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Forts Of Old San Juan: San Juan National Historic Site, Puerto Rico (National Park Service Handbook)



Synopsis

Tells the story of the evolution of the defenses of San Juan, Puerto Rico, and the role they played in helping to safeguard Spanish possessions in the Caribbean from the 16th to the 19th centuries.

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Customer Reviews

Interior Dept., National Park Service, Division of Publications

Very interesting with lots of history

Perfect

"The Forts of Old San Juan" is the official National Park Handbook for touring Castillo de San Felipe del Morro and Castillo de San Cristobal in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The former, known as El Morro, was designed by Juan Batista Antonelli and built by 18th-century engineers. The fort covers over 5 acres and had the primary responsibility for defending the harbor of San Juan, doing so with batteries of cannon on four different levels. The latter, San Cristobal, is the largest of the San Juan forts, covering 27 acres, and protected the city's landward approaches. I wish I had this booklet when I visited the forts a couple of years ago because while visitors had a sense that these were an imposing pair of defensive positions, you get a more sophisticated understanding from reading it. This booklet is divided in three parts: Part 1, Old Forts in a Modern World establishes the key idea

that in fortifying San Juan the Spanish military engineers made maximum use of the city's natural defensive features and erected fortifications that controlled both land and sea approaches. Part 2, Gateway to the Indies provides the history of Puerto Rico and the importance of San Juan as a strategic seaport. This is where you will find a look at La Fortaleza, the first fort built to protect the harbor and city of San Juan. Small by European standards, its main purpose was to repel attacks by the Island-Carib Indians and not the Dutch (who destroyed the fort in 1625). However, it does give you a basis for comparison to the other forts. This chapter also looks at Sir Francis Drake's attack in 1595 and the Earl of Cumberland's attack in 1598 (a diagram explains how a siege worked circa 1700). Part 3, A "Defense of the First Order" explains how Puerto Rico's strategic significance compelled King Philip IV to repair and strengthen the fortifications to the massive edifices we can still see today. In 1797 the prolonged attack by General Ralph Abercromby and Admiral Sir Henry Harvey failed. However, the city fared less well when an American naval squadron commanded by Admiral William T. Sampson, including the U.S.S. Iowa, bombarded the forts. Even though it has been a couple of years since I visited, the text is clear enough and the illustrations have enough details that it all readily came back to me. The handbook is illustrated with contemporary photographs, maps, and diagrams of the forts, along with a few historical paintings and illustrations. So if you are visiting San Juan and decide to visit the Forts of Old San Juan, pick up this handbook so you can not only understand the various architectural structures you will be seeing but also the history of the forts and the practical utility of the forts in defending the harbor and town of San Juan. If you have visited other National Parks and picked up other handbooks then you already know these are high quality efforts.

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