

Love at



IT'S ALL IN THE NAME

The white sands of Playa Bonita, on the D.R.'s north coast, are unspoiled even by Samaná Peninsula standards.

First Sight

The Dominican Republic's Samaná Peninsula has become a magnet for expatriates drawn to its classic Caribbean ambience and for hospitality entrepreneurs looking for the next great place.

BY IAN KEOWN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES SCHNEPF



“I realized I could live here,”

a Frenchwoman named Armell Cogeze tells me, “and have a big garden, too.”

So four years ago she and her husband, Cyril, emigrated from Lille to the tiny seaside town of Las Galeras, on the tip of the Dominican Republic’s Samaná Peninsula.

I found myself chatting with Madame Cogeze because what I had first assumed to be a typical *colmador*, one of those Dominican neighborhood joints for rum and gossip, turned out to be a trim little *épicerie*, a boutique delicatessen, where the owner and her clients—one German, one Swiss—were discussing charcuterie meats and Livarot cheese in animated French.



Las Galeras is a delightfully ragtag fishing village with a towel-on-the-sand atmosphere and a wind-swept beach. I first went there about 20 years ago, fell in love with its timeless Caribbean character, and vowed to return someday to flake out among the fishing boats drawn up on the sand, within aroma distance of the fresh shrimp cooking on the grills. That day turned out to be more distant than I had hoped, and when I finally made it back this past spring, I experienced the usual *frissons* of trepidation, dreading to find that the town’s main drag (indeed, its *only* drag) had been tarted up with emporia or that the ladies with the grills had been deposed by sushi bars.

I had just come from a delightful 21-room hotel owned by a Croatian lady and run by a German lady, and now I was in the middle of a scene that happens scores of times a day in Provence. Armell and Cyril Cogeze had vacationed in Las Galeras for 10 years before settling here, growing that big garden and opening their authentic little *épicerie*; her European customers, likewise, had come upon this quiet little backwater while vacationing and decided that this was where they wanted to live. Love at first sight—it was a romantic song I heard many times on my weeklong jaunt through the Samaná Peninsula, from the mouths of expatriates from France, Germany, Spain, the Azores, the Basque Country, Toronto and Colorado. The world, it seems, is discovering this unique corner of the Dominican Republic.

The Samaná Peninsula is the northeasternmost tip of the island of Hispaniola, jutting into the Atlantic and forming the great sweep of Bahia Samaná. The drive from the town of Sanchez in the west to the village of Las Galeras in the east covers a mere 40 miles; the distance from the bay shore to the Atlantic coastline is only 10 miles at the peninsula’s widest point. Given the hills, indentations and ambushing potholes, however, the usual miles-per-hour calculations become the motoring equivalent of island time. Not that you’d want to drive fast anyway; the scenery is too beguiling for that. Samaná is noted for its *cocoteros*, or coconut palms. Millions of them. Groves of *cocoteros* line the beaches and cloak the hillsides, and in the sharp afternoon sunlight they fill the landscape with a green so vivid and brilliant it seems to have been digitally enhanced. When I’m not looking at coconut groves, I’m catching glimpses of inviting beaches. Unlike the long stretches of strand at, say, Punta Cana to the south, the

EXCLUSIVE ALL-INCLUSIVE
The plush Gran Bahia Principe
Cayo Levantado resort sits
on an islet in Samaná Bay.
Opposite: Guest relations.



SAMANÁ PENINSULA

38 miles

El Catey Airport
Las Terrenas
Playa Moron
Playa Rincon
Las Galeras
Sanchez
Samaná

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

SANTO DOMINGO



SEASHORES AND CETACEANS

One of Cayo Levantado's beguiling beaches. Opposite: Whale expert Kim Beddall on her boat, the *Victoria II*.

“I once told my mother I wanted to touch a whale,” says Samaná Bay tour guide Kim Beddall, who moved from Canada 25 years ago. “Now I’m trying to make sure that other people *don’t* touch them.”



beaches of Samaná are mostly cozy coves embraced by hills or cliffs, like playas Fronton and Rincon near Las Galeras, or Limon, Moron and Karisma near El Limon. Many of them can be reached only by boat or scraggly footpath (and it wouldn't surprise if some of them have never known a human footprint), but that still leaves more than enough desert-island escapes to fill a week of beachcombing.

Despite all this natural beauty, the peninsula has often been overlooked by even the most popular travel guides and overshadowed by major tourist destinations such as Puerto Plata and Punta Cana — until now. Like any Edenic getaway, the Samaná Peninsula is not immune from insinuating progress. Cruise ships — biggies, alas — now make frequent calls at the town of Santa Bárbara de Samaná (the regional capital, commonly referred to as Samaná); a brand-new airport, El Catey, capable of handling international flights, has just gone into service at the western end of the peninsula; and two years ago the government opened a new highway that cuts the driving time from the Dominican Republic's capital city of Santo Domingo to Sanchez to two-and-a-half hours. Will an influx of weekend trippers from the capital encourage a flood of hotels and gated condos? Will charter flights from Europe lead to rows of high-rise, low-price all-inclusives? What, I wondered, will happen to all the whales?

Some 85 percent of all humpback whales that cruise up and down the North Atlantic seaboard are conceived and born in the waters of the Dominican Republic. Judging by the ancient petroglyphs in nearby native Taíno caves, they've been repeat visitors for centuries. Each December, some 1,500 of them gather in the warm, shallow waters of Bahia Samaná to do what nature prompts them to do.

“It's like one big spring break for whales,” says sea-tanned

Kim Beddall of Victoria Marine tours. And she should know. Beddall came to Samaná from her native Canada 25 years ago in response to an ad for a dive instructor. “I loved the warm weather,” she says, “but after several years as a divemaster, I became more interested in the whales.” There were no formal whale-watching activities back then, so Beddall bought her first sightseeing boat, a 23-footer, and took people for excursions around the bay. Now she's owner and skipper of the *Victoria II*, a sturdy 50-foot launch that makes trips twice a day during the season, wind and waves permitting.

I bobbed around for a few hours aboard *Victoria II*, hoping to score a sighting. It was late in the season (mid-March), but we eventually caught up with one family of humpbacks. The adult whales shied from us, but their frisky calf performed a flipper breach, a spy loop, a couple of tail lobes and other silly *Megaptera novaeangliae* tricks. Visitors who miss the whale-watching season can catch up with these legendary creatures by taking a boat trip across the bay to Los Haitises National Park and scouting around mangrove forests and caves where the ancient Taíno people made their whale petroglyphs.

One of the most popular ways to get up close to the sights and scents of the tropics is a horseback ride through the rainforest, in the heart of the peninsula, starting out from the hill town of El Limon, just off the main road between the towns of Samaná and Las Terrenas. The procedure here is to stop off at a *parada*, or entry point, to link up with guides, size up the horses and stock up on bottled water, then set out at a slow clip-clop through groves of native trees such as the *cigua blanca* and the *uva de sierra*, past small, brightly painted homes made of palm wood and thatch, to the 140-foot El Salto del Limon waterfall for three hours of escapism, Indiana Jones-style — with a dunk in a refreshing swimming hole as a reward.



Up on the Atlantic coast, Las Terrenas is another fishing village poised for development and ready to merengue. It's flanked on either side by a string of largely undeveloped, covelike beaches where the sand is separated from clusters of small hotels and rental cottages by dirt tracks — barely wide enough for one car — that wind among the coconut palms. A typical Antillean hodgepodge, its narrow streets bustle with pedicabs, and its sidewalks overflow with dimly lit *supermercados* and *colmados*, and enough displays of paintings and carvings to qualify it as an artists colony if only the exhibits could be designated “art.”

“The next St. Tropez” is a frequent boast, but I can't see Las Terrenas as a Riviera-style playground, and most of the locals I talked to, native and expat alike, seem to be less than keen on the idea of an influx of the beautiful people. But there is a certain buzz and vibe to the place, a budding urbanity that owes much to a group of expatriates who have opened restaurants, augmenting the local shrimp with coco with a broad array of international cuisines.

The buzz focuses on a narrow street known as Pueblo de los Pescadores, a row of former fishing huts that has morphed into a tourist-friendly strip that includes a sports bar, a tapas bar, a couple of pizzerias and assorted restaurants. They're all

casual and relaxed, as beach-side dining should be. If you seat yourselves at La Terrasse, for example, the proprietor, Willy Barrera (“I came here for vacation from the Canary Islands and decided to stay ...”), won't be insulted if one of your group wants pizza and your waiter has to slip through the billowing curtains to fetch your order from the pizzeria next door.

At Playa Coson, west of town, The Beach redefines “beach” style by filling a traditional seaside cottage with museum-caliber antiques and a refined design esthetic. (The toilets even have small flagons of Bulgari eau de toilette.) Check the handwritten daily menu for the delicately flavored *Camarones Chinole* (shrimp prepared with a passion fruit sauce).

Another hot spot dedicated to raising the town's culinary ambitions (and prices) to the next level is the two-year-old Mi Corazon, a bi-level courtyard restaurant that weds white-on-white minimalism with traditional Mexican hacienda grandeur. Its creators are a quartet of Swiss/French chefs and restaurateurs who started visiting the Dominican Republic decades ago. Says co-owner Werner “Lilo” Kipfer, an effusive greeter and enthusiastic cheerleader for Las Terrenas: “After we rented a house here we decided to open a restaurant for fine dining because the town is getting sophisticated faster than everyone thought ...”

DINING AND WINING

Epicureans passing through Las Terrenas will relish the acclaimed French bistro La Terrasse, next door to the *muy cool* El Mosquito Art Bar, whose barkeeps (right) are famed for their extensive drink repertoire.



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What Lilo has in mind is the well-heeled clientele that will arrive with the area's upcoming residential/resort projects. As I drive around the peninsula, I pass signs and billboards for new gated communities (some of which seem to have fallen prey to the economic nosedive and are still little more than scars on the landscape), but the grandest of them hover around Las Terrenas. At the spectacular Terrazas de Cosón, about 1,000 feet up in the hills, the Swiss owner has called in world-class eco-designers to create low-impact villas featuring garden-tiled roofs and solar panels with accumulators to produce electricity for the garden sprinklers. Another Las Terrenas newcomer (scheduled to open this fall) is Balcones del Atlantico, the brainchild of Maximo Bisono, president of Bisono Enterprises. "We're the biggest developers in the country," he tells me. "We've built dozens of hotels for other people, but this is my own project." "This" is 75 acres of luxury apartments beside an 8,000-foot beach with six massage cabanas. Ponds, streams and swim-up bars link four-story villas that will eventually encompass 350 apartments. That may be more concrete than the territory needs (even with 25 of those acres set aside as a nature preserve), but few owners or guests will care once they catch sight of the impressive interiors featuring exotic natural finishes from Italy, Bali and the Far East.

So, what of tomorrow? The Samaná Peninsula is one of those precious spots that inspire loyalty, and the conservation-minded are working to maintain its natural charms and prevent its ending up as one big, gated community.

"I'm often called an eco-terrorist," says Ruben Torres as we dine on grilled dorado on the breeze-cooled deck of La Terrasse. "I always seem to be telling people they'd better do this or that or they'll ruin what they've come here to enjoy in the first place." The 36-year-old marine biologist from Santo Domingo has driven up to Las Terrenas to check out progress at Balcones del Atlantico, where he is a consultant. "The fact that the owner put a marine biologist on his team shows that he's serious about the quality of the beach and the sea." Torres was hired to restore the resort's dunes and beach and to reanimate the reefs; today, he says, lobsters are thriving and local fishermen have been persuaded that sound conservation practices work to their own benefit — more fish, more cash.

Down in Samaná, Kim Beddall now has a second vocation: conservationist. "I once told my mother I wanted to touch a whale," she says. "Now I'm trying to make sure that other people *don't* touch them." In 1994, she helped create The Center for Conservation and Eco-Development of Samaná and its Environs, a group that licenses whale-watching tour boats and



Peninsula House owners Cary and Marie-Claude searched Europe for their dream inn before discovering Samaná. “It was the beauty and the unspoiled landscape of the place that swayed us,” says Marie-Claude.

oversees their operation. “At least,” she notes, “the Samaná whales have gone from being endangered to just threatened.”

For now the conservationists seem to be holding their own, and I did welcome some of the Peninsula’s innovations, like the cosmopolitan dining and the luxury accommodations. When I first visited the area two decades ago, lodging options were mostly B&Bs and self-catering bungalows, but today several new resorts let visitors balance their sweaty forays into unspoiled nature with contemporary comforts. Three of the new all-inclusive resorts are owned by a Spanish chain: Bahia Principe El Portillo, outside Las Terrenas; Bahia Principe Cayacoa, in the town of Samaná; and Bahia Principe Cayo Levantado on a hilly islet a five-minute boat ride from the mainland. All offer exceptional value, and the plush resort-style digs on the Peninsula are the 132 suites at the Cayo Levantado. With its terraced gardens and dining tables set up beneath canvas-shaded colonnades, it has the elegant air of a classic grand hotel on the French Riviera.

The emergent sophistication of the peninsula reaches its zenith on a mirador-like plateau dominated by Peninsula House, a two-story plantation house with Victorian gables and wraparound veranda. Lawns lead to a garden-shrouded swimming pool with dreamy views of forested gullies and glistening sea. Co-owners Marie-Claude Thiebault and Cary Guy came here six years ago, then spent two-and-a-half years designing and decorating the interiors with antiques and

artifacts from a lifetime’s collecting by Marie-Claude. “My passion is decorating,” she informs me, so the six spacious suites go well beyond the usual Frette bathrobes and Belgian-linen sheets. Mine had a crystal chandelier and an original painting above a bathtub enclosed in Brazilian hardwood.

The refinements of Peninsula House may be a far cry from Villa Serena in Las Galeras, but a vacation that combined the two would be just about ideal, the cosmopolitan polish of the former complementing the island simplicity of the latter. Serena shuns televisions and radios (the better to maintain the promise of its name), and the tented massage gazebo in the garden would tempt anyone, at least for an hour, to quit admiring the seascape of islets and headlands.

The Villa is the perfect setup for its setting, for — behold! — Las Galeras is just as I remembered it. The thatched stores were still there, buildings were still no taller than the palm trees, and the fishing dinghies were still hauled up on the sand and still needed a coat of paint. True, Rafaela la Famosa and the other cheerful grill cooks were now housed in a rustic pavilion sponsored by the Asociación Comunitario de Vendedoras, but they were still serving up their trusty home-style classics.

Sample their *pescado con coco*, sip a cool *cerveza*, then toss your towel on the sand, listen to the lulling surf and drift into daydreams: Now you know why all those expats have zeroed in on the beauty and serenity of Samaná.

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For **THE ESSENTIALS** on the Samaná Peninsula, turn to page 86.



COOL WATERS AND WARM WELCOMES

A splash in the swimming hole at the bottom of the 140-foot El Salto del Limon rewards a vigorous trek. Opposite: Proprietors Cary Guy and Marie-Claude Thiebault welcome guests to the Peninsula House.