

ALFREDO MAIQUEZ LONELY PLANET

nightly beach party, which begins after sunset with bonfires near Onno's, Lax and a half-dozen other comfortable, open-air restaurants. As the moon begins to rise and the Presidente beer starts to flow, reggae gives way to techno and salsa until, by 1 a.m., the disco lights are flashing and the Macarena's pumping at high volume.

In Cabarete, sound is a mighty force to reckon with. From the high-pitched buzzing of Motoconchos (motorcycle taxis), to the rapid-fire merengue resounding from every bodega, it's a loud town. Visitors interested in getting some sleep are advised to find accommodations far from the center of action.

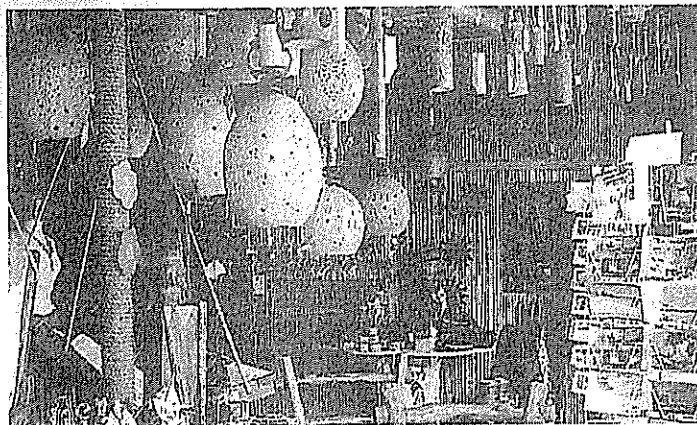
Cabarete is home to several well-run day-trip outfits that offer boating, rafting, mountain biking, snorkeling, horseback riding and Quadrunner excursions. Destinations include some of the D.R.'s spectacular national parks and nearby islands like Paradise and Bacardi. (Cost: \$35-\$90.)

Travel to and from Cabarete is generally via nearby Puerto Plata, where an airport, numerous car-rental agencies and frequent bus service facilitate travel to all major cities.

The heart of Hispaniola

Santo Domingo seems surprisingly cosmopolitan for a Caribbean city, until you realize that it is the oldest settlement in the New World. Founded by Christopher Columbus' brother Bartolomé in the late 1490s, it has ripened over 500 years into a gritty metropolis of about 3 million people.

Old Santo Domingo, the original fortified settlement established by the Columbus brothers at the mouth of the Ozama River, is a picturesque quarter



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of cobblestone streets, cathedrals and Inquisition-era mansions. The Parque Colón (Columbus Park) is near the center of an easy-to-manuever network of streets which provided the model for the first American towns. It's a good place to sit on a bench and people-watch or enjoy a plastic cup of rum.

Beyond the living museum that is Old Santo Domingo, the nearby Plaza del Cultura houses a cluster of culture halls celebrating everything from ancient Taino Indian culture to modern Dominican art. The Faro a Colon (Columbus Lighthouse) located across the Ozama River in the Mirador del Este Park is a massive cross-shaped structure reputed to hold the remains of the famed explorer.

Santo Domingo is one of the most affordable shopping cities in the Caribbean. At \$28 pesos to the dollar you can expect to pay about 60 cents for a cup of

coffee, \$3 for a good cigar and \$7 for a bottle of premium rum. The city's Mercado Modelo is a good place to shop for handcrafts and a Panama hat. Jewelry stores selling bargain amber and larimar, a native turquoise-like stone, vie for business with oil, herb, crystal and stone-crammed botanicas. Side streets are lined with spice stalls, with vanilla beans hanging from the rafters and cinnamon sticks the size of batons.

All the major chains have hotels in Santo Domingo. For a one-of-a-kind experience in the heart of the old quarter, check into Bettye's Galerie & Exclusive Guest House. Steps from the Plaza Colón, Bettye's is a tiny guesthouse/folk art gallery run by an American woman and a great source of information on local culture. Space in the charming townhouse is limited, so be sure to make reservations well in advance.

PALM PLAZA The Museo Alcazar de Colon is in Santo Domingo's old quarter. Left, local crafts are for sale in the beach town of Cabarete.



C.SWANSON DAILY NEWS

if you go...

The Dominican Republic has launched a new tourism Web site, www.godominicanrepublic.com, featuring information on accommodations and flights, though at press time it was still in development. Search www.dominicanrepublic.com for hotel info, or call (809) 541-5652.

Visitors should consult their doctor about antimalarial drugs before departing.

Rates at Punta Cana Resort and Club range from \$75 (basic) — \$990 (3-bedroom villa); 1-888-442-CANA, www.puntacana.com. For other hotels in Punta Cana, try www.puntacana.net. Search www.activecabarete.com for lodging in Cabarete. Rooms at Bettye's Galerie & Exclusive Guest House are \$44 (double), \$35 (single) and \$22 (hostel); (809) 688-7649, www.hostelworld.com.