

# delightful Dominican Republic



An intoxicatingly beautiful land  
of pink flamingoes,  
humpback whales, rainforests,  
pristine beaches and  
extraordinarily friendly people.

BY THOMAS WILMER

Amazing. Astounding. Incredible. These words are exclaimed by those who discover the Caribbean's best-kept-secret: the Dominican Republic (Republica de Dominicana). This travel destination is no secret to the British, Canadians, Italians, French, Spanish and others from around the world – but it certainly is to Americans.

The Dominican Republic, occupying the eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola, is one of the Caribbean's top tourist destinations. Surprisingly, if all 37,000 annual American visitors arrived on the same day, there would be a hotel room for every one of them. It is the Canadians and Europeans who keep the Dominican Republic tourist trade booming throughout the year. Do the Euros and Mapleleaves know something Americans don't? Apparently so.

There are two primary reasons why such a paltry number of American tourists visit the Dominican Republic (fondly referred to as D.R. by locals and visitors). First, virtually

all advertising is targeted at Canada and overseas. Second, many Americans know very little about the country other than the it shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti – and by association, many people assume the worst. Actually the two countries are as different as night and day.

The Dominican Republic is one of the Caribbean's safest and friendliest countries. Spanish is the *lingua franca* but most locals who work in the tourist sector are fluent in English and many also have a com-

mand of various European languages as well. Twenty-five years ago there were fewer than 3,000 hotel rooms in the entire country, and the economic base was dependent on agriculture. Today there are in excess of 38,000 hotel rooms and more are presently under construction. Tourism and manufacturing have taken over as the country's primary sources of income and employment, and corporate agribusinesses have supplanted traditional family farms.

holiday hotels, resorts and inns, along with an abundance of endearing attractions. For the outdoor adventurer there's something for every possible sensibility: highland mountains, broad verdant valleys, capes, atolls and cays, mangrove estuaries, saltwater lagoons, lush tropical rain forests, picture-postcard beaches, caves and coral reefs. An Eden of flora awaits the visitor, with more than 5,700 species of plants (some found only in the Dominican Republic), as well as distinctive land animal species and 258 bird species including the brilliantly plumed *piragua barrancoli* parrot, colorful parakeet, and flame-pink flamingo.

PHOTOS: THOMAS WILMER



Top right: Casa del Mar Resort, located on the southeast coast of the Dominican Republic. Above: Saona Island, a short boat ride from Casa del Mar Resort offers the visitor a glimpse of a very different world, where time seems to stand still.

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D.R. is graced with an extraordinary bio-diversity, a complete array of

Some tourists come specifically to enjoy the marine life such as the lovable, but endangered, Antillean manatee and sea turtles, while others schedule their visits to coincide with the annual arrival of the Atlantic humpback whale. Humpbacks inhabit La Navidad and La Plata

Banks from December through March during their annual, three-month mating season (their traditional birthing grounds are in Samana Bay on the north coast).

The land of Dominicana is home to 3,175 meter-high (10,318 feet) Duarte Peak, the Caribbean's tallest mountain (yes, they even have snow), as well as Lake Enriquillo, the largest in the entire Antillean chain (it's 44 meters below sea level). But this is just the beginning – there are numerous large, meandering tropical rivers where outdoor enthusiasts enjoy excellent fresh-water fishing, kayaking, canoeing and bird watching.

Thrill seekers love the opportunity to don a life vest and crash helmet and climb aboard neoprene rafts for explosive rides through exhilarating class-five rapids. There's truly something for everyone here from cycling and rain forest hiking to sailing and excellent deep sea SCUBA diving and snorkeling. The Cabarete region east of Puerto Plata is wind-surf heaven and many people are surprised to learn that the Dominicans have hosted the World Cup of wind surfing for many years.

#### CASA DEL MAR RESORT: PARADISE FOR HALF THE COST

The all-inclusive resort concept is one of the fastest growing vacation trends in the tourism industry. It makes perfect sense to know before leaving home exactly how much the vacation is going to cost. Typically, the room, all meals and drinks, nighttime entertainment and outdoor sport activities — wind surfing, jet skiing, horseback riding and more — are included in the package price. It is not uncommon to pay \$300 or more per person, per day for a quality all-inclusive Caribbean resort experience.

Without a doubt, one of the best values in the Caribbean is to be found in the Dominican Republic. The all-inclusive vacation that will cost \$300 per night, per person on Jamaica, Antigua and other Caribbean islands, which are traditionally frequented by Americans, can be had in the Dominican Republic for less than \$150.

The 15-year-old AMSHA Hotel Company, one of the country's largest and most successful resort operators, maintains more than 1,700 rooms at six properties located in diverse environmental regions around the country.

The new 600-room AMHSA Casa del Mar Resort is located on the outskirts of the former sugar cane town of La Romana on the island's southeast coast. The Casa is a perfect example of an all-inclusive resort with class and an air of sophistication. Mind you, this is not a five-star experience, but it was never intended to be. Casa del Mar offers the attributes that one would expect at



The four-star gourmet restaurant Casa del Rio offers extraordinary vistas in addition to excellent cuisine.

an upscale three-star property. Located on sprawling oceanfront property (every room has a view of the sea), the Casa is dappled with coconut palms, palatial lawns and an abundance of colorful tropical flowers and plants. Of course, since it's been open less than two years, most of the resort's plantings are immature, but in traditional Caribbean fashion, the landscapers trucked in hundreds of fully grown coconut palm trees to add that essential air of an established property.

The culinary offerings are reason enough to book a holiday at Casa del Mar. Four distinct dining venues offer something for every gustatory whim and preference. The open air, thatch-roofed Bayahibe restaurant provides a casual, come-as-you-are environment (this is where most people go for breakfast and possibly lunch).

As buffets go, Bayahibe is far above average, but it's not fine dining; that's reserved for the opulent Asia restaurant and Michelangelo's. No expense was spared in either of the fine dining venues' construction. An evening at Asia is an occasion for dressing up, as the Oriental motif interior design, decorations and music are all stunningly elegant and authentic, and the service is superb.

In contrast, Michelangelo's is playfully Mediterranean in style (it's casual elegance here), and the designers obviously had fun when they created the towering metal palm trees and other whimsical Roman motifs (the color accents of copper-green, grays and blues were chosen to recall a Pompeian ruin). There in the middle of the Caribbean, the waiter introduces the evening's repast, and serves it, with all the aplomb and poise that

one would expect to find in a four-star restaurant in Milan.

If casual and quick define a preferred eating experience, check out Caramar Terrace. Located adjacent to the swimming pool and beach, under a mammoth, open air, palapa-style thatched roof structure, it offers sandwiches, barbeque specialties and thirst quenchers at the bar (the Terrace also serves an excellent Continental breakfast from 7 a.m. to 10 a.m.).

To keep a waistline in check from all the Casa's gourmet indulgences, visitors might want to sign up for a session of tennis followed by a wind surfing venture. Or maybe try SCUBA diving, beach volleyball, archery, horseback riding, canoeing, sailing, water skiing, or a leisurely pedal boat jaunt while the kids race around the bay onboard a banana boat. Afterwards, an appointment can be penciled in with one of the massage therapists or, at the very least, a long session in the Jacuzzi.

Guest accommodations are ample in size. All rooms are equipped with two doubles or one king-size bed with mini-bars, full baths, air conditioning and private balcony decks with ocean views. The rooms are perfectly acceptable, but sleeping accommodations are not the main reason why people stay at Casa del Mar. It is the location for certain and the friendly staff, as well as the wide array of amenities, that keep people coming back for more.

On-site activities and services include nightly live shows, discotheque, juice bar, pizza service, midnight snacks, beauty salon, excursion center, nanny service, gift shops, afternoon tea, and special children's programs and game area.

