

# GOOD VIBES ONLY

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San Juan is a capital that dances to its own beat – and offers moments to suit the mood. We found old-world charm, spaces where creative crowds gather and easy-breezy beaches. Wherever the rhythm takes you, there will be music, rum, coffee and new friends to show you the way





“STROLL PAST THE RESORTS AND BOUTIQUES OF CONDADO, OR THROUGH THE PRETTY RESIDENTIAL POCKET OF OCEAN PARK, AND YOU’LL SOON HIT WIDE SWATHES OF PALE-SAND BEACHES THAT STRETCH FOR MILES ALONG THE COAST”



It’s impressive, really, that a place can be both lively and incredibly laid-back – a frenetic urban centre with sleepy, old-world charm. But it’s fitting for San Juan, the capital city of a place that’s neither country nor state, but rather somewhere in the middle as a self-governing US territory.

San Juan is a rich tapestry woven by neighbourhoods, from upscale Ocean Park to the historical old town. Each seems to dance to its own distinct beat. The best way to explore, then, is to simply wander and follow that rhythm wherever you feel it.

The city’s vibe is immediately palpable in Santurce, an area built around a convergence of creatives over the past two decades, and where bold street art blends with the vibrant coffee shops and restaurants. On its main street, Calle Loíza, the rhythm grows louder, into a drum beat. Following it leads to the weathered turquoise walls of La Goyco Community Cultural Centre, where a local day festival is in full flow. In the central open courtyard, a crowd dances to traditional plena music, friends embrace in greeting and others gather at the cluster of stalls for hot arepas (cornmeal cakes) and cold beer.

Such a scene is not rare; for Puertorriqueños, getting together to share music and food is an essential part of living. And visitors are wholeheartedly encouraged to take part. Ideally, you will fall in love with their island, too, so recommendations are often given long before you ask for them. Mere moments after ducking into a bodega for a bottle of water, the man behind the counter is showing me photos on his friend’s Facebook page: “See this great beach we went to last week,” he delights, “you should go!”

The beaches are a must in Puerto Rico, but fortunately you won’t need to travel far – San Juan is hemmed with them. Stroll past the resorts and chichi boutiques of Condado, or through the pretty residential pocket of Ocean Park, and you’ll soon hit wide swathes of pale sand that stretch for miles along the coast. A dip in the clear, bath-warm sea is a grand idea at any time of day, as is a fresh coconut from one of the vendors dotted along the beach. Alternatively, if it’s nearing cocktail hour, a pineapple with a dash of rum is pretty hard to beat. ►►









The historic core of the capital is Old San Juan, which perches on a small peninsula jutting into the Atlantic Ocean. No beaches here; rather, a sense of the island's past, flanked as it is with the historic fortifications of Castillo San Felipe del Morro and Castillo San Cristóbal. The old town also harbours the island's prettiest streets: cobbled avenues of Spanish colonial buildings in ice-cream hues, best taken in at a leisurely meander as you wander in and out of the shops and galleries. Or pick up a £1 cup of guava shaved ice at beloved hole-in-the-wall Limbers and head down to the historic promenade, El Paseo de La Princesa, which follows the curves of the waterfront.

Of course, that cool underlying rhythm of San Juan continues long after the sun goes down. Wherever the night takes you, there will surely be rum, music and conviviality. Plus, there will be a gentle comfort in knowing that, in the morning, you can wake up to a cup of good, strong Puerto Rican coffee – duly fortified and ready to do it all over again.





In the Know

# San Juan

## STAY

### HOTEL EL CONVENTO

100 CALLE DEL CRISTO, 00901  
*elconvento.com*

An historic building with plenty of atmosphere feels like an appropriate choice for a stay in Old San Juan. Enter this 350-year-old former convent, today a smart hotel with elegant archways, sumptuous Spanish tiles and carved wooden touches. A plunge pool with a Jacuzzi overlooks San Juan Bay, while the recently opened restaurant, Santísimo, delivers top-notch modern Puerto Rican fare.

### DREAMCATCHER BY DW

2009 CALLE ESPAÑA, 00911  
*dreamerspuertorico.com*

Unwind at this boutique hacienda in Ocean Park, just a couple of blocks from the beach, where artfully placed Buddha statues remind you to find your Zen. Opt in for delicious organic breakfasts (it's the capital's only vegetarian hotel, so expect a wholesome, meat-free menu), book in for yoga on the deck, or simply grab a drink from the honesty-box bar and slide into the nearest hammock.







PANOTECA SAN MIGUEL

EAT

CAFETERÍA MALLORCA

300 CALLE DE SAN FRANCISCO, 00901  
+1 787 724 4607

Pull up a stool at the counter of this neighbourhood diner, order a coffee and peruse the simple menu of home-style cooked breakfasts that will sort out a rum-ruffled head. But definitely spring for at least one Mallorca, the traditional, sweet doughy buns it's famous for.

PEKO PEKO

1000 AVENIDA JUAN PONCE  
DE LEÓN, 00907  
[@pekopekopr](#)

Once a popular food truck, Peko Peko is now a beloved ramen restaurant by chef Arturo Carrión, who conjures broth that is sumptuous and savoury, and noodles with the perfect bite. There are brilliant intersections of Japanese and Puerto Rican flavours, such as tostones (fried plantain) topped with tuna and avocado.

PANOTECA SAN MIGUEL

85 AVENIDA JOSÉ DE DIEGO, 00927  
[@panotecasanmiguel](#)

This formerly online-only bakery gained such a following that it opened a store in Cupey. High ceilings and dove-grey tiles create a calm space in which to enjoy croissants, bobois (cloud-soft buns filled with cream), sourdough and campesino (country) loaves, and maybe a glass of vino, plus pizza on Thursdays.

TOSTADO\*

1805 CALLE LOÍZA, 00911  
[facebook.com/tostadopr](#)

A hip Santurce joint specialising in local ingredients. If the toasted sandwiches don't take your fancy, how about pulled-pork tacos, grilled mahi mahi with mofongo or one of the stacked burgers? Alternatively, try the one with chorizo, plantains and aioli, or some French toast with Swiss cheese and a fried egg.



CASITA MIRAMAR

DRINK

CASITA MIRAMAR

605 AVENIDA MIRAMAR, 00907  
[facebook.com/casitamiramarpr](#)

The craft cocktails are reason alone to enter this maze of a venue with ample intimate corners and interiors flavoured with a dash of vintage Miramar. You can raise many a glass to the mixologist, including one of a smoky mescal with chilli liqueur and a splash of raspberry.

LA FACTORÍA

148 CALLE DE SAN SEBASTIÁN, 00901  
[lafactoriapr.com](#)

This street-corner bar looks low-key and grungy, but it's a clever facade. One of North America's 50 Best Bars, it specialises in ingenious cocktails that help explain the acclaim. More secrets reveal themselves through a door which leads to a wine bar and a DJ-led dance floor. There's no signage, so just follow the sound of music.

CAFÉ CON CÉ

1765 CALLE LOÍZA, 00911  
[cafeconcepr.com](#)

Hidden down a sleepy side street, this minimalist café has Scandi vibes but is all local, serving speciality coffee from Puerto Rico's Jayuya region. Grab an alfajor (honey and nut confection) or a slice of cassava cake, before chilling out on the little leafy patio out back.

FILTRADO

68 CALLE DE SAN FRANCISCO, 00901  
[filtradopr.com](#)

One of those word-of-mouth places you have to go looking for, but where you'll be rewarded with surely the best coffee in town. Behind the counter, you'll find a quiet, shaded al fresco space to sit in and savour your brew. Note: Filtrado is only open in the afternoons, presenting its coffee not as a means of waking up but of slowing down and enjoying.



LA FACTORÍA





MUNZ

SHOP

EL GALPON

ANTIGUA CASA CABILDO,  
154 CALLE DEL CRISTO, 00901  
[galpon.co](http://galpon.co)

To explore Puerto Rico comfortably, you need a good sun hat, and El Galpon has you covered. Co-founder Gustavo Lerner began making premium Panama hats in Ecuador in the Nineties, working with his partner, Betsy. Their shop has become a trusted name in San Juan.

MUNS

201 CALLE DE LA LUNA, 00901  
[munsthebrand.com](http://munsthebrand.com)

This stylish, slow-fashion concept store was founded by sisters Bianca and Paola Muns, who also design all the jewellery. The entire MUNS clothing range is made in a small, female-run factory in Puerto Rico, and everything is created with sustainability in mind.

OJO DE TIGRE

606 CALLE HIPÓDROMO, 00909  
[ojodetigrepr.com](http://ojodetigrepr.com)

One for the vinyl junkies, this record shop, gallery and events space is a local favourite. Browse the lovingly curated selection of new and second-hand records (check out the section dedicated to Puerto Rican musicians), as well as the ranges by independent designers and artists. Pride of place is a 1950s lathe-cut machine for bespoke records.

DO

CASTILLO SAN FELIPE DEL MORRO

501 CALLE NORZAGARAY, 00901  
[nps.gov](http://nps.gov)

You can't miss this impressive and imposing historic fortress, whose thick stone walls practically envelop the northwestern tip of Old San Juan. Built by the Spanish over a period of 250 years, del Morro served as the first line of defence against attacks from the sea, as invaders attempted to capture the gateway to the New World. Now, it's a Unesco World Heritage Site worthy of respect, and a visit when you're in town.

MUSEO DE ARTE DE PUERTO RICO

299 AVENIDA JOSÉ DE DIEGO, 00909  
[mapr.org](http://mapr.org)

Take a reprieve from the heat and indulge your cultural side at one of the many brilliant galleries across the city. The Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico is the biggest, not to mention a bit of a San Juan institution. The grand colonnaded building was once a hospital but is now home to 18 exhibition halls filled with paintings, sculptures and other media dating from the 17th century – much of which appears together in the current Puerto Rico Plural exhibition.