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Soak up the rays in Caribbean paradise



Postcard perfect ... sunset on the coconut-palm-lined white sands of Punta Cana

SWIMMING with sharks sounds like a terrifying experience you would avoid at all costs.

But it is relaxing in the Caribbean paradise of the Dominican Republic.

Mind you, these are not the man-eaters of Jaws fame, they are their more harmless cousins, nurse sharks.

In the resort of Punta Cana, there is a great excursion which takes you out to a reef and lets you snorkel with the sharks in a large netted area.

These sea beasts are up to 13ft long but they glide peacefully underneath you. Thankfully, you do not look like dinner to them!



Fishy business ... in the water with friendly sting ray

The sea around Punta Cana is a blue that will blow you away. It is postcard-perfect, with coconut palms lining the white sands.

Then, just when you think the island's colours can't get any more vivid, you dive below the surface of the water - it's like sticking your head in a tropical fish tank.

On the reef excursion, you also get the chance to cuddle a stingray and swim among fish like the yellow snapper, which features on the menus at many local restaurants.

Christopher Columbus was the first Western tourist to enjoy this stunning island, but recently the Dom Rep has had a poor reputation for low quality all-inclusive resorts with dodgy buffets.

However, Punta Cana is raising its game and cheering because British Airways have just started the first scheduled flights from Gatwick.



Wired up ... fly above forest with Zip Line Adventure

The vast majority of the hotels are still all-inclusive, but most offer an array of a la carte restaurants.

At Dreams Punta Cana and sister hotel Dreams Palm Beach, there are specialist restaurants offering good quality French, Italian, Mexican and Asian food, plus a huge buffet restaurant.

The Dreams resorts are ideal for families or couples after a lively time.

There's an Explorer's Club for youngsters and a really cool Core Zone, where teens can hang out.

For a quieter holiday, you may want to opt for the more exclusive Secrets Sanctuary, a Spanish colonial-style hotel in a beautiful beach setting.

The ultimate golf hotel is the Golden Bear Lodge and designer hotel lovers should check out the Paradisus Palma Real - ultra-stylish.



Eco friendly ... tour the resort on electric segways

It can be difficult to drag yourself away from the swim-up bars that feature at most all-inclusive resorts, but it is worth leaving the hotel for a couple of excursions.

A catamaran sailing trip to Saona Island is wonderfully relaxing and on the way back to shore you can dive for starfish.

The transfer to the port also takes you through some interesting villages and towns full of local colour.

Another excursion put a little too much colour in my cheeks - green.

The Zip Line Adventure is scary. Tourism is not always one of the world's most eco-friendly activities, but with zip-wiring you fly above the forest causing very little damage.

You are taken up the mountains and through vibrant vegetation to the Zip Line Centre.

Here you will find a series of wooden platforms zig-zagging down the mountain, linked by cables up to 270 yards long.

You then hurtle down the wires, 50ft above the lush vegetation in a harness. A real adrenalin rush.

Getting up the mountain is an adventure in itself - there is only a very bumpy dirt track, lined with beautifully painted houses and dense rain forest.

You will see cocoa, papyrus and sweet lemons growing by the side of the track.

Another green attraction is the Segway Off-Road Eco Tour. Segways are rather odd-looking two-wheeled vehicles. Leaning forward on this weird machine seems unnatural at first.

But you don't tip over and, after just a few minutes, the electric Segway begins to feel like part of you.

Lean left and you go left and lean backwards and you go into reverse. Amazing. Complete freedom.

The Segway nips through the Punta Cana Resort and makes the 90-minute tour a great experience.

And, since it is electric, you are leaving virtually no carbon footprints on these unspoilt beaches.

It takes you on tracks through lovely vegetation and you end up at the Punta Cana Hotel's unique Eco Trail, where there are 11 stunning natural lagoons.

You can dive off jetties into five of them, which is a refreshing experience.

A 90-minute Segway tour including transport and drinks is 69 US dollars. Check out segwaycaribe.com.

If you are staying at the Punta Cana Resort you can do a proper tour of the Indigenous Eyes Ecological Reserve for nothing.

Guests from other hotels can also visit for just ten dollars - and it's well worth it. See puntacana.org to find out more.

Go: Dominican Republic

GETTING / STAYING THERE: BA have launched a twice-weekly direct flight to Punta Cana.

Flight only is from £644 return. A week all-inclusive at Dreams Punta Cana is from £798 per person in November, including BA flights from Gatwick.

You can make big savings by booking at ba.com. The Paradisus Palma Real is from £1,267 all-inclusive.

Flight only is from £644. The twice weekly flights are on Mondays and Thursdays.

See ba.com for flights and holidays.

MONEY: Currency is the Peso, but there is no point in getting any. Everyone prefers US dollars.

WATER: Most hotels have water treatment plants and it is safe to brush your teeth in tap water. Stick to bottled water for drinking. Ice and salads are safe in the hotels.