

GETTING LUCKY IN SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO



Lounge poolside at San Juan Marriott Resort.



A waterfall in El Yunque Tropical Rainforest



Brightly colored buildings line the streets of San Juan.

PHOTOS: PUERTO RICO TOURISM

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

It may seem like I'm living a sunny life on the road, but the truth is that I tend to have really bad luck. Exhibit A: I was robbed of a third of my income last year, but the amount is too paltry to attract any lawyers to take my case. So when I heard about Puerto Rico's annual "San Juan Bautista" celebration in June—which is said to bring good luck—I jumped on the chance to change my fate and booked a trip to the San Juan Marriott Resort & Stellaris Casino. I wasn't necessarily a believer, but what did I have to lose?

TRAVEL

San Juan Bautista (or Saint John's Night) is a San Juan custom that takes place every June 23, the eve of Saint John the Baptist's birthday. To ensure good luck for the next year, thousands of people gather on beaches and at the stroke of midnight, walk or dive backwards into the water—typically three, seven or twelve times (depending on how much luck is needed and/or how much fun the process is discovered to be) because these numbers are considered luckiest. The belief is that the waters are blessed and can purify the soul and take away evil.

Bad weather thinned the crowds at this year's event. But the water was warm, the undertow was cooperative and the waves spread like welcoming arms. Time will tell if the experience yields benefits. But, hey, if you throw yourself into the ocean during a lightning storm and live to tell the story, you must be lucky, right?

The next day, it was suggested that I test out my new luck at the 12,700-square-foot Stellaris Casino, which offers poker, blackjack, roulette, craps, baccarat and more than 400 slot machines. But I had another idea, and instead headed to the Ocean Club Spa for a deep tissue massage, hoping to coax my new luck to penetrate my system. Fully relaxed, I ventured to the golden beach to soak up some rays and, later, body surf in the invigorating aqua waves. After showering in my 14th-floor ocean-scene room, I stared out at the spectacular view and considered how lucky anyone might feel staying at this 525-room resort, which recently completed a \$35 million redesign so all guest rooms now boast luxury bedding and state-of-the-art technology.

Conveniently located just five miles from the airport, the San Juan Marriott Resort is easily a destination in itself, boasting six restaurants and various recreational options. But it's within walking distance of (or a quick taxi ride to) some of San Juan's best shopping, dining, adventure, historical and cultural landmarks, including:

The **Arecibo Observatory** is home to the world's largest radio telescope and NASA's search for extraterrestrial intelligence.

Casa Blanca, originally built by Ponce de León in 1521, is now a museum showcasing 16th- and 17th-century art and furnishings.

El Morro is the oldest fort that once served to help defend San Juan; **San Cristóbal** is the largest of San Juan's historic forts.

Old San Juan, a 475-year-old neighborhood on the western half of the island, is a 47-square-mile district that's home to most of Puerto Rico's government buildings, many boutique shops, major retail outlet stores and several restaurants.

Plaza Las Americas is the largest shopping mall in the Caribbean.

Rio Camuy Cave Park houses one of the world's largest underground river systems.

The **San José Church**, which was built 1532-1539, is the second oldest church in continuous use in the New World.

The **San Juan Cathedral**, built in 1540, is the burial site of Ponce de León.

El Yunque Tropical Rainforest is the only tropical rainforest in the U.S. National Forest System. **SP**

IF YOU GO

■ **GETTING THERE**

Delta offers nonstop service from Atlanta to San Juan. AirTran Airways began offering new nonstop flight service to San Juan from Atlanta on March 5.

■ **WHERE TO STAY**

San Juan Marriott Resort & Stellaris Casino
888-817-2033 or 800-464-5005
www.marriott.com/sjujr

■ **KNOW BEFORE YOU GO**

U.S. citizens don't need a passport to travel to Puerto Rico. The San Juan Marriott Resort is offering an "Easy Access" package now through December 20, 2008; rates start at \$305/night and include accommodations in a newly renovated city view room and breakfast daily for two adults and two children (younger than 12) at La Vista Restaurant. In addition, guests who travel on the new



El Morro

AirTran flights and show their flight stub at check-in will receive a \$100 food and beverage credit per room for use during their stay at the resort.

■ **WORDS OF EXPERIENCE**

Avoid the Bacardi Rum Distillery tour; valuable time and money is better spent elsewhere. Crave a rum schooling? Head to the Mount Gay Rum Distillery on Barbados instead—it's a far superior experience.

■ **MORE INFORMATION**

Puerto Rico Tourism Company
800-866-7827
www.gotopuertorico.com/san-juan-puerto-rico.php