

Discovering a different
DOMINICAN

Fried-Egg Pizzas, Banana Bread, Jam and Secret Beaches

My partner and I are known for taking exotic vacations so when we decided to spend two weeks in Samaná, there was a surprising amount of flak from friends and family.

“Dominican Republic? Really? Everyone goes there.”

Well, sometimes you just want a four-hour flight versus 10 or 19 hours in the sky. You want a long beach without spiky urchins underfoot. You want sunsets and rum shacks and no greater purpose than to just be. You don’t want to swallow anti-malarial pills that give you near-psychotic dreams every night. You want flights for two for \$1,000 return and rooms for \$65 a night.

We spend so much time researching overseas trips and mapping routes and days through deserts that a lazy, beach-magnet trip was the necessary prescription. We wanted egg-frying-on-the-sidewalk hot, long walks on that precious postcard beach, grilled shrimp, cheap beer and a few paperbacks.

And what we wanted, we got.

Samaná is a direct four-hour, 20-minute flight from Toronto. A cruise ship sounds its horn at this port every few days — sounding our own internal horns to go further from the bloated crowds. A \$100 taxi ride further. Locals enthusiastically pack into the backs of the guaguas — old Nissan and Mitsubishi pickup beaters with wood-plank seating — that stop every 100 metres or so. We’ve subjected ourselves to local “transport” before and decided our public transit experiences in those other places justified ponying up for a proper taxi to Las Terrenas in the north.

“Lonely Planet” describes Las Terrenas as an expat haven and a solid base camp for indie travellers. French women supposedly burned along the downtown strip on ATVs with baguettes. They actually did! Here, we could find morir soñado — a smoothie of orange juice, milk, sugar and crushed ice that translates appropriately: “to die



Catch of the day in Las Galeras.

dreaming.”

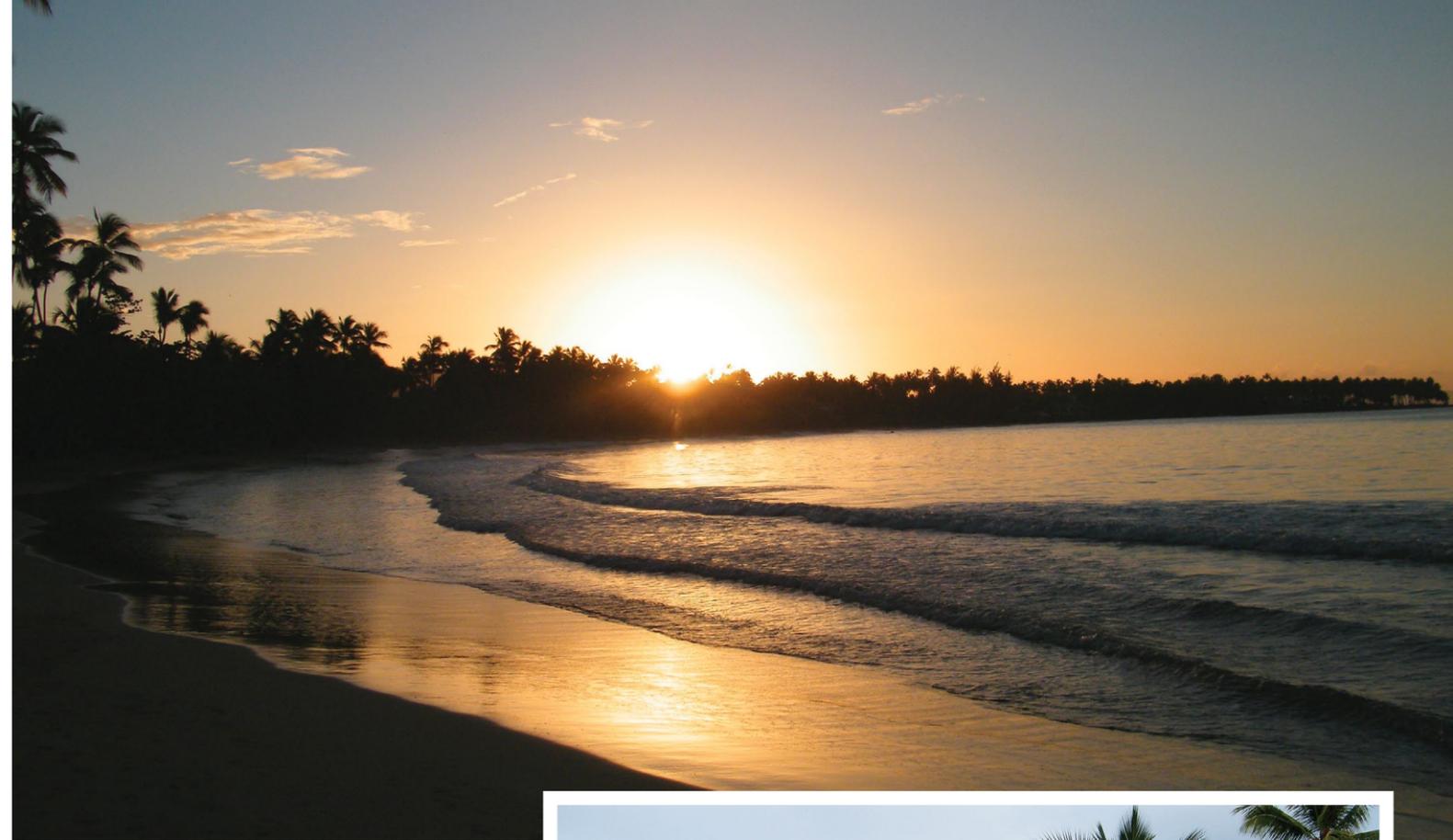
Dreaming started early when we asked our driver about stopping for beer. We were parched and sticky in our just-left-January-in-Canada jeans and polar fleece. He nodded and, in less than five minutes, he slowed in front of a house with a thatched roof and speakers bigger than Great Danes. A pony-tailed girl skipped rope and dizzy chickens pecked in circles out front. He honked his horn in a special pattern and a sinewy teen emerged. Our driver bellowed in Spanish and we suddenly found ourselves holding glacier-cold one-litre bottles of Presidente, open, in brown paper bags.

The ride was stomach-lurchingly hilly, through a verdant swath of palms, jungle tangles and rice paddy fields. The Dominican has two mammals — rats and bats, though I kept my eyes trained on the canopies, fully expecting monkeys and sloths.

At Costa Las Ballenas, we were quickly charmed by new expat Italian owners, Vincenzo Giardino and chef Gilda Borgnini. They had taken possession of the tired seafront property in December 2015 and

had a long to-do list. Luckily, we have stayed in rooms with no toilet seats and Donald Duck shower curtains, surrounded by taxidermy rabbits wearing children’s clothes. We’re forgiving, even when rooms are strawberry-yogurt pink and the toilet is as private as Facebook. There was no door, but you could see the stars at night, or conversely sun tan at certain points of the day. We were surprised to find a flat-screen TV in our bungalow (español programs only), scented toilet paper and beach bar pizza slabs for 100 pesos (two bucks).

We investigated our surrounds, making our way into “town.” One morning we witnessed a motorbike leading a cantering horse with a frayed rope passing a diesel-burping vehicle that looked homemade that cut off a shiny new Land Rover. We quickly found \$3 bottles of local rum, corn flakes (gluten-free even, the regular variety wasn’t available), plantain chips and yogurt. The vegetable section was a sorry sight of wilting broccoli, depressed tomatoes and scrubby onions. We had narrowly missed the mango and avocado season. I couldn’t believe we were on a tropical



island and couldn’t find a single banana. No pineapples? The shelves of the four supermercados we poked around were full of squeeze salad dressings, sardines, canned wieners, baseball bat-sized baguettes and rock candies that guaranteed dental work.

But back to the beach. We could survive on rum and corn flakes and pizza slabs. It was a brilliant blue sky every day. There were the token geckos skittering about and electric tree frogs at night. Flowers of every colour perfumed the air. We flip-flopped to Playa Bonita, a pool-like part of the sea where few bothered to walk as it was 10 minutes from the convenience of the promenade. Locals fried up langostino and pescado for 1,000 pesos (\$20 US) for a feed for two. Beers included.

We had drowsy days of reading, napping and ambling along the boardwalk, gushing over the manicured and pedicured lawns and sweet real estate. At night, we practised amateur mixology with mango nectar, limón frappé and island punch sodas that we had bought in town.

The beachy perks of Las Terrenas are



found in the skyline. There are no highrises. There are no chain hotels. There are no jet skis or pesky beach vendors hounding to braid your hair or to buy necklaces made out of shells and fake shark teeth. There was a solo guitarist who played out of interest, not for money.

The beacon of our day was the spear fishermen bringing their bounty to shore.

TOP: A beautiful sunset in Las Terrenas
BOTTOM: Boats parked on a beach in Las Galeras, waiting for the next excursion.

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Around 4 o'clock they'd wade back in, a rainbow of scales suspended on rope: rays, jelly octopi and rock lobsters by the bucket. We routinely ate our way through the seafood menus, but my partner fell prey to spaghetti Bolognese at the nearby slick Atlantis Hotel. She's ordered it wherever we've travelled, and every day in Italy — but it was here, in little Las Terrenas, where she found the best Bolognese, ever.

Onward: Las Galeras

The sleepy fishing village an hour and a half from Las Terrenas was a serpentine taxi ride through roller-coaster terrain. Men were clustered around tables playing dominos, women sat fanning themselves, babies on their knees. Loudspeakers rigged on the backs of trucks blared that cabbages and papayas were for sale. Everywhere, music thumped — out of houses, makeshift bars, parked vehicles, phones.

At Sol Azul, a Swiss-owned bed and breakfast, we found a good dose of hospitality, banana bread jam, the freshest-smelling towels and a property that was like waking up inside a botanical garden magazine spread. We had a jackfruit tree outside our door, crown of thorns, lime trees, jasmine — so many fragrant blooms. There was a power spread of piña colada yogurt, fresh cheese, dulce de leche, passionfruit juice, eggs any style with avocado, tomato and a pinwheel of homemade jams: guava, starfruit, kumquat, mango and the coveted liquid banana bread in a jar. Divine, especially for \$65 a night.

The bed was so firm we could have played ping pong off the surface, but the rooms were kitted out with everything from mosquito coils to a cool loft space and bean-bag zen zone. Better yet? Two nonchalant cats and an affectionate lab made their rounds. The other guests were European — German, French, Czech. It was rare to hear English being spoken in Las Galeras.

The supermercados of Las Galeras were of similar ilk to Las Terrenas. Finding things to eat and picnic with was a struggle. We had packed tins of tuna and a cartel of trail mix from Canada, but it was getting difficult to find substance beyond hunks of tasteless

IF YOU GO

If you are seriously sketching out plans to visit Samana this is what you need to do:

- Spend a poolside afternoon at Villa Serena in Las Galeras. The beers are the most expensive on the island, but they come with an addictive bar snack: red-skinned peanuts and baked coconut inundated with garlic salt, barbecue spice and coarse pepper.
- Learn German. Or bring a lot of English books. We went on a scavenger hunt to a half-dozen hotels after we ripped through our paperback supply. We thought six would cover us for two weeks. All the shelves of traders are German or Dutch.
- Beware of the “Dominican Tattoo,” the characteristic right leg burn from leaning into the exhaust of the motorbike taxis. We counted nine raw and bandaged raspberries. Ear plugs. You may find falling asleep to the sound of waves poetry, but others describe the waves in Las Galeras like a “freight train” that runs all night.
- Don't buy duty-free rum en route. It's so cheap once you arrive. Instead, grab a bunch of golf ball-sized limes and find your favourite combo — Cuba Libre (with Coke) or Santo Libre (crushed limes with rum and ice). Buy those homemade coconut cookies for sale by wandering vendors on the beach. They are softer than muffin tops and you will miss them as soon as you leave the island.
- Go to El Maguey (Las Galeras) on the beach. It's a haphazard open sky art gallery/bar/resto. For 1,400 pesos (\$30 US), we had four paralyzing Santo Libres, a Mama Juana shot (the mysterious aphrodisiac blend of red wine, honey, rum, herbs, twigs), grilled papagayo (neon blue fish) and a mountain of fries. Under a fingernail moon and a tablecloth of stars, with a beach dog at our feet and the “freight train” waves, this was a perfect night.
- If you've grown weary of the predictability of the all-inclusive shuffle, Samaná is easily traversed. Arranging private taxis (though expensive) is seamless through the hotels and bed and breakfasts and will save you hours of milk-run travel through the hills and farms.
- Pack a picnic (the cold radish and fried egg pizza will do in a pinch) and navigate your own donkey path to your own secret Samaná. We did.

or too-briny cheese and “salami” that was more of the bologna persuasion. I took to drinking boxes of chocolate milk — it tasted dreamy, exactly like melted chocolate ice cream — and white buns that crumbled when you looked at them. God bless preservatives.

We tried a German sandwich shop that ended up being a flat Wonderbread assembly of red onion and bologna meat with murder-scene amounts of ketchup and mayo. To-go paninis at the French-owned La Marseillaise became our beach staple.

Our days were all about finding the next great pocket of beach. This sometimes led to thorny, scratchy scrambles across coral, barbed wire, garbage dumps and cow patties. Over crab cakes and mojitos, a Brit bartender at the Bungalow Grill let us in on a secret “donkey path” to Colorada Beach, a secluded spot that only the ambitious found. But when we arrived at the beach, thrashed and wobbly from the terrain, it was fully shaded and covered in aphids. Back to our base camp: La Playita.

Despite the pep talks about Rincon being one of the best beaches in Dominican, we skipped it. The four-kilometre \$20 US (each) boat ride over “Perfect Storm” ocean swells was not enticing. Unfortunately, El Niño and company have eroded the beaches on the northern peninsula at a startling rate. Leaning palms and a short shore are becoming the norm. Photos from just five years earlier showed the sandy beach was so much wider.

Near the end of our stay, we found intriguing pizza combos at Bar Roma, the Italian-owned joint “downtown.” The open seating allowed for unobstructed viewing of the motoconchos pulling wheelies up and down the main road. A pizza with a one-litre beer was \$20 US and came loaded with ham laid like sod, fried egg, a slice of radish and one anchovy.

On our last night, we found the better place — El Pescador. Their Toscane pizza with generous amounts of chicken, tomato and onion with hell-hot sauce earned a spot on our Best Pizzas We've Eaten Around the World list. 



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