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San Juan is popular for many things but its forts are the reason why it attracts tourists in droves every year. Of all the forts here, the Castillo San Felipe del Morro also known as El Morro Fort is the most popular. The Castillo San Cristobal or San Cristobal Fort is equally famous and is the largest structure build by the Spanish in the western hemisphere.

The forts served as a line of defense in protecting the San Juan Island from invaders. They played an important role in the history of San Juan and Puerto Rico as critical protective forces. San Juan was attacked as many as five times in its history. As the Gateway to the Indies, the island was susceptible to enemy attacks as the high ocean currents and strong winds helped European ship sail effortlessly into the San Juan harbor. The wealth of the Caribbean Islands was another reason why enemies tried to capture the place frequently.

The frequent attempts to attack the harbor forced King Charles III from Spain to order San Juan to build a “Defense of the First Order”™. A gigantic city wall, smaller forts and major fortifications such as the El Morro and San Cristobal were built to protect the place. San Juan is called “The Walled City”™ because a major part of the old city is surrounded by gargantuan walls that are 18 to 25 feet thick and 3.4 miles long. It was constructed between 1634 and 1638 but the wall was thickened and raised to its present height in 1759.

The Fuerte San Juan del la Cruz is the smallest fort as known as Fortin or smallest fort. Its strategic location helped Spaniards defend the San Juan harbor entrance. The fort also protected the mouth of Bayamon River connecting San Juan to other island settlements.

The El Morro is the second largest fortification and located on the northwestern tip of the San Juan islet. It is the first structure visible from any ship entering San Juan Bay. Construction of this fort began in 1539 but it took approximately 250 years for the fort to get its present form.

The San Cristobal Fort is located along the north coast and about a mile east from El Morro. It covers 27 acres of land and is the largest fort built by the Spanish. Construction began in 1634 and it slowly became one massive structures of the country. A part of the fort and the gate was pulled down in 1897 to help the city expand to the east.

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[Azal Bailey](#) - About Author:

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