

48 HOURS

SANTO DOMINGO

The Dominican Republic capital is an interesting add-on to a beach break, finds Meera Dattani

One thing is for sure: if Santo Domingo was in Europe, it would be hot city-break territory.

Caribbean islands aren't always known for their compact, easily navigable, enticing capitals, but 'La Capital', as it's known, definitely doesn't conform to the stereotype.

By the Ozama River, Santo Domingo was the first seat of power for the Spanish colonisers and, as a result, it has the first cathedral, university, monastery, convent, castle and fortress of the 'New World'. Now, its historic centre, the Zona Colonial, is a Unesco World Heritage Site.

Full of intriguing museums and historical sites, pretty squares and quiet courtyards, craft shops, excellent restaurants specialising in modern Dominican cuisine and atmospheric bars with outdoor patios, it's perfect for aimless wandering.

It's an easy place to do as the locals do, too. If there's a baseball match on, ask your hotel to purchase tickets or book a tour, such as Urban Adventures' Sights, Sounds & Tastes of Santo Domingo, which gets under the city's skin.



PICTURES: SHUTTERSTOCK



09.00: Alcázar de Colón



15.00: National Botanical Gardens



17.00: KahKow Experience



19.00: Nightlife tour



09.00: Cathedral of Santa María la Menor



19.00: The Food Truck Stop



If it's a Sunday night, nothing beats live music and dancing in front of the San Francisco monastery

17.00: Catch the late-afternoon rays setting over the Monasterio de San Francisco, the ruins of the first monastery in the Americas. Nearby is the first castle of the Americas, the Alcázar de Colón, and one-time residence of the viceroy of the Indies – none other than Don Diego Colón, a son of Christopher Columbus.

19.00: For a real local experience, take a taxi to The Food Truck Stop on Avenida República de Colombia. Open-sided but covered, there's a fantastic atmosphere and food to suit every palate, from Dominican classic mofongo, made of mashed-then-fried plantain, to sizzling steaks and burgers, plus local beers and cocktails. Alternatively, stay in town and stroll along the Malecón (esplanade) before ducking in to one of the many seafood restaurants. If it's a Sunday night, nothing beats live music and dancing in front of the ruins of the San Francisco monastery, where Grupo Bonye play salsa, merengue, jazz and more till late.

Where to stay

Hodelpa Nicolás de Ovando

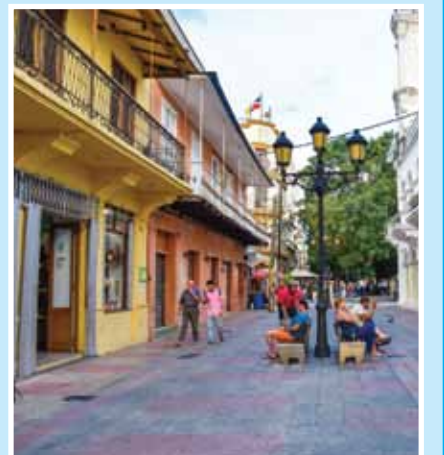
One of the city's most atmospheric hotels, this Unesco-listed property dates back to the 16th century and used to be the home of Santo Domingo's founder, Nicolás de Ovando, the first Spanish governor of the Americas. There's a lovely river-view pool, plus heritage rooms, plant-filled courtyards and an excellent fine-dining restaurant, Dos Mundos. **Book it:** From \$135 per night. hodelpanicolasdeovando.com

Hodelpa Caribe Colonial

On the lovely Isabel La Católica street near the main square, this modern art deco-style property is a perfect city hotel, fusing style and character with convenience. Local art gives the 54-room property lots of style, rooms are smart with spotless bathrooms, and there's a large rooftop terrace and on-site restaurant. **Book it:** From \$89 per night. hodelpa.com

Billini Hotel

Once a guest house for monks and nuns, this colonial house is now a true luxury design hotel in the Zona Colonial. With 24 rooms set around a Spanish-style courtyard, this property is all about the style, with cool art, bold prints, funky chairs and a great Moon Rooftop bar and restaurant by the outdoor pool. **Book it:** From \$153 per night. billinihotel.com



DAY ONE

09.00: What makes Santo Domingo appealing is that most sights are in the walkable Zona Colonial. Head down to Plaza de España by the river, where the cruise ships dock, and inside the Alcázar de Colón. Built in 1510, it was the colonial palace of the Columbus family, first lived in by Christopher Columbus's son, Diego, and is now an interesting museum showing the life and times of the first colonisers.

11.00: Continuing the history lesson, walk along the Calle Las Damas, the first paved street of the New World, to the Fortaleza Ozama, the oldest fortress in the Americas, for fantastic views over Santo Domingo. En route to lunch, take a walk along Calle El Conde, the first commercial street in the New World and now a popular shopping destination, lined with restaurants, cafes, shops and streetside art sellers.

13.00: Relax in one of the city's most atmospheric restaurants, Buche Perico on Calle El Conde. Inside, a vertical garden awaits in a courtyard setting; it's pretty at night too and there's often live music. Try the ceviche with coconut, yuca mashed balls, creole-style goat or a traditional sancocho stew.

15.00: If gardens are your thing, head to the 160-hectare National Botanical Gardens, a 10-minute taxi ride away. The largest of its kind in the Caribbean, it features a Japanese garden and more than 300 types of orchid. Alternatively, get your shopping fix at Mercado Modelo back in the Zona Colonial – this is the ultimate place to practise those bartering skills and pick up some local crafts.

17.00: For the perfect late-afternoon treat, head to the KahKow Experience. This engaging chocolate museum



Stroll around the buzzing main square, Parque Colon, with the lit-up cathedral a lovely backdrop

takes a fun, storytelling approach to one of our oldest pleasures, from bean to bar, via interactive exhibits and a stint in the chocolate-making lab where you can create your own bar to take home (or eat). The shop, while a little pricey, is an excellent place to buy gifts.

19.00: Start the night with an aperitif and a stroll around the always-buzzing main square, Parque Colon, with the lit-up cathedral a lovely backdrop. For dinner, if you're after fine dining, book a table at Dos

Mundos restaurant at the Nicolás de Ovando hotel, where chef Martin Omar serves up delicious Dominican dishes that fuse ancient ingredients with modern cooking styles. Dishes include salmon marinated in local spices and Dominican-style baby goat stew with rum. Alternatively, book an Urban Adventures nightlife tour that takes in several city bars, from local haunts to rooftop spots (£54). A consistently good bet for a late-night drink, bites and dancing is Jalao on Parque Colon.

DAY TWO

09.00: Explore the cathedral and its ornate interior, one of Santo Domingo's key sights and the oldest cathedral in the Americas. A short walk away is the Museum of Royal Houses, a set of former Spanish government offices now transformed into a museum detailing the events and characters – from Francis Drake

to Spanish royals – that have shaped Santo Domingo.

11.00: It's grim, but the Memorial Museum of Dominican Resistance is a must-visit for those wanting to understand the history of this nation. Myths about the 'greatness' of former dictator Trujillo are still prevalent and the museum does a good job of filtering truth from fiction. Most of the exhibits are in Spanish, but it's heavy going in any case, and the audio guide is a far better way to get to grips with the Dominican Republic's past, including its relationship with island neighbour Haiti. You'll probably need a strong coffee afterwards. Thankfully, there are several establishments on Calle Arzobispo Nouel – try Affogato at number 251 or La Mochila at 158.

13.00: The atmospheric little square by Calle Padre Billini is home to several restaurants including the excellent Lulu

Tasting Bar, a gastro tapas bar with a courtyard in a historic building. Graze away at the bar or take a table but either way, order as many dishes as you can fit, as they're incredibly creative and tempting. It's also a lively spot by night, with live music and DJs. The fried arancini rice balls, ceviche and garlic mushrooms come recommended.

15.00: Grab a taxi and head two-and-a-half miles to the Plaza de la Cultura. Here, you'll find the Museum of the Dominican Man, which features relics and artefacts from the pre-Columbian Taíno civilisation, and the excellent Museum of Modern Art, rated as much for its architecture as for what's inside – a permanent collection of more than 1,000 works by some of the country's most influential artists. This is no small feat, given there was no Fine Arts School until the 1940s thanks to dictator rule and political mayhem.