn't prevented it from becoming an open secret. Reserve ahead.

TOP END

Ajili-Mojili (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-725-9195; 1052 Av Ashford; dishes from \$25; ☎ lunch & dinner) The waiters wear hats and the reception displays aromatic cigars from the Dominican Republic, so leave your sandals and singlet in your room and venture out to this classy Condado classic. Housed in one of the neighborhood's few remaining eclectic mansions, the menu is high-end *comida criolla* – such as island-style pork loin with *mofongo* – while the atmosphere is refined and romantic. Expect discreet service and sky-high prices.

Ramiro's (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-721-9049; 1106 Magdalena; dishes \$25-37; ☎ lunch & dinner) In the subjective

battle to find San Juan's best all-round restaurant, Ramiro's is often in the running. Situated in the heart of rejuvenated Condado, the flavor here is Spanish with New World infusions. Expect guava sauce with your lamb, avocado with your crabmeat and banana chutney with your halibut. Ambience is elegant and reservations are a good idea.

Isla Verde

Shogun (Map p101; ☎ 787-268-4622; 35 Av Isla Verde; dishes \$5-14; ☎ lunch & dinner) Lots of Japanese restaurants line the Isla Verde strip. This is one of the most popular, serving standard fare like tuna, maki and California rolls, or specialty rolls that you can put together yourself or choose from the à la carte menu.

Edith Café (Map p101; ☎ 787-253-1281; Av Isla Verde Km 6.3; dishes \$6-15; ☎ 24hr) No frills, no formalities, but good food – and it's open 24 hours, though you'd think it wasn't operating at all looking at the heavily tinted windows. Come here for breakfast after one of those exuberant all-night parties and nip your hangover in the bud with two fried eggs, bacon and ham washed down with a strong cup of coffee.

Che's (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-726-7202; 35 Caoba; dishes \$12-24; ☎ lunch & dinner) Che T-shirts aren't too common in Puerto Rico, where the man who promised to 'create two, three...many Vietnams' in the Americas is regarded with a certain degree of suspicion. That said, you might see the odd red-starred beret in here tucking into *churrasco* and *parrillada* (grilled, marinated steak), or veal chops with a kind of revolutionary zeal. Generally considered to be the best Argentinean food around, Che's is popular with *sanjuaneros* and expats of all political persuasions who allow themselves to be united momentarily by a bloody good steak.

Metropol (Map p101; ☎ 787-791-5585; Av Isla Verde; dishes \$12-26; ☎ dinner) You can't miss this place – it's right next to the cockfighting arena. It's a neighborhood favorite well known for the plentiful portions and simple (but not plain) Spanish fare. Wandering tourists are sometimes lured out of their upscale resorts and into its inviting fold.

Casa Dante (Map p101; ☎ 787-726-7310; 39 Av Isla Verde; dishes \$14-22; ☎ lunch & dinner) Casa Dante is a family-run restaurant that serves more variations of *mofongo* than one would think humanly feasible. All are delicious, and you can stick to fajitas or enchiladas or a basic steak if that's what you prefer.

Oyster Bar & Grill (Map p101; ☎ 787-726-2161; Condominio La Posada, Av Isla Verde; mains \$20-30; ☎ lunch & dinner) Rubbing up against the fancy joints in Isla Verde, the Oyster looks like a rather lack-luster alternative. But step inside to taste the spicy crawfish and signature oysters and you could be in for a surprise. Surprise number two comes later on when a dance-happy, salsa-loving crowd hits the floor for a party that doesn't finish until 4am at weekends.

Miramar & Santurce

Chayote (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-722-9385; 603 Av Miramar; dishes \$22-30; ☎ lunch & dinner) Named for a flavorful island vegetable, Chayote is situated in the understated and none too trendy Olimpio Court Hotel (p113). But with its robust *criollo* cooking injected with French, Hindu, African, Spanish and Central American flavors, the restaurant easily trumps the sometimes iffy rooms. International celebrities have been spotted among the traditional wicker and contemporary art furnishings here.

Pikayo (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-721-6194; 299 Av José de Diego; dishes \$25-40; ☎ noon-3pm Tue-Fri & 6-11pm Mon-Sat) Wilo Benet is the island's very own Gordon Ramsey (without the expletives), a celebrity chef par excellence who has uncovered the soul of Caribbean cooking by infusing colonial era Puerto Rican cuisine with various African and Indian elements. Adding atmosphere to authenticity, Pikayo, Benet's showcase restaurant, is situated inside San Juan's stunning Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico (p100) where – with unprecedented transparency – diners can watch the action in the kitchen on closed-circuit TVs. Intrigued? Well, shimmy on over.

Río Piedras

Taquería Azteca (Map p102; ☎ 787-763-0929; 52 Universidad; dishes \$7-15) If you're in the area, this unfussy Mexican place near the university does burritos, nachos and empanadas *muy rápido* with all the right ingredients. A great place to meet tomorrow's literati.

DRINKING

Old San Juan

El Batey (Map pp90-1; 101 Calle del Cristo; ☎ 3pm-late) If Hunter S Thompson were still alive and living in Puerto Rico, this is where you'd probably find him. Cool, crusty and unashamedly bohemian, the walls of this cavernous drinking joint are covered in graffiti while the low-key

lighting will have you groping in your pockets for spare change to light up the suitably retro jukebox. Across the road from the exquisite El Convento Hotel, El Batey is a place to down shots, shoot pool and ramble soulfully about when Elvis was king and the Bacardí bottles still came from Cuba.

Blend (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-977-7777; 309 Fortaleza; ☎ 6pm-late) Blend has been described as uber-chic; it's certainly ubernew and – later on in the evening – uberbusy. Cocooned in an old colonial building on Fortaleza St, this fashionable dining and nightlife spot belts out electronic music from its cavernous and moodily lit interior.

Noise (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-724-3426; 203 Tanca; ☎ 10pm-late) And plenty of it – mainly of the hip-hop variety; salsa-searchers look elsewhere. Brave ladies get in free on Friday nights. There's a metal detector and airport style pat-down at the door. Enough said.

Oleo (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-977-1083; 305 Recinto Sur; ☎ 6pm-2am) This is Nuevo Old San Juan at its best or worst – depending on your musical persuasion. Forget that image of straw-hatted, guitar strumming *jibaros*. Olio is all loud dance music, minimalist furnishings, expensively-clad 20-somethings and an atmosphere that's more Vegas than Borinquen. Communication is via shouting or sleek Latino body language.

Condado & Isla Verde

Kali's (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-721-5104; 1407 Av Ashford; ☎ 6pm-late Tue-Sat) Sophisticated *sanjuaneros* love this moody, Asian-themed restaurant and bar. Sheer curtains flutter against dark maroon walls while trendy patrons sip cocktails and order Indian-influenced appetizers at a big bar adorned with candles.

Atlantic Beach Hotel (Map pp98-9 ☎ 787-721-6900; www.atlanticbeachhotel.net; 1 Vendig; ☎ from noon) Some will tell you that the Caribbean's gay scene begins and ends at this beach-side establishment. Others – while acknowledging its historical importance in the growth of gay nightlife – claim that it slid downhill since its 1980s peak. Whatever your viewpoint, the Atlantic's still crowded, well known and very much part of the scene.

Wet & Liquid (Map p101; ☎ 787-728-3666; Water Club, 2 Calle Tartak) Here they are, the beautiful people, perched on zebra-striped stools or lounging on strategically positioned sofas, martinis in hand. The buffed body-builders, the

fashionistas, the 20-something wannabe actresses corseted into tight black dresses. Popularly considered to be two of San Juan's most esteemed watering holes, Wet and Liquid comprise two separate bars situated in Isla Verde's Water & Beach Club (p112). Liquid dominates the ground floor, Wet inhabits the roof. Interconnected by a space-age elevator that is decorated rather surreally with its own water feature, this is where San Juan's well-heeled and the well-endowed come to swap email addresses. The real glitterati arrive some time after midnight.

ENTERTAINMENT

Old San Juan is the G-spot of the city's nightlife, hosting what is popularly considered to be the hottest and hippest entertainment scene in the Caribbean. Walk the aesthetic streets of the historical quarter after dark and you'll encounter all sorts of cross-cultural surprises: an exotic belly dancer in a colorful Asian-fusion restaurant, a spontaneous drumming ritual in Plaza de Armas, live jazz seeping out from underneath the winking louvers along Paseo de la Princesa. For a condensed late-night scene, hit San Sebastián with its dive bars and musical clubs, or Calle Fortaleza with its trendy yet undeniably tasty restaurants.

Isla Verde is an alternative nexus with most of the action confined to a trio of international class hotels. Further west, resurgent Condado plays hosts to one of the Caribbean's biggest gay scenes. Down-at-heel Santurce also has a handful of late-night dance clubs that you'll need a taxi or car to negotiate to and from.

Live Music

OLD SAN JUAN

ourpick Nuyorican Café (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-977-1276; 312 San Francisco; ☎ 7pm-late) Now, this is more like it. If you came to Puerto Rico in search of authentic salsa music, the legend still lives on at the Nuyorican Café. San Juan's hottest night-spot is a congenial hub of live Latino sounds and hip-gyrating locals that easily emulates its famous New York namesake. Stuffed into an alley off Fortaleza, opposite a nameless drinking hole, you get everything from poetry readings to six-piece salsa bands that squish onto the stage here. And you'll meet people too – the Nuyorican is refreshingly devoid of pretensions or dance snobbery. Things usually get interesting around 11pm-ish.

Gallery Café (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-725-8676; 305 Fortaleza; 🕒 7pm-1am) This café in the old city features jazz on Wednesday night, and funk, hip-hop, Latin jazz and techno Thursday to Saturday. Happy-hour specials run till 9pm on Friday. You get a well-dressed local yuppie gang here.

CONDADO & ISLA VERDE

Marriott Hotel Lobby (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-722-7000; 1309 Av Ashford; 🕒 from 6pm) Salsa springs up in the unlikelyst of places, including in the lobby of this international hotel chain. But this is no standard tourist show. Indeed the authenticity and variety of the music here is something to behold – and people dance too (including the staff). Thursday through Saturday is salsa and meringue dancing, Wednesday is Nueva Trova with a Cuban influence, and Sunday through Tuesday is a live salsa sextet.

Martini's Cabaret (Map p101; ☎ 787-791-6100; InterContinental San Juan Resort & Casino, 187 Av Isla Verde; admission around \$30; 🕒 from 8pm) A luminously lit discotheque and lounge that has booked headliners such as Whitney Houston and Jay Leno in its day – Martini's in Isla Verde's InterContinental is where you go for live music, dancing or the odd celeb surprise. There's more than a hint of Las Vegas in the surroundings – and the drink prices.

Dance Clubs

OLD SAN JUAN

La Rumba (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-725-4407; 152 San Sebastián; 🕒 11pm-late) This is what you came to Puerto Rico for – a club so packed with people of all ethnicities and ages that it matters not if you are an expert twirler or a rank neophyte who can't even spell syncopation. It won't get busy until after 11pm, when the live bands start warming up, but soon enough the trickle of people through the door will turn into a torrent and you'll be caught up in a warm tropical crush of movement. Expect salsa, samba, reggaeton, rock and, of course, rumba music.

Kudetà (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-721-3548; 314 Fortaleza; 🕒 10pm-5am) In the snakes and ladders of San Juan nightlife, Kudetà (coup d'état – geddit?) is a precocious newcomer. It is also part of an emerging new trend: a Pan-Asian restaurant that metamorphoses after hours into a hip club with a hidden upstairs lounge where diners can disappear to dance off their Indonesian barbecued baby-back ribs and Cuba Libre-cured salmon roll salad. They've

even invented their own furniture – the suede-covered Kudetà Collection.

Club Lázer (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-721-4479; 251 Cruz; 🕒 11pm-late) It's been around for a while, but it's still a big draw. Cruise-ship escapees, employees on a night off, young, old, gay and straight pack into Club Lazer for a wild night of fun. Probably the most 'alternative' of all San Juan discos. The music ranges from house, electronica, reggaeton (sometimes) to rap and hip-hop.

Café Hijos de Borinquen (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-723-8126; 51 San José; 🕒 8pm-late Tue-Sun) Gotta wedge your way in on weekend nights. DJs, acoustic guitars, sing-a-long sets and even a bit of patriotic fervor as the clock hand approaches midnight. And that's just the start. The so-named 'Sons of Borinquen' has been known to keep going until 6am.

CONDADO & ISLA VERDE

Club Brava (Map p101; ☎ 787-791-2781; El San Juan Hotel & Casino, 6063 Av Isla Verde; admission \$5-15; 🕒 10pm-3am) A swinging club inside the El San Juan Hotel that frequently get breathless reviews from celeb spotters and all-night dance fanatics. The two-level interior is small, and the music a mix of dance, reggaeton and salsa. The atmosphere's electric and the people-watching possibilities in the lobby beforehand strangely voyeuristic. Dress up, bring your credit card and get ready to jive to what is touted as the best sound system in the Caribbean.

El Chico Lounge (Map p101; ☎ 787-791-1000; El San Juan Hotel & Casino, 6063 Av Isla Verde; 🕒 10pm-2am) If you want to dance but discos aren't your style, then try El Chico. Professional dancers move among the crowd getting everyone in motion. Live music adds to the fun. Dressy attire required.

Cocobongo (Map p101; ☎ 787-727-3422; 2940 Av Isla Verde; 🕒 11pm-late) A Mexican-flavored restaurant/club with fine margaritas, this is a good place to catch live salsa and it rocks till late.

SANTURCE

Club Liquid (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-647-3619; 1420 Av Ponce de León; 🕒 9pm-4am) The former Asylum Club has confusingly changed its name to Liquid (there's another Liquid bar in the Water & Beach Club Hotel). This one's darker, sweeter and more nocturnal. Night owls, of both straight and gay varieties, end their Sunday morning dance-a-thons here. Expect an

18-to-23 crowd here, except on gay nights when it's noticeably older.

Krash (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-722-1131; 1257 Av Ponce de León; 🕒 10pm-late) The former Eros club may have changed its name but it's still predominantly gay. Theme nights are the staple here and DJs shake the house nightly with the latest club sounds from LA, New York and beyond. Hot dancing is de rigueur and the toilets sport some strangely erotic Hellenic murals. There's a \$10 cover charge after midnight.

Kouros (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-977-0771; 1515 Av Ponce de León; 🕒 10pm-late Sat & Sun) Open only on the weekends, Kouros is probably the most glamorous disco in town, and it caters to a well-beeled gay male and female crowd (although certainly anyone is welcome). If you want to put on something slinky and get hot and sweaty under a strobe light, check out Kouros.

Cups (Map pp86-7 ☎ 787-268-3570; 1708 San Mateo; 🕒 10pm-late) Lesbian-friendly bars are hard to come by in San Juan, but this one in Santurce is a laid-back women's scene popular with couples and cruisers.

Classical Music, Opera & Ballet

Luis A Ferré Center for the Performing Arts (Bellas Artes; Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-724-4747; 22 Av Ponce de León; tickets \$15-45) Built in 1981 in Santurce, this center has more than 1800 seats in the festival hall, about 700 in the drama hall and 200 in the experimental theater. The three concert halls fill when the Puerto Rican Symphony Orchestra holds one of its weekly winter performances. International stars also perform here, and it stages productions by the Ópera de Puerto Rico and Ballet de San Juan.

Theater

Something of a city emblem, the **Teatro Tapia** (Map pp90-1; ☎ 787-722-0407; Plaza de Colón; tickets \$15-30) on the south side of Plaza Colón is an intimate neoclassical theater designed in the Italian style with three-tiered boxes and an elegantly decorated lobby. Dating from 1832 and named after the so-called 'Father of Puerto Rican literature,' Alejandro Tapia y Rivera, the building has long acted as a nexus for the island's rich cultural life and has hosted big names from the world of opera, stage and ballet from around the world. The theater was restored extensively in 1949 and then again in 1976, 1997 and 2007. Experts today rate it as

the oldest free-standing drama stage in the US and its territories.

The Tapia's contemporary performances are usually in Spanish and frequently feature new works from Spain or Latin America. The acting is professional and performances attract Puerto Rico's literati and social elite.

Cinemas

Movie theaters can be found in most of San Juan's major shopping centers. You can also look in the yellow pages of the phone directory under *Teatros y Cines* (Theaters & Cinemas) for the one nearest you; be sure to ask someone you trust whether the movie house is in a safe area before you go wandering around its locale after dark. The average cost of a cinema ticket is adult/child/senior \$6/2.50/4.

Reading Cinemas (Map pp86-7; ☎ 787-767-1363, 767-3505; Plaza Las Américas) In the Hato Rey district, this is the city's largest multiplex.

Teatro Metro (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-722-0465; Parada 18, 1313 Av Ponce de León) This classic, restored cinema is in Santurce, edging towards Miramar.

UA Cinema 150 (Map p101; ☎ 787-791-0707; Laguna Gardens Shopping Center, 10 Av Laguna) This awaits viewers in Isla Verde.

Fine Arts Cinema (Map pp98-9; ☎ 787-721-4288; 654 Av Ponce de León) The island's only true art-house cinema was once a sanctuary for adult-only movies. These days it shows a good selection of independent films from around the world.

Movie buffs should refer to p108 for information on the city's up-and-coming annual cinema festival.

Casinos

Although it may not be Vegas, San Juan has certainly developed a reputation for being Las Vegas-on-sea, a mantle it stole from Havana when Castro threw the mob and their gambling syndicates out of Cuba in 1959. As a result a lot of travelers and islanders come down here purely for the action. All of San Juan's casinos are associated with resort hotels, and the gaming houses have now expanded to offer Caribbean Stud Poker, Let It Ride, Pai Gow Poker and the Big Six Wheel, as well as the standard blackjack, roulette, craps, baccarat and minibaccarat. Most of the city's casinos are open between noon and 4pm, and 8pm and 4am. Casual-smart dress is the norm.

Resorts featuring casinos include the InterContinental (p112), the El San Juan (p112)

and the Ritz-Carlton (p113) in Isla Verde, the San Juan Marriott (p111) in Condado and the **Sheraton Hotel** (Map pp90-1 ☎ 787-721-5100; 100 Brumbaugh) in Old San Juan.

Sports

Estadio Sixto Escobar (p97) is a popular place for track-and-field competitions.

Home of the Montreal Expos until 2004, **Hiram Bithorn Stadium** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 787-725-2110; Plaza Las Américas, Av Roosevelt) is a small ballpark built on Astroturf. It's named after the first Puerto Rican to play in the majors.

The **Roberto Clemente Coliseum** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 787-754-7422; Roosevelt Ave) is the place to catch top boxing bouts and basketball games.

For a decent gym try **San Juan Fitness Club** (Map pp90-1 ☎ 787-877-0887; 259 Fortaleza; ☎ 5am-10pm Mon-Thu, 5am-8pm Fri, 8am-6pm Sat), which has an impressive array of equipment and charges \$10 a drop-in (\$20 for four visits).

SHOPPING

Arts & Crafts

The best arts and crafts shopping is in Old San Juan. San Francisco and Fortaleza are the two main arteries in and out of the old city, and both are packed cheek-by-jowl with shops. Running perpendicular at the west end of the town, Calle del Cristo is home to many of the old city's chicest establishments.

Shops worth looking out for are **Bóveda** (Map pp90-1 ☎ 787-725-0263; 200 Calle del Cristo; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat) and **Butterfly People** (Map pp90-1 ☎ 787-723-2432; 257 Cruz; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat), but your best bet is to wander at will and check out what's on offer. Popular Puerto Rican souvenirs include *santos* crafts, domino sets, cigars, rum and coffee.

Markets

Artisans Fair (Map pp86-7; Parques Muñoz Rivera & Sixto Escobar, Puerta de Tierra) Head here for more traditional shopping. The market is generally open on weekends, but call the PRTC (p88) ahead of time to inquire about changing hours of operation.

Mercado de Río Piedras (Map p102; Paseo de Diego) Of course, there's also the market for produce, meats and bargain clothing (p101).

Shopping Malls

Plaza Las Américas (Map pp86-7; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 11am-5pm Sun) Took the wrong turning at Miami airport? Well, no actually. The Caribbean's largest shopping mall is the 200-store Plaza Las Américas situated rather ostentatiously in Hato Rey. It's as indigenously Puerto Rican as Starbucks, but it sells almost everything you're ever likely to need.

Plaza Carolina (Map pp86-7; off Hwy 26; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 11am-5pm Sun) This is a similar operation,

which lies to the east of the city, offering US standards such as JC Penney and Sears among its collection of 150 shops. It is off Hwy 26 (Expreso Baldorioty de Castro) in Carolina.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

International flights arrive at and depart from Aeropuerto Internacional de Luis Muñoz Marín (LMM), which is about 8 miles east of the old city center. See p286 for information on airport services and for a list of international carriers that fly to San Juan.

Several airlines provide services between San Juan and the other parts of the commonwealth, though Puerto Rico's domestic air network is limited. Private aircraft, charter services and the bulk of the commuter flights serving the islands of Culebra and Vieques arrive at and depart from San Juan's original Aeropuerto de Isla Grande, on the Bahía de San Juan in the city's Miramar district. See p290 for details.

Cruise Ship

More than a dozen cruise lines include San Juan on their Caribbean itineraries, and as the second-largest port for cruise ships in the western hemisphere, the city is visited by more than a million cruise-ship passengers a year. All ships dock at the piers along Calle La Marina near the Customs House, just a short walk from the cobblestone streets of Old San Juan. See p289 for details.

Público

There is no islandwide bus system; públicos form the backbone of public transportation in Puerto Rico and can provide an inexpensive link between San Juan and other points on the island, including Ponce and Mayagüez. For more details see p290.

In San Juan the major público centers include the LMM airport, two large público stations in Río Piedras (Centro de Públicos Oeste and Centro de Públicos Este) and – to a lesser extent – the Plaza de Colón in Old San Juan. These are the places you should go first if you want to attempt to understand the intricacies of the fun – but sometimes difficult to fathom – público system. For detailed information see p290 and p141.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

The bus is the cheapest option. Look for the 'Parada' sign outside the arrivals concourse at LMM airport. The B40 bus will get you from the airport to Isla Verde or Río Piedras. From Isla Verde you can take bus A5 to Old San Juan and Condado. From Río Piedras you can take bus A9 to Santurce and Old San Juan.

There are also airport shuttle vans or limousine kiosks on the arrivals concourse. Chances are you can join some other travelers headed your way. Once the van fills, you'll pay around \$7 to Isla Verde, \$9 to Condado and \$12 to Old San Juan.

Getting to LMM airport from hotels in the San Juan area is easy. Staff at virtually all of the midrange and top-end hotels will arrange for a taxi or airport shuttle van to pick you up in front of your lodging at your request. Depending on how many people share the cost of the ride, you can expect to pay between \$4 and \$20. If you go it alone, there are fixed prices to/from the airport and the following destinations: Isla Verde (\$10), Condado (\$14) and Puerta de Tierra/Old San Juan (\$19).

Bicycle

San Juan is in the dark ages when it comes to provisions for cyclists. The only operator in the central tourist areas is Hot Dog Cycling (p105) in Isla Verde, which offers daily and weekly rates and allows you to take its bikes around the island. You can also rent bikes out in Piñones (p125). Rather surprisingly, cyclists can navigate a pleasant and safe cross-city route by following the shoreline from Old San Juan through Condado and Isla Verde as far as Piñones (the last part is on a designated bike lane). There is an additional bike path in Parque Lineal in Hato Rey (Map pp86-7). Elsewhere, getting in and out of the city by bike is difficult and – given the audacity of the drivers – not always advisable.

Bus

The **Autoridad Metropolitana de Autobuses** (AMA; Metropolitan Bus Authority & Metrobus; ☎ 787-767-7979) has a main bus terminal (Map pp90-1) in Old San Juan near the cruise ship piers. These are the routes taken most often by travelers (bus numbers are followed by associated route descriptions):

DETOUR: LA PLACITA DE SANTURCE

Revitalized after a recent injection of municipal funds, the once dilapidated Santurce marketplace (Map pp98-9) is rocking just like old times. The show starts not long after dawn when bleary-eyed market traders stock up their permanent stalls with homegrown treats from around the island. There's chayote from Barranquitas, pumpkin from Coamo, pineapple from Lajas, and mango from Mayagüez – all glowing colorful, tasty and fresh in the morning sun.

Materializing mid-morning, inquisitive shoppers arrive en masse to finger and bag the best produce, before sitting down for a hearty lunch in one of the square's many family-run cafés. **Don Tello** (☎ 787-724-5752; 180 Dos Hermanos; mains \$6-13; ☎ 11am-4pm Mon, 11am-10pm Tue-Sat) is a perennial favorite, although the vintage **El Popular** (787-722-4653; 205 Capitol; mains \$5-7; ☎ lunch & dinner) lives up to its populist name with huge portions of delicious *comida criolla*.

At 5pm, with the market winding down for the evening, the square undergoes a heady transformation, particularly on Fridays. Still dressed in their smart work attire, groups of exhausted office clerks roll in to drink, chat, de-stress and unwind. As the myriad bars fill up, ties are loosened, a salsa band lets rip from a makeshift stage, and a bright and infectious energy infiltrates the humid yet congenial surroundings. It doesn't take long for the dancing to start. A shimmy here, a holler there, and suddenly the whole square is alive with inebriated marketing reps kicking off their high heels and slick-haired business analysts salsa-ing like repressed Ricky Martins into the morning light. Come 6am and there's little left, save for a handful of all-night revelers nursing premature hangovers and the familiar clatter of early morning traders setting out their wares for another day of business.

B40 LMM Airport, Isla Verde, Piñones and Río Piedras.
M1 & M9 Old San Juan, Río Piedras via various routes.
B21 Old San Juan, Condado, Stop 18 (Santurce), Plaza Las Américas.
A5 Old San Juan, Stop 18, Isla Verde.
C10 Hato Rey, Stop 18, Condado, Isla Grande.

In Old San Juan there is a handy free trolley bus that plies a route around the old quarter (see Mapp90–1). The trolley starts and finishes just outside the main bus terminal (see above), but you can get on and off at any one of two dozen designated stops.

Car

If you can avoid driving in the city, by all means, do so. Traffic, parking and the maze of thoroughfares make having, let alone driving, a rental car in the city a challenge.

Old San Juan has the city's two safest and most accessible parking facilities: Covadonga parking lot on Recinto Sur, just as you enter town; and Dona Fela, next door, which is slightly cheaper.

For access to El Morro or the nightlife of San Sebastián, check out the underground lot (beneath Plaza del Quinto Centenario off Calle Norzagaray) at the upper end of town. Parking costs \$2.50 for the first hour, and 75c for additional hours.

For car rental, both **Avis** (800-874-3556) and **Hertz** (800-654-3131) have offices at LMM International Airport.

Ferry

A commuter ferry service called the **Acua Expreso** (☎ 787-788-1155; per trip \$0.50) connects the east and west sides of Bahía de San Juan, Old San Juan and Cataño. In Old San Juan, the ferry dock is at Pier 2, near the Sheraton Old San Juan Hotel & Casino. The ferry runs every 30 minutes from 6am to 9pm.

Metro

The brand-new Tren Urbano, which opened in 2005, connects Bayamón with downtown San Juan as far as Sagrado Corazón on the south side of Santurce. Efficient trains run every five minutes in either direction between 5:30am and 11:30pm. Bicycles are permitted with a special permit. The 16 super-modern stations are safe, spacious and decked out with acres of eye-catching art and polished chrome. The line, which is a mix of sky-train and underground, charges \$1.50 one-way

or \$3 return for any journey, regardless of length. For more information contact **Tren Urbano** (☎ 866-900-1284).

Taxi

Cab drivers are supposed to turn on the meter for trips around town, but that rarely happens. Insist on it, or establish a price from the start. Meters – when or if they do go on – charge \$1.75 initially and \$1.90 per mile or part thereof. You'll also pay \$1 per piece of luggage. There's a \$5 reservation charge; add a \$1 surcharge after 10pm.

Taxis line up at the south end of Fortaleza in Old San Juan; in other places they can be scarce. Don't make yourself a mugging target by standing on a deserted street waiting for one to pass by – call from the nearest hotel. Try **Metro Taxi Cabs** (☎ 787-725-2870) or **Rochdale Radio Taxi** (☎ 787-721-1900); they usually come when you call.

AROUND SAN JUAN

PIÑONES

Of the many arresting cultural contrasts visible in Puerto Rico, none is as striking as the abrupt transition from modern San Juan to pleasantly ramshackle Piñones, gateway to the east coast. The two worlds are linked by Punta Cangrejos, a small bridge on Rte 187 that spans Boca de Cangrejos (Crabmouth Point); once you cross it, 'resort-land' quickly becomes a distant memory.

Do as the visiting *sanjuaneros* do on weekends and saunter along the sandy curves that are backed by spiky pine groves, nosh on seafood snacks and *coco frío* (ice-cold coconut milk) sold at roadside stands, and soak up the strong Afro-Caribbean culture that permeates Loiza Aldea and Carolina, two neighboring towns that maintain strong indigenous identities in the face of urbanization.

Both a state forest – Bosque Estatal de Piñones – and a neighborhood of its parent municipality, Loiza Aldea, further to the east, Piñones presents an alternative to the high-rise condos and casino hotels of Isla Verde to the west, and the massive pharmaceutical plants of Carolina to the south. During vacations and on weekends, this entire stretch is filled with *sanjuaneros* and locals enjoying lots of African-influenced music, food and drinks.

Friquitines, also known as *buréns* in Piñones, are food kiosks of all shapes and sizes (and states of hygiene) that line the coastal road. Proprietors roast plantains, whole fish, codfish fritters and skewered pieces of seasoned pork over wood fires (it's a good idea to avoid oysters, seviche and other raw or lightly cooked dishes). Reefs just offshore create good surfing conditions and protect bathers from the full force of ocean swells, and on the days the ocean's just too rough, there's the recently completed Paseo de Piñones, a first-rate nature trail and bike path along the beach and through the forest reserve.

History

In the 16th century most of this fertile low-lying coastal region was farmed and inhabited by local people. Once the Spanish arrived and took over in 1719, huge tracts of land were turned into massive sugarcane plantations and captured natives were forced to provide the necessary labor, although they resisted mightily. Unable to keep many of their farmhands from melting into the nearby mountains, plantation owners began shipping in African workers, and sometimes stole them from other Caribbean islands. Most of the 30,000 residents living in the municipality today are freed descendants of these Yoruba slaves. The region is justifiably proud of its Afro-Caribbean heritage: Loiza Aldea is named after Luisa, a powerful Taíno *cacique* (chief) who ruled the area before the Spanish conquest.

Orientation & Information

Whatever is happening in laid-back and rural Piñones is happening on Rte 187, which parallels the ocean. Entering from the west side, coming from San Juan, there's a little bridge to cross and then immediately a sign on the left saying '*Bienvenidos a Boca de Cangrejos*' (Welcome to Crabmouth Point). The sign leads up a small incline and onto a cliff overlooking the water. Several popular *friquitines* and restaurants are located there; it's a popular drinking place and offers fabulous views, especially at sunset. The road circles and brings you back down onto Rte 187. Parking is available on the cliff top. About a mile down the road is another concentration of popular beach shacks, set just a little off the road overlooking the ocean. There are few accommodations and no real sense of the town

beyond what is immediately visible along Rte 187; eventually Rte 187 hits Rte 951, which returns to Hwy 3.

The nearest information center is located relatively close by in the LMM International Airport terminal bordered by Rte 187.

Dangers & Annoyances

Avoid walking along deserted strips of beach after nightfall, and be aware that some drug activity takes place on the beaches toward the west side of town. Don't venture onto the beach in that area at night. Watch your speed while driving; transit cops love to patrol scenic Rte 187.

Beaches

Piñones' wild beaches contrast sharply with the well-raked expanses of Isla Verde not two miles to the west – and this is part of their attraction. You can find a choice spot almost any place where Rte 187 parallels the coast. The most picturesque and deserted beaches start around Km 9. For swimming, avoid the corals at the western end of the strand of beaches. Unfortunately, this is where most of the food stands are, and it's where the bus from San Juan ends its route. Nonetheless the walk east is a pleasant ramble along a dedicated hiking/biking path.

Activities

To see a patch of the rarely viewed coastal wilderness, you can join up with a **kayak** flotilla on a three-hour guided ecotour of the Laguna de Piñones and Laguna la Torrecilla. The lagoon features fish, birds and the occasional manatee. Copladet Nature & Adventure Tours (p104) in San Juan can hook you up for \$80. Boat hire is also available from Centro Cultural Ecoturístico de Piñones (see p126).

If the **surfing** is good at Piñones, you will see rows of cars with board racks parked by a good break. Or you can check ahead with one of the San Juan surf shops before you go (p104).

For **bicycling**, head across to the 5-mile-long Paseo de Piñones bike trail, running from the east end of Isla Verde along the shores of Playa Piñones and into the Bosque Estatal de Piñones. You can rent bikes from Domiro Sousa Brugal at El Pulpo Loco (p126), a beachfront restaurant on the bike trail, for \$10/20 per hour/day. Alternatively head for COPI (p126) across the road.

Eating & Drinking

Although the ocean vistas, open-air seating and shade from the tall pine trees make the food kiosks a terrific place to kick back with a cold soft drink or beer, hygiene is not always a top concern for vendors in Piñones. If your stomach hasn't acclimatized yet, hit one of the more established restaurants listed below.

Piñones has a well-established nightlife, especially on weekends. There's no specific gay and/or lesbian bar in town, but gay couples won't attract any unwelcome attention at local spots.

There are countless bars, restaurants and beach shacks here and names come and go. To list them all would be nigh on impossible and detract somewhat from the joy of wandering between them and ending up where your senses carry you.

To get started you might want to try **Reef Bar & Grill** (☎ 787-791-1374; mains \$15-20, beers \$3; ☎ noon-10pm Wed-Thu, noon-2am Fri-Sun) with its seafood and African-flavored sides, or Dominican-run **La Terraza** (mains \$15; ☎ lunch & dinner) which has live music on Saturday night. **Puerta del Mar** (mains \$13-18; ☎ lunch & dinner) is also fun and serves classic *mofongo*, fritters, deep-fried fish and burgers, while **El Pulpo Loco** (☎ 787-791-8382; Rte 187 Km 4.5; mains \$6-18; ☎ lunch & dinner) is a *criollo* place that also rents out bikes.

Just in front of El Pulpo Loco, **Soleil Beach Club** (☎ 787-253-1033; www.soleilbeachclub.com; Rte 187 Km 4.6; mains \$8-24; ☎ 7pm-1am Wed-Fri, 10pm-1am Sat, 2-5pm Sun), the town's hottest night spot,

showcases live jazz, '70s and '80s music, salsa, blues, and weekly *bomba y plena*.

Getting There & Away

The B40 bus picks passengers up near the Cockfight Arena on Isla Verde (connect with A5 for the rest of San Juan) and runs all the way to the settlement at the west end of the beach at Piñones. Walk a mile to the east for some decent swimming beaches. You can also cycle to Piñones from San Juan. A dedicated bike lane begins just west of Isla Verde.

LOÍZA ALDEA

Take Hwy 187 east from San Juan to catch some fresh air and rural scenery (and escape the commerce and traffic jams on Hwy 3). The road eventually breaks out of the Piñones forest. When you cross a bridge spanning the island's largest river, the Río Grande de Loíza, the road brings you to the center of Loíza Aldea, commonly called Loíza. This town is a largely rural municipality in the coastal lowlands east of LMM airport, and it includes Piñones as well as three other districts.

Loíza dates from 1719 and has a rich Taino heritage. Sadly, there's little infrastructure to support tourism, and none of the settlements here are scenic. Most of the 30,000 residents are poor. There are only two reasons for a traveler to visit – a church and a fiesta. You will find some kiosks set up along the roads in Loíza that sell the usual snacks, but there's nowhere to sleep at night. Stay in nearby Piñones, San Juan or at any number of places around Luquillo, El Yunque or Fajardo.

GETTING AWAY FROM IT ALL

You don't have to run to the hills to get away from it all. In fact, some of San Juan's greatest escapes can be found only a mile or two from the city center.

The **Corporación Piñones Se Integra** (COPi; ☎ 787-253-9707; www.copipr.com) is a community based nonprofit organization that is involved in improving the facilities in Puerto Rico's poorer barrios, particularly Loíza. Concurrently, they are working hard to keep the island's traditional Afro-Caribbean culture alive. Headquartered in the **Centro Cultural Ecoturístico de Piñones** (Rte 187, Boca de Cangrejos, Loíza), situated to the right of Rte 187 immediately after you cross the bridge at Boca de Cangrejos, the organization promotes some of Puerto Rico's best *bomba y plena* performances at its on-site **Café El Búho** at 9pm on the second and last Friday of each month. You can also arrange traditional dancing and percussion lessons here (phone or check website for details) as well as enjoy regular expositions of local art.

Sitting on land that was recently saved from the developer's bulldozers via direct community action, COPi has also pledged to protect the region's priceless but precarious ecology. To discover it for yourself, you can hire both bicycles and kayaks at the cultural center to utilize on the adjacent Piñones bike path and lagoon.

Information

The center of the town is called the Plaza de Recreo, known as La Plaza, and is just east of the bridge over the Río Grande de Loíza. Here you will find the **Loíza Tourism Office** (☎ 787-886-6071; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri).

Sights

At the northern end of the plaza, **La Iglesia del Espíritu Santo y San Patricio** (Church of the Holy Ghost and St Patrick) appears every bit as proud and colonial as the cathedral in Old San Juan, and stands out from the humble collection of surrounding modern buildings.

The church dates from 1646 and took its name from the patron saint of Ireland to honor Puerto Rico's famous Irish mercenaries, who designed many of the fortifications of Old San Juan.

Festivals & Events

Puerto Rico's African soul is unveiled for nine days every July and August in the **Fiesta de Santiago**, a cultural extravaganza of drums, masks and hybrid religious iconology relating to the Catholic Saint James the Moor Slayer.

Shopping

Handmade *vejigante* masks carved by local artisans are available in many places in Loíza (and are generally of higher quality for less money than what you'll find in San Juan). Wander the streets around the town center and you'll see plenty of colorful creations quite literally staring out at you.

The most famous shop in town is **Estudio de Arte Samuel Lind** (☎ 787-876-1494; Rte 187 Km 6.6). The studio, which is open to visitors when someone is at home, is 2 miles south of town on Rte 187. Samuel doesn't sell masks but his paintings, sculptures and serigraph prints cost between \$15 and \$350. To drive there, head toward Río Grande until you see a sign for the studio. Turn left and stop at the third house on the left. Públicos from San Juan to Río Grande will stop at the studio on request. About 20 other mask makers work in the area. The tourist office will supply details.

Getting There & Away

You can catch a público to Loíza's plaza from Río Piedras in San Juan for about \$2, which is not a bad way to go during the Fiesta de Santiago, when traffic into Loíza on Hwy 187 and Hwy 188 can be more frightening

than a *vejigante* mask. Públicos return to Río Piedras from a terminal in Loíza (three blocks away from the plaza), but usually only during daylight hours.

CATAÑO & BAYAMÓN

Together, Bayamón and Cataño have a denser concentration of strip malls than any other area in Puerto Rico, which may be one reason why tourists don't seem to be flocking across the bay. Other reasons could be the heavy industrialization, traffic that could make you pull your hair out, and air that's often fouled with noxious chemicals. Nonetheless, there are a few things worth seeing in Bayamón and Cataño, although nothing warrants staying overnight.

To get here, you can take the Acua Expreso ferry from Old San Juan and enjoy a quick harbor tour along the way (p124). The new Tren Urbano now links Santurce, Hato Rey and Río Piedras to Bayamón; from Old San Juan/Condado you can catch bus B21 to Sagrado Corazon station and the start of the train route.

If you head about a mile north of town to where Hwy 165 meets Hwy 870, you can follow the latter to a secluded picnic site amid the dramatic setting of Isla de Cabras.

Sights

BACARDÍ RUM FACTORY

Called the 'Cathedral of Rum' because of its six-story pink distillation tower, the **Bacardí Rum Factory** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 787-788-8400; Hwy 888 Km 2.6; admission free; ☎ 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Sat) covers 127 acres and stands out like a petroleum refinery across from Old San Juan, near the entrance to the bay. The world's largest and most famous rum-producing family started their business in Cuba more than a century ago, but they began moving their operation to this site in 1936. Today the distiller produces some 100,000 gallons of rum per day and ships 21 million cases per year worldwide.

In exchange for some freebies you'll be escorted on a tram tour that lasts about 30 minutes. To get to the Bacardí factory, take a público (about \$3 per person) from the ferry terminal in Cataño along the waterfront on Calle Palo Seco (Hwy 888). At Km 2.6 north of town, look for the Cathedral of Rum and other Bacardí factory buildings to your left, rising above the landscape. Free tours of the plant leave every 30 minutes on the half-hour.

THE BACARDÍ STORY

While the free guided tour of the famous Bacardí factory in Cataño is big on bonhomie and generous with the gratis drinks, there is a noticeable tendency to gloss over various elements of the company's 150 year history – and with good reason. Today the Bacardí brand retains its headquarters in the Bahamas and runs the largest rum factory in the world in Puerto Rico. But, with brutal irony, its roots were sown more auspiciously several hundred miles to the west, in Cuba, a country with whom the company's powerful bosses have been at loggerheads for the last 50 years.

Founded in 1862 in the city of Santiago de Cuba, the world's largest rum dynasty was the brainchild of Don Facundo Bacardí, an immigrant from Catalonia, Spain, who had arrived on the island in 1830 at the age of 16. Recognizing the unusual quality of the sugar cane in Cuba's eastern valleys, Facundo began experimenting with rum distillation using molasses until he was able to produce a refined, clear spirit that was filtered through charcoal and aged in oak barrels.

The new drink quickly caught on and, in time, Facundo passed his burgeoning rum business down to his sons Emilio and José. Emilio went on to become a well-known Cuban patriot during the Second Independence War against the Spanish and, in the 1890s, was exiled briefly for his revolutionary activities. He returned to Cuba a hero in 1898 and was promptly named as Santiago's first mayor. It was during this tempestuous period that Bacardí concocted its two famous rum cocktails, the Daiquiri (named after a Cuban beach) and the Cuba Libre, both mixed with their signature clear rum.

After the repeal of the US prohibition laws in 1932, Bacardí began expanding its operation outside Cuba, opening up a bottling plant in Mexico and establishing the Cataño distillery in Puerto Rico, a move that enabled them to combine cheap labor costs with direct entry into the American market. But, post WWII, with the whiff of revolution in the air, far more ominous changes loomed. Although the family initially supported Castro and his rugged band of Cuban patriots in the late 1950s (a banner on Bacardí's Havana HQ had greeted the rebels with a cordial 'Gracias Fidel!'), they quickly changed tack when the new Cuban leader began nationalizing businesses island-wide in 1960. Abandoning a 100-year tradition, the company was promptly relocated overseas, lock, stock and rum-filled barrel.

In the years since, the Bacardí clan has remained a vociferous voice in the powerful anti-Castro movement in the US and gained rum-slinging notoriety for their sponsorship of dubious far-right groups and other clandestine political operations. In the early 60s, the family attempted to sponsor a plot to bomb Cuban oil refineries and thus spark a countrywide insurrection, until their cover was blown by a front page story in the *New York Times*. A couple of years later, Bacardí boss and one-time Fidel pal, José Pepin Bosch, is said to have bankrolled a CIA plot to assassinate the Castro brothers and Che Guevara using mafia hit-men.

Yet, despite controversy, Bacardí has remained the world's most popular rum selling more than 240 million bottles annually in 170 countries. In Puerto Rico, the Cataño factory reigns as the so-called cathedral of rum churning out over 70% of the company's annual global production.

ISLA DE CABRAS & FUERTE DEL CAÑUELO

Located at the end of Hwy 870, north of the Bacardí Rum Factory and the settlement of Palo Seco, **Isla de Cabras** (Goat Island; Map pp86-7; admission \$2) is perhaps the greatest seaside refuge in metro San Juan for travelers craving privacy and nature. There isn't much here except some shade trees, park benches, rocky seashore, waves and litter. You can fish, but the offshore currents are too dangerous for swimming. The ruins at the north end of the island mark a late-19th-century leper colony.

On the island's south end stand the remains of Fuerte del Cañuelo (Cañuelo Fort). The fort, which is nothing but ruins today, dates from 1610 and once shared the responsibility of protecting Bahía de San Juan with El Morro, which is across the channel marking the entrance to the bay.

PARQUE CENTRAL DE BAYAMÓN

In the old tradition of urban oases like New York's Central Park, this pristine park (Map pp86-7) stands across from the new city hall (the industrial-looking bridgelike structure

spanning Hwy 2) in the center of Bayamón. It is remarkable for its landscaping and the preserved country house located on the grounds. The train running around the park's perimeter is one of the last vestiges of the days when sugarcane railways laced the northern lowlands of the island.

MUSEO DE OLLER

Located in the former city hall on the plaza of Bayamón's historic district, this art and history **museum** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 787-785-6010; admission free; 🕒 8:30am-4pm Mon-Fri) pays tribute to native son Francisco Oller (1833-1917), considered the first Latin American impressionist. Most of Oller's great works are displayed elsewhere, but the restored neoclassical museum building is worth a peek if you are in the area. The collection includes some Oller portraits, Taíno artifacts, and sculptures.

LUIS A FERRÉ PARQUE DE CIENCIAS

This 42-acre **science park** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 787-740-6868; Hwy 167; adult/child & senior \$5/3; 🕒 9am-4pm Wed-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun) is located in Bayamón on Hwy 167, south of the exit from the Hwy 22

toll road. Children seem to get a kick out of this science museum, despite the fact that the focal point of the park is education. It features pavilions that include a new planetarium, electrical energy museum, physics museum, rocket plaza, aerospace museum, transportation museum and zoo. There's also an artificial lake that kids can paddle-boat through just for the thrill of it – no educational lesson attached. Parking costs \$1.

CAPARRA

This is the site of Juan Ponce de León's first settlement on the island, established in 1508. The site was rediscovered in 1936, and only the foundations of a few buildings remain. There is a small **museum** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 787-781-4795; Hwy 2 Km 6.6; admission free; 🕒 8:30am-4:15pm Tue-Sat) featuring Taíno artifacts that is open irregularly. Located on a highly commercial section of Hwy 2 east of Bayamón in Guaynabo, the site is only worth a visit to ponder why the great conquistador ever imagined this spot on the fringe of a mammoth swamp could possibly be suitable as a location for a colony.

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