

SOUTH CENTRAL OVERVIEW

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While the Dominican Republic's famous Punta Cana resort area provides relaxation at every turn, Santo Domingo and the south central region are all hustle and bustle. With just over three million people, Santo Domingo serves as the Caribbean's most diverse destination and, arguably, its most vibrant. The city itself displays contrasts at every turn. Contemporary hotels sit on ancient cobblestone streets, luxury cars park beside well-worn scooters, and eclectic cuisine at hip restaurants is served next to street vendors serving traditional Dominican fare.

As the oldest city in the New World, Santo Domingo features the first cathedral, first university and first hospital of the Americas. In fact, visitors often note that the well-preserved Zona Colonial makes them feel as though they've been transported in time.

Despite all this history, Santo Domingo is quite modern and very continental. The city's restaurants offer nearly any cuisine in the world; boutiques and major chain retailers from the United States and Europe have set-up shops; and a wealth of museums, galleries and theaters ensure no shortage of cultural experiences.

But even Santo Domingo's residents need a getaway and for that reason the nearby beach towns of Boca Chica and Juan Dolio provide a respite.

Top Attractions

Colonial Zone

The first city established in the New World, the Colonial Zone was erected by Columbus' brother, Bartholomew, and his son, Diego. Here visitors will find hundreds of preserved buildings dating back to the early 1500's, many of which are museums. Among them are Alcazar de Colon (Diego's home), Ozama fortress, and the palace of the Spanish court.

Insider's Tip: The former home of Nicholas de Ovando, governor of Santo Domingo in the 1500's, is today the Sofitel Nicolas de Ovando. A stay in this luxurious hotel gives visitors an idea of what it must have felt like to live here, although with modern amenities.

Cultural Plaza

Santo Domingo has dozens of museums, many of which are located in the city's Cultural Park. Here, visitors can see the Museum of the Dominican Man, the Museum of Modern Art, the National Museum of History and Geography, and the National Museum of Natural History.

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Columbus Lighthouse

Constructed in 1992 to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Columbus' discovery of the New World, the Columbus Lighthouse is a mammoth structure in the shape of a cross. Visitors come here by day to see the tomb that houses Columbus' remains and by night to see the Dominican sky lit with a cross from the beams atop the lighthouse's roof.

National Aquarium

Located just minutes from the Columbus Lighthouse, the National Aquarium is a huge fish complex with a plexiglass tunnel running through it, thus, giving visitors the feeling of being underwater. A hit with kids, the aquarium's most popular resident is Tamaury, a giant manatee. (See the Family Activities backgrounder.)

Ship Wrecks

Visitors interested in scuba diving will especially enjoy exploring the wrecks off the coast of Boca Chica. "The Hickory" and "El Limon" are found in the La Caleta National Underwater Park and act as a reef to thousands of species of colorful fish and fauna. (See Snorkeling and Scuba Diving backgrounder.)

Festivals

Santo Domingo is home to two famous annual festivals. The first, the Merengue Festival, is a week-long celebration of the country's most famous music genre. At the party, held along the Malecon, revelers dance in the streets to music provided by some of the world's best known merengue acts. Just as popular is Carnival, a celebration that occurs just prior to the Lenten season. Characterized by homemade masks, parades, food and, of course, drink, Carnival is a colorful celebration. A third festival, held every two years in July, is the Presidente Beer Latin Music Festival at the Juan Pablo Duarte Olympic Stadium. In the past, acts have included Christina Aguilera, Marc Anthony, Ricky Martin and Enrique Iglesias.

BOCA CHICA

Conveniently located near Santo Domingo's airport, Boca Chica is a resort town bustling with activity. The beach is actually a reef-protected lagoon characterized by powdery sand and turquoise waters. And because of its conditions – calm, warm waters – the area is a popular destination for Santo Domingo residents and their children on the weekends.

Considered a "shopping beach," vendors set-up shop up and down the main street that runs parallel to the beach. Visitors, many of whom come from the wide array of hotels and resorts in the area, can buy everything from jewelry and artwork to food and drinks. Hotels and resorts fitting any budget are located here, as well as an array of nightlife and restaurants.

JUAN DOLIO

Located halfway between Santo Domingo and La Romana, Juan Dolio is a perfect escape for couples and families. While the town is calm and peaceful, excitement is only minutes away in the form of an excursion to La Romana or Santo Domingo. For golf enthusiasts, a Gary Player-designed course is just a few minutes from the area hotels. Other excursions include scuba diving, a baseball game at San Pedro Tetelo Vargas stadium, or one of the many other day trips available from tour operators.

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