

FALL ARTS & TRAVEL

Punta Cana

Dominican Republic's scorching hotspot

by Albert Rodriguez
SGN A&E Writer

Gorgeous, tropical, unspoiled, and very remote, there she is ... Punta Cana.

This resort town, located on the southeastern shore of the Dominican Republic, has become quite the vacation hotspot for American, Latin American, and European tourists. With crystal blue beaches, temperatures at boiling level, ever-flowing rum, and the meringue playing like a surround-sound stereo system, this place is sizzling.

Getting to Punta Cana from Seattle requires a 10-hour journey with a connection in New York, Miami, Chicago, Dallas, Charlotte, Philadelphia, or Atlanta. Spanish is the primary language spoken throughout the island country, which gained independence from neighboring Haiti in 1844, but all resorts, airport officials, and hospitality service counters have representatives who also speak English. Locals

are Gay-friendly, as are fellow Latin Americans and Spaniards, and even a scowling Russian can be tamed with a smile and polite greeting. There were several Gay

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ELVIS BOWYER

FILE PHOTO

by Jessica Price
SGN Contributing Writer

For a first-time visitor used to the experience of urban travel destinations, Hawaii seems like a far-off utopian fantasy dotted with palm trees, gigantic fruit, and beautiful people with bronzed skin.

The true Hawaii remains fiercely connected to its land and roots, though it's still a progressive destination with many faces. It's a place that feels foreign yet recognizably domestic, familiar, and traversable, but miraculously a little beyond the grip of most mainland characteristics. The melting pot created by the early Polynesian settlers and the later arrival of sun worshippers, businesspeople, and tropical adventurers lends a very real diversity to the feel of Hawaii as a whole.

The island of O'ahu is a first-time visitor's ideal sampler of a life less ordinary, not so remote or illusory after all, and every bit as perfect as you've heard.

The vibrant metropolis at the heart of O'ahu is Honolulu, the main point of entry for most flights, including those that connect to the other islands. With the reasonable prices of flights on Alaska Airlines or Hawaiian Air and flight times clocking in at a little over five hours, getting there is easy for Seattle-based travelers. The convenience and proximity from the West Coast make O'ahu a prime vacation destination for Washington, California, Alaska, and Oregon residents; these states make up the largest cross-section of U.S. visitors each year (Australians also make up a large part of annual tourist volume). Locals from the neighboring islands are also frequent visitors to O'ahu, a name which means "the gathering place."

Although most travel to the islands begins with the Honolulu's bustling Waikiki and the world-class shops and clubs adjacent to the beach, there's much more beauty and authenticity to be found in exploring the other parts of the island.

The North Shore

The drive from Honolulu to the North Shore along the Windward coast of O'ahu is breathtaking in any direction you look. Pristine beaches and blue seas parallel occasional villages, small farms, and lush, green mountains looming in the distance (parts of *Jurassic Park* were filmed in the 4,000-acre Kualoa Ranch).

Surfing in the North Shore is a main attraction due to world-famous winter waves, but before you reach the impressive surfing beaches, you'll pass the lush grounds of the North Shore's Turtle Bay Resort (57-091 Kamehameha Hwy.). This charming resort boasts ocean views just 40 feet from high tide. Under current zoning laws in Hawaii, the hotel would be set back much farther, making the classic resort one of a kind for location alone. But the stunning views aren't all the hotel has to offer. The resort was built in the 1960s as an all-inclusive property, which translates to all the activities you could choose from, arranged at the press of a button. The modest rooms are clean, comfortable, and large, but if you've come to O'ahu

to stay in your room, you'll be missing the point of Turtle Bay completely. Wander the beaches on the hotel's 880 acres; snorkel for an hour free of charge; rent bikes or mopeds; or choose between tennis, golf, or a tour by kayak or helicopter. If you prefer a more leisurely pace, the resort offers massage services, scenic poolside lounging, and cozy beach cottages as an alternative to standard rooms for longer stays. The stables at Turtle Bay are highly recommended; gentle, guided trail rides along the beach and through the ironwood forest take you through locations recognizable from *LOST*, *Pirates of the Caribbean IV*, and *For-*

at the end of Kahala Avenue, and sets the bar high for providing a sense of tranquility and seclusion overlooking a stunning, crescent-shaped beach between the majestic Diamond Head and Koko Head craters. The hotel's elegant lobby and open-air veranda are inviting and reminiscent of the hotel's glamorous history. The grand chandelier is the same one that has been in place since the hotel was built in 1964. Over the years, film stars such as Elizabeth Taylor have made the hotel a frequent getaway; Elton John and his family were recent guests, and every president since Lyndon Johnson has visited

— though guests aren't treated like a ny-

of the World's Best Places to Stay and is affiliated with the International Gay & Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA) and welcomes Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender guests. They also celebrate love by welcoming all weddings and commitment ceremonies.

Though it's difficult to find a reason to leave the grounds of the Kahala, just a 15-minute walk through the surrounding neighborhood and its lovely homes will bring you to the West Coast boutique-style Kahala Mall. Whole Foods is an anchor there, and many restaurants can be found on Waiialae Avenue such as Assagio's (4346 Waiialae Ave.) or Wahoo's Fish Taco (4614 Kilauea Ave.). If you have a rental car, lunch and a top-notch Hawaiian microbrew can be found a little farther east at Kona Brewing Company at Koko Marina in Hawaii Kai (7192 Kalaniana'ole Hwy.). Local IPA Big Swell is a popular choice at the casual, open-air restaurant overlooking the marina.

Before leaving O'ahu, the extraordinary grounds of the recently integrated Honolulu Academy of Arts and The Contemporary Museum (2411 Makiki Heights Dr.) are must-sees. The museum is perched atop Honolulu's scenic Makiki Heights, and the serene gardens feature outdoor art installations and Asian-influenced landscape architecture. The permanent collection features David Hockney, Jasper Johns, and Louise Nevelson, among others. The museum's indoor/outdoor café is an excellent, offbeat place for a meal, serving up healthy, summery dishes perfect for admiring the changing outdoor art and sculptures.

These sights and places to stay are just a fraction of the diverse experiences the island of O'ahu has to offer. From peaceful tropical gardens and secluded beaches to bustling downtown Honolulu, the island presents many terrains and many faces to the sun-seeking vacationer. To fully experience the unique sense of place Hawaii is known for, O'ahu is the perfect place to begin your exploration. The island is vast and brimming with uncommon choices.

EXPLORING O'ahu HAWAII'S GATHERING PLACE

getting
Sarah Marshall

(which was filmed entirely on Turtle Bay's beautiful grounds).

For dining, aside from the many restaurants at the hotel, you can visit the nearby town of Haleiwa for inexpensive, delicious healthy fare at Celestial Natural Foods (66-443 Kamehameha Hwy.), a quaint café and grocery favored by locals. On Sundays, Haleiwa hosts a sprawling farmers market which serves as a community gathering place with Hawaiian music, crafts, and the best in fresh, locally grown produce. Also fresh, inexpensive, and unbelievably delectable are the offerings of the many shrimp trucks dotting the North Shore near the town of Kahuku, a busy aquaculture area. Dishes are ordered at the windows of these moveable kitchens and typically come with rice, a green salad, and pineapple slices. When the afternoon sun gets a little intense, find the nearest shaved ice shop such as the family-owned Aoki's Shave Ice, which has been serving up this local treat for 30 years (66-117 Kamehameha Hwy.).

Before leaving the North Shore area, drive inland to the Dole Plantation (64-1550 Kamehameha Hwy.) if not for the soft-serve-over-fresh-pineapple treats, then for the incredible sight of spiky pineapple fields stretching out on either side of the two-lane highway.

Kahala

East of the thickly populated beaches at Waikiki and discretely tucked beyond Diamond Head Crater Park is the upscale residential area of Kahala.

The Kahala Hotel & Resort (5000 Kahala Ave.) is the hidden gem

thing less than royalty no matter who they are. What is unique to the resort is the service and sense of family that you fall under the moment you arrive. Many of the hotel employees have been with the Kahala since it opened, and the rooms and bungalows feel more like a fantasy vacation home than a hotel. Also on-site is a picture-perfect swimming pool and beach cabana with recreational sporting gear available, or you can book a relatively inexpensive, education-focused dolphin encounter with one of the resident Atlantic bottlenose dolphins. Many ocean-facing rooms actually overlook the dolphin lagoon and ponds that are home to sea turtles and reef fish. The Kahala Hotel & Resort is listed in the 2009 Condé Nast Traveler Gold List



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