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A taste of the Caribbean: Dominican Republic

By Gill Williams [9/05/2010](#)



Resort that makes celebrity honey is a treat in the Dominican Republic



On a normal day you'd expect about 80 flights to roar over the Puntacana Hotel on the final approach to the [resort's](#) airport.

But the skies above the Dominican Republic were empty, with aircraft from Europe grounded by the volcanic ash.

So I paced up and down the beach like Robinson Crusoe, trying to figure out a way to escape. The watersports centre was a possibility. Pedalos looked hard work but we could have stolen a seacat, caught the tradewinds and sailed to Miami. My Man Friday on the next sunlounger was more philosophical about a few days' delay.

"If we have to be marooned, there are worse places to be stuck than a four-star resort in the Caribbean," he said, taking a slurp of Presidenté beer.

True. We had the pool terrace all to ourselves - apart from a couple of Martinair crew trying to figure out if their layover allowances would run to another round of margaritas.

When I closed my eyes, the only sounds I could hear were the lapping of waves on the Atlantic beach and the hammering of woodpeckers in the palm trees.

This is what the whole region of Puntacana would have sounded like a few decades ago when it was still jungle.

That was before the building of a resort which now encompasses three championship golf courses, two hotels and luxury villas owned by the likes of Latin crooner Julio Iglesias.

There's one other tropical sound here that Julio didn't bargain for when he bought his beachhouse - the buzzing of bees in the aircon system.

Happily, bees and Julio have come to an agreement - they won't buzz if he won't sing - and now the colony has been moved to its own hive in the grounds of the resort's organic farm.

This farm is run by the Puntacana Ecological Foundation and they provide homes to displaced jungle bees. Each hive is named after local celeb home-owners... next to Julio's hive is one named after fashion designer Oscar de La Renta.

The honey collected from the tropical forest near this farm is sold by the Foundation to help pay for local conservation work.

One of their projects, just a short stroll along the beach, is the protection of a 1,500-acre nature reserve called the Indigenous Eyes Ecological Reserve.

This reserve is home to more than 150 species of birds and 500 varieties of plants and takes its name from 12 freshwater ponds - called Eyes by the native Taino people.

With turquoise water and fossilised shells embedded in the limestone, the Eyes are like the backdrop to movie hit Avatar. The Taino believed the Eyes had curative properties, so in the interests of medical research (mosquito bites, margarita hangovers) I lowered myself into water so clear it was difficult to guess the depth.

From beneath the surface I could see Man Friday's feet dangling off the jetty. Fish nibbled at his toes while he snoozed in the sun.

The best time for a swim is before 3.30pm when the ponds are invaded by local schoolchildren. They go to a private school in the resort village where parents pay according to what they earn, so the children of the poorest gardener share a classroom with the grandkids of the company's millionaire owner.

Dominicans are certainly not the richest people in the world but they are among the happiest - officially the second most cheerful in the world after Costa Ricans.

"And we're getting happier all the time," giggled farmer's wife Maria, when we dropped into her farm about an hour from the resort. Maria has good reason to smile. A few years ago she had no running water, the nearest well being half an hour's slog uphill.

Then she opened her home and farm to visitors and now has a thriving business selling fresh chocolate and coffee to tourists.

Better still, a local adventure daytrip company - Bavaro Runners - paid for a cistern to be built on the farm. Now Maria and her family have running water.

But some things don't change and the farmers still hand-roast, grind and pound coffee and cocoa beans, letting loose the most delicious aromas on Earth.

Bavaro Runners' safari truck takes us from the coast up the dirt road to Maria's Farm. It's our first stop on the so-called chocolate route that winds between farms into the mountains.

Maria treats us to coffee and chocolate then pours a shot of something called mamajuana that sounds illegal, looks like Ribena and has a kick like one of the mules we see tethered along the roadside. It's local moonshine and we need another coffee to keep us on the straight and narrow choc route.

If you want to make money in this country, go into the paint business because every village house is elaborately decorated. Outside most villages are tiny banks no larger than garden sheds with names like Banco Ponderosa and Banco Paul. Not exactly the Royal Bank of Scotland but infinitely more profitable.

The choc tail halts briefly at the cocoa farm belonging to Senor Lin. Kevin the guide marches us through cocoa plantations and the Lin grandkids climb trees to pick fruit for us to munch on the journey.

Our next stop is a women's chocolate-making co-operative.

Dreading a cup of hot chocolate in the 30 degree heat, I had another pleasant alcoholic surprise. Cocoa wine. This is not some sickly liqueur but a rather good, clear fortified wine with just a hint of chocolate.

Teetotalism obviously isn't a big thing here. The chocolate is fermented and the cordials invariably laced with rum. Luckily we're being chauffeured from one alcho-choc experience to another. Kevin decides we need sobering up so we have lunch at El Parador Oasis outside El Seibo.

No chocolate wine on the menu, which is perhaps a good thing. So we order yucca empanadas - pasties stuffed with the flesh of those pot plants that were popular in the Eighties.

It may be all peace, quiet, humming birds and buzzing bees down at the beach but outside the holiday resorts lies a much, much noisier country. The Dominican Republic is at its most raucous during the build-up to an election (not ours, theirs).

The campaigning, with free tots of mamajuana, ear-splitting merengue music and the chance to loudly slag off the opposition is just like the circus coming to town.

We join the rally on the streets, helping put the partying back into party politics.

After the third glass of mamajuana I've forgotten we're four hours late for dinner and I don't much care. Good thing we didn't have a flight to catch...

What's the deal

Get return flights with Thomas Cook Airlines (www.flythomascook.com) in June from Gatwick to Puntacana from £409. B&B at the Puntacana Hotel from £30pp per night - see www.puntacana.com

If you want to help with the Puntacana Ecological Foundation, go to www.puntacana.org

For daytrips into the countryside with Bavaro Runners Safari Adventures go online to www.bavarorunners.com