



photography: Stephen Smith

aka the “DR”

The Dominican Republic a.k.a the “DR” is the home of snazzy resorts, spicy merengue and big baseball exports like Sammy Sosa, but beyond the Caribbean island’s sandy white beaches there lurks an island secret.

It was deep in the heart of the Samana peninsula where I discovered it. This pinky-finger sized nub jets off the DR’s fabled northern coastline and opens up to a wilderness sanctuary where thousands of humpback whales are known to frolic in the warm azure sea each year. That’s no secret.

But what’s not widely known is that Samana is shaping up to be the next big tourism destination in the DR for the eco traveler. Unlike other Caribbean islands where you have to take out a mortgage to engage in

some wilderness activities like scuba diving, spelunking, and deep sea cave diving, you can do that around this lush peninsula and even tread off

the beaten track where beach toweled tourists are hard pressed to go.

I left my palatial digs behind at the Occidental Gran Bahia where the sunny pool and breezy balconied suites overlooking the ocean beckoned so many fellow Canadians and signed up for an afternoon of adventure.

With a rag tag team of adventure seekers, we hopped on a tour bus and ventured deep in the heart of coconut and cocoa country. The sun blazed ahead as we drove past a guagua (Spanish for public transit) of guys and school children who stood outside their candy colored palm huts all the way encountering hairpin turns and ascending the ancient mountain range of la Sierra Samana.

I always like to tread where few others do so here we were at the small roadside village of El Café. Sandwiched between the twin capes of Rincon Bay in Las Galeras and Playa Bonita in Las Terrenas near the Los Haitises National Park, sits the family-run paradass where Basilio has been trekking to these mountains for eight years and has some 25 horses prepared for the excursion.

There he was sporting a big golden toothed smile with his wife, Ramona, who along with their children Jose and others eagerly awaited us. Away from the wooden homes and beyond the group of giddy school kids who were striking baseball positions à la Sosa stood the corral. The old mare slowly steered her charcoal eyes my way. It was my turn to saddle up. Our close knit group was ready for a guided trek to see the isolated beauty of El Limon Falls.

This place is a treasure chest of legends. The name Samana means the Tainos Indian queen who once lived here. When Columbus came across Samana he wrote in his diary he had never seen in his life as many arrows flying at the same time as when he passed by Samana. This was the turf of the native Ciguayos who were driven out of the region with

the arrival of Colombus and the Spanish. In the 1820s hundreds of freed slaves from Philadelphia arrived to the shorelines to start a new life. It seemed everyone wanted a taste of paradise.

Virtually left unscathed, the unspoiled beauty of the region has created a wilderness refuge of flora and fauna. We galloped by plants that donned names like mighty explorers and fearless cowboys. Juan Primero, Cigua Blanca and Uva de Sierra are all native species here. From the lofty perch of the royal palms, herons flew overhead grazing over the wondrous thick canopy of verdant trees. The air felt different too. It was slightly cooler and humid as we galloped across the Rio Limon, The water was knee deep as my four-legged friend tested out the mountain river, jumping in for a refreshing dip.

We scanned the horizon and saw only a sea of green royal palms beneath our feet as we stood on the edge of the mountain's spine, staring into the horizon. Jose nudged the horse and off we went into the thick bush ascending higher every minute. Soon our mini caravan stopped and the team of eco explorers scaled up the side of the ancient sierra until the veil of whitewater showed its mighty head in the distance. "This is the best place for our view," I hear a voice echo in the distance.

Indeed. Shuffling to the trail head, Jose taps me on the arm and offers a bouquet of laurel leaves. In Samana, there's a saying that every Sunday before starting the week you leave two laurel leaves with water and sugar and meditate on the upcoming week's wishes so everything will be alright.

Mesmerized, I pluck a couple and stare watching the fresh cold waters of Arroyo Chico plunge 40 metres over the grand one known affectionately by the locals as Cascada El Limón.

I smile to myself satisfied that I made the plunge into

the heart of Samana and found paradise, knowing all the while that my breezy oceanfront room will be my next heavenly stop later that evening. Everything was alright.



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