

## Charlotte Observer

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SECTION I



### DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, NATURALLY

Preserving nature is a big part of Puntacana Resort. **Page 2**

## Travel

# An eco-friendly Caribbean resort

Site in the Dominican Republic has nature preserve, beach, golf, unusual plant and animal life and access to a big barrier reef.

FOREIGN CORRESPONDENCE



JOHN BORDSEN

Jake Kheel, 31, is environmental director for Puntacana Resort & Club in the Dominican Republic; he is also executive director of the Puntacana Ecological Foundation. Originally from Massachusetts, Kheel has been involved with the Dominican Republic for 15 years, and has lived there almost four.

**Q. Punta Cana is a large enough tourist destination to warrant an international airport. How big an area is this?**

When the founders of our company arrived about 40 years ago, there wasn't a whole lot out here - no major population, just a handful of families. There were a few fishing villages; people burned the forests to make charcoal.

The region, on a peninsula in the far southeastern part of the island, was known as Carbon Engano and our property was known as Punta Borrachon - "Drunkard's Point." They coined the name Punta Cana: Cana is a native palm species.

Nobody realized how much the area was going to grow, so they didn't trademark "Punta Cana." Now the whole region is known by that name. There are 27,000 rooms in some 50 hotels, most of which have "Punta Cana" in their names.

We get lost in the shuffle, but our resort was the first.

**Q. When did the environmental aspect come into play?**

We always had the idea of sustainability. Ted Kheel, my grandfather's brother, was one of the resort founders and he was involved in ecological and civil rights issues in the U.S. His partner, Frank Ranieri, was a Dominican who wanted to combine progress and devel-



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Boats linger near the beach in the Dominican Republic.

opment.

Our resort is a bit different. Most hotels here are all-inclusive. They're looking for a large turnover of guests who spend a week or so. In our case, we're looking for people who might come down any day of the week and stay at a more exclusive hotel, and may be interested in buying a retirement home.

The whole development is low density, for people who want privacy and space between homes. We leave the forests and native trees where they are. Tourists typically come to see the beaches, the Caribbean water and the biodiversity.

**Q. The various Caribbean islands, including Hispaniola, which the Dominican Republic shares with Haiti, have somewhat different environments. What does Punta Cana have that's unusual?**

The Dominican Republic's biodiversity: 36 percent of plants here are only found naturally on this island. The Punta Cana area has the second-largest barrier coral reef in the Dominican Republic, and it fringes almost 80 percent of our property. A common characteristic of our area is freshwater lagoons fed by underground springs. And you have different insects, birds and lizards.

**Q. What are the most unusual things?**

I'd say the palm chat - the national bird - which is endemic to the island. Palm chats are common in Punta Cana. They're loud, outgoing and live in big nests that typically are in the cana palms. The bird has a symbiotic relationship with the tree.

Plants? The guayacan - "the tree of life." It's a strong and slow-growing hard wood that used to be used to make boat propellers. They grow near the coast, where the wind is strong. They're beautiful.

**Q. Your grounds have nature preserves - and golf courses. Do you ever get wild boars turning up on the 6th green?**

No boars. You might see feral cats or dogs, but they're not common. You'll see birds and insects but nothing poisonous and no poisonous snakes. The golf course has a lot of green area, but not a huge amount for animal interaction.

**Q. What about snorkeling and scuba?**

There definitely are some good spots. The reef is good. There are issues with overfishing, partly because so many people live here. There are few long-term local fishermen left; most are roving in from other places. We're working to make the front of our property a no-fishing zone.

There's plenty of scuba, and there are trips from the resort that go to a national park - an eco reserve - maybe an hour and a half from here.

Our property has a wide range of stuff to do - golfing, sailing, bike riding, tennis, scuba diving. You can walk the nature trails and swim in the freshwater lagoons. Then again, just hanging at the beach is nice.

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