



Punta Cana & the Southeast

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Why Go?

A Caribbean workhorse of sun and sand, the southeast is synonymous with go-big-or-go-home tourism and carries the weight of the Dominican Republic's most dramatic beaches and cerulean seas on its tanned, well-toned shoulders. Sprawling resort developments, some like city-states unto themselves, line much of the beachfront from Punta Cana to Bávaro, offering families, couples and the young and restless alike a hassle-free Caribbean holiday on some of the most idyllic environs in the region. But there is life beyond Punta Cana. Less-crowded beach towns like Bayahibe and Juan Dolio offer only slightly less dramatic seascapes but sands that go unshared with the masses; and isolated get-aways like Playa Limón, beyond the sugar plantations and inland mountains to the north, showcase a different and worthwhile side of the Southeast if you can tear yourself away from the buffets long enough to take the rewarding journeys required to make their acquaintance.

Best Places to Eat

- » Restaurante Playa Blanca (p103)
- » Mama Mia (p94)
- » Chez Mon Ami (p103)
- » Ristorante El Sueño (p83)

Best Places to Stay

- » Paraíso Caño Hondo (p107)
- » Casa de Campo (p87)
- » Barceló Bávaro Palace Deluxe (p102)
- » Hotel Limón (p106)

When to Go

If you're looking for a fiesta, North American Spring Breakers descend upon Punta Cana – March sees the most traffic, both petrol-fueled and margarita-fueled. If you're not on Spring Break, this is probably a bad time for that leisurely family vacation. If you can hold off just past the winter holidays, January and February offers the same sun and sand as Christmas and New Year's Eve – but a whole lot less people. And for those pinching pesos, October rides the tranquil fence between hurricane season and the preholiday onslaught. *¡Salud!*

History

Before sugar, it was cattle ranching and the cutting and exporting of hardwoods that drove the region's economy. But Cuban planters, fleeing war in their country, began to arrive in the southeast in the 1870s and established sugar mills with the Dominican government's assistance (this migration also explains baseball's popularity and importance in the region). Rail lines were built and La Romana and San Pedro de Macorís, formerly sleepy backwaters, began to prosper as busy ports almost immediately when world sugar prices soared. Hundreds of families from the interior migrated to the area in search of jobs. In 1920, after peasants were dispossessed of their land during the US occupation, many fought a guerrilla war against the marines in the area around Hato Mayor and El Seibo. Until the 1960s, the economy in the southeast was still strictly driven by sugar despite fluctuations in the world market and agriculture in general. However, when the US company Gulf & Western Industries bought La Romana's sugar mill, invested heavily in the cattle and cement industries and, perhaps most importantly, built the Casa de Campo resort, tourism became the financial engine of the southeast, and remains so today.

Getting There & Around

The majority of international visitors to this region fly directly to the airport in Punta Cana (see p104) and then are whisked away in private vehicles to their respective resorts. Otherwise, it's anywhere from a 2½- to four-hour drive, depending on your destination, from Aeropuerto Internacional Las Américas in Santo Domingo. La Romana has an airport as well, though it mostly handles charter flights (see p89).

Traffic between the resort centers can be surprisingly heavy and it's difficult to navigate much of the road system, which is being revamped and expanded. Though the distances aren't great, travel in the region, especially along the coast north of Bávaro all the way to Sabana de la Mar, can be slow and unreliable because of the poor condition of the roads. It's now possible to fly between Punta Cana and the Península de Samaná.

EAST OF SANTO DOMINGO

Cross Río Ozama, the eastern border of the Zona Colonial in Santo Domingo, and the claustrophobia fades, the horizon opens and you remember that you're in the Caribbean. The highway hugs the coast for some time with promising views but then retreats inland once again, passing service stations and shops hugging the roadside until the turnoff for the beach resorts of Boca Chica and Juan Dolio a little further on.

Parque Nacional Submarino La Caleta

In the past this underwater park was a park in name only; little was done to protect the 12 sq km of underwater acreage in front of the Aeropuerto Internacional Las Américas. As a result of lax controls and the damage from Hurricane Jean in 2004, the number of coral and fish species here is very low. It is also the resting place of the *Hickory*, a salvage ship that was scuttled in 1984, the year the park was founded and now a popular dive site, depending on which dive operator you choose. If you're interested in diving here, contact one of the dive shops in Boca Chica or any of the resorts in Juan Dolio. Some will tell you they refuse to go there as the site has been over-dived and is destroyed, while others say it's still full of marine life.

Boca Chica

POP 58,200

Boca Chica is a survivor. After enduring development boom-bust cycles and being overshadowed by resorts further east, it staggers on, albeit catering to a weathered crowd and marred by sex tourism. It held a certain amount of cachet when the moneyed class built vacation homes here during Trujillo's regime, and in the 1960s when a few bayside hotels were built, and even again in the early 1990s during another construction boom. These days, however, aside from its proximity to the capital and the airport, there's not a lot to recommend it; after all, it's not much further to nicer resorts to the east.

Sights

The thing about the beach at Boca Chica is that it's in Boca Chica. This means that