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Teeth of the Dog is the Dominican Republic's most famous layout

Puntacana

Viva La Republic!

Shaking off its slightly downmarket image thanks to recent visits by the Pitt-Jolie family and Beyoncé, the **Dominican Republic** is tipped to be one of this year's hottest destinations, not least because of the sheer quantity of top-class golf courses sprouting up on its craggy shores

Even if you are the proud possessor of a GCSE in geography, you might not be entirely sure where the Dominican Republic is. Your instinct might suggest that it's close to the Caribbean somewhere, but did you realise that it shares the island of La Hispaniola with Haiti? In fact, it's just east of Cuba, west of Puerto Rico, south of the Bahamas, north east of Jamaica, very close to the Tropic of Cancer and is sandwiched between the Atlantic to the north and the Caribbean to the south.

Including the stopover in Paris, the Air France flight from Heathrow takes about 12 hours, but as soon as you step out of the aircraft into the balmy tropical air, you sense that the effort has been worth it.

As well as a golf course or two, many of the resorts have swimming pools, tennis courts and perhaps a spa. But how many can boast their own international airport?

Puntacana can. More appealing even than the well-appointed terminal buildings is La Cana golf course. One of a handful of Pete Dye designs dotted around the eastern end of the island, it opened for business in 2001 and is the first of the recent wave that has lifted the total number of courses on the island to around two dozen.

The original site was perfectly flat and two million cubic metres of pulverised limestone were spread around to create the contouring and produce some mighty mounds, steep greenside drop-offs and intriguing greens. The result is a magnificent test of golf that thrills from the comparatively straightforward opening hole to the spectacular finish alongside a stunning beach.

The more you golf in the Dominican Republic, the more you will realise how much importance is attached to sea views and holes that front on to the beach. As well as keeping their own score, conscientious visiting journalists are obliged to tally them as they go round. Here the score was 14 of the former and four of the latter. The fact that this adds up to 18 is purely fortuitous, as a hole that fronts on the beach scores in both categories. Only where the latter is greater than the former are there grounds for suspecting an excess of visits to the drinks' buggy.

Care for the environment is another recurring theme and La Cana, in common with most recently constructed courses in the Dominican Republic, is proud of the fact that it is planted with Paspalum grass, which can be irrigated with brackish water. In fact, La Cana claims to be the first course in the Caribbean to have used this type of fescue.

A second course at Puntacana is opening later this month. Designed by another legendary architect, Tom Fazio, it winds along the north shore of the resort's luxury Corales enclave, which is the posh end, and boasts a number of celebrity residents including Julio Iglesias, Oscar de la Renta and Mikhail Baryshnikov. Rumours that Bill Clinton owns a less-than-modest house on the estate are rife, but unconfirmed. What is certain, however, is that the former US president is a great fan of the Dominican Republic and often visits to both golf and stock up on cigars.

Once again, an enormous amount of material has been shifted around to create attractive features to transform what was a previously flat headland. The result is a simply superb course. However, I hesitate to recommend it simply because much is made of its exclusivity and consequently the number of rounds that can be played on it will be severely limited. Nevertheless, and despite what is certain to be a stratospheric green fee, it's worth a try, if only to try and spot megastars. Oops, I nearly forgot, there are six ocean-front holes, including the great 18th, which demands a gutsy tee-shot over the Bay of Corales.

Punta Espada, the first of three Jack Nicklaus signature courses to be created at Cap Cana, has strong claims to being the number one track on the island. Indeed, Golfweek magazine selected it as the best course in the Caribbean and Mexico and it's not hard to see why. It undoubtedly has an unquantifiable magic that provokes gasps of admiration in nearly all those lucky enough to play it.

Opened at the end of 2006, the $18m dollar course sweeps around the coast in majestic style to present a challenge to which no golfer with blood in his veins can fail to respond. Even the so-called inland holes are not short of drama or appeal. At a gimme shy of 7,400 yards off the back tees, it's certainly not short and the great players of the Champions Tour have learnt to respect it.

Roco-Ki was designed by Nick Faldo

Last year, Keith Fergus' holed a 95-yard wedge for an eagle two on the penultimate hole on Sunday afternoon and finished with a total of 13-under-par, which gave him a one-stroke victory over Mark O'Meara and Andy Bean. Meanwhile, the course shoots to the top of the Dominican Republic's 'Ocean Hole Leaderboard' with a score of eight.

Another day in the Dom Rep, and another great golf course designed by a world famous pro: this time it's the Nick Faldo's Legacy at the Roco-Ki Resort. Legend has it that Mr Mulligan created the concept of the free provisional on the first tee because the journey to his course crossed a rickety bridge that rattled the bones and unsettled the nerves. The unfinished road leading to Roco-Ki would suggest a similar dispensation be made here were it not for the fact that the opening hole is the easiest on the course, so that even a badly topped drive won't do any irreparable damage.

Enjoy the first, because what follows becomes significantly less friendly as the course drops down from a cliff-top headland, weaves through a hostile mangrove swamp, saunters around a gentler sawgrass area, before emerging back onto the headland. It's very tough in places and the caddies – which, incidentally, are a welcome feature on all the courses – certainly earn their tip as they tangle with the worst that nature has to offer in a brave attempt to locate your ball. Try and save at least one of your rapidly diminishing stock of ammunition for the last, a spectacular uphill par five that offers not one, but two opportunities to smack one either over, or into, the ocean. It and the 17th are the only genuine ocean holes.

Casa de Campo resort is blessed with no fewer than four Pete Dye courses, the newest of which languishes under the rather awkward name Dye Fore, presumably as in 'to die for'. Another unfortunate misnomer is the Links, which is well inland. Both, however, are highly regarded and look spectacular.

La Romano Country Club is a private facility within the complex that occasionally let's the Great Unwashed onto its fairways. But the undoubted jewel in the Casa de Campo crown is the Dientes del Perro, translated as Teeth of the Dog, which boasts, wait for it, no fewer than eight sea-front holes and is regarded by many as simply the best course in the Caribbean. Although I've not played them all, I've certainly not played any better. Incidentally, its name, which is a truly great one, comes from the resemblance some of the rocks that stick out of the sea bear to a canine's canines.

Built 40 years ago without the benefit of suitable equipment, the course was hewn out of the rock with sledgehammers, pickaxes and chisels. Generous fairways and the soothing sound of the waves lapping against the shore combine to provide a predominantly relaxing experience. However, the pulse quickens and the adrenalin flows when skirting the ocean, particularly on the 5th and 7th, which are a thrilling pair of par threes that require committed tee shots over the ocean to perilous greens.

With Donald Trump having set up shop in town, developing resorts, hotels and villas, there's no shortage of places to stay, including the Sanctuary Cap Cana Golf & Spa which, as you'd expect in the Dominican Republic, comes with an obligatory ocean-front view.

Cap Cana

How to get there

Air France flies to Punta Cana three times a week from London. It also operates three flights a week to Santo Domingo, Las Americas. Both flights are from Heathrow and go via Paris. For more information visit www.airfrance.com. For golf packages visit www.yourgolftravel.com.