

Sightseeing in old San Juan

By IRIS SANDERSON JONES

OLD SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — There were armies of them, all in uniform, marching beside the walls of the old fort and climbing all over the cannon balls.

You could photograph them if you were fast enough to catch them in your camera before they moved on, with their teachers urging them to form a double line and to stop talking. The children of Puerto Rico take field trips in the spring, making colorful clusters wherever you go in this 450-year-old walled city of Old San Juan.

The students in different color uniforms gather around the cannon at El Morro. Red-and-white checked dresses and slacks and white shirts skip down the blue brick street called Calle Cristo, white green and yellow plaid scatter the pigeons at the Pigeon Plaza while overlooking the sea.

Some travelers expect hostility from the local people here because you sometimes find it on other Caribbean islands and because we read about conflict between those who want statehood, independence, or the status quo.

The children will cure you of that fear. Sit on a bench and at least one will come very close. Give that one a

little encouragement and they will all come to greet you, saying "hello", I'm an American, too.

OLD SAN JUAN is an ancient walled city on a point of land guarding San Juan Bay. It is a historic zone preserved by the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, with two massive forts, El Morro and San Cristobal, guarding the stretch of wall that faces the Atlantic.

El Morro is a massive six-level fort started in the 16th century and now administered by the National Park Service. A children's museum is under construction in the old 18th century powderhouse.

The fort is a good place to get a view back over the old city and to plan a walk through the old blue streets. The blue street bricks are adobe, made from old mining slag carried to sea as ballast and dumped by the Spanish on the Puerto Rican shore.

Legend says "the tailings from old silver mines." The guide book says "casting slag from Spanish iron foundries."

Either way, follow the blue brick road from El Morro up the Calle Norzagaray to the Plaza de San Jose and down the Calle Cristo, which will give you the most sightseeing in the shortest walk.

The plaza hosts an elegant restored



A sign of the times. Puerto Rico is on its way to becoming highly industrialized. However, pineapples and bananas, and of course imported soda, are plentiful and enjoyed in the open marketplace. (Photo by Iris Sanderson Jones)

Dominican convent, San Jose Church (original burial site of Ponce de Leon) the San Juan Museum of Art and History, and the remarkable Pablo Casals Museum.

Casals left his memorabilia to Puerto Rico, including manuscripts, photographs, cello and a library of video tapes that may be played on request.

The Calle Cristo runs several blocks straight down from the Plaza de San Jose to the glass wall of the Cristo Chapel (see Travelog). Here you are in a typical Colonial Spanish setting, with green plazas, creamy stucco-fronted buildings and wrought iron balconies.

Only the colorful potted flowers are missing. Agriculture generally seems to be disappearing from Puerto Rico now that it has been industrialized.

At the first crossing, marked by the San Juan Cathedral, you will find one of the island's most unusual hotels at the corner of Callejon de las Monjas.

Hotel El Convento is a former convent. The old colonial environment has been admirably restored. Stop in for at least a drink, or for lunch in either the outdoor patio or the chapel-turned-dining room.

CALLEJON de las Monjas is one of two stepped streets left in the city. It will detour you briefly off Calle Cristo to Plazuela de la Rogativa, and a great view of the sea. Hardy walkers can continue uphill back to the fort.

Try to stop at Casa Blanca, a museum built in a restored 15th century house where Ponce de Leon's descendants and Spanish military

commanders once lived. Back on Calle Cristo, you will find small well-kept shops on either side, and in adjacent streets. One more cross street down which you can see the white front of the Fortaleza, and then you are at the Cristo Chapel and the Parque de las Palomas, the Pigeon Plaza.

You can see it all from the Pigeon Plaza. Children eat ice cream and feed the pigeons under the Laurel of India and the Mango trees. Their faces

reflect the Taino Indians, the Spanish Conquistadores and the African slaves who settled this island waf by wave over the centuries.

Below is the Tourist Information Center, and the ferry docks where you can take a 10-cent ride to Catana, and visit a rum distillery. Across the bay of ships you can see the high-rise skyline of the new city.

Across Calle Cristo is the Museum of Puerto Rican Art and a first-class historical library, La Casa de Libro.

When you go . . .

Hotels in San Juan stretch along the Atlantic coast from the Caribe Hilton, in Puerto de Tierra, near Old San Juan, to the hotels and condominiums of Isla Verde to the east. The Caribe was the first major hotel built in the area and is still considered first class.

Most hotels are on the adjacent stretch of coastline known as Condado Beach, with a convention center called El Centro flanked by the Condado Beach Hotel and Hotel La Concha, the centerpiece of the strip. All three are run by Hilton International.

This Condado Beach strip runs from the Condado Holiday Inn, just across a short stretch of water from the Caribe, to the Dupont Plaza, formerly a Sheraton Hotel and now independent.

These hotels range from \$75 to \$100 a night, double for the summer season, mid-April to mid-December. Hotels ranging from \$25 to \$50 double are also on a list available from the Puerto Rico Tourism Co. 11 E. Adams St., Suite 802, Chicago, Ill. 60603.

Book accommodation for four nights at any major hotel in San Juan and you will receive, free, a package giving you entrance to LeLoLai Festival activities, a good choice of folkloric stage events and sometimes accompanying dinners.

There are other hotel complexes within 20 miles, either side of the city, as well along the coast.



travel log

Iris Sanderson Jones

Those legends hold certain fascination

Legends are among the most memorable gifts to bring back with you when you travel. Especially if they're not true, and most of them aren't.

I learned this first in Bardstown, Ky., when a local guide told us about some paintings hanging in the city cathedral. The King of France had lived briefly in Bardstown, she told us. In gratitude, he sent these original oil paintings all done by famous old master painters.

What an exciting story! Why had I never heard of these famous paintings before? I bought a guide book and later sat down to tell the world about it.

For some reason, there was no mention of the famous paintings in the guide book. Perplexed, I called the city's Chamber of Commerce.

"Oh those guides are always telling that story," I was told. "Most of them even believe it."

I have since learned that tour guides around the world tell outrageous lies, most of which they believe.

I thought of this as I was touring Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, our guide told us about the Cristo Chapel.

ACCORDING TO his wonderful story, the Spanish once held horse races down this street. One day a man and horse failed to make the turn and plunged over the edge into the sea.

Cristo Chapel was built to commemorate their misfortune and to keep future horsemen from a watery grave.

I love that story. It may or may not be true, although the people of Puerto Rico certainly tell it as if they believe it. Tourists love it.

The chapel is a glittering semicircle of glass at the end of the Calle Cristo, right next to the Parque de las Palomas, the Pigeon Plaza.

Tourists take pictures every day of the child buying ice cream from the vendor who parks between the plaza fence and the chapel. Neither the tourists nor the ice cream vendor really care whether the legend is true or not. In fact, if you know something that indicates the legend isn't true, please keep the information to yourself.

Those of us who love legends like it just the way it is, with the ghosts of old Spanish horsemen flying down the blue brick street.



Puerto Rican school children climb the cannon balls during their tour of the Castillo de San Felipe del Morro, a massive six-level fort begun in the 16th century and now a San Juan national historic site.

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