

NORTHEAST COAST OVERVIEW

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For those vacationers who dream of a one-on-one with Mother Nature, a visit to the Samana peninsula on the Dominican Republic's (DR) northeast coast is like pulling up a chair on her front porch.

Samana's beauty lies in her simplicity. Here, unspoiled beaches serve as a threshold to vibrant coral reefs and mountain waterfalls intersect lush tropical forests. But while Samana is a top destination for eco-tourists and naturalists, some come to this "off the beaten path" peninsula to interact with humpback whales alone. After all, Samana is home to one of the largest and best breeding grounds in the world for this elusive mammal.

But while Samana's beauty is the stuff of legends, its history is fodder fit for a fairytale. Columbus stopped here on his discovery of the New World (see "Playa las Flechas" in the Beaches backgrounder) but the area didn't become populated until late in 1756 when people began migrating from the Canary Islands. Soon Samana became a lair for pirates who pillaged passing ships. What followed was a short ownership by Napoleon Bonaparte and later, settlement by freed American slaves.

All this history and meshing of cultures has made Samana one of the most impressive melting pots in the DR. "Americanos," descendents of the African-American inhabitants, mix with Europeans from France, Spain and Italy. Not only do people here *look* different from their Dominican brethren, but the food and even the language has a twist all its own.

Top Attractions

Whale Watching

From January through March, Samana showcases its status as (according to the World Wildlife Fund) one of the best humpback breeding grounds in the world. In fact, as many as 5,000 whales make their way to this area each year.

Full and half-day whale watching excursions are available through several companies with most departing from Samana (the town). Visitors board a 50-foot vessel equipped with bathrooms, snack bars and hydrophones for listening to the sounds of male humpbacks. Costs average \$50 for adults. (See Tour Operator backgrounder.)

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Salto de Limon

Considered the most spectacular of Samana's many waterfalls, Salto de Limon offers a 150 foot cascade of water to a large swimming hole. While the waterfall is accessible by foot, the best way to get there is by horseback. Local tour operators can coordinate travel to Salto de Limon from the town of El Limon. In fact, many include a traditional Dominican lunch in the cost. (Tours can be arranged by hotels. But, for those wanting a more local experience, *paradas* (roadside tour operators) operate in El Limon.

Cayo Levantado

Accessible by ferry, Cayo Levantado is located just off the coast of Samana (town). Featured in Bacardi Rum ads from the 1970's, this coconut palm-lined island paradise has become one of the area's top tourist destinations. Ferries from Samana cost approximately \$20 each way.

Insider's Tip: While Cayo Levantado does attract a crowd, a short walk to the opposite side of the island provides a bit of a respite.

Parque Nacional Los Haitises

Located just south of Samana peninsula, this national park is essentially 83 square miles of mangrove swamp. Within it, however, are more than 100 species of birds and mammals and caves bearing pre-Columbian Taino art.

Parque Nacional Los Haitises is best explored by boat, many of which depart from Samana (town). Most excursions last approximately three hours and cost \$40 on average.

SAMANA

The town of Samana is located on the southern side of the peninsula along Samana Bay. It's a popular base for tourists who plan to participate in whale watching excursions or day trips to Cayo Levantado, both of which leave from the town's port. Samana's Malecon, or beachfront strip, is the center of activity and features outdoor cafes and small shops.

Samana is heavily populated by Americanos, descendents of freed American slaves. For this reason the town holds a series of annual harvest festivals, a tradition dating back to the yam and rice festivals of West Africa. These lively events are held on Fridays from late August through the end of October at Samana churches.

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LAS GALERAS

At the tip of Samana peninsula, close to world-famous Playa Rincon, lies the town of Las Galeras. This small fishing village has experienced a boom in the past few years with the addition of a large all-inclusive resort (Casa Marina Bay) and several smaller hotels. However, because of its remote location, Las Galeras has been able to maintain its serene nature. So idyllic is this town that it is a popular honeymoon destination for those couples who want a true escape to paradise.

The main attraction in Las Galeras is the beach found at the end of the town's main road. Here visitors can meet locals who gather at the beach's food kiosks.

Hotels can give information on catching the ferry to Playa Rincon or beachfront horseback riding, a particular favorite of tourists to the area.

Insider's Tip: Escape the quiet for a short time with a visit to Indiana's. This open-air dance club plays "bachata" music nightly.

LAS TERRENAS

Perhaps the most popular destination on the peninsula is the resort town of Las Terrenas. Run primarily by French expats, Las Terrenas offers a good variety of accommodations, ranging from all-inclusives to comfortable boutiques.

Visitors to Las Terrenas have no shortage of things to do. The town features several small malls, a wide variety of restaurants and even discos. Despite this, the highlight of a visit to Las Terrenas is the beach.

Insider's Tip: An ATM and Internet access are available near the El Paseo Plaza.

SAMANA AIRPORTS

Samana is serviced by two airports – Arroyo Barril International and El Portillo. In addition, El Catey International Airport opened fall of 2006, thereby opening the Samana peninsula to a greater number of international flights.

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