

Peninsula of Samaná—Microcosm of the Caribbean

Samaná is unique, different and beautiful. Samaná, geologically the oldest part of Hispaniola, was, until quite recently, an island in its own right. Samaná was where the Amerindians, the Tainos, put up the biggest fight against the Spaniards. Samaná has always attracted visitors, although not so much for the undisturbed stretches of white, palm-fringed, sandy beaches as for its important strategic geographical location. French incursions alternated with the intrusion of English and Dutch buccaneers and pirates. In the nineteenth century Samaná was captured by Napoleonic forces, and was even sold to the United States for one million pesos. The natural safety of the bay made Samaná a focus for ship-based commerce, with navigable river and rail links to the interior, and a region of immigration, attracting Haitians, Puerto Ricans, Jamaicans and other islanders from the English-speaking Caribbean, not to mention the „English“ from Philadelphia. The resultant cultural diversity and mix in Samaná is intriguing. From African Methodist, Wesleyan to Catholic churches, from petroglyphs and pictographs to Barchata and Bamboulá, from Pica Pollo to „Donplin“. The peninsula and its surroundings has a rich and fascinating heritage. The towns and villages, caves, wrecks, and the landscape modified by human activities are alive with traces, vestiges, remains and reminders; although sometimes a little interpretation is needed.

Samaná has long attracted certain regular visitors. For eons humpback whales from the North Atlantic have migrated every winter to the warm and protected waters of the Bay of Samaná. Under the strictest guidelines, developed by the Association of Boat Owners in Samaná and CEBSE (Center for the Conservation and Ecodevelopment of Samaná Bay and its Environment), these playful colossi can be admired at fairly close range without intimidating mothers and their calves or risking your safety. In view of the outstanding natural beauty of the region and its unique natural and cultural resources, the initiative has been taken to have the contiguous area of the peninsula, the bay and Los Haitises recognised as a Biosphere Reserve.

Biosphere Reserves are protected areas in terrestrial, coastal, and marine environments that have been selected to serve as representative examples of a countries natural and cultural patrimony. Reserve designation is provided by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Man and the Biosphere Program (MAB), initiated in 1971. The Biosphere Reserve is the oldest and only internationally recognized program which designates protected areas with the objective of making conservation compatible with economic and social development.

CEBSE, a Dominican non-governmental, non-profit organization founded in 1992, is actively engaged in the conservation and sustainable development of the region and has established an ecotourism program. This program operates at different levels: naturalist guide training, community education, working together with and advising the local and national tourism industry, government organizations and development agencies. The mid-term aim is to develop tourism which brings economic benefits to the local communities and the region, and conserves the outstanding natural beauty and resources for posterity and the long-term viability of the tourism sector.

There are many ways of appreciating and enjoying Samaná. First and foremost is being informed and secondly being open to the „other“. No matter what the activity, respect the environment and the culture.

There are many places to stay, from luxury hotels to small family-run guest houses, the most choice being found in and around Las Terrenas, Las Galeras, and the town of Samaná. As yet accommodation in the villages is informal and ad-hoc but being developed.

Whale watching

In the season (mid January to mid March) the town of Samaná is the focus for guided and regulated whale watching trips, although many small operators offer trips from various embarkation points between Samaná and Las Galeras. Although very few „pirates“ operate, make sure that your captain and guide have permits to enter the whale watch area, have been certified by the Whale Sanctuary Commission and CEBSE, and comply with the regulations.

Humpback whales are the most playful of their species, providing spectacular displays which include breaching, flipping, and tail lobbing; mainly performed by males out to impress. Mothers and their calves are less active but equally fascinating, as they can be observed relatively close to the shore. The Whale Sanctuary Commission monitors whale watching very closely for your benefit and that of the whales.

Los Haitises National Park

Guided boat trips to Los Haitises are run from the same places as above as well as from Sánchez. Visitors may only enter the national park with a certified guide. With its keys and caves Los Haitises is an important mangrove and tropical rain forest reserve and home to the endangered manatee, many birds, reptiles and bats. In Pre-Columbian times the Tainos sought refuge and left petroglyphs and pictographs in the myriad caves found in the karstic formations.

ACTIVITIES

Scuba diving and snorkeling

Clear waters, coral reefs and walls, and qualified diving instructors with gear for hire are found close to and in Las Terrenas, Las Galeras, Samaná and Los Cacaos. Snorkeling can be enjoyed off any of the sandy beaches.

Horseback riding and community-based ventures

Horses are still the only form of transport for many living off the „beaten“ track, and are the best way of exploring. Horses can be hired on an ad-hoc basis almost anywhere. Organised horseback treks are offered in Samaná, Las Galeras, Las Terrenas and El Limón. For the inexperienced, short horseback trips are offered to the attractive Salto Limón waterfalls. These trips are mainly community-based ventures, promoted by CEBSE, and are located at El Limón, El Café, Arroyo Surdido and Rancho Español, on the road between Las Terrenas and Samaná.

Mountain biking and hiking

As yet no organized tours are offered. Information at CEBSE on routes available. Routes can be planned using detailed ordinance maps.

Caving

Being a karstic region, the peninsula is riddled with caves, passages, caverns and grottoes which are largely unexplored and open to discovery. Another community based venture is found in Cuevas de Agua, Cabo Samaná, where local guides provide an introduction to this fascinating subterranean world.

Taking it easy, going lobster, chilling out and getting around

Las Terrenas, Las Galeras and Samaná are the centres for restaurants, cafes, bars and bakeries, stores etc, car and. motorbike hire, boat trips. Check out the map for the many beaches, bays, coral reefs, and other features. If you can't drive, clamber on a pick-up truck taxi or flag down a motorbike taxi. If you really like miles of truly deserted beaches, head for El Rincón. Be warned, the road/track is rough in places. The same is true of the „road“ to El Valle, a beautiful beach. If you prefer full-catering and a gentle throng, hop on a launch to Cayo Levantado. If you can't speak Spanish, try your English. *Samanes*, English with a Creole twang, is still spoken by the older folks in the villages and above all in Samaná.

Do's and Don'ts

Apart from customary courtesy and respect for other cultures and the environment, please adhere to the following:

- stick to paths and tracks
- no driving on beaches, nor riding cross bikes or 4-wheel balloon-tired bikes along foot or horse trails
- do not disturb or touch corals
- do not leave rubbish
- do not consume or purchase immature fish (small fry), lobsters or prawns
- do not purchase live birds or animals (especially parakeets and turtles); nor shells or conches
- use water sparingly
- save energy

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Please contact CEBSE, Inc. if you want more information on sustainable tourism and activities as well as ordnance maps:

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