

## Celebrating New Years Eve in San Juan, Puerto Rico – 2006

Leslie and I began our trip to Puerto Rico with a flight to Boise, Idaho and a hair-raising drive over icy roads to Baker City, Oregon where we spent the Christmas holiday with my sister Lynn and Brother-in-law Nils. After several days with Lynn and Nils, enjoying lots of delicious food and Christmas cheer, we drove back to Boise to catch our flight to San Juan by way of Atlanta and Orlando. The flights were very nice, and after spending a couple of hours in the Delta Airlines Crown Room at the Atlanta airport, we boarded the flight to San Juan where we arrived at 9:30pm (Atlantic Time Zone). Since Puerto Rico is an American “Territory”, it is not considered an “international” destination, hence no passport was required, just our driver’s licenses. From the airport we took a taxi for the short ride to the “Caribe Hilton Hotel” where we checked into a lovely room overlooking the ocean and the ancient “St Geronimo Fort”.



Caribe Hilton Hotel



St Geronimo Fort

Then we headed to the Oasis Bar in the hotel lobby for a drink, where we listened to an amazing local musician by the name of “Mr. Angel”. Over the next hour he sang an incredible variety of songs, from Latino to 1950’s R&B, and even a bit of Italian Opera! As we left the bar, I bought one of his CDs. The next day, we both got up rather late, around 10:30am local time, which was 6:30am Pacific time. As we headed to the restaurant for breakfast, I noticed there had been heavy rain overnight. Following breakfast, I picked up a tall latte at Starbucks in the hotel and proceeded to book a tour to the “El Yuende Tropical Rainforest” for the next day. Then I walked along the rocky shore to a small shelter, just as a brief but heavy rain shower hit. Along the way were many beautiful views of the sea crashing on the rocks below the trail. Soon I came to the remains of “Fort San Cristobal” that had once been an old Spanish military post more than 400 years old and was occupied until the “Spanish American War” in 1898. The old fort was massive, with 30 ft thick stone walls and heavy gun emplacements all along the outer walls.



Fort San Cristobal

The fort is now a National Historic site, and as I entered, a National Park Service ranger explained the fascinating history of Puerto Rico during the 400 year colonization by Spain. In addition, there were some outstanding exhibits showing the hard life the Spanish soldiers endured during the long time they defended what was considered the best natural harbor in the Caribbean! Upon seeing the display of the soldier's thick woolen uniforms, I couldn't help but imagine how the intense heat and humidity must have taken a heavy toll on them. As I looked beyond the fort, there were many lovely bright yellow and orange old buildings shining under the tropical sun, as huge waves pounded the rocks below the fort. Further along the coast was another old Spanish military post, "Fort Del Morro" located on the western tip of a peninsula. As I approached it, I came to a large grassy park where a lot of people were flying kites in the strong wind coming off the ocean. In the center of the park were many street vendors selling all manner of local foods, including traditional "conch fritters".

Fort Del Morro



As I walked back to the hotel along the very narrow, colorful streets of “Old San Juan”, I passed many lovely old buildings painted in beautiful pastel colors of pink, blue, yellow, and green. A lot of them were being “restored” to retain their distinctive “local feeling” – a highlight of the old town. I also discovered some grand old Spanish colonial buildings along the “Avenida de la Constitution”, including one that had once been the first casino on the island. (Ironically, it is now a government office building!) Just before I reached the Hilton Hotel, I came to a large park with lovely old trees that looked like they were being “strangled” by tropical vines. Within the park were many gorgeous flowering trees whose pink blossoms were covered in small droplets of water from a heavy rain shower just before the bright sun broke through the dark clouds – beautiful!



Old Casino



“Strangled” Tree



Old San Juan



Back at the hotel that evening, I joined Leslie for dinner in the “Lemongrass Restaurant” which served Asian fusion dishes. While I enjoyed a fantastic sushi roll of tempura lobster, along with a cold pint of Sapporo, Leslie opted for an order of pork dumplings in hoisin sauce. As we were finishing dinner, the heavy rain began again and a rather chilly wind blew in from the ocean – not a very “tropical” feeling, but dinner was fabulous! (Earlier in the evening before dinner, I had a local “Medalla” beer in the Oasis Bar as I watched a Salsa dance class where everyone looked like they were having a lot of fun, despite being obvious “novices”!) After dinner, while Leslie returned to the hotel room, I sat in the Lemongrass Restaurant bar writing my travel notes for the day. Meanwhile, some beautiful electronic “techno” music was playing in the background, a far cry from the loud Salsa music in the Oasis Bar. I noticed a couple of young guys seated near me as they ordered several rounds of strong Cognac cocktails, followed by a huge plate of Sushi, which they polished off in record time! Two cups of double espresso and a couple more rounds Cognac completed their “dinner”. Outside there was another heavy rain shower and strong gust of wind to remind me of the weather. As I continued writing my notes, I had to

include an observation I made the day before when we arrived at the hotel. A lot of hotel guests were dressed especially stylish, particularly the women, who seemed to delight in displaying their “ample” physical “assets” wherever they had them! (some assets were located in more pleasing places than others!) And in the midst of this “display” were a lot of families with small children.

The next morning, Leslie and I joined a group for a tour to “El Yuenge” in the mountains of the Caribbean National Forest . When the tour bus arrived, we were warmly welcomed aboard by our driver/guide named “Augustin” (aka “Gus”). Just after we were all seated and Gus had pulled out of the hotel driveway, the chief of hotel security suddenly ordered our bus to stop and asked Gus to look at the left front tire. At first, most of us thought it must be a flat tire, but the security officer requested that we all get off the bus. After we disembarked, we looked at the tire and it was almost totally “bald”! So, Gus contacted the tour company and requested a new bus be sent for us, after which he proceeded to take the bus back to the company office. About 15 minutes later, a new bus arrived with another driver/guide named Irving, and he welcomed us aboard the bus, and immediately apologized for the delay, as well as not being in uniform since it was supposed to be his day off. As we continued our journey to the mountains, Irving was very talkative and narrated throughout the trip, including a lot of local humor. At one point he suddenly slowed down and called our attention to a vehicle on the side of the highway. It turned out to be our first bus, sitting there disabled by a left front tire that had blown out! As we all looked at it, we couldn’t help but thank the hotel security chief!

On the route to El Yuenge, Irving pointed out many lovely beaches and lots of small food stands alongside the highway roasting whole pigs and carving the tender meat for BBQ sandwiches. The smell of the roasting pork was almost overwhelming, and I think we all wished we could stop for a taste! Other stands were serving local favorites such as boiled cod and conch fritters. About 45 minutes later we turned off the main highway on to a narrow, twisting road that climbed up the mountains through the dense tropical rainforest. Our first stop was the “El Portal Visitor Center” at the entrance to the Caribbean National Forest. The walkway leading to the visitor center was actually an elevated path on top of the lush forest and beautifully designed to resemble a part of the forest. As we entered the center, a forest ranger informed us that this northeast part of the island receives a total of more than 300 inches of rain each year, and as a result, a “cloud forest” formed where clouds hung over the highest peaks more than 80% of the time!



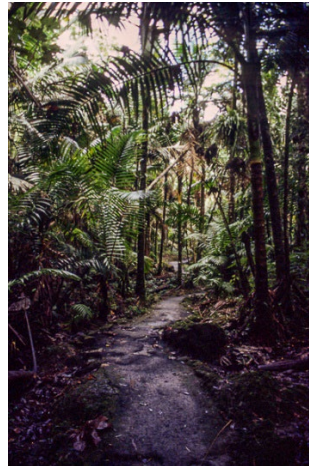
El Yuenge Tropical Rainforest Visitor Center

Our second stop on the tour was a stone observation tower at 1500 feet elevation that afforded us a magnificent view of the surrounding mountains, as well as the coast of the Atlantic Ocean far below.

From the observation tower we drove down the mountain to a lovely nature trail and rock pond that had been constructed by the CCC during the Depression era. Walking along the trail through the lush forest, we were surrounded by beautiful tropical flowers everywhere. Our last stop was a visit to the spectacular “Coco Falls” where most of the kids rushed to scramble up the slippery rocks to stand under the cold water tumbling down the steep rock face of the mountain. As we headed back to the city, we all felt the tour had been a great trip into the mountains and a wonderful view of a side of Puerto Rico not to be missed. My only regret was not having more time to spend hiking the trails through the tropical forest.



El Yuenge “Cloud Forest”



Nature Trail



Coco Falls

Upon our return to the hotel later that afternoon, Leslie and I decided to walk along the coast to visit the historic “San Cristobal Fortress”, although Leslie was suffering from a couple of serious blisters! (She had a couple of spare band-aids with her, but they got used all too quickly on our walk.) Soon it became obvious she was in considerable discomfort, so we stopped several times as she “repositioned” the band-aids – but it was to no avail! At that point we were lucky to spot the small “Tiger Market”, but unfortunately they had no band-aids, or anything like them! At long last, we finally reached the old fort, where I left Leslie to view the historic structure from the comfort of one of the park benches.

Meanwhile, I walked down to the harbor below the fort where I saw a monstrous Princess Cruises ship that was at least 20 decks high! I spent some time walking around the harbor taking photos of the old colonial buildings. As the intense heat and humidity began to “close in on me”, I walked across the street to the “Sheraton Old San Juan Hotel” and ordered an ice-cold Medalla beer while I sat on the patio with a view of the cruise ship.



Cruise ship in port



Old San Juan waterfront

Later, I met up with Leslie at the old fort and we quickly decided to take a taxi back to the hotel for the sake of her feet! That evening we shared a dinner, beginning with classic Spanish “tapas” in the hotel’s “New Madrid Restaurant”, along with a bottle of “Anares Reserva Rioja” wine from Spain that was

spectacular! My order of prawns baked with plantains was great, and Leslie's filet mignon tips in garlic sauce were delicious. We finished dinner with a lovely coconut flan for dessert. After dinner I went to the "Normandie Bar" in the hotel to write in my journal and postcards to friends and family. Before leaving the bar, I decided to buy two tickets for the "Hilton New Years Eve" dinner the next evening. After enjoying a fabulous breakfast buffet in the hotel the next morning, we took a taxi to "Plaza Colon" in Old Town San Juan where we toured the historic "Fort Del Morro" and walked along the old city wall on the coast. Soon we came to "La Puntilla Park" surrounded by beautiful old trees overhanging a lovely path through the park. Then, as we wandered around old San Juan we were amazed by the colorful old buildings, especially the "Hotel el Convento", an old convent that had recently been converted into a beautiful hotel.



Hotel el Convento courtyard

From old San Juan we boarded a small ferry for a short trip across San Juan Bay to downtown San Juan. During the short trip, a group of local musicians entertained the passengers with traditional Caribbean music. The sound of the drums was especially beautiful, the same as I remembered from the time I spent in Africa many years before. As the ferry docked, the classic old pink "US Customs House" on the harbor front stood like a symbol of the historic past of the island. We saw three huge cruise ships docked in the harbor as we walked down "Calle Fortaleza" to the main square "La Fortaleza". Standing in the middle of the square was an old man dressed as "Che Guevara" and loudly proclaiming "Independence for Puerto Rico"! (very few people paid any attention to him)



Old Customs House



"Che Guevara"

Back at the hotel that evening, we joined the New Years Eve dinner and party where we had a very fun time enjoying both the traditional Puerto Rican cuisine and Caribbean entertainment. (two major ingredients in Puerto Rican dishes are "adobo", a marinade of garlic and lime juice, and "sofrito", a

savory mix of peppers, onions, garlic, and herbs) Throughout the evening it seemed like almost everyone was on the dance floor, especially when long “conga lines” suddenly formed! It was a lot of fun to watch people of all ages enjoying the music and dance. (What I enjoyed the most about the evening was the “Junkanoo” music, a strong rhythm of West African drums combined with the loud sounds of bells, pipes, and noisemakers - a wonderful way to “ring in” the New Year!) It was an evening not easily forgotten!



Caribe Hilton Pool Bar

After a very fun New Years Eve celebration, we were rudely awakened the next morning at 7:00am by the incredibly loud noise of a “power washer” outside our window! When I complained to the front desk, I was told that it was necessary to “clean up the mess” left over from people celebrating New Years Eve! When I asked why they couldn’t have waited until a later hour in the morning, they had no answer. Following breakfast, I tried unsuccessfully to get an access code for the hotel’s wireless network, but the business center was closed, and no one had a key for it. So, with no way to check my email, I walked around the edge of the lagoon in front of the hotel to Isle Verde Beach, a gorgeous long stretch of beach lined with palm trees.



Isle Verde Beach

Near the end of the beach was an area with several hotels and condos, as well as a strange combination of fast-food stalls and small local shops next to several of the world’s most expensive stores, such as Cartier and Ralph Lauren! In the same neighborhood were new high rise apartment buildings adjacent to old buildings being renovated! The whole place was very much “out of character” compared with Old San Juan, and quite disappointing. Feeling pretty hot and sweaty after the long walk along the beach, I stopped at the Marriott Hotel patio bar for a much needed ice cold beer as I watched the waves crashing on the beach. When I returned to the Hilton Hotel, I decided to take a dip in the ocean, and it was a delightful feeling as the waves rolled over me. After that, I returned to the hotel room to take a shower before heading down to the lobby bar to watch the Rose Bowl game between USC and Michigan. Before the game started, and prior to the national anthem, a moment of silence was observed

in memory of former president Gerald Ford who had passed away six days earlier. I was surprised to find out that he had played football as a center on the University of Michigan team. Unfortunately, Michigan was defeated by USC 32 – 18.

After the game, I joined Leslie for a lovely dinner in the hotel before we retired to our room for the night since we had to be up early the next morning for our return flight to California. We were fortunate to enjoy first class seats on Delta Airlines all the way home. As we sat in the Crown Room at Atlanta airport, we both felt the celebration of New Years Eve in San Juan was a memorable experience, and a wonderful introduction to the island of Puerto Rico! (Definitely a place to return to again!)

### PHOTO GALLERY



Wedding by the sea – Caribe Hilton Hotel



Beach – Caribe Hilton



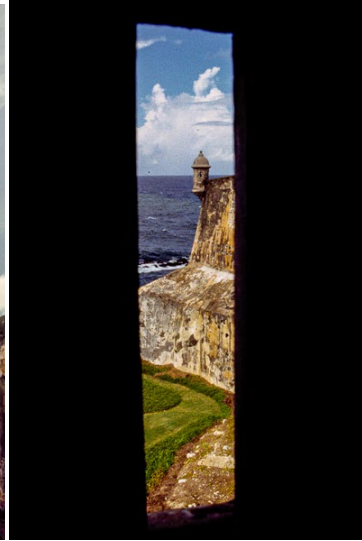
Ceramic Mural – Caribe Hilton lobby



Historic City Wall – Old San Juan







Fort Del Morro



Tropical flowers – El Yunque Rainforest



Hotel Balcony - Old San Juan



Telephone Kiosk



Façade – Old Customs House



View of Old San Juan harbor – Sheraton Hotel bar



Old Dominican Convent



New "Pink Hotel" – Isle Verde beach

MAPS

