



Help Puerto Rican Recovery by Planning an Elegant Getaway to San Juan

Along with the rest of Puerto Rico, San Juan's infrastructure was damaged by Hurricane Maria, but don't dismiss the city as a vacation destination. The tropical paradise is rich in history and culture, and still has much to offer visitors looking for a cosmopolitan holiday in the sun.

by **Emilie-Noelle Provost**

When you're in Puerto Rico and walking alongside someone who lives there, that person is likely to stop and open any door you might come upon, then wait patiently for you to pass through it first. It would be a mistake to be "polite" and insist that the person go ahead of you. Regardless of your intention, your offer might be interpreted as rude, or mark you as unrefined.

Puerto Ricans are sophisticated people who take pride in their gracious manners and warm hospitality. This is just one of the things I learned on a recent visit to San Juan.

Like many Caribbean islands, Puerto Rico's history is complex. Its art, music, food and literature reflect a blending of its native Taíno culture with those of the Spanish colonists who populated the island beginning in the early 16th century, the African slaves the Spanish brought with them, the smattering of French, Dutch and German immigrants who made the island their home in the early 19th century, and also with modern American

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culture. This fusion also can be seen in the beautiful faces of the island's people.

Puerto Rico has been part of the United States since April 1899, when the Treaty of Paris officially ended the Spanish-American War and Spain ceded the island, along with the Philippines and Guam, to the U.S. government. In its constitution, Puerto Rico designates itself as an "associated free state," allowing its own governor, judiciary and legislature to have jurisdiction over the island's internal affairs. The U.S. government controls Puerto Rico's commerce, foreign relations, customs and immigration, currency, maritime laws, military service and bases, the constitutionality of its laws, treaties, media communications, agriculture, mining, highways, postal system and social programs.

Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, but their representation in Congress is limited. They cannot vote in presidential elections, and most people living there don't pay federal income tax. Many Puerto Ricans are bilingual, speaking both Spanish and English fluently.

Founded in 1521 by Spanish conquistador Juan Ponce de León, San Juan was originally named "Puerto Rico de San Juan Bautista" in honor of Saint John the Baptist. Eventually, the entire island would come to be called Puerto Rico, with its capital city known simply as San Juan.

Old San Juan, the original part of the city, is still surrounded by massive fortification walls, punctuated by iconic sentry towers built by the Spanish to protect it from invading pirates and attacks by rival European nations.

I stayed in the heart of Old San Juan at Hotel El Convento, a former convent built in 1651. Overflowing with original oil paintings and sculpture that harken back to the building's original purpose, the hotel's 58 rooms surround an open interior courtyard framed by wrought iron balconies. Home to the hotel's Patio del Níspero restaurant, the courtyard is a fabulous place to socialize with cocktails or to grab a quick, delicious meal. Guests staying on El Convento's stylish third floor enjoy a nightly wine and cheese reception that's included in their room rate.

El Convento is within walking distance of nearly all of Old San Juan's attractions, including the Castillo San Felipe del Morro and Castillo San Cristobal fortresses, both fully operational since the Sept. 20 Category 4 hurricane and more than worth your time. As of my visit in January, most of Old San Juan's museum's had not yet reopened. But one, Museo de las Américas, offered a free exhibition about Hurricane Maria, featuring work by Puerto Rican artists. This powerful exhibit made me feel connected to the people and the island in a way that little else could.

Directly across from Hotel El Convento is the Cathedral



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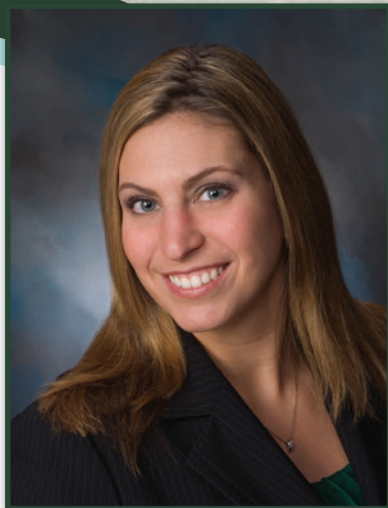


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de San Juan Bautista. Originally built in 1521, the church is the second oldest cathedral in the Western Hemisphere and one of the few remaining examples of medieval European architecture in the New World. It's also the final resting place of Ponce de León, whose grave is marked by a column of white marble.

Spend some time wandering Old San Juan's cobblestone streets. There's much to be discovered there, including incredible Spanish Colonial architecture, parks overflowing with flowers, street musicians, art galleries, boutiques, open-air cafes and breathtaking views of the sea.

If your idea of a tropical vacation includes rolling surf and a

looking at my feet). The esthetician who did my facial was one of the loveliest people I've ever had the pleasure of meeting, and my skin looked so good when she was done that I had to restrain myself from hugging her.

Located on the Vanderbilt's main floor, 1919 Restaurant offers striking ocean views. It's been named the finest restaurant in Puerto Rico by some critics and is the place to go for any special occasion or if you just feel like treating yourself to a fantastic meal. On the night I visited, I enjoyed a tasting menu with wine pairings created by Executive Chef Juan José Cuevas, a native of Puerto Rico. Cuevas uses local products whenever possible — both for their quality and

to help support the people who grow and make them — and it shows in the freshness and unique tropical flavors that define his cuisine. I lost track of how many courses I tried, but I can say that each was special. Just as lovely as the food, the restaurant's staff helped make the night forever memorable, even though I was dining by myself.

A Dec. 29, 2017, New York Times article reported that about half of Puerto Rico's population was still without power, especially in rural areas. Hundreds of thousands of people have left the island for the U.S. mainland, according to the New York Times, NBC News and other sources. Progress is being made — I witnessed several construction crews at work during the few days I was there — but at a much slower pace than anyone wants.

You can help: Puerto Rico is standing patiently with its door open, waiting for you to come through. Enjoy an elegant tropical vacation in San Juan, and tell your friends to do the same. The money you spend will stimulate the economy, help create jobs, and provide much-needed tax revenue that just might help save one of America's most unique and beautiful places.

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lounge chair, I also spent some time at the Condado Vanderbilt Hotel. Located on Condado Beach, about 3 miles from Old San Juan, the grand hotel was built in 1919, and designed by Warren and Wetmore, the same firm that built New York's Grand Central Station. While several area resorts still remain closed after Hurricane Maria, the Vanderbilt never closed for business and appears unscathed.

The hotel is home to several chic restaurants and bars. It also has an infinity pool, a private beach, a fitness center and a gorgeous spa, where I was lucky enough to get an appointment for a facial.

As spas go, the Vanderbilt's is on the posh side. From its comfy lounge to its wide variety of customized services, few details are overlooked (the attendant was able to guess my sandal size by