



THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC'S LAST FRONTIER

The Samaná Peninsula is the kind of place where you get drinks from a thatched hut and buy fish from the guy who caught it. It's one of the last undeveloped swaths of beach in the Dominican Republic—but that's about to change.

JOSH DEAN goes to find out what's at stake.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID NICOLAS

The main beach in Las Terrenas, just one of many untouched stretches of white sand on the Samaná Peninsula

THE WALK TO THE BEACH from my hotel in the small Dominican town of Las Terrenas took five minutes down a rutted, sandy lane bordered by walls covered in bougainvillea. Ahead, coconut palms beckoned, and beyond them the kind of perfect white beach and blue water that seem to exist only in pamphlets produced by tourist bureaus. I stopped at a thatched-roof cabana bar, ordered a mojito made with fresh mint, local limes, and Dominican rum, and threw my towel onto a patch of sand roughly the consistency of flour.

It's not like I had to think about where to position myself. In the few hundred yards spread out around me, there were maybe a dozen people, and the number of overly tanned and topless European women (four) was greater than the number of people splashing in the surf (three). In both directions, the beach curled slightly out to sea, creating a horseshoe of white. I'd read that the Samaná Peninsula has the highest density of coconut palms per square meter on earth, and from here that certainly looked to be true. The trees formed a swaying green wall behind the beach, and if I squinted even slightly, the one- and two-story buildings just inland vanished into the canopy. I was sitting at the edge of the biggest town on the peninsula, but it didn't take much imagination to feel as if I had the whole place to myself.

Jutting from the northeast corner of the island like a thumb, the slender, 35-mile-long Samaná Peninsula has long been spared the kind of mass tourism that has overtaken so much of the Dominican Republic's other prime beach land (think Punta Cana or Puerto Plata). Samaná is best known for sheltering a warm bay where humpback whales winter and reproduce, putting on spectacular shows as they breach. Dominicans have



From left: Aude Mentrrier and her mastiff at her hotel, Eva Luna; the fried plantains at Luis, on Playa Cosón; a typical bedroom at Eva Luna; the lounge area at La Terrasse, a French-Caribbean restaurant in Las Terrenas



been weekendng here for generations, often just camping on the beach. And European expats—mostly French—have been coming here for decades, many staying behind to open small casita hotels and authentic patisseries. But that’s about it for tourism. I spent four days on the peninsula and didn’t run into a single American—an amazing fact considering that more people from the U.S. have visited the Dominican Republic this year than any other Caribbean nation.

Change is coming, though. This past June, the Dominican government cut the ribbon on a new \$150 million road (DR-8, or the Samaná Highway) that connects Santo Domingo with Samaná. The highway’s purpose was to shorten the drive from five hours to two—and to literally pave the way for more development. Just west of the peninsula at El Catey, a \$70 million airport opened in 2006; the runways are long enough to accommodate commercial jets but so far have been used mostly by charters from France. There’s one large-scale resort group on the peninsula already (Gran Bahía Príncipe, with four locations), and more are on the way. Billboards advertising condominiums and resorts are frequent around Las Terrenas, and gleaming condo-hotels are already beginning to rise alongside the casitas.

All of which raises some questions. Could Samaná’s days as a throwback to the old Caribbean—the one that predates cruise ships and Club Meds—be in peril? Or will all the investment simply make the place a more convenient version of itself? I flew direct from New York City to Santo Domingo in the morning

and by early afternoon was chasing that mojito with a dip in the surf; I couldn’t have done that a year ago. But how soon until hotel towers outnumber all those palm trees?

TO THOSE PEOPLE ALARMED at the imminent ruin of the Samaná Peninsula, I offer this: It took me three Avis employees, two gas station attendants, and a guy selling bananas along the road from the Santo Domingo airport to actually direct me to the new highway. It doesn’t yet appear on the maps handed out by Avis staff, so the first woman told me to navigate a tangle of old highways and said it would take “about five hours” to reach the peninsula. The second woman knew what I was talking about but couldn’t quite tell me where it was. The third vanished into a back room and returned with the highway drawn on my map in black marker.

Once I finally found the road, things quickly looked up. Shiny new red-and-blue signs welcomed me to DR-8, and a ribbon of smooth blacktop rolled out before me. It was a Monday, so there was almost no traffic, and I whipped north, blowing past green fields and a vast palm plantation. About 60 miles in, things got hilly and jungly, and then the road wound down again via

switchbacks so dramatic that the recommended speed is 30 miles per hour.

At the town of Sánchez, the gateway to Samaná, I headed east on a two-lane route rutted with patches of dirt, homemade speed bumps, and potholes the size of Smart cars. A billboard showing a river of new asphalt offered assurance that the authorities will be paving this road, too—very soon! (The government recently received a \$45 million development loan to do just that, but as with many of the peninsula’s projects, work has yet to begin.) I bumped along until I spotted the Mobil station that acts as the only landmark signaling the turnoff to Las Terrenas, and made a left.

A barefoot Haitian greeted me in French at the door of **Villas Eva Luna**, a collection of five stucco-and-wood casitas 300 yards up a narrow lane from the town’s main beach. He walked me along a path and pointed to a one-bedroom structure with wooden doors that swung open to reveal a large kitchen with a whirring ceiling fan. “Su casa,” he said and then smiled and walked away. He didn’t give me a key (one would appear later), and I’d yet to pay a single dollar. Eva Luna doesn’t take credit cards, so I had arrived on the good faith of a promissory e-mail.

Soon enough, a 30-something Frenchwoman showed up on my porch with two dogs, a hulking mastiff puppy and an alert Belgian shepherd. She introduced herself as Aude Mentrrier; she owns and runs Eva Luna with her partner, Jérôme. The two bought the property from a fellow Frenchman eight years ago, she explained, and other than her feeling that there are “too many French people” around (some 2,500 is the number locals cite), they’re quite happy. I asked Aude why so many French settle here, and she said she didn’t know—as did everybody else I asked on my trip. (I later learned that the connection dates back to an 18th-century French-owned coconut-export business.)

As one of the only French people I’d encounter in Samaná who spoke passable English, Aude became my unofficial guide,

doling out restaurant recommendations, driving directions, and tips on what was worth seeing and what was a waste of time.

Mostly, she told me to go to the beach.

I’M NOT ENTIRELY CONVINCED that Samaná could be spoiled anytime soon, no matter how many roads get paved. There’s just so much of it. But if I had to pick one place that represents what makes the peninsula special, it would be Playa Cosón.

It’s not an easy beach to get to. The morning after I arrived, I took the only right heading back out of Las Terrenas toward the mainland and followed an even narrower road than the one that had brought me in. I had seen many signs around, as well as ads in a local tourist guide, promoting a development of \$1.7 million-and-up condos known as Terrazas de Cosón, said to be opening in 2010. I fully expected to arrive there and find the skeletons of resorts-in-progress, along with busloads of prospective buyers wandering around the palm fronds in pith helmets.

But I drove along, alone, for about three miles until a few smaller strands of road began to peel off toward the beach, each with a tiny hand-painted wood sign bearing the name of a restaurant or bar. Aude had suggested I visit a place called **Luis**, and when I spotted that word, in blue paint chipped away by the elements, I turned, negotiated a 100-meter goat track to the beach, and parked in the shade near a small wooden shack, where Luis himself greeted me.

“Buen día,” he said.

The beach bar
at the Hotel
Alisei & Spa.
Opposite:
locals at the
main beach in
Las Terrenas



*AT THE PUBLIC BEACH, LOCALS
ARRIVE TWO OR THREE PER SCOOTER
TO PLAY IN THE CALM, CRYSTAL WATER*





From left: the terrace off one of the two-bedroom bungalows at Eva Luna; the road near Eva Luna; Fishermen's Village, a row of restaurants and cafés that open up to the beach; fresh bread at Sucre Salé



I looked at my watch. Noon. "What drinks do you have?" "Mojito, caipirinha, piña colada, cerveza..." he said. I asked for a mojito.

He pursed his face and repeated the word, in question form. "Mojito?" He turned toward the shack's small bar and yelled, "¿Hay mojitos?" Someone hollered back. "Ahora, no." They were apparently out of mint. He shrugged. "Caipirinha?"

The establishment's few lounge chairs were all occupied by French tourists who appeared to have settled in for the day, so I grabbed a plastic table chair and dragged it nearer to the water. It was an even rawer version of what I'd seen that first afternoon—in either direction, for a distance of at least two miles, was untouched beach absent hotels, absent villas, absent everything save for a very few thatched huts and a handful of bronzed French families and topless ladies.

This is what a beach club wants to be: a bunch of mismatched chairs, an open kitchen, a cooler, and a jolly local guy cooking shrimp and fish somebody caught that morning. I paddled around in the placid water and read 100 pages of my book before moving from the beach to one of the scattered tables, where I ordered shrimp that Luis cooked on an open-air grill. A teenager brought them over to me on a platter with sliced avocado, red beans and rice, and a Presidente, the national beer of the D.R.

As I ate, two white SUVs arrived and disgorged four men in khakis with ample bellies that stretched their oxford shirts taut. They were clean-cut and prosperous looking. I watched them walk away from the hut along the tree line and point out (I had to

assume) where they hoped pools and swim-up bars would one day reside. It seems convenient to say this, but I swear it's true: I could feel tension in the air as every head at every table turned to track these men. They split up, and two of them parked themselves just feet from my table with their arms behind their backs.

THE NEXT MORNING, I GOT UP intending to check out Cascada del Limón, a popular waterfall reached via horseback, but Aude dismissed the idea. "It is not *fantastique*," she told me. What was *fantastique*? An all-day back-roads tour of the peninsula's interior, she said, and suggested I go to town to set one up with **Flora Tours**, a local operator that is, naturally, French-owned.

The main street through Las Terrenas is lined with open-air fish and beer stands, a smattering of shops selling trinkets, some cigar shops, and a few unusual benefits of having so many French people around, such as **Sucre Salé**. There, a crowd of French expats gathers every morning to savor strong Dominican-grown coffee and flaky Parisian-style croissants while they chat over breakfast and see who can smoke the most cigarettes.

The road forks when it reaches the beach, and to the west, it shifts from asphalt to sand and passes a cluster of renovated fishing shacks known as Pueblo de los Pescadores (Fishermen's Village). The best restaurant in town, **La Terrasse**, is here. So is **El Mosquito Art Bar**, a dark, animal-print-heavy place where the

expats get drunk. To the east, the road gets wider and better paved and actually has a name: Avenida 27 de Febrero. It is by far the best road in the area, and leads to the largest branch of the all-inclusive resort Gran Bahía Príncipe. But first it passes a long strip of small hotels and cabana bars where Europeans in Speedos play *boules* in the shade of coconut palms, and then a public beach where locals arrive two or three per scooter to play in the calm, crystal water.

The Bahía Príncipe, a sprawling 462-room pastel colonial-style complex, sits tucked amid the palms behind an imposingly large gate. It's a tasteful five-star resort otherwise, and one so popular with Dominicans that there's an adjoining airstrip to accommodate private planes and occasional flights from Santo Domingo. On the east side of Bahía Príncipe, a large condo development is under way, and just to its west, the El Portillo Beach Club & Spa is rising. It's not hard to take it all in and imagine how a place like Cancún comes to be.

I made my way back into town and stopped in at Flora Tours to book my back-roads tour. Then I retired to the beach near Eva Luna for a drink and later walked to La Terrasse for a dinner of fresh grilled dorado, served with a spicy cream sauce that benefited nicely from the fusion of French and Dominican cultures.

ALL-TERRAIN VEHICLES are the preferred method of transport on Samaná, which makes sense as soon as you spend any time on the roads. My last morning there, I fired up a coughing four-wheeler and set out behind Stéphane and Sylvie, a couple of French tourists from Lyon, and our 20-year-old Dominican guide, Willy.

We buzzed by the new resorts and turned away from the beach, through banana fields and villages and thick patches of forest. Willy occasionally stopped to show *continued on page 86*



Sucre Salé
Plaza Taina,
coffee 50¢

La Terrasse
Pueblo de los
Pescadores,
809/240-6730,
dorado entrée
\$11.25

ACTIVITIES

Flora Tours
235 Calle Principal
Duarte, 809/360-
2793, flora-tours.
net, full-day
quad tour
for two \$120

NIGHTLIFE

**El Mosquito
Art Bar**
Pueblo de los
Pescadores,
809/877-8374

WHEN TO GO

High season on the Samaná Peninsula is mid-January to mid-March, when tourists come to watch humpback whales in the bay. But don't worry: The beaches are still empty.

LODGING

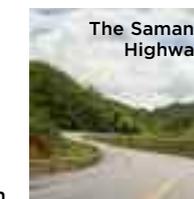
Villas Eva Luna
4 Calle Marico,
809/978-5611,
villa-evaluna.com,
from \$100, includ-
ing breakfast

FOOD

Luis
Playa Cosón,
grilled shrimp \$9

GETTING THERE

Roads in the Dominican Republic are often not well marked, so DR-8, the new highway from Santo Domingo to the Samaná Peninsula, can be tricky to find. Add to that the fact that the road doesn't yet appear on most maps—and that it has four different names—and you're on the way to getting lost. We have directions at **BudgetTravel.com**.



2/3 Vertical
Non-bleed
4 1/2" x 9 5/8"



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us points of interest: coffee trees, cocoa trees, orange leaves being used as medicine, a view of the peninsula from the top of a pass. From that apogee, I asked him what he thought about all the construction down below.

“It’s too much,” he answered. “Many hotels. It’s very tranquil here now. I don’t want it to be like Punta Cana.”

We rode on through villages—where children chased us and waved, begging for rides—and then stopped at a village co-op made up of 25 families and learned how they raise organic coffee beans, cocoa, and vanilla, and make *mama juana*, a legendary local concoction that smells like anise and is said to be a natural form of Viagra.

I don’t speak French, and neither Stéphane nor Sylvie spoke much English, but at lunch they managed to tell me about their horseback trip to the falls. It was, of course, *fantastique*. I asked where they were staying: the Bahía Príncipe. Stéphane said it was very nice and that they were happy there. He asked me what I thought of Samaná, and I said it was stunning. He agreed and then said something surprising: “I think we came at the right time. In two or three years...oof.”

We passed a resort construction site, about halfway between Las Terrenas and the peninsula’s tip, and then rode onto Playa Limón, a beach that appeared to be every bit as long as Playa Cosón. For miles to the east, the only building in sight was a private villa in the distance that Willy told me belonged to “an Italian guy.” There were no beach shacks. There were no French-owned cabana hotels. There weren’t even swimmers or fishermen. As I looked back toward the footprint of the resort-in-progress, it looked dwarfed by the forest. It could easily rise, and still this place would be remarkable.

We parked the quads, stripped down to bathing suits, and dove into the flat, blue water. I felt refreshed. ■

Credit: