

The irresistible blend of generous hospitality, championship golf courses and vibrant scenery on offer in the Dominican Republic was more than enough to persuade *Giuseppe Velotta* to pack his clubs and pay a visit on behalf of KINGDOM

THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC FIRST APPEARED ON THE MAP, SO TO SPEAK, ON 5 DECEMBER 1492—DURING CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS'S MAIDEN VOYAGE TO THE NEW WORLD. THE INTREPID TRANSATLANTIC EXPLORER LANDED ON THE ISLAND AND IMMEDIATELY NAMED IT HISPANIOLA, EVEN THOUGH IT WAS ALREADY KNOWN AS "QUISQUEYA" TO THE 600,000 TAINO INDIANS WHO LIVED THERE. THE TAINOS WERE PEACEFUL AND HOSPITABLE TO COLUMBUS AND HIS CREW OF SPANISH SAILORS. IN TURN, COLUMBUS GREW FOND OF HISPANIOLA AND DESCRIBED IT IN HIS JOURNAL AS A "BEAUTIFUL ISLAND PARADISE WITH HIGH FORESTED MOUNTAINS AND LARGE RIVER VALLEYS."

Within a few years the settlement of Santo Domingo had been confirmed as the capital despite being dwarfed by Pico Duarte, the highest mountain in the West Indies at more than 10,400 feet.

Fast forward to 2010, more than 500 years since the first tourist checked in, and the Dominican Republic, which occupies the eastern part of the island, is once again highlighted on a map—this time the golfing map. Voted golf destination of the year in 2009 for the Caribbean and Latin America by the International Association of Golf Tour Operators (IAGTO), it has 25 courses and counting (mostly dotted around its coastline) along with eight international airports and a population of approximately 10 million people.

Situated in the heart of the Caribbean, just west of Puerto Rico and a couple of hours' flight time from Miami, the Dominican Republic is well established as a tourism hot spot—in stark contrast to Haiti, its near neighbor on the western side of the island for which the recent earthquake and subsequent humanitarian disaster are just the latest in a seemingly unending catalog of tragedies.

More than a million Americans make the trip each year to the Dominican Republic, including a rising number of celebrities, musicians, politicians, billionaires and even royalty,

many of whom have rallied round impressively in recent weeks to help arrange funds and medical supplies for stricken Haiti.

The attractions of the Dominican Republic start with its sandy beaches, dazzling green landscapes, waterfalls, year-round sea breezes and exotic cuisine, not to mention its friendly policies towards the environment. A leader in eco-tourism, the Dominican Republic created the world's first sanctuary for (humpback) whales at Samana on the east coast in 1986, and has since established protection zones for more than 20 percent of its land and coastal areas.

Further along the east coast from Samana the Dominican Republic is benefiting from the investment of over \$6.5 billion in luxury developments, championship courses, marinas and the maintenance of ecological sites to preserve the pristine beauty of the land. This region now has half the country's courses, so this seems as good a place as any from which to launch our golf adventure. One development that inevitably catches the eye is **Cap Cana**. Located on the easternmost tip of the Dominican Republic, once fully developed it will encompass 33,000 acres and be home to three Signature golf courses, 5,000 residential units and at least five 4-star luxury hotels.

After an extremely comfortable flight from Europe with Air France, we landed at the local Punta Cana airport. Cap Cana is only 10 minutes from the airport and an integral part of the resort is a state-of-the-art marina which has up to 1,000 slips and is capable of mooring yachts measuring up to 150ft in length. As it is the only full-service marina within a 250-mile radius that encompasses both Puerto Rico and the Turks & Caicos Islands, Cap Cana is the ideal place to stop if your yacht needs a service or refuel during an island-hopping spree round the Caribbean. In addition, the marina has a grand canal surrounded by boutique shops and restaurants that are guaranteed to keep you occupied if your dreamboat does indeed require some remedial attention.

Those wishing to sleep on dry land will be made especially welcome by the elegant **Sanctuary Cap Cana Golf & Spa** resort. The Sanctuary has 176 suites, innovatively laid

Golf doesn't get a lot better than the 10th hole at Punta Espada





All the guests at the Sanctuary Cap Cana Golf & Spa resort can enjoy their own piece of a private beach with a clear view of the sea

out to form a small yet romantic colonial town dotted with palm trees, gardens and waterfalls. Designed with more than a nod to its Spanish colonial heritage, the resorts' buildings are adorned with rich woods, marble and tiles throughout.

The majority of the suites and villas are either directly on the beach or have clear views of the sea. The most attractive of these have to be the island suites: set on two levels, with their own private mini-island complete with beach, palm trees and enough space to practice wedge shots. For the visitor whose budget cannot quite stretch to an island suite, the Sanctuary offers over half a mile of private beach, five swimming pools and a spa. And once the sun has set there are four restaurants catering, seemingly, for almost every taste. Meat lovers can enjoy the renowned David Crockett steak house while those who prefer fresh fish can try the day's catch at the Blue Marlin seafood bar.

The delightful scenery and relaxed surroundings of the Sanctuary notwithstanding, the highlight of your visit could well be a round on Cap Cana's **Punta Espada** course. Laid out by Jack Nicklaus and home to the Champions Tour's Cap Cana Championship in late March, Punta Espada showcases 7,396 yards of golfing beauty that is never far from the pristine Caribbean coastline at any stage during the round. It opened to rave reviews in November 2006 and four months later earned a place in *Golf Digest's* top-100 courses outside the U.S. Currently 46th in that particular ranking, it also features prominently in similar listings in other reputable publications.

Even though it is Nicklaus's first foray into the Dominican Republic, he has created a layout that offers sea views from every hole. The layout cleverly incorporates the limestone cliff that cuts through the course and also features

interesting elevation changes, tidal lagoons, beaches, bluffs and jungle foliage. Eight of the holes either hug or cross the coastline, most notably the par-4 17th where the tee shot has to carry a bay, while perhaps the most memorable view is from the back tee of the 2nd, perched high above the fairway of a 611-yard par-5 that doglegs right towards the sea.

Las Iguanas, the second of the projected trinity of Nicklaus courses at Cap Cana, is due to open later this year and is expected to have a distinctly windswept, almost linky feel.

But golf isn't the only attraction on offer. **The Golden Bear Lodge & Spa** provides a privileged level of service that includes the personal attention of both a butler and a golf concierge. Inspired by the life and legacy of Nicklaus, the lodge's elegantly styled suites form a condominium village that overlooks Las Iguanas. Throughout the lodge are framed pictures and souvenirs from Jack's glittering playing career. Another of the lodge's highlights is its Magnolia restaurant where the cuisine served up by chef Jose Alias is sumptuous.

More stunning golf can be found a few miles up the coastline at Puntacana Resort & Club, home to two courses—P.B. Dye's **La Cana** and Tom Fazio's **Corales**—with a third, P.B. Dye's **La Hacienda**, due to open in a few months' time.

Born from the vision, passion and commitment of New York labor negotiator Ted Kheel and local crop duister Frank Rainieri, the resort has grown from a jungle covering 30 square miles into one of the world's most sustainable tourism developments. Originally the location comprised miles of coastline, coconut groves and coral reefs, but had no infrastructure for access. Beach cottages were built in 1971, with a school opening the following year for the children of employees. Then, driving his own →

bulldozer, Rainieri cut a rough road through the undergrowth and subsequently cleared a modest airstrip. Throughout, Rainieri and Kheel maintained a constant focus on nurturing the local community and environment in the knowledge that it was the only way to bring about long-term success on a sustainable basis.

By 1983, the single dirt runway had turned into the world's first fully private international airport. Today, it's the third busiest hub in the Caribbean with direct flights arriving daily from the likes of New York, Miami and Paris, but there's no shortage of

On arrival we are greeted by the smile of Jay Overton, director of golf and the course's unofficial guardian angel. "I know Mr. Rainieri will come and ask me about the course condition," he tells me. "He wants the playing experience to be perfect".

Stepping out on to the 1st tee you can understand why Rainieri gave Fazio carte blanche, and as much land as he needed, to create the best course possible. Certainly, the fruits of his labor do not disappoint. The adventure of playing Corales takes you from inland holes bordered by lush trees



Evan Schiller / www.golfsbots.com

Fazio's design skills are memorably showcased by the glorious 8th hole on the Corales course at Puntacana Resort & Club, "where land meets the sea"

VIP treatment. An automobile is often waiting on the runway to whisk guests through customs and deliver them to the first cocktail of their visit within 20 minutes of landing.

Four decades after construction began, the resort now contains 420 elegant guest rooms found in a variety of tree-shaded villas, most ocean fronted and all set in extensive gardens. Puntacana also has a full-service, deep-water marina, five restaurants, a 1,500-acre ecological reserve, three miles of white-sand beach and a variety of home sites beside the golf course. The jewel at the heart of the property, though, is **Tortuga Bay**, a collection of 15 private beachside golf villas with interiors designed by fashion guru Oscar de la Renta. One of the country's most famous citizens, De la Renta first became involved with the development of Puntacana in 1997, and he soon persuaded fellow celebrities Julio Iglesias and Mikhail Baryshnikov to move there. Today, all three own beachside residences along the north shore of the Corales enclave.

Fazio's stunning Corales layout ('where land meets the sea') has only recently opened to provide a deeply personal golfing experience for the residents and guests of Tortuga Bay. With a maximum of 40 tee times available per day, there's no danger of the holes ever showing signs of wear and tear, or of golfers being put on the clock by the course ranger because they've slowed down to admire the breathtaking views.

and resplendent flower beds to holes circling crystal blue lakes and ultimately toward and alongside the crashing waves of the rocky, turquoise Bay of Corales. The highlight of this closing stretch is the stern challenge set by the final three holes, symbolically named "Codo del Diablo" the Devil's Elbow. Another unusual variation from Fazio—alternative greens and tees—can be found on two holes at Corales—the par-4 15th (two greens) and par-3 17th (two tees).

Water is a dominant aspect of the La Cana course with ocean views on 14 holes with the other four—the 5th, 7th, 17th and 18th—all positioned right on the beach. The par-3 holes are particularly challenging, especially the 12th which has an island green in the middle of a lake, but the signature hole is the short, 'risk and reward' par-4 7th where long hitters can aim at the green over some coconut palms and a cluster of pot bunkers or play safe with an iron to an island fairway.

P.B. Dye, whose favorite bumper sticker reads "My Other Car is a Bulldozer," has helped to design two other courses in the Dominican Republic in addition to his two creations at Puntacana. At **Barcelo Golf de Bavaro**, he is currently updating Juan Manuel Gordillo's 1991 design, while his other layout is **La Estancia**, perched on a cliff edge 400 feet above the Chavon River near the town of La Romana on the south coast.

P.B. is a natural for the Dominican Republic. He →

graduated from the University of Tampa where he studied Spanish and on the day La Cana opened he delivered a 20-minute speech in the native language. “Everyone came up to me afterwards and said ‘wow,’ speaking to me in Spanish,” he recalled. “I had to tell them that I can speak it and write it, but I can’t hear it that well.”

P.B. Dye is, of course, the son of Pete Dye, who has also left an indelible mark on the Dominican Republic—most notably at the port of **Casa de Campo**, a 7,000-acre playground a few miles east of La Romana. Casa de Campo has long been a popular stop-off for passengers of the ubiquitous cruise liners that zigzag across the Caribbean. In addition to golf, this five-star complex offers tennis, shooting and riding while shore excursions take visitors to the restaurants and shops of such nouvelle villages as the Marina and Altos de Chavon which was designed to resemble an old Spanish town. The most celebrated of Dye’s three creations at Casa de Campo is the evocatively named and hauntingly beautiful **Teeth of the Dog**, a genuinely challenging test that is regarded as one of the best courses in the Caribbean and was recently ranked 33rd in *Golf Digest’s* non-U.S. ranking.

Seven of the 18 holes on Teeth of the Dog are set directly alongside the Caribbean Sea—a distraction that few golfers can resist whatever the state of their game. Not surprisingly the Teeth of the Dog has an abundance of devilish doglegs and signature Dye obstacles such as elevated greens and trick-of-the-eye trees.

Teeth of the Dog might be ‘top dog’ as far as Casa de Campo aficionados are concerned, but its nose is only just ahead of the 18-hole **Dye Fore** course which boasts, in the 12th and 15th holes, two of the finest and most picturesque par-threes in the world, and can stretch to a Gargantuan 7,770 yards off the tips.

The Links course, Dye’s other effort at Casa de Campo, is hilly with a plethora of bunkers and notably tall rough made up of bahia and guinea grasses. Compared by many visitors to traditional Scottish links courses, it meanders around a number of lagoons and features several lakes populated with a bewildering variety of wading birds. It also has only five holes where water does not come into play and is thus quite a challenge in its own right. Dye’s other Dominican Republic design, dating from 1980, was in a completely different setting. **Las Aromas** is a short (6,210 yards), inland gem set amidst tobacco fields in the hills to the south of the town of Santiago.

Space limitations mean we can’t profile all the Dominican Republic’s golf resorts, but suffice to say there has been no shortage of ‘big name’ designers practicing their craft there. Among the other notables are: Sir Nick Faldo (Roco Ki), Nick Price (Punta Blanca) and Jose ‘Pepe’ Gancedo (White Sands and Cocotal)—all immediately north of Puntacana; Greg Norman, whose Signature course near the town of Juan Dolio on the south coast opens later this year; Gary Player at Guavaberry, also near Juan Dolio; and Robert Trent Jones Sr., who built Playa Dorada (1976) and Playa Grande (1997—the last course he designed) on the north coast.

None of this golfing creativity, though, would have been possible without the warmth of Dominican Republic hospitality and service. One enthusiastic traveler describes it as “the ultimate home away from home.” It was that way for Christopher Columbus, and has been for visitors ever since. ■

JETBLUE AIRWAYS TO FLY TO PUNTA CANA FROM J.F.K.

JetBlue Airways, the leading airline servicing the Dominican Republic, are launching a new nonstop international service to Punta Cana from New York’s John F. Kennedy International Airport and Boston’s Logan International Airport in May.

The daily flights between Aeropuerto Internacional de Punta Cana and JFK begin on 6 May with the weekly service from Logan International starting two days later.

“JetBlue flies nonstop to 35 destinations from Boston and Punta Cana is its ninth Caribbean destination from Boston,” said Ed Freni, Director of Aviation for the Massachusetts Port Authority.

“JetBlue is proud to be launching a fourth destination in the Dominican Republic,” said Scott Laurence, JetBlue’s vice president of network planning. “We are very happy with our operations in the Dominican Republic and look forward to continuing our growth and sharing the JetBlue Experience—complete with free snacks, drinks, seatback TVs and friendly service—with more travelers to and from the country.”

The Punta Cana service will be operated with spacious 150-seat Airbus A320 aircraft.

JetBlue serves 53 cities with 600 daily flights. All seats are assigned, all travel is ticketless, all fares are one-way and an overnight stay is never required. For information or reservations, call 1-800-JETBLUE (1-800-538-2583), TTY/TDD 1-800-336-5530 or visit jetblue.com



Water is a treacherous presence on the 5th hole at Pete Dye’s Teeth of the Dog

GOLF WEBSITES

capcana.com

casadecampovacation.com

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legr.com (La Estancia)

punta-blanca.com

puntacana.com

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