

Walking Tour of Old San

The Old San Juan Visitor Center, officially called Puerto Rico Tourism Information Center, is located on the corner of Marina Street and Comercio Street in a beige waterfront building (The Ochoa Building). This is right across cruise Pier 1 and next to Plaza Dársenas. It is very easy to find, especially if you are coming on a cruise. There you can obtain maps of the old city and other areas of Puerto Rico, brochures of attractions, and a Que Pasa Magazine, the official magazine of the Puerto Rico Tourism Company, all of this free of charge.

When you are ready to start your tour, start walking west (to your left if your back is to the bay). In this plaza, you will find nice benches with a view of the bay and little yellow Casita (which will soon be a gallery). Also here you will find an outdoor crafts market is usually open all day on weekends and on some week days depending on the cruise ship itineraries.

Continue left down the **Paseo de la Princesa**. This lovely street is tree lined and has lovely gardens, benches, statuary, and a nice shady restaurant. You will usually find some vendors, and there is a clean public bathroom (50¢) on the left side.

You can't help but notice the massive City Wall to the right. The city wall or **La Muralla** was built around the city. Started in the early 1500's, it is almost 20 feet thick in places and up to 60 feet tall in places. It was constantly being extended as the city grew and was finally completed in 1782. It was built to protect the city against enemy attacks.

As you continue along the Paseo, you will come to **La Princesa**. This lovely building was once the San Juan jail. (Notice that the criminals were kept outside the city walls!). Now restored, it houses the Puerto Rico Tourism Company (phone 787-721-2400). Take a little time and go inside. The building is air conditioned and always has a changing collection of art. Ask for a quick explanation of the jail portion, then go out to the back courtyard and go to the right, through the tiny walk between the buildings to see the jail cells. It is open weekdays.

As you continue down the Paseo, you will see a beautiful fountain with a bronze sculpture by Luis Sanguino called "**Raices**", which symbolizes the island's cultural roots.

At the end of the promenade, you can see across the bay to Catano. The big golden cream colored building you see (with the distillation "smoke stacks" and wind turbines) is the Bacardi Rum Factory building. You can take a tour of the Bacardi operation. You can either drive yourself, or take the La Lancha ferry from Pier 2 in Old San Juan to Catano and then a taxi to the rum factory.

Continue on the Paseo to your right. You will see a metal sculpture that looks like "spikes" on the right. Later on the right is a sculpture of Queen Isabella in a nice little cool sitting area.

Continue along the Paseo. Here you will find the City Gate. You have a choice to either continue on the walk outside of the city wall, or go through the gate into the city.

If you choose the walk along the wall, the trail is called the **Paseo del Morro**. It is almost 3/4 mile long one way. This walk follows along the city wall to below [El Morro fort](#). The trail actually ends at El Morro fort. Starting 10/14, you can go to the end and enter El Morro Fort from there only on "Free Days" at the fort. However they say you will be able to start at El Morro and access the Paseo. At some point in the future, they will have steps that will connect the grounds outside the fort to the Paseo. Either way, along the route, you will be able to get many great photos of [El Morro](#), and the Garitas (guard towers). It will be hot, and there are no trees for shade. You can not walk off the trail, it is monitored by guards. You will see many cats on this path. They are protected by the Parks Department – do not touch or feed them. They are spayed/neutered, vaccinated and fed by a local animal organization called Save a Gato . This paseo is open 6:00am-10:00pm daily. Bring a hat, water and sun screen!

But our tour will take you through the City Gate. This is the only remaining city gate. It was one of six original massive wooden doors that, centuries ago, were closed at sundown to protect the residents. This pretty red-painted **Puerta de San Juan or San Juan Gate** is where you re-enter the city. Above the gate is inscribed “Benedictus qui venit in nomine domini”- Latin for “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”. As you walk through, notice how the wall is about 15 feet thick. Go straight through the gate and up the hill. You are following the same path many sailors took after a long voyage – straight up the street, to the cathedral, to thank God for a safe journey.

As you are walking up this street, try to peek into any buildings being renovated. These are 400 year old houses that have beautiful Moorish tile work, and lovely open inner courtyards.

Just before you get to the Cathedral, you will pass a small shady park. Here you can sit, relax and people-watch in the cool shade. You will find the Children’s Museum – a fun interactive stop for kids – at the foot of this park. The Children’s Museum is open Tuesday through Sunday.

The **San Juan Cathedral** is a 450 year old church. Ponce De Leon is interred here. The artwork on the ceilings has been recently restored and it is very pretty – go in and take a look. Mass is still held here. Open daily.

Once outside the Cathedral (with your back to the cathedral) turn right and continue going up the hill on Cristo Street. Be sure to make stops along the way. There is a Ben and Jerry’s up about a block for a cool snack. There are also many restaurants, bars, art galleries and museums – so take your time and explore!

At the top of the hill you will find San Jose Plaza. Here you will find the San Jose Church, which is undergoing restoration. The Church is currently not open. But it is the oldest church in San Juan.

In the corner by the church door, you will find the back entrance to the old Dominican Convent. It now houses the National Gallery – about 150 artwork pieces from Puerto Rican artists from the last few centuries. Stop in. It’s definitely time well spent.

Cristo street ends here, so turn left – you will be at the Plaza del Quinto Centenario. This park has a sculpture of a Totem pole and, down the steps, you will see a fountain that the kids love to play in. From here you will see **El Morro** across the field.

You can’t help but see the massive **Castillo de San Felipe del Morro (“El Morro”)** across a large field. This field is always windy, so everyone flies kites here – especially on weekends! Off to the right is the San Juan Cemetery – an interesting (though morbid) side trip. When you are ready – make your way across the field until you get to the entrance to the fort.

[El Morro](#) is a huge, six-level fortress built to protect the city from sea invaders. The Fort itself was originally “completed” in 1589, but the massive walls were added in the mid 1700’s . The fort is a National Historic Site administered by the US National Park Service. They offer a short introduction and tour in either Spanish (on the 1/2 hr mark) or English (on the hour) every hour throughout the day. Alternately, you can do a self-guided tour with the map you get upon admission. There is also an explanatory video shown continuously throughout the day, in both English (on the hour and half hour) and Spanish (on the 15 and 45 min mark).

[El Morro](#) has all sorts of neat areas to explore: the barracks, kitchen, latrine, chapel, storage, etc., all connected with ramps and stairways. And the views are great – just seeing a massive cruise ship, dwarfed by this large fort is amazing! There is a small military museum, and gift shop on the premises. The fort is open to the public daily (except Christmas, New Years, and Thanksgiving) from 9:00 am to 6:00 pm. There is a \$5 admission fee valid for entrance to both El Morro and San Cristobal forts for people 16 years old and up. Phone 787-729-6777 for more info.

After you have completed your tour of the fort, cross the long yard and continue straight into the **Plaza de Ballaja**. In this building (an old barracks) you will find many wonderful museums – Museo de las Americas – which

contains 3 permanent exhibits including folk arts, Indigenous Indian museum and a study of African influence. There are also some rotating temporary exhibits. There is a small fee for some exhibits. Open Tuesday through Saturday 9am-12n, 1pm-4pm, and Sunday from 10:00am to 4:00pm. Phone 787-724-5052 for more info.

When you exit, cross the **Plaza de Beneficial** (view the sculptures) and **Casa Blanca** will be on your right, at the end of San Sebastain Street. Casa Blanca was built in 1521 as a “strong-house” for Ponce de Leon, but he died before it was completed. Today it is a National Historic Monument, and a “museum” of period furnishings. The house is only open Wednesday through Sunday from 8:30am to 4:00pm (closed 12-1 for lunch). However, the gardens are free to walk around in during the day(8:30am -4:30pm. They are a lush area, full of plants and water features. It is a nice tropical, cool retreat from the city. Admission to the Casa Blanca museum with guided tour is free. Phone 787-725-1454 for more info.

When you leave Casa Blanca, go down San Sebastian street a little bit, then turn right and go down the steps to Calle Sol. Turn right onto Calle Sol. This street has beautifully painted houses. At the end of Calle Sol, turn to the left and you will see **La Rogativa** plaza. This statue commemorates the night a march through town by the Bishop and townswomen scared off British invaders. There is a small window across the street from the statue that says Limbers. Stop and get one. If no one is at the window, just knock loudly or call out a greeting. For \$0.75, you will get a sweet fruit flavored ice. Very refreshing on a hot day. Then continue up Las Monjas street to Cristo Street.

Once on Cristo Street, turn right. You’re now in the shopping district! Stop in any and all of the stores and galleries! Here you’ll find everything from brand name outlet stores, to quality jewelry, to handmade items and souvenirs.

When you get to Fortaleza Street, turn right. At the end of the street, you’ll see a pretty blue building – **La Fortaleza** – which was built in the early 1500’s as the first fort to protect the city from sea invaders. It was soon realized it was inadequate to guard the entrance to the harbor. So, in 1846, the building was remodeled from a fort to the mansion you see today. Now it is the official Governor’s Residence, and a World Heritage Site. There are “garden” tours available (\$3 donation requested) throughout the day, either in English or Spanish. Open Monday through Friday from 9:00 until 3:30 pm. You need to make reservations -either call or stop in at the yellow building on the left side of the street a few doors up from the Fortaleza. Proper attire (long shorts are allowed, but no sleeveless shirts, etc- think casual vacation clothing, just not too sexy!). Phone 787-721-7000 for more info and reservations.

Return to Cristo Street, turn right, and go to the end of the street. This beautiful old chapel is **Capilla del Cristo (Cristo Chapel)**. It was built in 1753. There are different versions of the story of why it was built – either by a thankful father whose son lived after his son and his horse fell over the wall, or by a sad father whose son died after falling over the wall on his horse. Either way, the altar is made from thousands of the silver "promesas" that are given as offerings for a wanted miracle. The Chapel is taken care of by volunteers, which open it occasionally every week. If you are lucky enough to be there when it is open, take a close look at the altar.

If you turn to your right , you’ll find **Parque de las Palomas (Pigeon Park)**. Here you will be able to feed hundreds of pigeons that live in this park home. The views are great from this area on top of the city wall.

If you turn to your left at the chapel, you can wander back down to La Casita plaza.

This time we will go east from **La Casita**. With the Casita to your back, cross the street (by the horse carriage rides) and continue along the waterfront (the bay will be on your right) just a little bit. On the corner is the Puerto Rico Tourism Company offices. They offer air conditioning, information [and free rum tasting](#). Stop in!

After you’ve cooled off, head back toward the La Casita and turn right at the corner onto San Justo Street. Go up 3 blocks and you will be on **Fortaleza Street**. This is one of the big shopping streets – stop in and treat yourselves to all sorts of "must-haves"! From jewelry to Puerto Rican crafts to clothes (famous maker and beach wear) to that last minute souvenir for Aunt Milly. If you want to shop, you can head left or right on Fortaleza. A neat store

for vibrant PR art and crafts is “The Handcraft Store” , which is right here on the corner of San Justo and Fortaleza. Once you are done shopping and you want to continue on this tour, you will want to turn right onto Fortaleza (heading east).

As you walk down Fortaleza, you will come to two [museums](#) on your left – **Casa de la Familia** and **Museo de la Farmacia**.

As you continue walking down Fortaleza Street to the east, you will also notice many great places to eat – you are in the "SoFo" (South Fortaleza) area. Check out the menus that are posted outside each of the restaurants. Any of these restaurants would be a good choice for lunch or dinner.

At the end of Fortaleza, bear to the left and walk through **Plaza de Colon**. Here you'll find a statute of Christopher Columbus ("Cristobal Colon" in Spanish) . Walk diagonally the the left through the plaza so that you are on the next street (San Francisco). From this end of the plaza, you'll be able to see the San Crisotbal Fort. You can get into the fort by walking up to the doors through the parking lot, or by walking up the hill on Norzagaray Street.

Castillo de San Cristobal (San Cristobal Fort) was built in 1634, and completed in 1771. It was built to protect the city from sea and land invasions. The for is 150 feet high, and is a great example of the strategic skills used to make these defenses. This fort is actually a number of different units connected by tunnels, each unit being self-sufficient if another part is invaded. This fort has a wonderful dungeon that you can visit and see the doodling of prisoners on the walls. You can also see some damage the fort sustained during some of the battles. This fort is a World Heritage Site, and National Historic Site, administered by the US National Park Service. The fort is open to the public daily (except Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years Day) 9:00 am to 6:00 pm . There is a small admission fee (\$5 adults).

After you're finished at Fort San Cristobal, you can head back down into the city, or you can continue along the north edge of the city (with the ocean to your right) and head back toward [El Morro](#). Or, if you go eastwards (with the ocean to your left), you will get to the Capitol Building. Go inside- it is beautiful. It is open Mon- Fri 9m-5pm
Enjoy your visit Viejo San Juan!

Marilyn's Place, 100 San Francisco