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## The Insider Guide

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# Dominican Republic

*If you're looking for a hassle-free Caribbean holiday complete with swaying palms, crystal-clear lagoons and soft white sands, consider the Dominican Republic paradise found*



Words: Kevin Raub

**M**ost dreams of the Dominican Republic begin and end in Punta Cana. It's a 100km-long sun-kissed playground of mega all-inclusive resorts (there are some 35,000 hotel rooms dotted across the area!) on sandy white beaches, backed by idyllic cerulean seas. In short, it's *the* postcard destination of the Dominican Republic, and has few rivals anywhere in the Caribbean. But on the diverse island of Hispaniola, which presses Haiti and the Dominican Republic cheek to cheek, there's much more besides – including outstanding eco-tourism, pristine colonial culture, a surfeit of wildlife and outdoor adventure, and plenty of squeaky-clean sands to call your own. >

**01 MUST-TRY  
DOMINICAN  
DISHES**

**Mofongo  
to you too,  
buddy!**



Mofongo

Fried plantains mashed into a ball with fried pork crackling, shrimp, octopus or other fresh stuffings.



La bandera

A typical dish of white rice, *habichuela* (red beans), stewed meat, salad and fried green plantains.



Pescado a la criolla

Fresh catch of the day, perhaps crab or lobster, spiced with a mild tomato, onion and bell pepper sauce.

**02 THE BEST FAR-FLUNG BEACH**

**The nearest  
faraway place**

They say it's not about the destination, it's about the journey. We beg to differ: spend a day on the most spectacular beach in the Dominican Republic, Bahía de Las Aguilas, and it's both. Hugging Haiti in an extreme corner of the Península de Pedernales, this remote beach is located 120km southwest of Barahona, and is reached via a combination of near-deserted one-lane highways, pockmarked roads, and a spectacular boat ride around craggy cliffs punctuated by sea-diving pelicans. The reward? More than 8km of nearly deserted beach that forms a lazy arc between two prominent capes.



**03 EXPLORE NATURE**

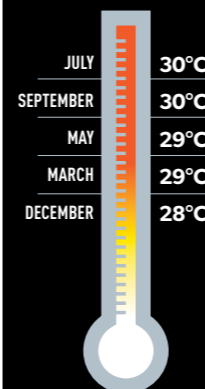
Criminally under-visited (but all the better for it), the southwest offers a different experience from the resorts of Punta Cana and the east. With a landscape that's more Wild West than Caribbean, the Península de Pedernales presents a cornucopia of off-the-beaten-path eco-tourism opportunities.

The largest protected area in the country, the 1,400 sq km **Parque Nacional Jaragua** is made up of the hyper-salinic Laguna Oviedo, the best bird-watching spot in the country (including flamingos, *above*), as well as iguana-strewn Isla Beata, and uninhabited Alto Velo island.

Further north, the 800 sqkm **Parque Nacional Sierra de Bahoruco** is notable for its mountainous terrain, running the gamut from lowland desert to cloud forest. At **Parque Nacional Lago Enriquillo**, an enormous saltwater lake 40m below sea level is home to the 11km-long desert island of Isla Cabritos, and you can mingle with an estimated 200 American crocodiles and iguanas the size of Volkswagens. Together, the three parks form the **Jaragua-Bahoruca-Enriquillo Biosphere Reserve**, the country's first UNESCO Biosphere. Believe us when we say it's awe-inspiring.

**HOT  
STUFF**

Below are the daytime peak temperatures around Punta Cana and the coast. Sun lovers take note: July and August see 10 hours of sunshine per day!



**DID YOU KNOW?**

**Larimar**, the volcanic-blue pectolite used in jewellery the world over, is only found here – and in just one place: the Larimar Mine outside Barahona. It's a popular tourist stop, so be prepared to haggle.



**04  
ADVENTURE  
STARTS HERE**



Surfing  
in Playa  
Encuentro



Diving in  
Bayahibe



Kitesurfing in  
Caberete



White-water  
rafting on the  
Río Yaque  
del Norte



## 05 MUST-READ

### *The Feast of the Goat* by Mario Vargas Llosa

Recounting the tyrannical regime of Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo, Peruvian Nobel Prize-winner Llosa creates a portrait of a country once ruled by corruption, greed and bloody violence. It's both compelling and shocking – but you won't be able to put it down.

## 06 ALTERNATIVE DINNERS

Escape the all-you-can-eat tradition of your inclusive resort to sample some of Punta Cana's best bites

### Comfort food

Besides serving the tastiest burgers in the Dominican Republic – they come minced with bacon and chilli or stuffed with ham, cheese and mushrooms – the Serbian couple that runs Nam Nam (*Plaza Sol Caribe, Bávaro, +809 988 31 76, nam-nams.com*) dish up all kinds of traveller favourites. Don't be afraid to douse them in the homemade habanero-carrot hot sauce or parsley mayo.

### Lunch with a view

The open-air Playa Blanca (+809 959 2262, *puntacana.com*), within the massive Puntacana Resort & Club complex, serves up platters of seafood and lobster, plus delicious braised Creole conch. It sits flanked by wild palms on one of the country's most postcard-perfect beaches, Playa Blanca (*below*), named after its beautiful bleached-white sands. Go on, make an afternoon of it.

### The blow-out meal

Punta Cana isn't overflowing with choices for foodies, but within the Paradisus Punta Cana Resort you'll find Passion by Martín Berasategui (*Bávaro, +809 687 9923, thomascok.com*). The renowned Spanish chef – holder of seven Michelin stars – oversees the seven-course tasting menu of Basque Country finery. Come with an empty stomach, it's worth every peso. Booking is advised.



## 07 SPORTS

# Play ball!

There's no doubt that Dominicans have baseball fever – this traditionally American game is the country's biggest sporting obsession by a long shot, if you'll excuse the pun. Attending a game is a must for sports fans, and the 8,000-capacity Estadio Tetelo Vargas, 70km east of Santo Domingo in San Pedro de Macorís, is the best place to do so. Here the Estrellas Orientales (*estrellasorientales.com.do*) toil away in the Dominican Republic Professional Baseball League throughout the winter. Games are often much wilder affairs than you'll see in America – watch out for the crazed cheerleaders and marching bands in the stands.

## DID YOU KNOW?

The country has given birth to more Major League Baseball players than anywhere outside the USA – nearly 3,000 and counting.



Batter up, then let's eat nachos



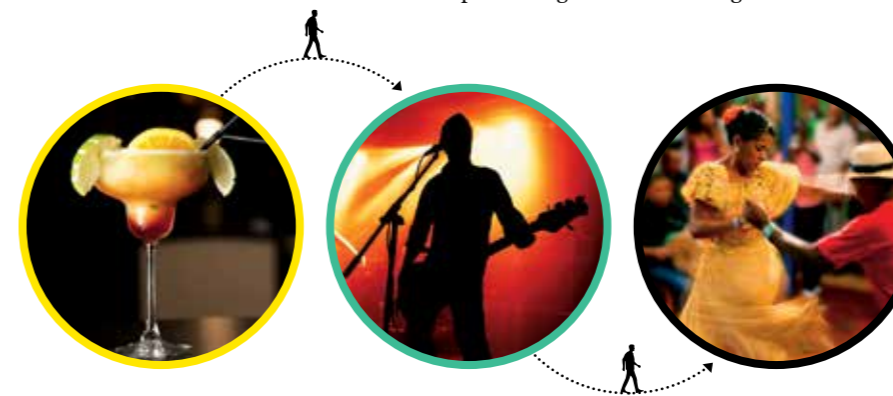
## 08 THE PERFECT DAY TRIP

Once a modest fishing village populated by white *casitas*, fashionable Las Terrenas (*above*) is now the social hub of the gorgeous Samaná Peninsula. This sophisticated beach town is home to some of the best cafes and restaurants in the country, with a palpable European flair thanks to the Italian and French expats who brought their *beignets*, baguettes and espresso with them. Besides being a great base for visiting El Limón waterfall, Parque Nacional Los Haitises and whale-watching in the Bahía de Samaná, restaurants such as Boulangerie Française (*Calle Duarte, Plaza Taína*), La Serviette (*Plaza Taína*), La Terrasse (+809 240 6730, *Pueblo de los Pescadores*) and Le Tre Caravelle (*Calle 27 de Febrero*) are perfect spots to linger over an evening of fine food.

## 09 A LITTLE BIT OF SPANISH CULTURE

### Colonial Santo Domingo

The cobblestoned boulevards and beautifully restored mansions of well-preserved Zona Colonial (*below*) were once the seat of Spain's 16th-century empire, and the area is now a UNESCO World Heritage site. Highlights of these atmospheric 11 square blocks include the Museo de las Casas Reales (*Calle Las Damas, +809 682 4202*), the base of Spanish authority for the entire Caribbean – today, it houses all manner of colonial-period treasures. The Cathedral Primada de América (*Calle Isabel La Católica*), as its name implies, is the oldest cathedral in the Americas – Christopher Columbus' son Diego set its first stone in 1514. Diego lived in the gothic Alcázar de Colón (*Plaza de España*), which today houses artefacts from the Columbus family.



## 10 SANTO DOMINGO AFTER DARK

### 21.00 La Galería

**de Arte Nader**  
Inside an art gallery, this sophisticated tapas bar takes top honours for its cocktails, swished by some of the city's best mixologists (*Rafael Augusto Sánchez, +809 544 0878*).

### 22.00 Casa del Teatro

The hipster venue of choice is a casual spot for live music, open-mic poetry, art and whatever else they conjure up, located in a historic Zona Colonial setting (*Calle Arzobispo Meriño, +809 689 3430*).

### 00.00 Jet Set

This seventh-floor disco with great city views caters to the young and the restless, with salsa, merengue and the country's own Afro-Latino dance style, *bachata*, on Mondays (*Avenue Independencia, +809 533 9707*).

## MEET THE AUTHOR

Kevin Raub is the co-author of numerous Lonely Planet guides, including *Caribbean Islands* and the first edition of *Discover Caribbean Islands*, due out later this year.

### 11 WHALE WATCHING

Between mid-January and mid-March, more than 10,000 North American humpback whales descend on the Bahía de Samaná, where their annual mating ritual takes place in stunning fashion. Whale Samaná (+849 809 538 2494, [whalesamana.com](http://whalesamana.com)), operated by Canadian marine specialist Kim Beddall, is the go-to outfit, with trips available from £35. Her advice is to visit in February, as it's the best month to take in the flipping, tail-lobbing, breaching splashdowns.



# Where to stay



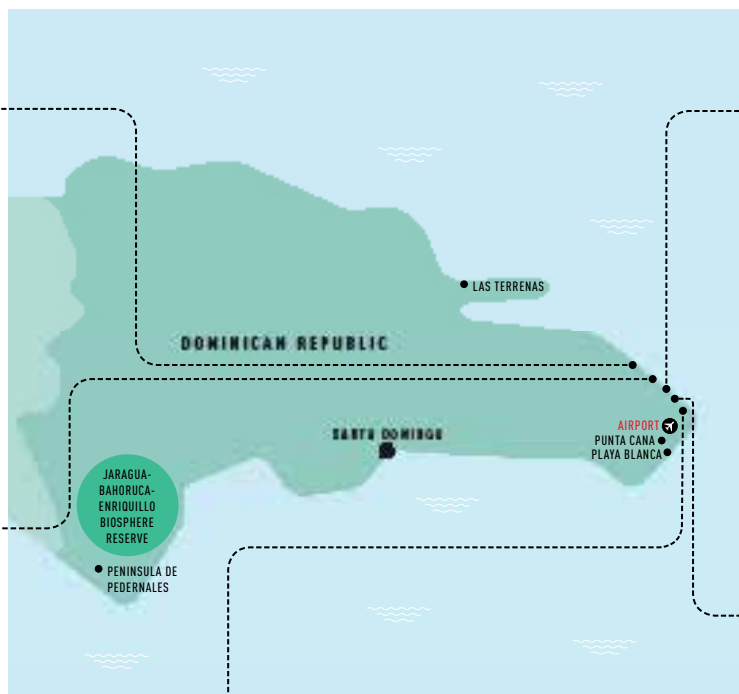
### BEST FOR ADULTS

**Excellence Punta Cana** – the clue's in the name at this adults-only resort with palm groves, powdery sands and a spa for pampering.



### BEST FOR WEDDINGS

**Dreams Punta Cana Resort & Spa** is situated on an unforgettable palm-backed beach with crystal-clear waters, where waiters pour free-flowing fine wines. You do the rest.



### BEST ALL-INCLUSIVE EXPERIENCE

**Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Punta Cana.** You know the drill by now: but bet you didn't know about its 15 pools, nine restaurants and Jack Nicklaus golf course.



### BEST VALUE FOR MONEY

With inclusive kayaking, paddle boating, sailing and windsurfing, there are no hidden costs at **IFA Villas Bávaro Resort & Spa**, so it's perfect for those on a tight budget.

### BEST FOR FAMILIES

If you like the sound of white sandy beaches, an 18-hole golf course and a waterpark, then **Grand Bahía Principe Bávaro** is the resort for you.

► **BE THERE...** All hotels are available to book through [thomascook.com](http://thomascook.com)