

# AL LADO DEL CONDADO

## CRUISING DELIGHTS ON THE FRINGES OF OLD SAN JUAN

BY ELLEN BIRRELL



Al Lado del Condado - Club Nautico de San Juan stands in foreground

“Condado? What?” Before 2012, Condado, which lies on the eastern edge of San Juan Harbor, was an unknown to us. Eclipsed by neighboring Old San Juan, the famous Municipio de la Ciudad Capital San Juan Bautista, that evokes images of Catholic cathedrals, crowded Spanish streets and towering 17th century forts, Condado is relatively unknown to cruisers. We had the chance to explore the entire peninsula on foot and by bicycle.

Sailing into glorious San Juan Harbor, past towering fortress walls, green hillsides dotted with fascinating architecture, cranes at work building new and restoring old, and a bay bustling with commercial vessels, cruise ships, sailboats, mega yachts and square riggers, we found a wonderful home base for exploring by taking a slip in Club Nautico de San Juan (CNSJ). Headquartering at al lado del [next to] Condado, in the easterly-most finger of San Juan Harbor, our experience was so good in February 2012 that we returned in December.

Steering toward San Juan Harbor’s entrance buoys, El Morro’s bastion of stonewalls come into view. The heads of tourists, peering like ancient defenders from turrets, gape at the approach of your boat. Well-marked, the entrance to San Juan Bay holds no danger except in the mightiest of swells. In January and late November we entered with no problem whatsoever. The scariest part of the operation would be staring down an arriving or departing cruise ship



Bicycling Condado

or commercial vessel. The good news: They are infrequent and you can easily see them coming.

Have your camera ready. With the sun over your shoulder, it is one amazing shot after another as you hug the bay’s north shore. Watch for La Fortaleza, a magnificent red gate within the fortress wall. In the 17th century, it was the only way into the guarded city. Within a mile, you’ll pass the USCG facility and find yourself in a finger of the bay containing a small anchorage dotted with mooring balls, and CNSJ and San Juan marina. A mud bottom offers good holding but the anchorage is small and crowded.

We chose to take a slip at the CNSJ. The docks, marine store and clubhouse are beautifully maintained and professionally managed. The 117 wet slips offer up-to-date



electrical fittings, fueling, and carts. Pricing is fair; service is strong with unparalleled access to everything.

For years we wanted to take our sloop into San Juan, but not one cruiser we met had sailed there. Rumors of danger and filth, as well as little current information, had put us off. How mistaken we were. Greeted by a dolphin while observing CNSJ's annual regatta, we watched youths and adults scoured in sea spray as they raced one design dinghies within the enormous bay.

Located on an isthmus, the two marinas offer easy access to the enormous estuary/lagoon bordering Condado's south side, which offers kayaking, Stand Up Paddleboarding (SUP) and snorkel park in Playito Condado. Watch for manatees at play. In the other direction (west), all the site-seeing, restaurants and waterfront of Old San Juan are just minutes away by foot, bike or car. To the south, modern walking paths separate the marinas from the San Juan Convention Center and Isla Grande Regional Airport.

Across an elegant modern bridge east of the marinas, you enter Condado. Like a miniature shore-side Las Vegas, it offers gambling and pulses with excitement sans huge neon lights. The two-lane main drag splits on either side of a strip containing eclectic stores and restaurants. The atmosphere is casual, hip, clean and trendy. High-end condos speak of a residential community but clearly vacationers roam, pedestrians and bicyclists abound.

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Stand Up Paddleboarding in Condado Lagoon



Kayak or SUP under bridges that separate the marinas and Condado lagoon

Riding our bikes along Avenida Ashford, which turns into Avenida Magdalena, we passed tempting Cold Stone Creamery, numerous gourmet and casual restaurants, boutique shops, beaches and tiny parks. Wave breaks and wide sandy beaches are endless. Open-air meditation and yoga classes can be seen on the numerous promenades and patios that keep Condado feeling airy and progressive.

Turn away from the ocean and go south a few blocks to an overpass above PR26. Within a block, Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico beckons, ready to relay the country's history in a regal way. An extensive grocery store is located another block south.

Ride on! From Condado, a new bike path extends a dozen miles to the kiosks and beaches east of Isla Verde. Though rental cars, taxis and buses are plentiful, we loved exploring Condado on foot and bicycle.

With historic charm to the west and crisp modernity to the east, nesting al lado del Condado could make all the difference when you visit Puerto Rico's capital by boat. 🚣

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*Ellen Birrell and her partner Jim Hutchins have lived aboard their Sun Odyssey 40 Boldly Go for three years in the Caribbean. Visit their website: [www.boldlygo.us](http://www.boldlygo.us)*