Dominican Republic

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financed projects, ranging from retirement communities to the 120-room Hotel Gran Bahia outside town.

Until changes occur, the best time to witness the hybrid products of Samaná's past is during two annual religious festivals: the week before Easter (Holy Week) and the celebration of the region's patron saint, Santa Barbara (the Patronales), which concluded late last month.

During these periods thousands of countryfolk stream into town, transforming the Malecón into a miniature Rio de Janeiro at Carnival. What little business the town usually conducts is replaced by processions, dances, games and contests, some conducted in English, others in Spanish and some in the patois of Haiti.

Loudspeakers blast merengue (the Dominican national music) well into the night. The loudspeakers are provided by Dominican rum companies, who do a good business at this time. Many revelers sleep on the benches and grassy areas lining the Malecón.

During the rest of the year Samaná remains sedate, a poor but not poverty-stricken town, home to a small group of American and European sailors and expatriates.

Other than the beauty and tranquillity, what draws most visitors is outdoor recreation. Around the docks of the Malecón one can arrange a day-trip, rent a motorcycle or fishing gear, have lunch or dinner or hire motorcycle-drawn carriages (called motoconchos) and small motorboats (called yolas).

Most beaches can be reached by motoconcho, which carry as many as eight passengers and are usually driven by teen-age guides. These loud and backfiring buggies also function as taxis. Yolas can be hired to reach beaches and caves accessible only by water or to travel among the small islands, called cayos, in the bay. Cayo Levantado, the largest (about a mile long and a half-mile across), is about 30 minutes by yola from the docks and makes for an interesting day trip.

Cayo Levantado's five beaches range from hidden to expansive, some lashed by currents twisting around the island and others gently lapped by the tide. Rocky trails cross the island.

EARLY each morning a group of cooks and vendors arrives. Some catch and grill fish, serving them with toasted plantains, while others mix the milk of coconuts with rum, serving a powerful drink called a coco loco to be sipped under the palm trees. In the evening the yolas return, taking workers and visitors back to the mainland.

Amid Cayo Levantado's natural treasures sits the closed, Government-owned hotel. Built atop the island's highest point, it must have been stunning. Today it sits in limbo as the Government negotiates for its renovation, leaving visitors to wander through doorless rooms.

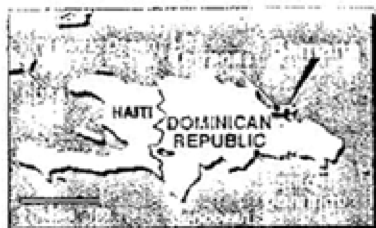
Another popular activity is game fishing; expeditions set out each morning from Samaná's docks. Across the bay and within range of a day's trip sprawls Los Haitises, a national park, rain forest and bird sanctuary, where pre-Columbian paintings can be seen on the walls of waterfront caves. The mountains, looming in the background, are criss-crossed by footpaths and riding trails.

The north side of the peninsula faces the rougher waters and uninterrupted vista of the Atlantic. Paradoxically, although the north coast is further removed from civilization than the town of Samaná, it is the site of the area's most modern accommodations at Las Terrenas. About a half hour by car or bus from the town of Samaná, Las Terrenas has been transformed in the past 10 years from a tiny fishing village into a small strip of hotels and resort compounds, ranging from quiet bed and breadfasts with rocking chairs and screened porches to large, all-inclusive compounds with tennis courts, windsurfing and scuba diving equipment, outdoor discos and transportation to and from the country's major airports.

Each winter humpback whales return to Samaná in order to breed and give birth, taking advantage of the warm sheltered waters of the bay between December and March. Although the chief whale-watchers are teams of marine biologists, nautical expeditions are also popular among tourists who travel alongside the whales, watching them and listening to them sing.

Samaná's history of cultural conjunctions preceded the relocation of the American slaves. It began with the first hostile encounter between the hemispheres on Jan. 12, 1493, when an army of Indians showered Columbus's ship with bone-tipped arrows. This Gulf of Arrows (as Columbus named it), situated about three miles east of town, bears no plaque but is well known among residents.

Pirates thrived in the coves and shallow waters of the bay until the city of Santa Barbara de Samaná was founded in 1756 by transplanted Canary Islanders whom the Spanish relocated in order to discourage British encroachment. Samaná's population was later augmented and diversified by fleeing French planters and their slaves when Haiti, which shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic, declared its independence from France in 1804.



The New York Times

Napoleon envisioned a capital for his New World empire in Samaná and had plans drawn for a new city on the site to be called Napoleon City. But British intervention and Continental concerns distracted the emperor and the plan was shelved. Then in 1822 Haiti invaded the Dominican Republic and began a 22-year occupation.

It was at this time that the formative event in Samaná's development occurred. Haiti's leader, Jean Pierre Boyer, made contact with abolitionist groups in Philadelphia and financed the passage and resettlement of as many slaves as the abolitionists could muster. Boyer's motives are disputed. Boyer said he was concerned with liberating the slaves, while Dominican observers said Boyer wanted to repopulate the country he had subjugated with residents partial to himself. Nevertheless, nearly 6,000 former slaves made the voyage to the Dominican Republic. The results were mixed: many died or returned, unable to adjust to changes in climate and culture. However, the 2,000 or so who relocated prospered.

THESE immigrants preserved their North American traditions. They ran their own schools, paying for the importation of English teachers, and maintained Protestant churches (primarily Methodist), despite occasional encounters with governmental intolerance. Today even the young people, bearing surnames like King, Green and Barrett, say that their ancestors came from Philadelphia.

Only the dictator Rafael Trujillo, threatened by the area's cultural independence, was able to introduce the Spanish language into Samaná, and his means were drastic; armed men publicly beat anyone heard speaking English. Most residents today are bilingual. The English of Samaná is unlike the singsong tonalities of neighboring former British colonies and sounds more like the English in the United States.

Samaná also retains [illegible] full of superstitious sightings of the Caribbean equivalents of vampires and werewolves. The superstitions, however, seem to be fading; when asked, residents say that they believe in the creatures but that the creatures appear less frequently and in fewer homes than they once did.

The remaining Americanos live off the land in small mountain villages dotting the peninsula. They grow coconuts, coffee, mangos and citrus fruits for sale. Their churches are easily identified along the narrow dirt roads: small, often windowless, wood-frame buildings perched on stilts or cinderblocks, immaculately clean, with pitched roofs, wooden pews and doors at both ends. On Friday and Saturday nights and Sunday mornings the churches are generally filled to capacity with worshippers of all ages singing hymns — in English. ■