Financial Times “How to Spend It”

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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. Sweaths of vegetation stretched away on either side.

For centuries there was nothing in Punta Cana — no town, no industry except coconut farming, nothing but tropical forest fringed by some of the world's most breathtakingly beautiful beaches. In the old days, jerky boxes of locally shoddy would come on long sailabs 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 army of building followed by the tour operators of the 1990s. The recreation of an unspoilt 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 southern third of the island of Hispaniola (the other third is Haiti, but that's another story and breathtaking 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 reasons. Its fame as a destination rests on its huge all-inclusive hotels, based on the Spanish package-hotel 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 paniers 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 saps 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, so I flew in from a snowbound London on the new British Airways Flight from Gatwick to Punta Cana, the privately owned international airport serving the Republic's eastern region. I spent my first night in a brand new five-star on the north-eastern edge of the cap, where the all-inclusives peter out into untamed coastline. In my huge suite at the Zoetry Agua I lay in a jet-lagged trance, soothed by the sound of the ocean. I loved the airy partitions of the Zoetry'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 as it's full name, Secrets Sanctuary Cap Cana. Cap Cana is the latest chink 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 3,000-acre estate are some impressive global brands; Sunprime is planning a new hotel, and Donald Trump is investing a projected $1.5bn into his Trump Paraiso Estates at Cap Cana, on the clifftop at Paraiso. 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 raked 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 luxury opens up surprisingly before you. There is a belltower, a chapel with a lounge bar in it, a cluster with a fountain — the research cleverly aged, the massive stone-coloured in Mediterranean tones of ochre and terracotta. Among the colonnaded pavilions, the clay-tiled roofs, the sea just over them, 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 b), the Sanctuary falls short on its sinuses, which are a notch below the public areas in sheer gorgonness. Service is charming, as always in the Dominican Republic, where the greatest resource is the amiable nature of the locals, but it 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
help thinking that a half-bottle of fine white should have gone down easily, especially at $40 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 Michel Leétierc 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 of the Sanctuary gave an idea of the resort's projected upscale marina, apparently inspired by a Mediterranean fishing village. The mock-up, under several meters 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 luxuriant end of Dominican tourism is paraded out into these vast bristled estates, these private paradises for the rich and/or famous. From the vantage point of these plush enclosures, the all-inclusive horizons of Bavaro 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 (shown overhead), on the south-east coast of the island, near La Romana. This 7,000-acre property, owned by the Cuban-American Taupol 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 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 next to the Caribbean's very best). At the heart of the estate, on a cliff above a meandering river, sits Atos de Chavón, a "Mediterranean village" built in a kitch-cook of coral stone and brick—entirely false, but undeniably in a Portmeirion 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 could reasonably wish for. The 265-room hotel has just had a repulsive relift, 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 Cigalee. (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 $20m (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 Dream was quite an eye-opener, and

Left and below: the five-star Sanctuary Cap Cana is located in a former wilderness that is being grazed for fine tourist property.

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-driven,Brazilian cocktail bar buzzed with the air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned air-conditioned a
and down-home restaurants, the rough-hewn palaces and crumbling colonial churches. At the Mercado de La Isla, 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 Punta Cana resort, which, back in the early 1970s, Oscar de la Renta and Julio Iglesias, together with local businessmen Frank Ramirez, 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 hardwood forests of astonishing clarity, glittering and cool in the hating heat. Down on the beach, signs warn children that they may share the sand with sea turtles, which come to lay their eggs here. If the green reeds 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 top. Despite the air of ruled-on 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 a basic rectangle; the beach has a few loungers, nothing more. There is no irritatingly intrusive service here, no campus 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 mesmerizing 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 needlessly tasteful, yet whose total lack of high-design pretension almost draws you to think it plain. My suite was high-ceileded, 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-appointed calmo 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 tasteless and mannered of a big Dominican package hotel as it’s possible to get. And that, believe me, is a highly commendable place to be. 

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