



# Dominican delight

A Caribbean hot spot is finally coming into its own

Just last week, Brad Pitt took a helicopter tour of a hot Caribbean destination, presumably scouting real estate for either a hideaway for himself, Angelina Jolie, Maddox, Zahara and baby number three, or a potential hotel investment that would suit the actor/architecture buff. But it wasn't in celeb-packed St. Barths or Anguilla (where he officially parted with Jennifer Aniston).

Pitt was searching for his place in the sun in the Dominican Republic, which has finally come into its own as a Caribbean hot spot. Of course, with more than 600,000 Dominicans living in the city, many New Yorkers have already experienced the island nation's charms. But with an 8% increase in U.S. tourism in 2005, Donatella Versace as a regular visitor, a Santiago-produced cigar taking the No. 1 spot on Cigar Aficionado's "Top 25 Cigars" list and, as a longtime kiteboarding mecca — the seaside town of Cabarete hosting the Kiteboarding World Cup for the fifth year in June — there's plenty of new buzz.

Long a favorite beach destination of Canadians, the Dominican Republic is among the best bargains in the Caribbean. And a flight from New York to any number of luxury resorts along the coast can put you on a brochure-perfect beach in the time it can take to maneuver weekend traffic.

The Dominican Republic has the ecological riches, funky nightlife and cultural heft to sustain a trip that will take you beyond hammock swinging and pool-side plunging into the realm of more adventurous travel. The major difference between the D.R. and other Caribbean spots? Its rural areas and provinces bordering Haiti may put visitors at risk for malaria, though the vast majority of tourists do not travel to such areas.

Covering three-quarters of the most geographically varied island in the Caribbean, the Dominican Republic is a country of breathtaking landscapes and a natural stage for everything from whale-watching to desert motorbiking.

Some of the world's best rum, coffee and cigars are produced locally and are available for a fraction of what they cost in the U.S. These specialties are also widely enjoyed by the laid-back Dominican people in the country's many restaurants, nightclubs and casinos.

Stretching back to the arrival of



**LADIES IN WAITING** The coastal town of Puerto Plata is the site of numerous merengue festivals, as well as amber- and rum-themed tours.

Christopher Columbus in the West Indies, the Dominican Republic's capital city of Santo Domingo has been the backdrop for revolt, romance and a long list of New World firsts that resonate in the architecture of its cathedrals, academies and municipal buildings.

Those willing to do a bit of legwork can put together an itinerary that takes them from the tranquil resorts of the northeast shore to the pulsing beach towns of the northwest coast, down through the island's central mountain range and into its historic capital city in about 10 days.

## First stop: Punta Cana

The late-winter ecotourists who flock to this tropical haven hoping to catch a glimpse of humpback whales migrating along the coast are as likely to spot celebrities like Oscar de la Renta and Mikhail Baryshnikov at the airport (both have homes here). Initially developed in the late 1960s, Punta Cana is a relative newcomer on the Caribbean resort scene, making it more affordable than established getaways in the island chain. Easy access from New York, a low profile and a handful of enlightened developers intent on preserving the coast's natural beauty make Punta Cana an attractive destination for five-star travelers. Bill and Hillary Clinton purportedly spend a few days here every year. But with more than 18,000 guest rooms to fill and a number of hotel construction projects underway, area hotels offer deals to fit every budget.

A standout among nature lovers is Punta Cana Resort and Club. Co-owned by de la Renta, Julio Iglesias and American labor lawyer/environmentalist

water lagoons, where backstroking bird-watchers are as common as fish. (The Dominican Republic is home to about 300 bird species that are nonexistent or rare in other parts of the world.) Families can rent two- and three-bedroom beach villas nestled in a coconut grove that's steps from the beach.

The nearby Punta/Cana Cornell Biodiversity Center hosts guided tours of the nature reserve, tree-planting activities, beach cleanups and nature expeditions.

The thatch-roofed Punta Cana International Airport is one of the most efficient ways of getting beyond the resort compounds that line the shores of Punta Cana. A charter flight from the airport to the north coast town of Samana/Las Terras, where whale-watching excursions are available between December and March, or to Puerto Plata, where amber- and rum-themed tours are offered year-round, costs about \$95 and gives travelers stunning views of the D.R.'s coast and mountains along the way.

An alternative is to rent a car, which can be more economical, particularly for family groups, but will require a greater time investment, as direct access highways do not exist to many popular destinations. Air-conditioned tour buses with comfortable seats travel all over the Dominican Republic at very reasonable rates and provide spectacular views of the island's mountainous spine and abundant countryside. Travelers with time and tolerance can move across the island in a combination of guaguas (jammed minivans) and public buses.

## Life's a breeze in Cabarete

Cabarete was once a lazy surf town 20 minutes outside of Puerto Plata. Today, bodegas, cafes and a hair-braiding syndicate line the pueblo's main drag, which has for the last decade sustained a steady influx of international wind and kite surfers drawn to the gusty afternoon winds and ripping waves along the coast. Local beaches, like La Boca, Kite and Bozo — named by and for the patrons they attract — may be less pristine than those of Punta Cana, but they provide a lot of good, clean fun. Watersport enthusiasts will want for nothing in Cabarete, as rental and instructional facilities catering to every aquatic whim line the beaches.

Recognizable by their masses of sun-bleached ringlets, the local kite-surfing pros — a cross between snowboarders and paratroopers — take off on seemingly suicidal wave-riding maneuvers each afternoon that provide hours of jaw-dropping entertainment for athletes of the lounge-chair variety. It's great for those more inclined toward girl-watching, as Cabarete is an increasingly popular destination for kite-surfing women from around the world.

Surfers of all ages meet at Cabarete's



**ON BOARD** Learning how to windsurf on a Cabarete beach

Theodore Kheel, the resort combines good taste and charm with an environmentally responsible hospitality.

In addition to a championship golf course and white-sand beach, the 15,000-acre development that encompasses the resort includes a 2,000-acre nature reserve punctuated with fresh-