

# San Juan's Isla Verde Beach

by Charles Kaplan

This is the second article of a series to be published about Puerto Rico and the Caribbean.

The year is 1948. World War II is over and the U.S. economy is booming. Vacation travel had been a luxury, but is now becoming affordable. All the conditions were right for Caribbean tourism to start taking off. At that time Havana, Cuba was the playground for wealthy Americans. But sharpies knew that the mob was running the casinos, the games weren't square and that government officials were being paid for their cooperation. Puerto Rico was anxious to get their fair share of American tourist dollars, but didn't want to invite in undesirable elements. In 1948, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico legalized casino gaming and in 1949 the first hotel and casino opened, the Caribe Hilton.



San Juan Metro Area, Puerto Rico

Fast forward to 1958. Pan Am Airways, now defunct, was the leading international airline of the day. They had just begun jet service to San Juan, Puerto Rico, greatly reducing the travel time and making the Caribbean more desirable to U.S. tourists. Seeking to capitalize on expanding U.S. tourism, Pan Am began developing resort hotels around the world through their hospitality division, Inter-Continental Hotels. The main tourist area in San Juan was, and still is, Condado Beach. But San Juan is a large modern city that can boast several neighborhoods with tourist appeal. Among them are Old San Juan, San Jeronimo, Carolina and Isla Verde Beach. Isla Verde Beach, pronounced Iz-la Ver-dee, and in English means "Green Island", is located just outside Luis Munoz Martin International Airport and has one of the most beautiful beaches on the island. In 1958, the area was underdeveloped, rundown and mostly overlooked by tourists. But that all changed with the opening of the San Juan Inter-Continental at 6063 Isla Verde Avenue.



Isla Verde Beach tourist map

There currently are five casinos open on Isla Verde Beach: The Inter-Continental San Juan Resort and Casino, The Wyndham El San Juan Hotel and Casino, The Ritz-Carlton San Juan Hotel, Spa & Casino and the Casino del Sol which is in the Courtyard by Marriott Isla Verde Beach Resort, and the Embassy Suites Hotel & Casino, which is just off the beach. Some information about the history of these casinos and their chips follows.

At **187 Isla Verde Avenue**, the **Americana** opened in September of 1963 and closed in 1976. This happened to be the first casino that I visited and have a great story about my luck that day. But is will have to wait for a future article. All Americana chips are hard to find and highly sought after by collectors.



After the Americana closed, it was replaced by the **New Palace** in October of 1976. This casino also has chips that call it simply **The Palace**.



\$1 HCE

\$5 HCE

\$25 HCE

\$100 HCE

The **Palace** closed in 1985 and reopened as the **Sands** in October of 1987.



\$1 Chipco

\$5 House

\$20 House

\$25 House

The **Sands** closed in 1997 and it later reopened as the **Grand Beach Resort and Casino**.



\$1 Bud Jones

\$5 Bud Jones

When the **Grand Beach Resort and Casino** closed in 2000, it was replaced by the **Inter-Continental Resort and Casino**.



\$1 Bud Jones

\$5 Bud Jones

\$ 25 Bud Jones



At **6063 Isla Verde Avenue**, the **Tropicoro Casino** in the **San Juan Inter-Continental** hotel opened in 1949. There currently is an Inter-Continental in San Juan, but it is the not same hotel. The current Inter-Continental is located at 5961 Isla Verde Avenue. It opened in 2000, it was formerly the Grand Beach Resort, and is right next door to the El San Juan which is at 6063 Isla Verde Avenue. So what does the El San Juan have to do with the old Intercontinental hotel? I did some research on the internet with Google and found this from Travel Writers' Magazine, in an article called "Saturday Night at the El San Juan" by Ron Bernthal.

"Now known as one of the grandest resorts in the Caribbean, the hotel was opened by Pan-American Airways in 1958, under Pan Am's trademark Inter-Continental hotel group. In those days, the area around San Juan's airport was underdeveloped and run-down, but with the introduction later that year of the first jet plane service from New York to Puerto Rico, the hotel's 300 rooms were soon filled with sun-starved tourists from the Northeast. San Juan quickly became a glamorous and exotic Caribbean destination, an inexpensive island where the lure of American culture, Spanish history, and warm Christmas weather attracted millions of visitors.

The property became the El San Juan Hotel & Casino three years later, and thrived during the economic boom of the 1960's. In the hotel's famous Tropicoro Club entertainers like Sammy Davis, Jr., Nat King Cole, Eddie Fisher., the Supremes, Johnny Mathis, and Paul Anka helped create an atmosphere similar to Las Vegas."

The postcards that follow are from the Intercontinental and the El San Juan and have almost the same view of the hotel from behind the pool.



The San Juan Intercontinental



The El San Juan Hotel & Casino

Now the \$64,000 question. Was there a casino in the San Juan Inter-Continental and if so, where are the chips? There aren't any known chips around identified from the "San Juan Inter-Continental". But, I think I have a reasonable answer. There is a club in the El San Juan that has been there since its opening called the Tropicoro. There are also some Puerto Rican casino chips from a Tropicoro, about which little is known. George Davis, the author of *The Obsolete Casino Chips of Puerto Rico - From the Albert Rollins Collection*, indicates that "The Tropicoro Casino opened in 1949 in the El San Juan Hotel. It was succeeded in 1950 by the El San Juan casino." I think George has the right idea, but perhaps the dates are a little off. Now the clincher. The known Tropicoro casino chips are all hot stamped small greek keys. The chips simply printed with "Tropicoro Casino", the denomination, and the initials "S J I". I contend that "S J I" stands for San Juan Intercontinental. This would mean that: The San Juan Intercontinental opened in 1958 and it's casino was called the Tropicoro. In 1960, this became the El San Juan Hotel and Casino.



Tropicoro \$1 chip    Tropicoro \$5 chip

In 1960, the **El San Juan Hotel and Casino** replaced the **San Juan Inter-Continental** hotel and the **Tropicoro** casino. The El San Juan is now a **Wyndham** and is one the oldest casinos still in operation on the island. It certainly has the reputation as being the most upscale of Puerto Rico's casinos. The set of Chipcos, below, were the first ever produced by the company.



\$1 Crest & Seal

\$5 Bud Jones

\$25 Scroll

\$100 Ewing



\$1 Chipco

\$5 Chipco

\$20 Chipco

\$25 Chipco



\$1 Lgkey Bacarrat

\$20 Lgkey Bacarrat

\$50 Lgkey Bacarrat

\$500 H&C Bacarrat

At **7012 Boca de Cangrejos Avenue** in Isla Verde, the first casino to open was the **Holiday Inn**. The opening date is not known, but it did close in 1975.



\$1 HCE

\$5 HCE

The **Isla Verde Beach Resort** opened in 1975 and closed a year later. This set of Paulson Hat & Cane metal insert chips are the only ones known from Puerto Rico and the entire Caribbean region.



\$1 H&C MI

\$5 H&C MI

\$25 H&C MI

\$100 H&C MI



There have been hotels at this location, but no casino until the **Casino del Sol** recently opened in the **Courtyard by Marriott**. Shown are the set of Grand Opening chips.



\$1 Chipco      \$5 Chipco      \$25 Chipco      Reverse

The **Ritz Carlton** is an elegant hotel and casino located at **6961 Avenue of the Governors**.



\$1 H&C      \$2.50 H&C      \$5 H&C      \$25 H&C  
\$100 H&C      \$500 Inverted H&C      \$1000 Inverted H&C      \$5000 Inverted H&C

Finally, off the beach at **8000 Tartak Street** is the **Embassy Suites Hotel and Casino**.



\$1 Bud Jones      \$5 Bud Jones      \$5 Grand Opening      No Cash Value

Well, that's it for San Juan's Isla Verde chips, casinos and hotels. Doing the research to write these articles is a lot of fun. Information is sometimes not available or difficult to find. If you have anything to add, please email me at [chas@ckaplan.com](mailto:chas@ckaplan.com). Please join me next time for another article about Puerto Rico and the Caribbean, right now warm breezes, a cool beverage and perhaps a hot dice table are calling me.