

Dominican Republic offers more than pristine beaches

Melody Wren
Special to The CJN

The lure of Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic is that it has something for every visitor, whether you prefer a “fly and flop” holiday, not straying too far from the pool, or an active and adventurous one.

The beaches are pristine, the locals are approachable, and opportunities for water sports, golfing and exploring abound. With constant summer temperatures and glorious sunshine, the major attractions in the Dominican Republic are the beach and the pools sprinkled with tourists. The “Coconut Coast,” as some call it, has 34 kilometres of bleached sandy beaches, surrounded with massive palm and coconut trees, and the water has multiple shades of blue you imagine exists only on postcards.

It is tempting when you go to an all-inclusive resort to simply stay put, but when visiting another country, why not find out something about it?

The Dominican Republic has so much to offer – just take a day, get into the countryside, visit local sights and markets and chat to the locals.

The Dominican Republic is the world leader in the exportation of high-quality tobacco, cigars being at the top of the list. Even if you don't indulge in cigars, touring the Don Lucas cigar factory is fascinating.

Two hundred cigars are made every day from different blends and types of Dominican tobacco. The 14 cigar rollers use four or five different leaves to make one cigar, then place it in a mould for 30 minutes.

Cigars used to be associated with old men, but now the factory's main clients are 25 to 45 years of age. According to Carlos Borgus, who has been the factory's manager for six years, the most expensive and best box of cigars in the world is the Arturo Fuente, however, he adds that “the best cigar is the one you like the most.”

After watching the cigar-making process, you can take the marble steps that lead to a gift shop selling cigars and cigar accoutrements for all budgets, as well as Larimar jewelry, which is made from a rare blue variety of pectolite found only in the Dominican Republic.

Check with your hotel about excursions that can be booked to local villages and mountains to see how local people live. Wander down the beaches and into villages to pick up authentic handmade crafts at market stalls.

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Paradisus Palma Real [Melody Wren photos]

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Luxury is no longer for the elite

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In Bavaro is the Taino museum, where you can learn about the Taino people, who have a direct link to Christopher Columbus. The living cave (mind the bats) reportedly four million years old, according to our guide, is lined with cave drawings and effigies perched on rocks.

Amber and Larimar are the semiprecious stones that are associated with Dominican culture. Larimar is quickly disappearing and is currently available only from one mine on the island. Primarily in silver settings, the stunning gems fluctuate in colour

from turquoise to sky to volcanic blue. The Dominican Republic is one of the few countries in the world that has authentic amber.

Where to stay: Luxury has a name and it is "Paradisus Palma Real."

Luxury is no longer for the elite, but covers many categories of people. I recently visited the Paradisus, which offers "Royal" service. Guests are treated like VIPs. They are supplied with cellphones that provide immediate contact to their personal butlers (shared with five other rooms).

Everywhere you go to in the resort, there are different aromas. Unique blends of in-



Cigar makers, both named Juan Carlos

cense and essential oils have soothing and refreshing scents, and change from area to area at the resort.

The Royal suites are closest to the ocean and for adults only. Activities are plentiful: golf, diving lessons, hobbie cats, and sailing. For the odd cloudy day when lying by the pool isn't appealing, "life activities" are held every hour, including painting classes, yoga, Pilates, rum tasting, cigar rolling and sushi making. Thinking of everything, the resort provides a free app for your smartphone or tablet (get it at the App Store) so you are not weighed down with paper maps, restaurant listings and schedules. It was invaluable in helping me find my way around the property as it is so vast.

The sister hotel, "Paradisus Punta Cana," has exactly the same services, with a more traditional Caribbean feel.

Unique to the Paradisus resorts is a "Kidzone," which is so much more than a place for children to play. Wee ones have

the option to paint, make crafts out of recycled materials, play ping-pong, foosball, bungee jump (yes, bungee jump) and go rock climbing. Upon your arrival at the Kidzone, a butler is assigned to accommodate your children. A cellphone allows parents to ask a butler to pick up the little ones from the beach and take them to lunch in the Kidzone. And this is not just any lunch – miniature buffets scaled to size feature scrumptious-looking snacks.

If you go: Direct flights from Toronto via Air Canada or Westjet take you to the small but upgraded Punta Cana Airport. Don't be put off by huge lineups at immigration – crowds are whisked through quickly and orderly.

Weather to expect: Most of the Dominican Republic enjoys lovely tropical weather all year round, with an average annual temperature around 25 C. There is a small variation between winter and summer months, November to April, with a reduction in humidity.

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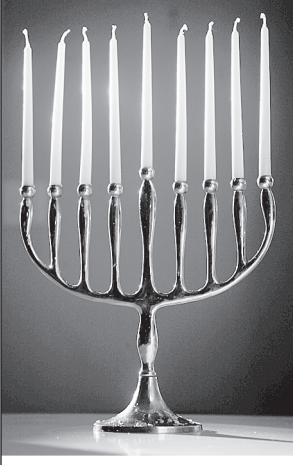
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