

# Boutique chic comes to the

The Dominican Republic is the home of the tacky all-inclusive break, so why have Beyoncé, Angelina Jolie and the Clintons started going? **Eva Wiseman** follows them to find the country reinventing itself as a luxury beach paradise

Until recently, the Dominican Republic's east coast, where the sea is a rich Photoshop blue and studded with ruddy Americans paddling in tiny stars-and-stripes briefs, was the budget destination for an all-in Caribbean break. Sweaty all-day buffets. Sweaty couples reigniting the spark in their 30-year marriages. Sprawling hotels with games rooms and 80s nights, and small but explosive illnesses from sweaty seafood cocktails and too much family-time. On YouTube, videos document the chest burns and shortlived nicknames of spring breaks passed there with incident and much beer.

But things have changed. The boutique hotel has arrived in the DR, and a growing number of luxury retreats are drawing Hollywood stars who might previously have favoured St Lucia, St Barts or Mustique. For years the Dominican Republic was served only by charter flights from the UK, but British Airways recently decided that the DR had moved sufficiently upmarket to merit a scheduled service, and launched twice-weekly flights to Punta Cana, its holiday heart. Like a groupie I agreed to follow in the documented footsteps of celebrity holidaymakers Brad, Angelina, Beyoncé and Jay-Z to visit four of the new five-star resorts, travelling north up the coast by bus with my boyfriend.

We began at Tortuga Bay (recent guests include the Clintons), a minute from the airport. As we stepped off the plane at sunset, the heat slapped us around the face. A second shock came as we entered the palm-thatched airport to be grabbed by a clutch of giggling girls in traditional dress who pose passengers for individual photographs, theme park-style, capturing them grey and broken from the 10-hour flight. Guests of Tortuga Bay are met by a personal concierge, who takes your bags, shows you the toilets, and glides you through security like a diplomat or reality TV star. Stunned, we emerged into the evening, and caught our first gust of coconut, blowing in from the runway.

Forty years ago, this was all forest. In 1971, a hotelier called Frank Ranieri started to clear a way to the beach and built the Punta Cana resort (later confusingly copyrighted as PuntaCana). In 1983 he added the privately owned airport, now the busiest in the country, and, like a welcome rash, more resorts appeared nearby, then more, and more. In 2005, with fashion designer Oscar de la Renta and crooner Julio Iglesias as partners, Ranieri added a boutique hotel, Tortuga Bay, to his empire.

On arrival at the hotel (a string of 15 villas along two miles of white beach) guests are offered the pillow menu, then given keys to their own golf buggy. I'll give you a second to drink that in. Around the manicured gardens well-slept guests trundle, gleefully bouncing over the concealed speed bumps.

The beauty of jet lag is that we saw the sun rise, over the beach. The agony of jet lag is that a sunrise can make you



A bedroom at one of the string of 15 villas that form the Tortuga Bay resort.

feel like crying. But by breakfast we were calm and, at one of the resort's eight restaurants, were offered eggs with uncomfortable regularity.

Birds hopped from chair to chair, singing like buskers. The birds are as much a sell here as the complimentary slippers or guests' personal mobile phones. As part of the resort's new voluntourism package, guests are invited to take part in the Dominican Republic's yearly census of its 27 indigenous bird species, including the rare Ridgeway Hawk, recently reintroduced by the Puntacana Ecological Foundation.

When senior staff talked about the group's vision, they repeated the phrase "eco-chic" like a mantra. To see what they meant, and despite burning skin and inappropriate footwear, we joined a group of

*The beaches are so perfect they could have been drawn by a bored child*

guests who were travelling to the resort's nature reserve on Segways, which are like electric scooters but funnier. They seem to work by thought alone. If you want to go right, you think, "I want to go right", and suddenly you're turning right.

A small accident involving a leg (someone else's) and a speeding Segway spoilt nothing for me - I zoomed through the streets, past the award-winning Six Senses Spa, where later a small Thai masseuse climbed over my back like it was an adventure playground, past the newly built mansions and the cartoon birds. In the reserve, which spans 600 hectares (1,500 acres), we saw dark natural lagoons swarming with turtles. Down the road are labs where students from Harvard and Columbia work to implement new ecological programs to protect

the Dominican coral reefs, replant coastal mangroves and maintain the health of the coastal ecosystem.

Jake Kheel, an American in khaki shorts who is head of the company's Ecological Foundation, talked us through their plans as we stood in the honeyed air by the beehives and swatted sand flies from our ankles. The resort's water is recycled for use on the golf courses, nothing on the property is built taller than a coconut tree and waste from the kitchens is comprehensively recycled by sheds of busy worms. The way he said it made it seem romantic, but then this island is dense with romance - the heat in Punta Cana caresses rather than suffocates, and the scenery is cartoonish in its loveliness. Each hotel has a private beach, shaved clean every morning by a raking steward. Even the storms are beautiful, cracking the night skies with badly drawn Zs.

Our next hotel stop was Zoëtry Agua, which opened last November. The thinking behind most of the country's new boutique hotels is that paying for things reminds guests how lovely and rich they are, how nice their \$30 club sandwiches are compared with the cold meat buffets available to people with coloured wristbands further down the coast.

Zoëtry's take on this is to offer guests "Endless Privileges" - a cute (ish) way of saying that even though this is a classy joint, everything's free. Its 53 suites are in palm-thatched cottages that wind in a horseshoe shape around a lake of flamingos and silent ducks. Above the beach, a swimming pool snakes its way wetly from room to room, allowing guests to leap from bed to pool in one ungainly bounce. Luckily, you are never more than three feet from a soft clean towel.

The lobby is a soaring open-air ark of wood, with sweet rum cocktails offered at every slight turn. Guests are encouraged to organise to take their meals by candlelight on the beach, or by their private pool. It was here that my boyfriend and I were first asked, "Are you on your horny-moon?", a question that would nip at us, hilariously, at every meal that followed.



And those meals didn't take our minds of the ribaldry. In a word, the food at the resorts of Punta Cana was horrid. We were as close to the sea as it's possible to be, so we hoped, perhaps, for some fresh grilled fish. But no. Each of the hotels did variations on a theme. Inedible pizza, knee-deep in Swiss cheese. Inedible lobster risotto, sweet, the consistency and colour of rice pudding with the jam already stirred through. Inedible Dominican fried chicken, so dry and expensive I had to look away. And everything had the sugary blandness of plantain, which per-

haps wouldn't have been so awful were it not for the fact that the toilet bleach was also plantain-scented. It takes a lot, believe me, to sour the mood when you're in paradise, but the meat wrapped around a banana did its best.

Punta Cana did feel like paradise though. The place is almost camp in its beauty - even after a week our mouths were wide Os when we again woke and saw the horizon. The beaches are so perfect they could have been drawn by a bored child - a thick stripe of white and an azure ribbon, dissected by crayoned-in

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## SIXTY-SECOND GUIDE TO THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

**BASICS**

The Dominican Republic is the second largest Caribbean nation after Cuba, with approximately 10 million inhabitants. It occupies the eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola, of which the western third is the country of Haiti. Haiti feels very African and most people speak French and Creole - the Dominican Republic is more Latin American, and Dominicans speak Spanish. Not to be confused with the little-developed Caribbean island of Dominica, population 73,000.

**GEOGRAPHY**

It's the most diverse of Caribbean nations, with high alpine wilderness, tropical rainforest, savanna, desert and mangrove

swamps, as well as the white-sand beaches. There are extensive opportunities for adventure tourism, including mountain biking, whale-watching and climbing Pico Duarte, at 3,175m the highest peak in the Caribbean.

**HISTORY**

Hispaniola was where Christopher Columbus first landed in 1492, claiming it for Spain. French pirates later made the island their base, and in the 17th century a formal French colony was set up on the north-western coast

# and of the all-in cheapie



Away from the package crowd on one of the Dominican Republic's unspoilt beaches. Alamy

palm trees dribbling with coconuts. Everywhere, newlyweds were gasping.

One morning we took a boat out to the coral reef, where a floating island caters to tourists with dedicated Dominican masseuses and a little juice bar. Snorkelling equipment is provided, as well as three-foot floats and kayaks, and penned-off areas for us to swim with sharks and cuddle de-stinged stingrays. (They felt like suedette shower mats.) Away from the pens you're free to swim out among the trumpetfish, spotted scorpionfish, wild needlefish, angelfish and peacock

flounders, and then, drying, crouch on the side with a slice of white bread while they nibble delicately at your fingertips.

Driving between resorts, our bus was overtaken often by mopeds carrying up to four passengers, clinging to each other's arms and waists as though happily drowning. Tin-roofed houses are scattered beside the fields, stalls sell wooden painted parrots and coconut juice, and naked children splash themselves from a trough of warm rainwater.

Sivory Punta Cana claims to have been the first boutique hotel in the Dominican Republic. Its rooms are like airy LA apartments - vast windows, private balconies and little trays of pastries dropped off by an invisible man before dawn. It boasts a wine cellar with 8,000 bottles, and a dimly lit Asian fusion restaurant. Nothing is even slightly free. So it was with quiet anticipation that, after a day by its gorgeous pool drinking its \$15 water, we boarded the bus for our final resort, Paradisus Punta Cana.

Paradisus, a high-end all-inclusive resort, recently opened an "ultra-luxurious" hotel within its sprawling grounds. While the main hotel, with its 424 rooms, 12 restaurants and mild threat of hen parties, sits in high-rise blocks by the beach, The Reserve offers family suites inland around a spa and semi-private pool. Each suite's bathtub is outside, decadent but not all that private, with just a half-wall shielding you from the world. Down a little path is your private bit of pool - each room has a thatched four-poster bed by the pool, for high quality shade and naps at midday, when the sun was so strong it bleached my hair from red to white-blond.

At lunchtime, with the option of leaving the hotel, if only to walk to a bigger, louder hotel, we made a discovery, and it was this:

an international mega-buffet is preferable to Punta Cana haute cuisine, any meal, any hour, any how. While a plate of peppers stuffed with hot lobster mousse led to a relationship-quaking fight, a leisurely stroll around the cooling salad bar helped us fall in love all over again.

Each day bled happily into the next, little joy on little joy - a friendly lizard, a really good dash into the sea, the discovery of kiwi and banana juice, or local Presidente beer. We went beyond relaxed to a soft, heavy-lidded happiness, padding from sea to shade like semi-aquatic cats.

Too soon we had to leave. The airport gift shop sells varying novelties of rum and cigar, and holidaymakers lie in the sun underneath the departures board, having forgotten the dim limbos they're returning to. As we rolled towards the departure gate, we saw the wall of photos taken as we disembarked.

For \$9, the same giggling girls were offering 8x10 relics of a time before we saw this dark blue sea and its fish and light, and smelled the plantain bleach or the fourth fresh towel of the day. We floated on to the plane, empty-handed.

■ *British Airways Holidays (0844 493 0759; ba.com/dominicanrepublic) offers a week at the Zoëtry Agua Punta Cana from £1,791 including flights, transfers and all-inclusive accommodation; a week at Tortuga Bay from £2,600, including flights, transfers and breakfast; or a week at Reserve Paradisus Punta Cana from £2,179 with flights and all-inclusive accommodation. Tailor-made trips mixing these and other options are also available. Excursions and tours can be arranged through Amstar (001 809 221 6626; amstardmc.com). See reef-explorer.com for snorkelling excursions.*

## FLEE THE COLD: LAST-MINUTE WINTER SUN

### HAWAII

Bon Voyage (0800 316 3012; bon-voyage.co.uk/spotlight) has seven nights' room only at the Outrigger Hotel on Big Island from £1,155 (saving £185), including flights from Heathrow and car hire. Valid for selected departures from now until March.

### MOROCCO

The Best of Morocco (08450 264585; realmorocco.com) has seven nights at the Majorelle Suites, in the fashionable Gueliz quarter of Marrakech, from £495 (saving £300) for stays until 31 January, including flights from Gatwick, transfers and the services of a housekeeper, who will shop and cook for you.

### TANZANIA

Tanzania Odyssey (020 7471 8780; tanzaniaodyssey.com) has seven nights at Ras Kutani, a retreat on the Tanzanian coast, from £1,685 (saving £225) for selected departures from now until March. The price includes flights from Heathrow, internal air transfers and full-board accommodation.

### BARBADOS

ITC Classics (01244 355 550; itcclassics.co.uk) has seven nights' bed and breakfast at Tamarind Cove on Paynes Bay from £1,270 (saving £540) for travel until 31 January, including flights from Gatwick and transfers.

### THAILAND AND MALAYSIA

Departing 28 January, Bales Worldwide (0845 057 1819; balesworldwide.com) has a nine-day trip, combining two nights in Bangkok, two nights in Singapore and a three-night journey on the Eastern and Orient Express between both cities, from £2,450 (saving £400), including flights from Heathrow, transfers, B&B accommodation in the hotels and full board on the train journey.

### MALDIVES

Trailfinders (0845 050 5871; trailfinders.com) has seven nights' half board in a beautiful and simply furnished garden villa at Vilu Reef Beach & Spa Resort from £1,579 (saving £125). The price includes flights from Gatwick and transfers. Book before 26 January for selected departures in February.



Enjoy the colourful spice markets in the souks of Marrakech.

### CAMBODIA

Stay seven nights at Hotel de la Paix, a boutique hotel in the heart of Siem Reap, from £1,589 (saving £220) with W&O Travel (0845 277 3355; wandotravel.com). The price includes breakfast, flights from Heathrow and internal flights. Book by 31 January for travel from 14 February to 31 March.

### JAMAICA

Stay seven nights at the elegant Coyaba Beach Resort, a boutique beach-front resort just 15 minutes east of Montego Bay, Jamaica's second largest city, from £915 (saving £100) with Kuoni Travel (01306 747002; kuoni.co.uk). Departing on 4 February, the price includes B&B accommodation, flights from London Gatwick and transfers.

### MEXICO

For departures until 12 February, ITC Classics (01244 355 550; itcclassics.co.uk) has five nights' room only at the Rosewood Mayakoba, on a mile-long arc of white sand on the Riviera Maya, from £1,825 (saving £279), including flights from London Heathrow and private transfers.

### INDIA

Visit the famous Golden Triangle (Delhi, Agra and Jaipur) on a six-night trip with Indian Odyssey (08454 300107; indiano-dyssey.co.uk). The holiday is available on selected dates in February and March and costs from £975 (a saving of £550), including flights from Heathrow, B&B accommodation, guided sightseeing and transfers.

Nicola Iseard

(what is Haiti today). It grew into the "pearl of the Antilles", a colony with huge wealth, thanks to its position on trade routes, and to sugar cane production. After protracted struggles between the two colonies, and with their colonial powers, Haiti declared independence in 1804, the Dominican Republic in 1865.

### ECONOMY

The Dominican Republic has the largest economy in the Caribbean, based mostly on tourism, but it is also active in agriculture, mining and sugar refining.

### VISA REQUIRED?

No, but all tourists need a tourist card, bought on arrival at the airport for \$10.

### VISITING HAITI

The political situation in Haiti is fragile but the Foreign Office does not advise against going. There are no visa requirements, although there is a departure tax, currently \$25. Buses run between Port-au-Prince and Santo Domingo, capital of the Dominican Republic, taking about seven hours.

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