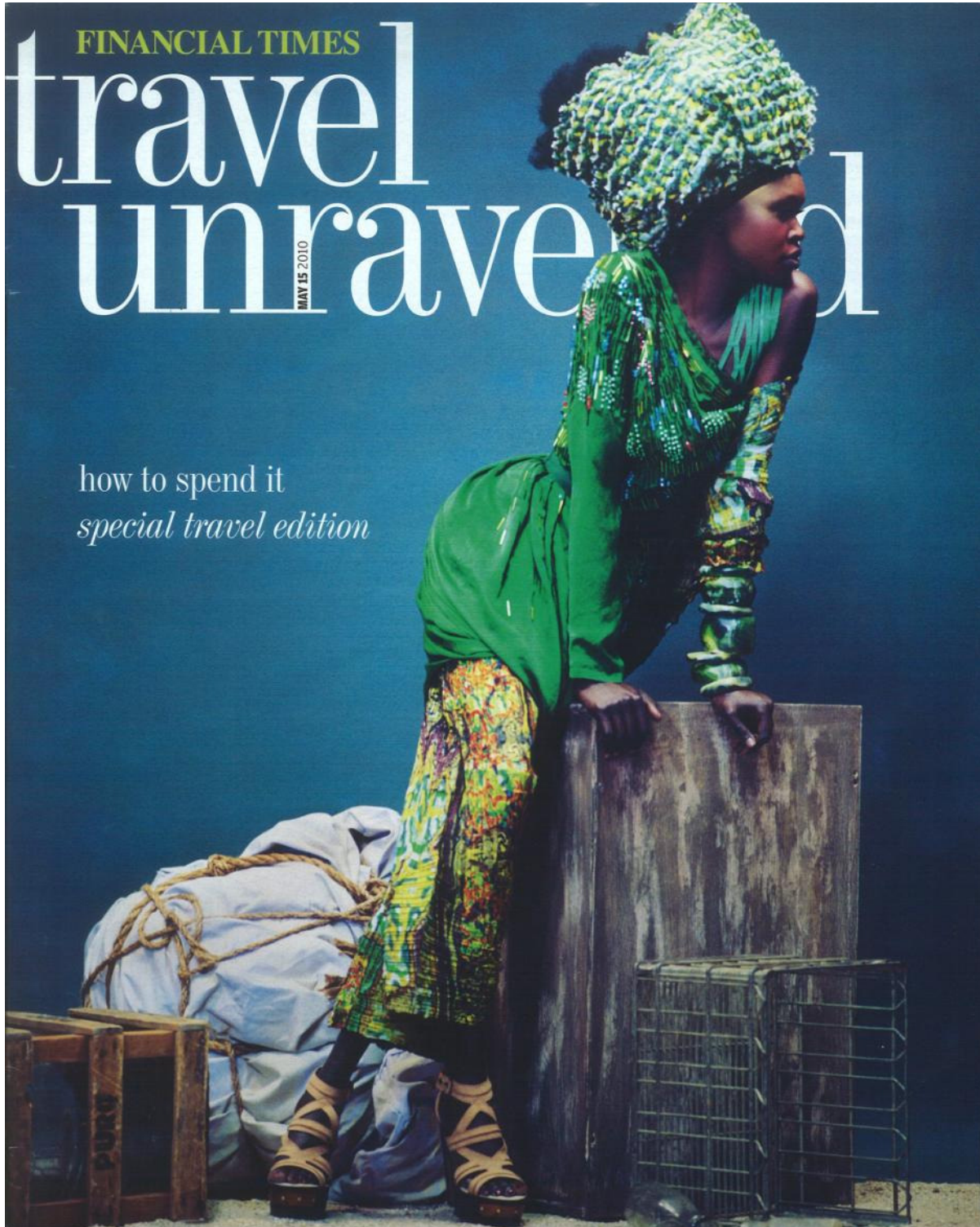


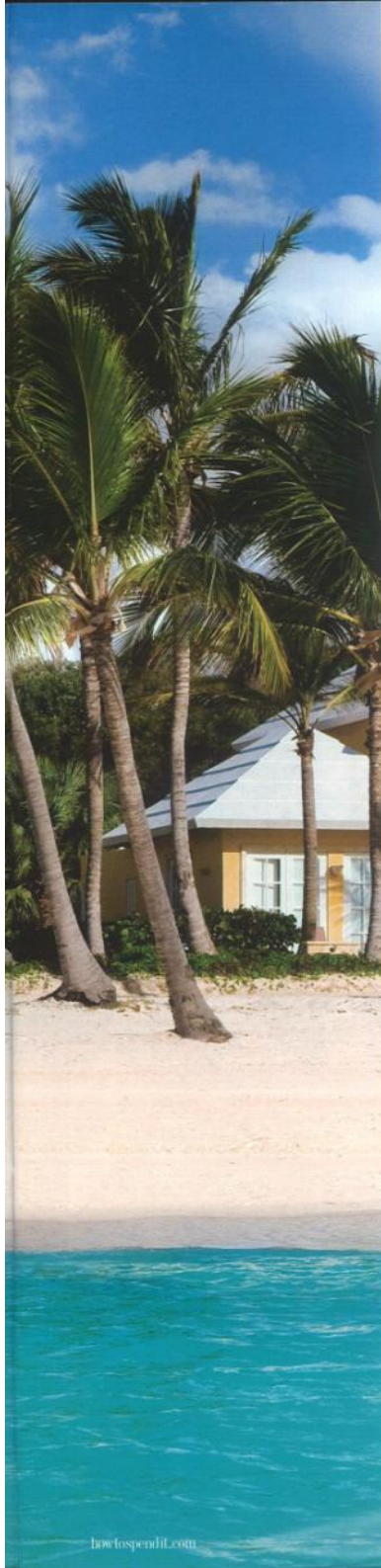
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anno dominican

Stunning beaches and pristine solitude have always been the Dominican Republic's best assets. Now direct flights and a clutch of impressive new five-star hotels are luring a new breed of luxury traveller, says Paul Richardson.

The road to the Sanctuary was wide, straight and empty. Where it left the traffic-choked public highway, a security man at a barrier checked my ID and waved me through. On this side the road was so new that the wheels left their imprint in dust on the clean grey Tarmac. Swathes of vegetation stretched away on either side. For centuries there was nothing in Punta Cana – no towns, no industry except coconut farming, nothing but tropical forest fringed by some of the world's most heartstoppingly beautiful beaches. In the old days, intrepid lovers of lonely shores would come on long safaris by 4x4 to enjoy the absolute solitude and simplicity of the place. Then came the pioneers, the Club Meds, the big Spanish hotel chains and an orgy of building followed by the tourist boom of the 1990s. The reinvention of an unloved wilderness as a full-on Caribbean playground within the space of 20 years is one of global tourism's more extraordinary narratives.

But this isn't the only thing about the Dominican Republic that might take you by surprise. The Republic is the largest nation in the Caribbean after Cuba, occupying the eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola (the other third is Haiti, but that's another grim and heartbreaking story), as well as the region's most visited country – and its most successful tourist economy.

If the DR has not hitherto figured on your mental world map, it is probably for the following reason. Its fame as a destination rests on its huge all-inclusive hotels, based on the Spanish package-tour model, whereby a single price gets you flight, accommodation and all the buffet food you can eat upon presentation of the coloured bracelet you are obliged to wear for the duration of your stay. For many years now the country has done very well out of the cheap-and-cheerful holiday business, packing the punters into hotel complexes on an ever more enormous scale.

But something has changed. The market is on the move – upwards. Tacky tourism might bring in the bucks, but in the long term it tarnishes the brand, so that after a while not even the cheap clients will touch it. What was needed, the Dominicans realised 10 years ago, was a new dimension of luxury and exclusiveness to bring in the high-spending, influential clients that would rescue the DR from its downmarket destiny.

It was this new dimension that I wanted to explore. I flew in from a snowbound London on the new British

Airways flight from Gatwick to Punta Cana, the privately owned international airport servicing the Republic's eastern region. I spent my first night in a brand-new five-star on the north-eastern edge of the cape, where the all-inclusives peter out into untarnished coastline. In my huge suite at the Zoëtry Agua I lay in a jet-lagged trance, soothed by the sound of the ocean. I loved the airy pavilions of the Zoëtry's open-plan bar/reception area, roofed with palm-leaves in the local style, and the hotel's vaguely Oriental atmosphere of chilled-out luxury.

It was pretty good, but not as good as the Sanctuary. Or to give it its full name, Secrets Sanctuary Cap Cana. Cap Cana is the latest chunk of the island's once-virgin east to be groomed for tourism, but this time it's for high-end travellers and private buyers. Among the projects slated for the 30,000-acre estate are some impressive global brands: Sotogrande is planning a new hotel, and Donald Trump is investing a projected \$1.5bn in his Trump Farallón Estates at Cap Cana, on the cliff-top at Farallón. We are promised "real-estate opportunities" and more golf courses to add to the DR's existing 35 courses (the estate already has several, including Jack Nicklaus's own design at his not-wonderful Golden Bear Lodge & Spa). Everything is on hold just now, poised for an economic recovery that seems to be perpetually just around the corner.

So you drive through the razed jungle down the wide, straight, empty roads, and you pull up at what, with your eyes half closed, might be a Tuscan palazzo, or perhaps a Spanish monastery. And a whole world of five-star fabulousness opens up surprisingly before you. There is a belltower, a chapel with a lounge bar in it, a cloister with a fountain – the stonework cleverly aged, the masonry subtly coloured in Mediterranean tones of ochre and terracotta. Among the columned pavilions, the clay-tiled roofs, the sea just over there, the whisper of a breeze in the trees, you forget to worry about the fakeness of everything in this context-free former wilderness, and simply admire the panache of this architectural embodiment of luxury. If one were disposed to nitpick (and one is), the Sanctuary falls short on its rooms, which are a notch below the public areas in sheer gorgeousness. Service is charming, as always in the Dominican Republic, where the greatest resource is the amiable nature of the locals, but is a little

too laid-back and loose-limbed for its own good. The welcome letter for Mr and Mrs Richardson made me giggle, and the fresh fruit was appreciated, but I couldn't

Left: Tortuga Bay, the jewel in the crown of the Dominican Republic's high-end hotel scene.



Left and below: the five-star Secrets Sanctuary Cap Cana is located in a former wilderness that is being groomed for luxe tourism.

help thinking that a half-bottle of fizz would have gone down nicely, especially at \$400 a night.

On a sultry January evening, the hotel was spectacularly lit, the domes and balustrades of the buildings set off against the soft black of the tropical night. Cap Cana's franchise restaurants, such as the David Crockett grill and the two-star Michelin Le Divellec restaurant, were functioning at half-cock or not at all. There is a "virtual" feeling, inevitably, about a five-year-old development on a monstrous scale where much of the real estate is still up for grabs. A scale model in the foyer at the Sanctuary gave an idea of the resort's projected upscale marina, apparently inspired by a Mediterranean fishing village. The mock-up, under several metres of glass, looked like something from an archaeological museum showing the way some ancient city might have looked – except that this particular city doesn't yet exist and, who knows, perhaps never will.

The luxury end of Dominican tourism is parcelled out into these vast branded estates, these private paradises for the rich and/or famous. From the vantage point of these plush enclaves, the all-inclusive horrors of Bávaro beach seem to lie in some parallel universe. One high-end development with a much longer track record than Cap Cana is Casa de Campo (pictured overleaf), on the south-east coast of the island, near La Romana. This 7,000-acre property, owned by the Cuban-American Fajul family, was once a sugar-cane plantation. For more than 30 years the place has been run as a real-estate proposition with a chic hotel at its heart, attracting some big showbiz names to its 1,500 private villas, beach, yacht marina, three polo fields and four golf courses (including the famous Teeth of the Dog, which golfing friends tell me is one of the Caribbean's very best). At the heart of the estate, on a cliff above a meandering river, sits Altos de Chavón, a "Mediterranean village" built in a hotchpotch of coral stone and brick – entirely false, but endearing in a Portneiron kind of way, and with its own stone amphitheatre, where Sting, Frank Sinatra and the Pet Shop Boys have all graced the stage.

Casa de Campo is essentially a sumptuous private suburb with everything a sumptuous private person



At night the sound of the waves and rustling palms crept in through the French windows – the rest was silence.

could reasonably wish for. The 265-room hotel has just had a superlative refit, all noble woods and plate glass, shades of brown and beige and cool modern furniture. Residents and guests all have access to the estate's lavish facilities, from the ranch with more than 150 horses to the top-flight spa by New York's Cygalle. (There is also an international airport, La Romana, handily sited just over the road.) Over lunch at the Beach Club, run by the people from Le Cirque in Manhattan, I picked up the gossip on the Puerto Rican and Venezuelan millionaires who have their second homes in the beachfront villas, costing anything between \$5m and \$25m (or \$3,500-\$10,000 a night, whichever you prefer). In one of the Casa de Campo's grandest villas Jay-Z and Beyoncé once threw a wild party. Clinton and George Bush Senior have stayed (but not at the same time). Gloria Estefan and Shakira are supposed to drop by from time to time (each in her own private plane).

Three days into my luxury-hotel safari, it was all going swimmingly. Then came the horror: the night I spent in an "all-inclusive". A glitch in the itinerary deposited me at Dreams Punta Cana Resort & Spa, a 620-room monster popular with Canadians and Russians. The Dreams was quite an eye-opener, and

it wasn't a pretty sight. The place exuded all the discreet charm of a package-tour resort on the Costa Blanca at the height of summer.

Large white Canadian couples and large white Russian couples competed to drink the pool bar dry of rum and Coke. A design fiend's screaming nightmare, the Dreams' public spaces were painted exactly the shade of burnt pink a Muscovite turns when you leave him or her in the sun for too long. I still wake in the night remembering the ghastliness of a towel fashioned into a doll shape, perched on a banquette at the end of the bed.

Shaken by the all-inclusive experience, I took a few days off to see the sights. One day I went up-country on an open-sided bus, lumbering along dirt tracks through dripping plantations of coffee and cacao. There is a growing eco-consciousness in the Dominican Republic, which translates into whale-watching trips off the Samaná peninsula, treks up the Pico Duarte – at 3,098m the highest mountain in the Caribbean – and meet-the-locals tours of the rural hinterland. Half an hour from the coast the countryside was rolling, unspoilt, tropically lush and dotted with shacks painted Caribbean pastel-pink, turquoise, yellow and pistachio green. Country

folk wielded machetes in their vegetable patches, while their elders sat in plastic chairs in the sun, chickens and children scurrying around their feet. I enjoyed watching the processes of Dominican country life – tobacco rolled into rustic cigars, coconuts crushed and pressed for oil, and cacao nuts sun-dried and ground for chocolate (then sold, rumour has it, to the Hershey Company). It was touching, too, to see the pride with which these people showed off the new cookers, loos and other mod cons they had been able to buy with the money they earned from these simple demonstrations.

Distances in the DR are greater than you think: from rich to poor, and from place to place. Most tourists never venture from their Truman Show hotels, and only a handful ever make it to the country's biggest sight of all. From Punta Cana it is a four-hour drive into the capital Santo Domingo, making an overnight stop essential. Fortunately, there are several fine places to stay in town, small hotels all of them, some in historic buildings, such as the classic

Nicolás de Ovando, the Hotel Francés and the Doña Elvira. By chance, I stumbled on the best of them, a five-room B&B in a colonial house, beautifully sited on a rampart at the sea end of town. At the Coco Boutique Hotel, run by a Portuguese and his Irish wife, everything that can be painted white is painted white except for the sky-blue façade, an exercise in cool and calming minimalism that works like a charm, especially after a day spent tramping the hot stone of the old town.

Santo Domingo was the first colonial city in the New World, founded (by Columbus's brother Bartolomé) a mere six years after the discovery that a New World existed at all. Old town Santo Domingo is a historic gem whose importance is hard to overestimate: this is the ground zero of the colonial enterprise in the Americas. The golden stone of this 16th-century city comprises some of the oldest buildings in the whole of the continent: its first cathedral, first hospital, first university, first court of justice. Francis Drake reputedly stayed at a tavern, founded in 1505 and still open for business, just over the way from the Columbus family home with its Gothic arched façade. The streets of the old town are a marvel to explore, poking among the chic shops

and down-home restaurants, the rough-hewn palaces and crumbling colonial churches. At the Mesón de Luis, I sat under a revolving fan as a very large waitress moved with great slowness, as if swimming in the thick and humid air, bringing me fried chicken with beans and rice and bottles of icy Bohemia beer.

A swift dose of Dominican coffee and it was time to head east again, to my final port of call and the jewel in the crown of the Dominican Republic's high-end hotel scene. Tortuga Bay (pictured on opening page) is part of the Puntacana estate, where, back in the early 1970s, Oscar de la Renta and Julio Iglesias, together with local businessman Frank Ranieri, took a far-sighted punt on this wild tract of the untouched east. In a part of the island with no infrastructure of any kind, no access roads, no water supply, just jungle and beach, the development took a while to take shape. Forty years later, however, the results have been worth the wait. The estate is run along sustainable lines, with organic gardens, an ecological foundation and a 1,500-acre nature reserve with freshwater lagoons of astonishing clarity, glittering and cool in the hissing heat. Down on the beach, signs warn clients that they may share the sand with sea turtles, which come to lay their eggs here. If the green-ness of Punta Cana is impressive, almost more so is the exquisitely achieved luxury of its flagship hotel. As far as boutique properties in the DR go, Tortuga Bay is the tops. Despite the air of rarefied exclusivity that hangs over it, in many ways the hotel has the virtue of simplicity. The pool with the bar and restaurant around it is your basic rectangle; the beach



Above: the hotel at Casa de Campo has recently had a superlative refit.

has a few loungers, nothing more. There is no irritatingly intrusive service here, no rumpus or music, only the creamy, dreamy sand, stretching away for miles to left and right, and a sea so still and blue that it seems to glow from within with a mesmerising inner light. The Caribbean has many lovely beaches, but the eastern end of the Dominican Republic surely possesses some of the loveliest.

As for the villas, designed by de la Renta, I have seldom stayed in a hotel room so faultlessly tasteful, yet whose total lack of high-design pretension almost dares you to think it plain. My suite was high-ceilinged, white-walled, with a colonial touch in the white-painted shutters and the locally made mahogany furniture. The bed was a giant four-poster entirely of wicker. French windows opened onto a delicious terrace, the palms and the sea just yards away.

A sense of well-upholstered calm imbued the hotel. At night the sound of the waves and the rustle of the palms crept in through the French windows – but the rest was silence. Tortuga Bay, it struck me, was the “anti-all-inclusive”. Its place in the scheme of things was about as far from the m el e and mayhem of a big Dominican package hotel as it’s possible to get. And that, believe me, is a highly recommendable place to be. ✦

CARRY ON, DR

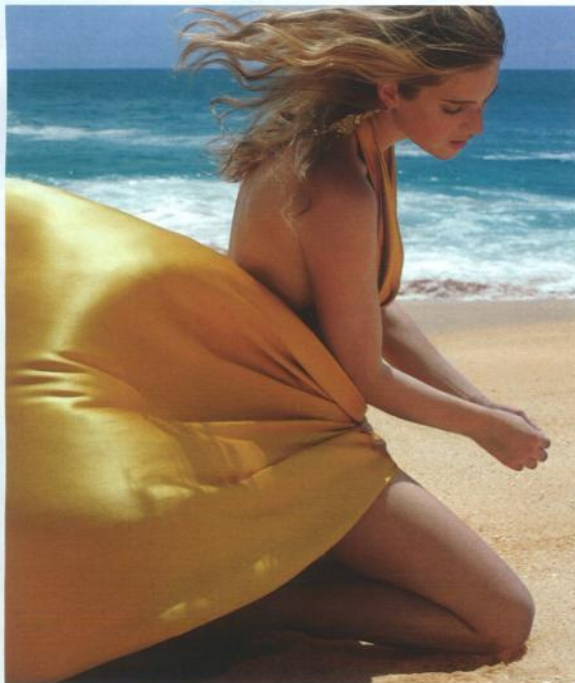
The best time to visit the Dominican Republic is high summer – June and July. These months are also the Caribbean’s warmest, with stable temperatures of between 25°C and 30°C and are generally quieter than the winter high season. And though May to October is considered the rainy season and August to September is the most likely period for hurricane activity, the weather varies little throughout the year. Avoid Easter and Christmas/New Year, which can get very busy.

Paul Richardson travelled as a guest of the **Dominican Republic Tourist Board** and **British Airways** (0844-493 0757; www.ba.com), which has flights from London Gatwick to Punta Cana (via Antigua) twice weekly (Monday and Thursday), £647 return (Club class, from £2,187). **British Airways** (www.ba.com/dominicanrepublic; 0844-493 0758) also offers seven nights all-inclusive at Zo try Agua Punta Cana from £1,483, including return flights from London Gatwick and return transfers. Staying at the Secrets Sanctuary with British Airways is the same price with flights and all-inclusive accommodation, but no transfers. Tortuga Bay for seven nights including British Airways flights is £2,462, including B&B accommodation and return transfers.

The following prices are for a double room, unless otherwise stated: **Casa de Campo**, La Romana (+1809-523 3333; www.casadecampo.com.do); from \$295. **Coco Boutique Hotel**, c/Arzobispo Portes 7, Santo Domingo (+1809-685 8467; www.cocoboutiquehotel.com); \$100. **Secrets Sanctuary Cap Cana**, Playa Juanillo, Punta Cana (+1809-544 4343; www.secretssanctuaries.com/sanctuary www.capcana.com); from \$400 per person. **Tortuga Bay**, Punta Cana, Higüey (+1809-959 8229; www.puntacana.com); from \$640. **Zo try Agua Punta Cana**, Uvero Alto, Punta Cana (+1809-468 0000; www.zoetryresorts.com); from \$550.

Kuoni (01306-747 008; www.kuoni.co.uk) offers seven nights all-inclusive at the Zo try Agua Punta Cana in a garden-view junior suite, from £1,595 based on two sharing, including flights with British Airways from Gatwick, private transfers and use of airport lounge in the UK.

IMAGE: BICOL; WWW.HABESORTS.COM/DR



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