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OLD SAN JUAN- Puerto Rico's Colonial Legacy

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Strolling the streets of Old San Juan truly is like stepping into the past. The second-oldest European settlement in the New World, this enclave from which the modern capital of Puerto Rico grew includes some of the best preserved examples of Spanish Colonial architecture anywhere.

Stucco buildings in a rainbow of pastel shades, trimmed with white shutters and archways, line narrow cobbled streets. Balconies, laden with pots of tropical plants, extend like hanging gardens over skimpy sidewalks.

Some facades conceal grand houses of the past; others, dimly lit bars and cool courtyard cafes. Still others have been converted to shops selling the kinds of items for which the Caribbean has become known: imported glassware, leather goods, designer clothes and glittering jewelry.

The historic district occupies a square mile within a four-century-old city wall. And three forts built to defend colonists (El Morro, San Cristobal and San Geronimo) remain intact for visitors to explore.

La Fortaleza also began as a military establishment but today is the official residence of the commonwealth's governor. The property's tower and gate were built in 1540, but the mansion was constructed in the 1800s. Nearby is Casa Blanca, family home of original governor Juan Ponce de Leon, who was with Christopher Columbus when he discovered the island in 1493 and who later explored Florida in search of the Fountain of Youth. It now is a museum of 16th and 17th century Puerto Rican life.

Iglesia de San Jose, the second-oldest church in the Western Hemisphere, served the descendants of Ponce de Leon. The family's coat of arms hangs above the altar.

However, San Juan Cathedral houses the explorer's tomb. Dating from 1540, the cathedral features authentic and rare examples of medieval architecture in the Americas, an elegant circular staircase and vaulted Gothic ceilings.

A simple chapel, Capilla de Cristo, stands where a street ends abruptly on a bluff overlooking the city wall. It is said to have been erected in 1753, after a young participant in a fiesta horse race was unable to stop and plunged over the unprotected edge.

Next to it is Parque de Las Palomas, a small park dedicated to the pigeons that roost in numerous shoebox sized holes cut into the enclosing wall. Local residents bring their children here to enjoy the shade and feed the birds. Two of the largest buildings in Old San Juan formerly were convents. The one built by the Dominicans in 1532 has become the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, organizing exhibitions and sales of native arts and crafts on site.

The other, founded by Carmelites in 1625, is now Hotel El Convento. Its rooms, featuring Spanish carved furniture and terra cotta tiled floors, open off colonnaded passageways that overlook the courtyard pool and outdoor restaurant.

North of the hotel, steep streets climb some of the steepest parts of the historic zone, while to the west, the promontory above San Juan Gate offers a view of dramatic sunsets over the bay.

Of course, there is much more to see and do in Old San Juan. For information, contact: Puerto Rico Tourism Company, PO Box 902-3960, San Juan PR 00902-3960, 800-866-7827, www.gotopuertorico.com.