



Five-star service

Sarah Bridge joins a Palladium Hotel Group fam to find out what's new in the Dominican Republic

A decade ago, an all-inclusive holiday in the Dominican Republic might have signified cheap and cheerful rather than a luxury Caribbean break – but a growing number of five-star all-inclusive resorts has given the destination an upmarket boost.

Its natural attributes – long stretches of white sandy beaches, verdant forests and coast-hugging islands – have long attracted tourists. Yet visitors to the Dominican Republic, which totalled a record-breaking 6.5 million in 2018, can now expect all the advantages of luxury travel, from swim-up suites and top-quality spas to fine-dining restaurants, private butlers and world-class golf courses.

“The market really opened up for UK visitors when scheduled airlines such as British Airways started flying here, in addition to the charter airlines,” says Sonja Rogers of the Dominican Tourist Board in the UK. “Now, the perception of the Dominican Republic is changing, from budget Caribbean to much more luxurious.”

PRESIDENTIAL SUITES

Former US president Bill Clinton, a regular Dominican Republic visitor, was seen a few months ago dancing the merengue, listening to a traditional *perico ripiao* band and getting in some golf in Punta Cana, where many of the country's hotels are located.

Holidaymakers wishing to follow in his footsteps will find themselves spoilt for choice as billions of dollars in investment – including \$500 million from the state – are poured into the Dominican Republic's growing luxury resort scene.

In the past year alone, five-star openings have included the adult-only TRS Cap Cana on the secluded Cap Cana coast, just 10 minutes from the airport, in an area soon to be transformed by developments including the Hyatt Ziva and adult-only Hyatt Zilara, scheduled to open in November.

The all-inclusive 115-suite TRS Cap Cana is an Instagrammer's delight, with stunning azure pools and access to a pretty nearby marina. The hotel also has three bars and four restaurants,

PICTURE: TRS Cap Cana

DON'T MISS

Santo Domingo: The Unesco-listed capital is the oldest city in the New World. Walking tours along its cobbled streets take in historical sites such as the Calle Las Damas and a 16th-century cathedral.

Local food: Try traditional dishes such as sancocho meat stew, mashed plantain and the staple rice, beans and chicken, and wash it down with a glass of mama juana if you're feeling brave.

Scape Park: This Cap Cana park is a big draw for families, with ziplining, horse-riding, caving, swimming and hiking among the activities.

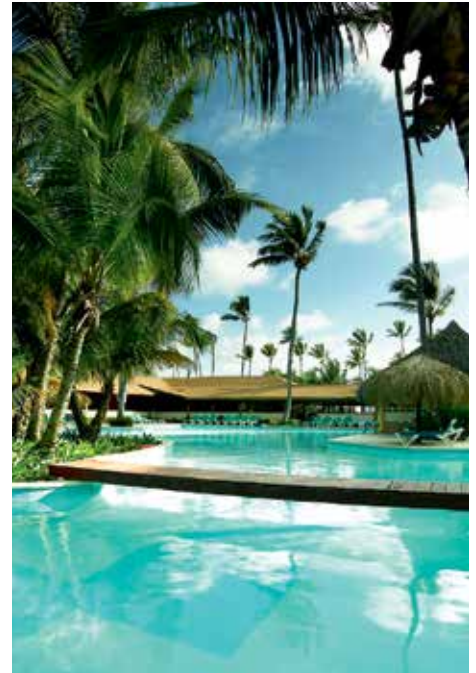
Saona Island: Travel by speedboat to this deserted island to sunbathe, swim and relax ahead of a leisurely catamaran ride home.

Coco Bongo: Expect a frenetic evening of dancing, music and cabaret, where tributes to Madonna, Queen and Michael Jackson are interspersed with acrobatic displays. It's loud, late and lots of fun.



PICTURE: Shutterstock

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Royal Deluxe Junior Suite at TRS Turquesa; Grand Palladium Punta Cana; agents on the fam trip



including two à la carte, and the popular Helios beach club with live music, while the Zentropia spa offers treatments, a gym, steam room, sauna and Jacuzzi.

Every room has a private balcony or terrace, with 24-hour room service and a private butler (guests can even email their preferred in-room drinks ahead of their stay). Staff were attentive in restocking beach towels, bringing drinks and putting on a programme of activities from cooking lessons and cocktail classes to petanque, merengue and yoga.

Stacey Hamilton, travel specialist at Feherty Travel, says: "I loved the laid-back atmosphere at TRS Cap Cana. Our room came with its own butler (amazing!) and the saxophonist playing at Helios while we dined was a lovely touch. My favourite night out was Coco Bongo – a combination of nightclub, Cirque de Soleil and cabaret show rolled into one – but my highlight was a trip by catamaran to Saona Island. Swimming in the natural pool and sunbathing on the island was bliss."

RESORT VIBE

Those seeking more of a beach holiday experience should head half an hour along the Punta Cana coast to a vast resort containing four Palladium hotels: Grand Palladium Bavaro Suites, Grand Palladium Punta Cana, Grand Palladium Palace Resort and TRS Turquesa.

Punta Cana is another hotspot for hotel development, with openings from the likes of Meliá – including the \$110 million Grand Reserve at Paradisus Palma Real, and family-friendly Meliá Caribe – plus Club Med and Finest Punta Cana, due later this year.

While the four Palladium properties share the same lush tropical surroundings, each has its own character, from family-friendly Punta Cana and bustling Bavaro to the boutique-style Palace and adult-only TRS Turquesa.

"The beautiful Grand Palladium Punta Cana Resort had a wonderful sense of tranquillity," says Brenda Proud, personal travel consultant at Hays Travel.

"Walking through the coconut palms of the gardens and stepping out onto the soft beach and seeing the gorgeous turquoise sea, I finally knew I was in the Caribbean!"

"My favourite restaurant was Sumptuori. The Japanese food was amazing and the chefs put on a great show, cooking food right in front of you."

A flotilla of buggies and a mini-train ferry guests around the vast resort, and a programme of events – from foam parties and dance classes to tequila-tasting and kids' clubs – keeps everyone entertained. The variety is a huge selling point: with the Dine Around programme, guests can choose from more than 20 restaurants, while a selection of pools at each hotel means you never have to fight for a lounger, though the beaches are not to be missed. Deep-turquoise sea and white-sand beaches are a magnet for sun-worshippers, sports enthusiasts – with parasailing, jetskiing and sailing widely available – and newlyweds. We saw one happy couple say their vows on the beach to a backdrop of crashing waves – making it a holiday they're sure to remember for ever. **TW**

BOOK IT

TRS Cap Cana: from £238 for a Junior Room

Bavaro Suites: from £151 for a Superior Junior Room

Grand Palladium Punta Cana: from £145 for a Deluxe Suite

Grand Palladium Palace Resort: from £171 for a Deluxe Suite

TRS Turquesa: from £182 for a Superior Junior Room

All prices are per night, based on two sharing all-inclusive in September or October.

palladiumconnect.com