

# History of Punta Cana, Dominican Republic



Tourists who come to the area maybe unaware that Punta Cana is specifically the name of the area to the south of the airport where the very first hotel was built. Most of today's resorts are actually in Cabeza de Toro, Bavaro, Cortecito, Arena Gorda, Macao and Uvero Alto. But nearly all the hotels use the name Punta Cana in their branding even when they are not geographically located in Punta Cana. Here follows Punta Cana's history in a nutshell...

Back in 1969 a group of American investors bought 30 square miles of undeveloped land bordering 5 miles of the east coast of the Dominican Republic in the province of La Altagracia. The land was pretty much just impenetrable jungle and bush with no access roads and only a handful of small, fishing villages dotted along the coast. But the beaches were some of the most beautiful on the island with their white sand, coconut palms, crystal clear waters and protective coral reefs.



A few years later a Dominican entrepreneur Frank R. Rainieri joined them with his vision to create a resort community that respects the natural habitat while offering visitors a world class vacation experience.

At the time the area was called Punta Borrachón (Drunken Point). Señor Rainieri wisely decided to rename it Punta Cana. Together with Theodore W. Kheel, an influential American lawyer and labour arbitrator, Dominican fashion designer Oscar de la Renta and international music artist Julio Iglesias they formed the Tourist Development, Residential and Industrial Company currently known as Grupo PUNTACANA.



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*images to enlarge*

In 1971 the first hotel was built in Punta Cana – the Punta Cana Club which stood on the area now occupied by PUNTACANA Resort & Club. The old hotel could accommodate 40 guests and consisted of 10 rustic cabins, a clubhouse, a small employees residential area, a power plant and a short, dirt airstrip for light aircraft.

In 1978 the French resort chain Club Med built a 350 room Club Med Punta Cana just north of Punta Cana Club.



But the area was still pretty isolated. The nearest town, Higüey, took 6 hours to reach. A new road was needed. The Colgate-Palmolive Company, which was required to repatriate its local entities' export earnings, became involved and the new highway was built making it possible to reach Higüey in 30 minutes thus connecting Punta Cana to the rest of the island's road network.



In 1982, after 8 long years of negotiation with the Dominican government, Grupo PUNTACANA's primitive airstrip was permitted to be developed to accommodate full sized commercial aircraft. In a joint venture with Club Med construction began and in 1984 Punta Cana International Airport (PUJ) was inaugurated with the first international flight (a twin turbo propeller aircraft) arriving from San Juan Puerto Rico. It was the world's first privately owned international airport. Without it Punta Cana wouldn't be what it is today. In that inaugural year the airport received 2,976 passengers, in 2009 it received just under 4 million.

Currently there are over 60 resorts in Punta Cana. These resorts, along with other tourism related business, provide employment for the ever growing local population.

To counteract Punta Cana's lack of public facilities provided by the Dominican government, Grupo PUNTACANA took upon itself the responsibility of creating and maintaining the area's public infrastructure. Access roads, security, waterworks and treatment plants, electricity, waste disposal, recycling, workers housing and schools were all established. Until recently Punta Cana was the only place on the island without daily electricity blackouts.

By providing the infrastructure Grupo PUNTACANA have turned this once inhospitable jungle coastline into a booming industry responsible for a quarter of the country's gross domestic product. Their sense of corporate responsibility is admirable – profits from the airport have been invested in community projects. Interest free educational loans, medical facilities, revolving loan funding for their worker's housing and an ecological foundation to protect and preserve the land and marine life are all part of their mission to promote sustainable development. Unfortunately, not all tourism operations in the area practice such a high level of social and environmental awareness and poverty is still apparent on your bus ride from the airport to your 5 star resort. But Punta Cana has come a long way from its humble origins and sustainable development is a constant, ongoing project. Idealistically one day in the future its effects will reach every part of the community.

- In the meantime Punta Cana continues to grow with construction starting on the new Coral highway linking Punta Cana to La Romana airport bringing the journey time down

from 90 mins to under 45. The future for Punta Cana looks bright, with it being set to remain one of the top vacation destinations in the Caribbean.

\* <http://www.dominicantoday.com>