



BUT TAKE A CAB

Parking can seem like utter chaos in Puerto Rico, but for good reason...and it's exactly the kind of thing the IPI Latin Parking Conference & Expo will address.

By Ken Stewart

If you fly into San Juan, Puerto Rico for IPI's Latin Parking Conference & Expo, Dec. 9-12 (latin.parking.org), from the north during daylight hours, the view from the plane will be of sandy beaches, high rise hotels, and condos. Just to the north of the city, you'll have a spectacular view of El Castillo San Felipe del Morro (El Morro), which is a 450-year-old Spanish fort at the entrance to San Juan Harbor.

Since explorer Ponce de Leon landed in San Juan around 1508, the island has been fought over and occupied several times. The U.S. wrestled it away from Spain in 1898 during the Spanish-American War, and today, Puerto Rico is an unincorporated territory of the U.S.

Puerto Ricans carry U.S. passports and use American dollars as the only local currency. There are 78 municipalities in Puerto Rico, each having at least one U.S. Postal Service Zip code. The capital city of San Juan boasts a population of about 2 million people, which is almost



THE BEACH

half the island's population of about 4 million people. The island is only 111 miles wide east to west and 39 miles long at the longest point north to south. It's not the largest island in the Caribbean, but the tropical climate and the varied atmosphere lures thousands of tourists to the Island of Enchantment each year.

Visitors will find small towns and modern cities, pristine beaches, world-class resorts, old-world historic sites, and local art galleries to occupy their time. If shopping is on a vacation agenda, San Juan boasts the largest indoor mall in the Caribbean. Other retail outlets run from Wal-Mart to Gucci to small independent shops and outlet malls.

Puerto Rico reflects a proud culture of native-born locals who are passionate about their heritage and not shy about sharing their views on current events or political campaigns. You will find a jewel in the Caribbean when you visit Puerto Rico. What you might not easily find, though, is a parking space.

Parking

Some years ago, a study suggested that for every 40 registered vehicles in Puerto Rico, there is one public parking space. If you rent a car, you may find that the ratio feels more like 100 vehicles to each available space. As is true in many cities in Latin America, when parking time limits are not in place and enforced, the prime on-street parking spaces are usually occupied by employees working downtown.

Although principal streets in the larger cities are adequate for traffic and on-street parking, many are narrow and difficult to traverse in the best of conditions. Combine too many cars with too

many people and the problem multiplies. Attempts to modernize and improve this have proven difficult. Outsiders may look at the traffic and parking conditions and criticize the way that many municipalities mostly fail to address the situation, but there are no easy answers to the parking issues here.

It's Complicated

As mentioned earlier, there are far too many cars and far too few parking spaces, but the car-to-space ratio is just the tip of the iceberg. While there are a number of parking garages, many of them are often fully occupied. Almost since the first automobile rolled off the boat and onto the island, there has been no charge for parking on the street. Puerto Rico, like many Latin American countries, must deal with a culture that is bigger than the parking issue in every city and town on the island. That culture says, "I can park anywhere I can find an open space because the streets belong to the people."

While most cities and towns have some active legislation on the books to govern on-street parking in urban areas, very few actually make parking a priority. Many standard parking codes exist but are mostly ignored. Motorists often park at will in yellow zones or in front of driveways, alley entrances, and bus stops. It's not unusual to see a car parked alongside the curb on a major street blocking one of two travel lanes, causing cars to merge during rush hour. Obviously, this slows traffic and creates chaos, but no one seems to notice and motorists just seem to take it in stride. It is also not unusual to see cars parked facing the opposite direction of traffic.

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Under varying circumstances, several entities can write parking code violations. The state police can write parking tickets almost anywhere and the Department of Transportation has an enforcement arm as well, but it's the municipal police that are mostly tasked with parking enforcement. That said, the police are not encouraged to write those tickets.

To be fair, most municipalities are understaffed when it comes to their police forces and most officers do not want to write tickets, especially in small towns. Everybody knows everybody and the local merchants have a good story to tell. Some merchants often complain to police and elected officials that issuing parking tickets to residents will hurt their business. Some customers complain that they won't return to shop in the downtown area for fear of receiving a citation. After all, the streets belong to the people!

Some merchants who are uneducated in the advantages of controlled parking turnover are often the first to complain about enforced parking time limits because they can no longer park their own cars in front of their businesses without being harassed by enforcement personnel writing tickets.

Political campaign planks have actually been based on whether parking fees will change and enforcement will be implemented or rescinded for on-street parking. It's important to note that unemployment is high and median income is low. Many residents see paid on-street parking as another unwanted and unfair tax.

Roadblocks

Another aspect of the parking issue is how citations will be processed, maintained, and tracked through the collection or adjudication process. Most municipalities don't have the facility or personnel to implement a program even if they wanted to do it.

There is a process by which a municipality can enter into an agreement with the Department of Transportation to have the Departamento de Transportación y Obras Públicas (DTOP) try to process the data and deny renewal of auto licenses until payment is made. Unfortunately this is not a foolproof system.

Most municipalities would encounter various difficulties if attempting to issue and collect parking citations in the traditional methods employed in the U.S. Ticketing is a non-starter in Puerto Rico—it's been tried and was a complete failure. The problem is that even though registered owners' names and addresses were obtained from DTOP, nearly 80 percent of mailed notices were returned

due to insufficient address information. Of the remaining 20 percent, almost none responded with payment.

Most residents believe that getting a municipal parking citation and having to pay that fine are two different issues. To hazard a guess, maybe 10 percent would actually end up paying that ticket. The average would be higher with tickets issued by the state police or DTOP.

While some cities do actually have booting and towing legislation on the books, most never enforce those laws, especially in an election year. Booting has been tried in some areas but there is no known legislation that addresses the issue of a motorist removing a boot from the car on the street or having the car towed to a location where the boot can be removed at his or her leisure. So far, it doesn't appear that any city has addressed that issue.

Budgetary considerations certainly play a part in a municipality's reluctance to implement an on-street parking program. However, the larger issue with city government is earmarking scarce city funds for a very unpopular program that would undoubtedly challenge a culture that has prevailed since the introduction of automobiles to the island.

There is some light at the end of the parking tunnel though. To date, several cities including San Juan have opted to implement a privatized on-street parking program using off-island expertise and investor capital. A few city governments have realized the need to turn over the parking in central business districts, but there are still implementation issues to be faced.

Change

Fortunately, some city governments are beginning to recognize the need for a structured on-street program. At least one city can point to an increase in the tax base with the help of parking space turnover. One advantage is that in a time when budgets are tight and tax increases are unpopular, the idea of additional revenue is one whose time may have arrived.

Visitors who stay at one of the many-world class resorts or upscale hotels will find no problem with parking, as it is almost always part of the building itself. In this case, visitors expect valet parking and service with a smile, and they're not disappointed. Puerto Rico is an island rich in culture and hundreds of traditions. When you visit enjoy the food, the customs, and the beaches...and the many taxis!

Rest assured, you will be warmly welcomed to the island when you arrive in December for the IPI Latin Parking Conference & Expo, as will your ideas, feedback, and enthusiasm. **P**



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