

## Destination Review: the Dominican Republic

In the last issue of our newsletter, many months ago, I wrote about Vietnam as a destination and I promised a follow-up. Well that will have to wait because earlier this year I fell in love with a



place I just have to share with you, the Dominican Republic. Last year was difficult for the tourism industry in the Dominican Republic, affectionately known as the DR. Tourism was way down in 2019 after biased media reporting regarding the dozen or so American tourist deaths. Never mind the fact that over 2.4 million Americans visit the DR every year without incident. Resorts were operating at 30% capacity as the media continued to hype their narrative throughout the year. After months of waiting the FBI finally released a report indicating all of the deaths the media labeled as “suspicious” and speculated were due to tainted alcohol, were actually due to natural causes. Which is what the government of the DR reported in the first place. These deaths were tragic, but they were not suspicious. And now that we can put that behind us, I thought it would be a good time to write an article about the DR as a destination.

Can I just say the DR is an amazing place to visit? Well it is. And it is one of the most affordable destinations in the Caribbean. The DR is a vacation destination that provides a wide range of experiences, from her world class white sand beaches to the adventure of wind surfing and the history of one of the oldest settled islands in the Caribbean, the DR has something for everyone. There are half a dozen international airports making even the most remote corner of the DR accessible to tourists.

Punta Cana is the best known tourist area in the Dominican Republic, a popular destination for an all-inclusive beach style vacation. There are four distinct resort areas within a reasonable drive from the Punta Cana International Airport: Punta Cana, Cap Cana, Bavaro Beach, and La Romana. A relaxing beach vacation at a resort in any of those areas would be a refreshing experience.

We stayed in the Cap Cana resort area, which is something of a more exclusive development. Cap Cana is a short 15-minute drive from the Punta Cana airport and it has only been developed for about the past 18 years. Our property, Secrets Cap Cana, is an adults-only all-inclusive resort catering mainly to couples. I posted plenty about the resort on social media so I won't repeat it all here other than to reiterate it was a little slice of paradise.

During our stay at Secrets we arranged to tour two all-inclusive properties located in Punta Cana proper that have been popular with our clients, the Royalton Punta Cana and Memories Grand Splash. The two properties are operated by the same company, both recently renovated, and both are family-oriented all-inclusive resorts. The properties are adjacent to one another with the Royalton being more upscale and providing beach front access. Although the Royalton is open to families, Memories Grand Splash is the more family friendly property of the two. It is more budget friendly as



well, and it has an amazing water park with a lazy river, kiddie water slides and splash pools, and adrenaline producing extreme water slides for the kids at heart.

Memories Grand Splash is situated behind the Royalton so it doesn't have its own beach, but a section of the beach in front of the Royalton is set aside for guests from Memories Grand Splash. That beach is a short walk through the Royalton property, but most people take advantage of the complimentary tram service the resort offers. The ride takes about 10-15 minutes and trams run continuously day and night. In addition to sharing the beach, the two resorts offer shared access privileges with guests staying at the Royalton having full access to the facilities at Memories Grand Splash, including the waterpark. Access to the Royalton facilities is more limited for guests staying at Memories Grand Splash.

One thing we did not do during our stay at Secrets Cap Cana is venture off property, other than our trip to the Royalton and Memories Grand Splash. For me, a beach vacation is a time to relax



and stay on the resort, though there is plenty to do throughout the DR. If you are staying at a resort in the La Romana area of the DR, one excursion to consider is a day trip to visit the fishing village of Bayahibe, and from there on to Saona Island. You can get to the island aboard a fast speed boat, or enjoy the journey as much as the destination by taking a two-hour scenic catamaran sail. Once on the island you won't find much to do other than enjoy the beach, the food, and the rum drinks. While that sounds great, I have to say if I am staying at an all-inclusive this is one excursion that wouldn't appeal to me since it essentially gives me what I've already paid for.

But...some people like a change of scenery and Saona Island makes for a pleasant day trip.

If you prefer to get away from the most popular tourist destinations in the Punta Cana area, you have quite a few options. If you are beach fan, you'll surely want to consider heading north from Punta Cana to the Samana Peninsula. You can fly into the Samana El Catey International Airport and then take an hour-long drive to one of several resort areas on the peninsula. Playa Rincon, located on the northern portion of the peninsula, is consistently ranked among the top 10 most beautiful beaches in the world in popular travel publications. There are no resorts or hotels on Playa Rincon...travelers have to stay in nearby Las Galeras and make a circuitous 30-mile drive to get to the beach. If you don't have a rental car there are tour operators that offer day trips to Playa Rincon that we can book for you. Two additional resort areas located on the south side of the Samana Peninsula, Samana and La Balandra, have resorts with nice beaches of their own, and both are about an hour's drive from Playa Rincon so you can have the best of both worlds.

If you are looking for a beautiful beach that is more isolated and well off the beaten path, head to the south side of the DR, not far from the border with Haiti. Bahia de Las Aquilas is a hidden gem that even many locals don't know about. It is a 4 ½ mile stretch of beach located within the Jaragua National Park, though it's not easy to get to. Access requires flying into La Isabela International Airport in the capitol city of Santo Domingo, and then it is an all-day affair by car with the last stretch being on unpaved roads followed by a short boat ride. Your reward will be a pristine sandy beach that isn't chock-a-block full of tourists. You won't find any of the all-

inclusive resorts that dot the coast in the Punta Cana region, but there are hotels in nearby towns. Or you can also stay in one of several glamping sites situated adjacent to the beach.

Along with some of the best beaches in the Caribbean, another of the Dominican Republic's great assets are her people. Spanish is the official language, and though many Dominicans speak English, we did run across a few communications problems. Nothing a bit of patience couldn't work through, but it is something to be prepared for particularly if you are heading to any of the less touristy destinations.

Overall Janet and I found the people we encountered to be proud of their heritage, pleasant, polite, and deeply hurt by the bad media coverage their island paradise has been receiving here in the U.S. We didn't feel any sense of resentment, just disappointment more than anything else. The good news is now that the FBI report is out tourism to the DR is on the upswing. There are pockets of crime throughout the DR so it is wise to use the same precautions there as you would when traveling here in the states. If you are planning to travel through the country rather than spend all of your time at a resort, be sure to do your homework and follow the guidelines published on the State Department's travel website.



Even though the DR is most popular for its beaches, there are many other attractions on the island. Perhaps the most popular being the capitol city of Santo Domingo. It is the oldest city in the Americas, settled by the Spanish conquistadors. You'll get a good view of colonial monuments and you'll see Diego Columbus Alcazar, the first cathedral built in the new world. You can also visit the National Presidential Palace and enjoy lunch at a traditional Dominican restaurant.

One of the first tourist areas in the DR is Puerto Plata, located on the DR's northernmost coast. Whether you are interested in history, culture, or adventure this region has it. Downtown Puerto Plata is a convenient 25-minute drive from the Puerto Plata International Airport, and there are multiple hotel and resort options to fit just about any style of vacation you seek.

During your stay in Puerto Plata you can take a cable car up to the highest point on the DR's north coast and see their Christ the Redeemer statue, stroll through the town's historic Victorian district, visit the oldest structure in the DR as you explore the San Felipe Fortress, or stroll along the Malecon (boardwalk or promenade). You won't want to miss the botanical gardens with their many Instagram worthy photo ops. One note of caution if you are considering a visit to Puerto Plata...you'll want to be mindful of cruise ship schedules. Puerto Plata is a popular shore excursion for ships docking at the Amber Cove Cruise Terminal, but Janet and I can help you sort that.

If you are an adventure traveler the DR offers plenty to feed your adrenaline addiction. Puerto Plata has become a popular destination for wind surfers, and throughout the DR you can find 4X4 and beach dune buggy tours, ziplining, and much more. Then there's Monkeyland, a five-acre squirrel monkey habitat managed by a husband and wife team. They have acclimated the monkeys to human contact and some amusing photo ops result for those willing to tolerate the

monkeys climbing on your head...and all over your body. Janet and I had a similar experience in Roatan and can I just say it was fun. A trip to Monkeyland is usually packaged as a day trip with



an excursion to a plantation where guests learn from local farmers about their organic farming methods. You'll see how they grow and harvest cinnamon, cacao, and coffee, and have the opportunity to taste the local vanilla, coffee, or hot chocolate. There are plenty of additional day and half day trip options...a trip out to Catalina Island, a visit to waterfalls, river caving, horseback riding on the beach...there is no shortage of activities if you want your visit to the DR to be more adventure oriented. Or

you can do like I do and spend all your time on the beach. I know we'll be back. In fact, we've already booked a return visit for January, and the beach is right where you'll find me!