



photography: Stephen Smith

### Punta Cana

This Caribbean island isn't just your average all-inclusive resort destination.

Long hailed as one of the largest affordable all-inclusive destinations that has been known to attract the gourmand-types queuing up by the all-you-can-eat-buffets and vacationer bingers extolling the virtues of rum-laced cocktails with their bellies up to the poolside bars, the Dominican Republic these days is attempting to dust off its "great for value" image by moving uptown so to speak.

Except in this case, the slick chi-chi crowd has tapped into the beauty of the bohemian charm that wraps itself around the eggshell powdery beaches of the island's southern part in Punta Cana and La Romana. This is where the high-rollers splurge.

Unlike Anguilla, the Turks and Caicos or St. Bart's where million-dollar private villas are the norm, you can still pick up a villa in the Dominican Republic for under a paltry million greenbacks. And that's

with the ocean view palm fringed beaches and haute couture amenities.

Drive across the countryside past the herds of grazing goats and cows and see a new animal, the building crane, jutting its steely head as it reshapes the island's skyline.

"Tourism is booming in the Dominican Republic and so is construction of second homes for people from northerly climes," noted Alain Mora, a St. Bart's real estate agent in an interview with The New York Times and added, "You can be a king in the Dominican for very little money. You need much more than that in St. Bart's. Houses that are \$400,000 to \$500,000 in an exclusive Dominican Republic development would start at \$1.1 million in St. Bart's."

Just ask Eddie Creed.

The retired Four Seasons Hotels and Creeds tycoon took a fancy to the D.R. while on a golf vacation there during the '70s. So he built a villa in the southeastern part of the island, overlooking the legendary Pete Dye-designed Dientes del Perro (The Teeth of the Dog) golf course. The course is located at the Casa de Campo resort, a luxury 7,000 acre enclave along the coast dotted with private villas and casitas suites. Celebrities Elizabeth Taylor and Sean Combs are among the glitterati who have retreated there.

For recreation, there's equestrian tournaments, tennis, scuba diving, a private yacht club, shops, restaurants, a hospital, plenty of R&R by the beach or pools and of course golf in the Caribbean's best 18-hole golf course.

"I was the golf club's 40th founding member," Mr. Creed says of the Casa de Campo Golf Club. Now he shows one of his latest creations, a painting, which he has taken up after his golf swing slowed down. Mr. Creed tells me that his latest house guest was singer Alicia Keys who was shooting a music video in a repro Greek amphitheatre a short drive from his vacation villa.

Italian architect and Paramount movie set designer Robert Coppa built a pseudo-Spanish colonial city in the '70s housing its own chapel, piazza, Greek amphitheatre and called it Altos de Chavon after the Chavon River that winds between sheer granite cliffs before spilling into the Caribbean Sea. A short drive from Casa De Campo, you'd swear this place was built by Christopher Columbus who discovered the Dominican Republic back in 1492.

The village's 5,000-seat open-air amphitheater was opened in 1982 by "Old Blue Eyes" Frank Sinatra and Carlos Santana. Today, other performers like Julio Iglesias and Gloria Estefan have graced this Grecian stage.

To the north at Cabarete on the Atlantic coast, windsurfers strike a gnarly pose as they battle the fierce updrafts that loom high along this stretch of golden sugar sand. I've made it to the country's windsurfing capital where bronzed barebacked, surf-strapped dudes take white knuckle flights over sun worshippers who lounge by the poolside of the posh Azzurro Club Cabarete and Estrella. Beating the heat, I decide to hitch a ride aboard the resort's white trolley car for an inside peak of Azzurro's spa. In shades of cool cucumber and pale yellow, the private massage rooms overlook the palm-fringed beachfront that punctuates the turquoise waters.

Dr. Jose Reyes, the spa's medical doctor and trained therapist, is gently covering a client in chocolate cream. "Chocolate cream is excellent for fatigue, muscle and joint aches," he later says of the two-hour anti-oxidant chocolate therapy treatment he introduced a year ago using locally harvested cocoa beans.

Jutting into the Atlantic Ocean off the nub of the Samana peninsula, the Occidental Gran Bahia resort is perched like a crown atop this rocky promontory. The glam factor is high with the suites styled in white washed walls, matching bright floral bouquet patterned curtains and bedspreads. The piece de la resistance for this castle-like hotel is undoubtedly the

panoramic view of the ocean which also doubles as a humpback whale sanctuary between January 15 and March 15. I open the French-doors of my private balcony overlooking the quaint islet Cayo Levantado and chuckle on how this remote jungle island was recently featured in a Bacardi Rum commercial that dubbed the place, "Bacardi Island."

In Punta Cana, Frank Ranieri, chief executive of Punta Cana Resort & Club, is busy with final touches for the debut of his newest baby, the Six Senses Spa, opening in December. The luxury spa will emphasize several programs such as the Planet Earth Core Treatment program, which includes gold, silver and crystal sprays, natural aromatic clays and native flower and herb essences.



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Besides the P.B. Dye golf course, arguably the Caribbean's closest resemblance to Pebble Beach, private villas, a self-contained 100-slip marina, an ecological reserve, a biodiversity laboratory and a horse ranch, the resort mirrors the uber chic tastes of its co-owners, singer Julio Iglesias and designer Oscar de la Renta, a Dominican Republic native.

Russian dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov was so impressed with the area after a visit with the designer he sold his getaway in St. Bart's and purchased a beachfront estate nearby.

With its pastel interiors, white shuttered windows and plunging pools, the Punta Cana Resort & Club tastes and feels like a California dream. Actors Harrison Ford and Calista Flockhart know this. They were guests in one of the exclusive luxury villas designed by de la Renta. President Bill Clinton and his wife Hillary also managed to slumber at Oscar's private mansion.

So if this D.R. seems far removed from the D.R. you know — relax, don't worry. Five-star resorts like the Punta Cana Resort & Club make you feel like an A-lister without the big pocketbook. Rates for a two bedroom luxury beach villa start as low as \$400US. Now that's a deal.