

A Bit of U.S. In Dominican Republic

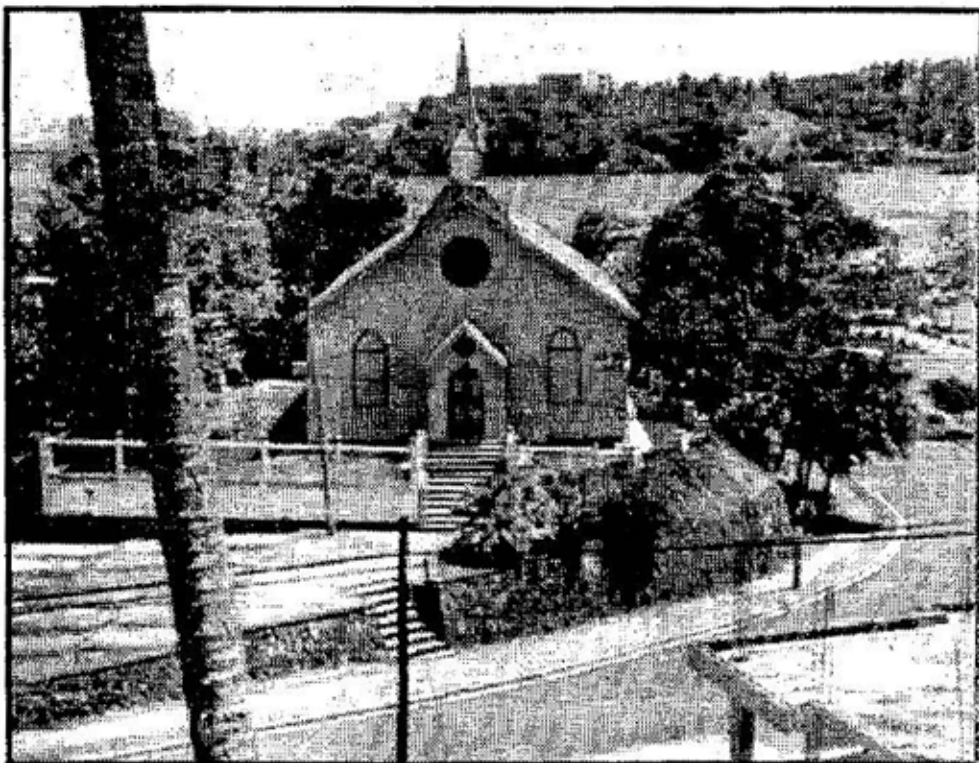
By GEORGE STOLZ

IN the northeastern corner of the Dominican Republic lies Samaná, a lush, rugged peninsula that bears testament to a forgotten moment in the history of the New World. In the 1820's, thousands of escaping American slaves relocated in Samaná, maintaining their North American customs in the isolation of their new Caribbean home. These Americanos (as their descendants still call themselves) lived beyond the reach of most modernizing and homogenizing influences until a highway was built 25 years ago, so that Samaná remained a cultural anomaly: an English-speaking, Protestant outpost of a Spanish-speaking, Catholic country.

Modern Samaná is more than an anthropological relic: it is coming of age as a 20th-century resort, popular especially among European visitors. The town, peninsula and bay, which all share the same name, possess the ingredients of a Caribbean resort. The town is small and peaceful, nestled between the steeply rising mountains and the gentle waters of the bay, with a variety of accommodations ranging from sparse pensions to a luxury resort complex. The 30-mile-long peninsula's 90 miles of coast abound with beaches. The mountains that form the peninsula's spine rise to heights of 2,000 feet.

That Samaná has remained underdeveloped while tourism has become the Dominican Republic's fastest growing industry is in large part due to Samaná's isolation. While most of the country's highways are excellent, the highway connecting the town and peninsula to the mainland is badly deteriorated, and the 170-mile drive from Samaná to Santo Domingo, the capital, takes at least five very bumpy hours.

Samaná, however, is not a backward village. It is a modern town of about 4,000 where breezy and brightly painted homes line wide and winding tree-lined streets and small shops and restaurants overlook the bayfront boulevard (known as the Malecón). Although most of the peninsula is beyond the range of telephone and power lines, the town has a few small hotels, bars and discos and some small restaurants serving French cuisine and re-



George Stolz/The New York Times

The Methodist church was brought from England plank by plank.

gional specialties like fish with coconut and stewed conch. There is a small airport, which offers two half-hour flights daily to the capital in five-passenger planes.

This combination of development and isolation is rooted in Dominican politics. The Government recognized Samaná's potential in the early 70's and initiated a plan to develop the region as a tourist center. The old wooden town was razed (with the exception of the Americanos' Methodist church, which had been moved plank by plank from England) and a new concrete town was constructed. Two Government-owned hotels were built, one on a bluff overlooking the town and the bay, the other on an island in the bay. The plan for the new town included parks, an airport, a new pier and a series of traffic circles.

But just as the fuse for the tourist boom was about to be lit, President Joaquín Balaguer fell from power, and the project,

associated with the outgoing party (and not untainted by controversy) was ignored by the incoming party. Without continued governmental promotion, Samaná was left a city marred by desuetude, the hotels virtually abandoned and the empty traffic circles serving as symbols for political satirists.

Circles, of course, are versatile symbols, as Mr. Balaguer, who was re-elected in 1986 and 1990, understands. The 84-year-old bachelor, who refers to Samaná in speeches as his girlfriend, has said that he plans to resume Samaná's Government-sponsored development. According to Origine Varva Orton, the governor of Samaná Province, these plans include expanding the airport to international standards and selling the hotels to private owners. However, as even Mr. Varva admits, these plans are still only plans. In the meantime, there has been a flurry of privately-

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