

## Travel



2A(BXWB,F-8B,T-9C,S-12C,R-7B,L-13C,P,C-8B)

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# Casa de Campo is a resort's resort

## Gulf & Western built ideal vacation spot

CASA DE CAMPO, Dominican Republic: When you fly from Santo Domingo to the private airport at Casa de Campo, you see the 7,000-acre resort spread out among the sugar cane fields at the eastern end of the island. Red-roofed casitas, villas and condominiums are scattered among lagoons and golf courses beside the Caribbean Sea.

There are no signs on the villa roofs reading "this is Oscar de la Renta's house" or "Sophia Loren slept here."

What attracts attention are other things: golfers teeing off across an emerald bay on one of the seven holes of "The Teeth of the Dog," polo master Jabar Singh, nephew of the Maharaja of Jodhpur, leading his team across the polo field; a 16th-century Mediterranean village sitting high above the Chavon River a few miles away.

THE FACTS of Casa de Campo are simple and impressive enough: two championship 18-hole golf courses designed by Pete Dye, 17 tennis courts, golf and tennis villas, a curve of man-made sand beach, horseback riding, polo games, rodeos and other special events at Jabar Singh's stables.

The story of the resort is more complex, a mixture of commerce and passion that could rival any soap opera. Here is a synopsis of the script:

Gulf & Western American Corp. (G&W) buys a sugar mill and a quarter-million acres of land around the village of La Romana in 1957. Profits that cannot be taken out of the country are used to build a glamorous resort, literally sculpted out of coral rock.

G&W's founding chairman Charles Bluhdorn falls in love with the site and builds one of the first villas there. Other beautiful people follow. The resort blossoms.

In the mid-70's Bluhdorn hires a Hollywood set designer to build a medieval Italian village called Altos de Chavon, literally "the heights above the Chavon River," as an artists' village. Local craftsmen, Dominican artists and international artists interact there. Later



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he adds a 9,000-seat Roman forum. Frank Sinatra gives the first concert.

THE DENOUEMENT comes when Bluhdorn dies suddenly on a plane en route from the Republic to a New York City hospital. His beautiful 22-year-old daughter has been running Altos de Chavon for three years by then. Life goes on, but G&W begins to wonder whether it is all an impossible dream.

What that scenario means to the traveler is that an unusual luxurious resort wants to increase its year-round occupancy rate while maintaining its style. One way is to work with selected charter operators; one of the few is Samson Tours of Southfield, which offers moderately priced trips weekly through mid-May. (Rates can be found in accompanying box.)

Casa de Campo is too big to walk around but you can rent electric carts, or catch a minibus that leaves for Altos de Chavon every half hour, circling the resort on the way. They leave from the main complex of dining rooms, bars and swimming pools. A steady stream of daytime tennis and golf players eat at the various restaurants around Altos at night.

The food at Casa de Campo gets mixed reviews from its customers. Breakfast in the Lago Grill is worth five stars in any guide book: fresh fruits squeezed to order, custom-made omelets and fresh Dominican coffee in the open air overlooking the golf course and the sea.

THE OPEN-AIR BAR is the resort's social center. The nearby Tropicana

**Many consider Casa de Campo the most complete resort in the Caribbean. Its 7,000 acres has a man-made beach, two championship 18-hole golf courses, 17 tennis courts and facilities for sailing, swimming, horseback riding and polo.**

— Photos by Micky Jones



serves elegant, expensive fare, and the nearby cafe El Patio is a pleasant lunch or light dinner spot. At Altos de Chavon, the Casa del Rio Restaurant offers an impressive view over the river, but the food is overpriced.

There is good Italian food more moderately priced at La Piazzetta, and several other smaller restaurants, the most interesting of which are a tiny sidewalk cafe called La Fonda that serves Dominican food, and a tiny bar with a dozen seats indoors and warm-weather service outdoors.

Most tourists browse the shops and art galleries, or visit the excellent museum of Taino, Taíno Indian archeology. A few stay in La Posada, a plain but interesting inn, in the village or rent an extravagant house. If a well-known performer is on at the forum, the village is jammed.

Few people realize what is happening at the back of the property where the New York-based Parsons School of Design has established a campus. A

pottery workshop will soon fill the gift shops with its wares.

There are a few things to do outside Casa de Campo. Visit the nearby town of La Romana briefly. Rent a car and drive the half hour to Baya Hibe, where you can eat inexpensive fresh lobster and watch the fishing boats come in from the outdoor tables at La Bahia Cafe. You can also take a day tour to Santo Domingo.

THE MAIN attraction of the area is Casa de Campo, however, tourists who stay in Santo Domingo often make the two-hour drive to the resort for golf or tennis, or to visit Altos de Chavon.

The same places that attracted Charles Bluhdorn here in the first place are found all over the Dominican Republic: good weather, friendly people, fresh fruits-vegetables-seafood. But if you want to hit a golf ball across a bay from one hole to another, or set up a polo game, or visit a crazy medieval village, you'll have to go to Casa de Campo.

Old hands in the Caribbean consider it the most complete resort in the Caribbean. You will be pleased to know that G&W has a good reputation on the island. They work with the govern-

ment; even the shoeshine boys in Santo Domingo say nice things about them. Nobody says "Yankee go home."

For more information about Casa de Campo, contact your travel agent.

### Casa de Campo charter rates

Samson Tours of Southfield offers weekly charters from Metro airport to Casa de Campo, through May 13. Generally, per-person-per-bedroom rates based on double occupancy are:

Casitas near the main complex: \$659 to \$799. These afford easy access to pools, restaurants etc.. One bedroom in a two-bedroom villa: \$599 to \$749. One-bedroom villa: \$729 to \$869.

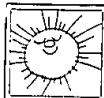
Rates include air fare, seven nights

accommodations, taxes, tips, and transfers to and from Santo Domingo airport. You must pay for all meals and resort activities.

Because of a 6 a.m. Sunday departure from Metro, your payment also includes overnight accommodations at the airport Holiday Inn with free parking for the week. Flights are direct from Detroit to Santo Domingo; you return via Aruba, arriving back in Detroit about 7 p.m. Sunday.

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