

TRAVEL

Simple charm

Bring an open mind, relaxed attitude to Punta Cana

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American tourists altered their vacation demands when landing in the beautiful palm thatched roof airport of Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic.

As tourists, they were outnumbered by European visitors whose travel desires tend to vary from what Americans expect. They don't ask for much; just the beach, a simple room, a meal and to be left alone.

The Dominican Republic's style meshes well with Europeans.

(Laid-back. Relaxed. Slow. Bilingual, with very little English. Clean and basic accommodations.)

An example of life at a Dominican Republic resort:

When a desk clerk is on a personal telephone call, tourists need to relax and wait for the conversation to end.

No problem. Just smile and you'll get one in return. Try to speak Spanish. Europeans showed no problem with this. Americans did. Show patience and be treated as a friend in this land where merengue dance was invented and culture is rich.

Dominicans are educated, polite and laid-back. A country poorer than U.S., but no less in pride.

Mixing a mild breeze with 85 degree temperatures and constant sun enhances the genuine happiness of those who live there. In late April we took the last plane for the season from Detroit to Punta Cana — the lush, undeveloped resort area on the eastern tip of the country that borders Haiti.

Punta Cana is a 25 resort town, no hotels higher than four stories, with a 40 mile stretch of white sand beach lined with coconut palm trees. Punta Cana lies where the stunning green waters of the Caribbean Sea and Atlantic Ocean meet and in April

Planning your trip

Visit

- www.mltvacations.com
- www.dominicanrepublicpage.com

Be prepared:

Tip the housekeeping staff a dollar a day, and they'll fill your room refrigerator with bottled water, beer and soda.

Drink only bottled water available at all the resorts or purified water from the resorts.

Bring insect repellent. Punta Cana is environmentally friendly meaning there aren't a lot of pesticides used here. We were bitten our first day by "no-see-um" bugs and awoke with big welts on our legs. After using the repellent, we had no problems.

Take a tour on The Monster Jeep Safari. An 8 by 8 old U.S. Army Jeep will take visitors through Higüey, into the mountains where guests can actually go into the homes of friendly locals, hear live local music, sample Dominican Republic coffee, then lay by a river in hammocks and enjoy lunch outdoors. The trip also took us to an authentic Voodoo house.

Warning: It also took us to a cock-fight demonstration, legal in the country, which upset most guests.

Bring lots of single dollar bills or toys; you'll want to give something to the young children who greet you at each stop. As the day goes on, and the deeper into the mountains you drive the poorer the children become.

Treat locals with respect. The Dominicans are educated — often learning up to five languages by the time they turn 18.

You will see the same waitstaff throughout the week at your hotel's restaurants. Tip early on and you will be treated with extra-courtesy.

Learn a little Spanish; even if just the basics. Show a little effort to communicate and you'll make friends.

there were few ripples and no undertow. While tourism is the largest industry in the country, Punta Cana is less than 12 years old. And it's safe.

Resorts

Punta Cana is strictly a beach resort city. It's mellow and charming.

Cabs and guided tours can take visitors to the small but busy city of Higüey about an hour away where locals and tourists together enjoy El Presidente beer in outdoor verandas, or shop in open-air markets. But in Punta Cana itself, daytime choices are beach and boat related. (For golfers, the place to visit is the resort city of Puerto Plata, on the northern side of the island about nine hours away.) We stayed at the Villas Bavaro

Beach Resort, an all-inclusive hotel with little pink, green and yellow wooden buildings nestled amongst lush vegetation of the huge property. Our room was wonderfully basic: Bed, small refrigerator, small bathroom and closet. Three hotels are spread on the beautiful Bavaro property meaning we had access to all of its restaurants — two buffets and a sit-down international restaurant right on the beach — under the stars. The pools are stunning, surrounded by terracotta-colored brick floors and outdoor bars.

Daytime is for sunbathing, swimming or boat tours. We took the riotous and popular Knotiki boat trip where guests snorkel, drink rum concoctions, limbo and dance under the palm-made roof of the huge pontoon-style



Relaxation: A bar with a palm-thatched roof sits above the pools at the Villas Bavaro Beach resort in Punta Cana. Near the pool, also outdoors, is an entertainment area where live bands play jazz music at dinner and upbeat Latino music afterward.

boat. Snorkeling is good, but not as vivid as Cozumel.

At the beach, a five minute walk from our hotel, or tram ride away, we found enough lounge chairs to accommodate every guest — most being German or French as Americans make up less than 12 percent of tourists.

When the hotel shows end around 11 p.m., most guests are tired from the sun and go to bed. Some party-goers, however, walk to the outdoor beach disco for techno-flamenco and reggae music. When that ends about 2 a.m. night owls take a \$10 cab to the Mangu nightclub about 10 minutes away where music and dancing lasts until everyone leaves. It's the hottest nightclub of the moment in Punta Cana.

A quiet vacation

Punta Cana isn't a wild Spring Break destination like Cancun. To get anywhere outside the resort, a bus or cab is needed. Life is quiet at night with just a few discos and casinos. Beaches are relaxing for adults and children and etiquette is shaped by the European tourists; meaning mostly topless and tranquil.

And thankfully this rich-in-culture country is keeping its Dominican style when it comes to dining:

No American food here except hamburgers or pizza on the beach at lunch. Dinners are wonderful spicy beans, rice, stewed vegetables, fried plantain, Mangu (mashed plantain similar to mash potatoes) and squash

soups. Lots of cinnamon desserts. We had no problem maintaining our vegetarians diets. Carnivores, however, often dined on goat and lamb.

Shopping

Be sure to purchase a piece of rare jewelry made with the stunning Larimar stone, that is mined nowhere else on Earth except this island. The beautiful light blue opaque stone resembles the color of the ocean water. Set in Sterling silver, be prepared to barter, but not like in Cancun because prices are already cheaper here. If they offer \$80, offer \$20 less. One American dollar is currently with 16 DR pesos:

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