

The Best of the Dominican Republic

Sugar-white beaches, inexpensive resorts, and rich natural beauty have long attracted visitors to the Dominican Republic. But at the same time, a not-entirely-deserved reputation for high crime, poverty, and social unrest has scared away many travelers. So which is it: a poverty-stricken country rife with pickpockets and muggers, or a burgeoning destination of beautiful beach bargains?

The answer, of course, is a little of both. The people of the Dominican Republic are among the friendliest in the Caribbean, and the hospitality here seems more genuine than in more commercialized Puerto Rico. The weather is nearly perfect year-round, and the Dominican Republic's white-sand beaches are some of the Caribbean's finest. Punta Cana/Bávaro, for example, is the longest strip of white sand in the entire region.

Safety *is* still a concern here, but that shouldn't dissuade you from planning a vacation to the Dominican Republic. Crime consists primarily of robberies and muggings, and most of it is limited to Santo Domingo (although the north-coast resorts around Puerto Plata and Playa Dorada are not as safe as they should be). There is little incidence of violent crime against visitors, however. Follow simple common-sense rules of safety, and you should be fine. Lock valuables in your hotel safe, carry only a reasonable amount of cash or (better yet) one or two credit cards, and avoid dark deserted places, just as you would at home.

(One note: Men traveling alone here will find themselves solicited more often by prostitutes than anywhere else in the Caribbean. Prostitutes are at their most visible and aggressive in such relatively unmonitored tourist zones as Cabarete and within the bars and lounges of most of the deluxe hotels of Santo Domingo, especially the Jaragua.)

The combination of low prices and scenic tropical terrain has made the Dominican Republic one of the fastest-growing destinations in

the Caribbean. Bargain-hunting Canadians, in particular, flock here in droves. Europeans arrive by the planeloads in summer. Don't expect the lavish, spectacular resorts that you'll find in Puerto Rico or Jamaica, but do expect your vacation to be that much less expensive.

Although referred to as "just a poor man's Puerto Rico," in reality the Dominican Republic has its own distinctive cuisine and cultural heritage. Its Latin flavor is a sharp contrast to the character of many nearby islands, especially the British- and French-influenced ones.

Columbus spotted its coral-edged Caribbean coastline on his first voyage to the New World and pronounced: "There is no more beautiful island in the world." The first permanent European settlement in the New World was founded here on November 7, 1493, and its ruins still remain near Montecristi in the northeast part of the island. Natives called the island Quisqueya, "Mother Earth," before the Spaniards arrived to butcher them.

Nestled amid Cuba, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico in the heart of the Caribbean archipelago, the island of Hispaniola (Little Spain) is divided between Haiti, on the westernmost third of the island, and the Dominican Republic, which has a lush landmass about the size of Vermont and New Hampshire combined. In the Dominican interior, the fertile Valley of Cibao (rich, sugar-cane country) ends its upward sweep at Pico Duarte, the highest mountain peak in the West Indies, which soars to 3,125m (10,253 ft.).

Much of what Columbus first sighted still remains in a natural, unspoiled condition. One-third of the Dominican Republic's 1,401km (871-mile) coastline is devoted to beaches. The best are in Puerto Plata and La Romana, although Puerto Plata and other beaches on the Atlantic side of the island have dangerously strong currents at times.

Political turmoil kept visitors away for many years, but even that is a thing of the past. Almost from its inception, the country was steeped in misery and bloodshed, climaxing with the infamous reign of dictator Rafael Trujillo (1930–61) and the ensuing civil wars (1960–66). But the country has been politically stable since then, and it is building and expanding rapidly. The economic growth hasn't benefited everybody equally, though. The country is still poor, even by Caribbean standards. Every day, many Dominicans risk their lives crossing the 87km-wide (54-mile) Mona Passage, hoping to land in Puerto Rico before attempting to slip into the United States.

The greatest threat to the Dominican Republic these days comes from hurricanes, which periodically flatten entire cities. The major

resorts have become adept at getting back on their feet quickly after a hurricane. Still, if a hurricane hits the country before your trip, you might want to call ahead and make sure your room is still standing.

1 The Best Beaches

The most tranquil beaches are those on the western side of the D.R., particularly Boca Chica or those along the southern coast of La Romana and Bayahibe. Beaches that front the Atlantic—notably at Punta Cana, La Samaná, and Puerto Plata—are likely to have more turbulent waters on and off throughout the winter months, although conditions are idyllic on many a day, even from December through February.

- **Playa Boca Chica** There is good and bad news here. The beach of immaculate fine sand is still one of the best in the Caribbean. The gin-clear waters are protected by coral reefs, making Playa Boca Chica one of the most family-friendly of all the strips of sands in the D.R. Now the bad news: The beach lies 30km (19 miles) east of Santo Domingo, and, as such, is the virtual Riviera for the teeming masses of this overcrowded city. Lined with coconut palms, the wide beach was a brilliant stroke of nature, but man-made intrusions have ruined a lot of its backdrop with pizza stands, cafes, bars, tacky souvenir stalls, and blaring music all day long. See chapter 4.
- **Punta Cana/Bávaro Beaches** One of the world's greatest beach strips is centered at Punta Cana and Bávaro on the eastern coast of the Dominican Republic. This stretch of beachfront goes on for 32km (20 miles) and is renowned for its all-inclusive resorts, the largest concentration in the Caribbean. The beaches here are wide, filled with golden sand, gorgeous, and safe for swimming all year. See chapter 6.
- **Cayo Levantado** On the peninsula of Samaná, along the east coast of the Dominican Republic, this island near the mouth of Bahía de Samaná lies 7km (4½ miles) southeast of the town of Samaná. It can easily be reached by boat. Once on this island, beach lovers will find three beautiful strips of white sand, but little in the way of facilities. A tropical forest covers much of this hill-studded island, and when not enjoying the beach, you can go hiking along trails that are cut through the jungle-like vegetation. Cayo Levantado was known to TV watchers in the '70s as the famous Bacardi Rum island, featured in commercials. See chapter 7.

- **Playa Rincón** On the eastern shoreline of the Peninsula Samaná, Playa Rincón is consistently hailed by *Condé Nast Traveler* as one of the 10 top beaches in the Caribbean, and we agree that it deserves such an accolade. Set against the 600m (1,969-ft.) cliffs of Cape Cabrón, the beach is hard to reach, but once you're here you can wander a Robinson Crusoe tropical paradise of white sands—just don't expect any facilities. There's plenty of color in the sea—vivid turquoise, blues, and greens that are safe for swimming and ideal for snorkeling. See chapter 7.
- **Playa Dorada** This is the most celebrated beach along the Amber Coast and the site of a large concentration of all-inclusive resorts. The golden or white sands along its Atlantic Ocean waters—often turbulent—have been discovered, and how, so don't expect to be alone on the beach. Instead of depending on beach facilities, most patrons of Playa Dorada use their beach-front hotels for food, drink, toilet facilities, and changing rooms. Water-skiers and windsurfers alike take delight here. Because the waters of this beach front the Atlantic, waves can be a bit high in winter, the waters a bit rough for swimming. Guests at all the Playa Dorada resorts have free access to the beach. See chapter 8.

2 The Best Attractions

- **Altos de Chavón, La Romana** This is a re-creation of a 16th-century Spanish village, lying near the famous Casa de Campo resort at La Romana along the southern coastline. It is a true living museum—part artisans' colony, part tourist diversion. Its highlight is a Grecian-style amphitheater. It's also one of the best places in the Dominican Republic to shop for handicrafts. See chapter 5.
- **Zona Colonial, Santo Domingo** Comprising nearly a dozen city blocks, this is what remains of the first European city in the Americas, and many of its monuments have been well preserved. Old Santo Domingo was the seat of Spanish power in the West Indies and was the port of that country's conquest of the Western Hemisphere. Wandering its cobblestone streets and exploring its old churches and monuments is to step back into history. At every turn, you see something historic, such as Calle Las Damas, the first paved street in the Americas. See chapter 4.

- **Alcázar de Colón**, Santo Domingo In the Colonial Zone of the old city, this fortress was built for Columbus's son, Diego, and his wife, who was the niece of King Ferdinand of Spain. Diego ruled the colony in 1509 and made this his residence. This is also the palace-fortress where he entertained the likes of Cortés, Ponce de León, and Balboa. See chapter 4.
- **Parque Nacional Los Haitises**, Samaná Peninsula On the southern tier of Samaná Peninsula, this sprawling park is the second-most visited in the country, covering 208 sq. km (78 sq. miles) and spanning 24km (15 miles) west from Boca de Inferno to the head of Río Barracote. It's a mangrove swamp that's home to some 112 bird species and nearly 100 plant species. Caves of the original inhabitants, the Taíno Indians, remain to be explored. See chapter 7.