

# EASY BREEZY



Amanera surf instructor  
Robinson Liriano at the resort.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
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# THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC'S FAMILY-FRIENDLY NORTH COAST DELIVERS SURPRISES ON EVERY SHORE.

BY MICHAEL BEHAR



**I**T'S A SWELTERING AUGUST AFTERNOON IN THE DOMINICAN Republic when I find myself scouring the jungle for passion fruit, or *chinola*, with my fit, young Dominican guide, Raul Custodio. We're hiking at a brisk pace in air so humid it feels like syrup, and by the time we reach a broad ridge that pokes above the forest, our clothes are a sopping mess. "No *chinola* here," he declares. "Let's keep going. I know another spot."

When I asked if we could look for it before our hike, Raul happily obliged. But he also warned me that our mission to locate the succulent fruit – with its tart flesh and tiny edible seeds that crunch like Pop Rocks – might not be easy. It's elusive, he explained, with stealthy vines that snake high into an unreachable canopy. If we're

fortunate, a few might drop at our feet from above. More likely, we'll have to hunt for fallen fruit scattered in the thick undergrowth.

The Dominican Republic is situated on Hispaniola, the second-largest island in the Caribbean (after Cuba), and borders Haiti. I've returned to explore its north coast with my wife, Ashley; our 3-year-old daughter, Sasha; and our 8-year-old son, Simon. It's our seventh trip here as a family, and it never disappoints – in part because the roughly 175-mile coastline, spanning the easternmost Samaná Peninsula to the Haitian border, seems to reinvent itself with every visit. In 2014, Puerto Plata's international airport underwent major renovations to accommodate more wide-body jets. The following year, a state-of-the-art cruise terminal opened – the first on the north coast – along with Amanera, one of only two Aman properties in the



**Amanera enticements (clockwise from top left): The resort's beginner-friendly break, pool, Playa Grande, and Dominican martini (dark rum, orange and lemon juice, passion fruit, and egg white).**



Caribbean. An explosion of new restaurants, hotels, and adventure outfitters has pushed tourism steadily higher each year, with visitors topping a record 6.5 million in 2018.

The DR is really two locales, each with its own distinctive pace and temperament. Travelers have long vacationed along its better-known southern coast, known for high-end, all-inclusive resorts that provide a more familiar, calculated experience. The north is different, with a focus on boutique, low-rise hotels and independent travel. “When you’re on the north coast, you have to mix with the locals – in the bars, in restaurants, in the towns,” says Laura Asilis, a Virtuoso travel agency president based in Santo Domingo, the Dominican capital. “People looking for that shouldn’t go to Punta Cana or Casa de Campo in the south, which is more like Cancún. They won’t experience our amazing culture.”

The two-hour drive from bustling Puerto Plata to Amanera takes us along the once death-defying Highway 5, now safer thanks to recent repaving and widening projects. The landscape transforms gradually as you proceed east, from sunbaked grasslands to the undulating jade-green hills that encompass the resort, where we arrive midday. Architect John Heah cleverly designed its Balinese-style teak-and-glass casitas to blend seamlessly into their 2,000-acre



A vendor on Playa Cabarete and (below) wild passion fruit in the jungle.

THE SEA TEMPERATURE HOVERS AT A SPALIKE 88 DEGREES, AND THE WATER IS SO SPARKLING AND TRANSPARENT, YOU MIGHT AS WELL BE SWIMMING IN LIQUID DIAMONDS.



environs. From our veranda, we overlook our private 60-foot-long infinity pool and, beyond that, Playa Grande, a mile-long beach we have practically to ourselves throughout our stay.

While Ashley decamps to the wellness center for a Thai massage, and Simon and Sasha make pottery in the indigenous Taino style with the children’s program director, I meet Raul in the lobby for our hike, which begins with a 30-minute scramble up steep switchbacks through cacao and moringa trees, the latter harvested for its anticancer compounds. A frigate bird soars overhead, exploiting the afternoon breeze and its four-foot wingspan to glide effortlessly. “Yes! Yes! Yes!” Raul exclaims, spotting bright-yellow passion fruit on the jungle floor. I manage to retrieve nine of them – a veritable bounty – but whether they’re edible is another story: It’s hard to judge the fruits’ ripeness by skin color alone; each is a game of chance until you dig into it. (They’re all superb, confirm Sasha and Simon, who later devour them with sticky smiles.)

**FORAGING FOR CHINOLA IS AN APT METAPHOR FOR TRAVELING THE DOMINICAN** Republic’s north coast: It’s not always obvious how or where you’ll be rewarded. Ashley and I first came in 2009, not long after we learned to kitesurf. We’d heard stories about the wind. But we were amazed





**La Dolce Vita's langostinos with garlic butter, in Las Terrenas.**

on that inaugural trip to witness it blowing strongly and steadily every day, from midafternoon to dusk throughout the summer months, when the potent sun creates a thermal effect that accelerates the trade winds.

In 1984, a French Canadian windsurfer named Jean Laporte visited a quiet village here called Cabarete and immediately realized its potential for the sport. Since then, Cabarete's population has soared from 2,000 to 17,000 residents, and it's become known as "the adventure capital of the Caribbean." Dining has come a long way too: Restaurants serving fresh-caught langostino, dorado, and other seafood have superseded roadside chicken shacks and scuzzy pizza joints. Meanwhile, kiteboarding's popularity has eclipsed windsurfing on the town's mile-wide bay, with as many as several hundred "kites" on the water on any given afternoon.

Thankfully, it's not always windy. Mornings are calm and the ocean placid, providing what some claim is the Caribbean's best surfing. At Amanera, Simon and I take a two-hour lesson with instructors who walk us halfway up Playa Grande to an inviting break, where we stand comfortably on the sandy bottom. In the shallow water, about 100 yards from shore, we wait for the perfect wave.

Simon pops up on his first attempt, standing confidently all the way to the beach. Then he does it again and again. "¿Cuántos años tiene? ¿Cuántos años tiene?" one instructor asks me, howling with delight. He's flabbergasted that a third-grader – a marginal swimmer from landlocked Boulder, Colorado – could take to surfing so readily.

But that's the thing about the north coast: Conditions are rarely intimidating. With its gentle waves and steady breezes, even rookie

## BEACH EATS

● **The Beach Club at Sea Horse Ranch** stands out among north coast restaurants for its rotunda, built on lava rock above the crashing surf, and specialties such as spicy shrimp ceviche, served Dominican-style with coconut milk, fresh chilies, and sweet-potato chips. *Sosúa.*

● French owner and chef Ed Coll opened **Otra Cosa** in 1998 as one of the north coast's first fine-dining restaurants and has garnered high praise ever since. Go for Cabarete's best sunset view and the duck with morel and cognac sauce. *Calle del Cementerio, Cabarete.*

● **Yalla's** inexpensive but magnificent tapas menu is scribbled on a chalkboard and based on what's fresh that particular day. Dine with a large group, order everything, and your tab won't exceed \$150. *Cabarete.*

● The ongoing debate about whether beachfront **La Casita de Papi** serves the best seafood around is irrelevant: Anywhere

you can dine barefoot with your toes in the sand is worth a visit. Order shrimp or langostino "à la Papi" – monster portions of the seafood in a garlic cream sauce, simmered with a secret spice mixture. *5 Cabarete.*

● **Vagamundo Coffee & Waffles'** popular pick-me-up is the nitro cold brew, which pairs nicely with its "Uluwatu" waffle, heaped with ricotta, passion fruit, and fresh mint. *Carretera Principal, Cabarete.*

● Cocktails are the big lure at **Mojito Bar**. During its extended happy hour (4 to 8 PM), the stiff namesakes are two for one. Even better is the *chinola* daiquiri. *Playa Cabarete.*

● Chef Andrea Peano blends traditional Italian with Thai, Greek, and Dominican cuisines at **Bliss**, where all the pastas are home-made and the candle-lit tables surround a kidney-shaped swimming pool (yes, you can take a dip midmeal). *Callejon de la Loma, Cabarete.*







Adventure-ready in Cabarete: A Laurel Eastman kiteboarding instructor, catching the breeze on the bay, and a scuba group heading out.

## TIP

"Make sure to visit the Mariposa ice cream parlor in Puerto Plata – set in a colonial Victorian house, it's known for local flavors such as *uva de playa* [sea grape]."

– Jaime Leon, *Virtuoso* agency co-owner, Santo Domingo



ocean-goers can enjoy surfing, kiteboarding, sea kayaking, snorkeling, or stand-up paddleboarding. The sea temperature hovers at a spalike 88 degrees, and the water is so sparkling and transparent, you might as well be swimming in liquid diamonds. Before today, I had never surfed. Nor had Simon. Now we're both eager to get back in the waves.

**AFTER A FEW DAYS AT AMANERA, WE RELOCATE TO CABARETE TO BE CLOSER TO** the kiteboarding action and dedicate mornings to activities best done before the wind ramps up, such as honing board skills at Playa Encuentro's beginner surf break. One day, we take a skiff to snorkel in Tres Rocas marine preserve a quarter mile offshore in Sosúa Bay. Sasha wouldn't dare dip her head underwater in our community pool at home. Now she dons a mask, snorkel, and life vest to join her

brother in the big blue, plunging from the stern into a living aquarium of queen angels, French grunts, spotted drums, and banded butterflies that school around them.

I'm up one morning to stand-up paddleboard with Simon, who sits cross-legged on the nose and wears swim goggles, dunking his head every few minutes to scan for marine life. It's 10 AM, and there's still not a soul on the bay. After a 30-minute paddle out to a reef, Simon reports, "No fish yet, Dad. Just lots of sand and coral."

It's this same reef that protected the region from Hurricane Maria's high surf and devastating storm surge, which leveled Puerto Rico in 2017. While heavy rains caused severe flooding in parts of the Dominican Republic, the north coast was largely spared. But be forewarned, it's still a developing country – you can't drink the tap water, power outages are common, armed guards police the ATMs, and corruption is endemic. Yet Asilis urges travelers to venture around



her homeland. “When people tell me they’ve spent the whole week at their resort, I tell them, ‘You didn’t go to the Dominican Republic.’”

The nice thing about the north coast in particular is that travelers don’t have to choose between cloistered luxury and seat-of-the-pants adventure travel; you can dabble comfortably in both worlds. Indeed, throughout our days we routinely interact with Dominicans, whose easygoing demeanor is both contagious and restorative. As a bonus, Dominicans adore children. When my kids get restless at a beachfront restaurant, a waiter takes charge, coaxing them onto the sand to play tag so my wife and I can enjoy dinner leisurely.

One day, we drive east to the Samaná Peninsula with no set plans. Our effort pays off when we stop to ask for directions from a local woman, who directs us to Playa El Portillo, arguably the most kid-friendly beach in the north, with chalk-white sand and an outer reef that forms a protected lagoon. It’s a natural wading pool, ideal for children to frolic in the shallows. After a full afternoon of swimming and snorkeling, we decide last minute to spend the night in nearby Las Terrenas, a seaside resort town that’s “still a virgin part of the island,” according to Asilis.

An evening stroll down the waterfront esplanade brings us to La Dolce Vita for dinner. Its langostino, steeped in garlic butter, is the best I’ve had in the country. As the restaurant fills up, the bartender switches deftly between mixing pineapple daiquiris and manning the wood-fired grill, where a cornucopia of seafood sizzles with a smoky haze. It’s a snapshot of the region’s wild and dynamic personality – a place primed for discoveries, even after repeated visits, where you should embrace spontaneity. Because not always knowing where to look for your next adventure often reveals its sweetest fruits.



From top: Casa Colonial and its pool view of Playa Dorada.



## NORTH COAST KNOWLEDGE

DISCOVER THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC’S WILDER SIDE.

**WHEN TO GO** June through August is the hottest, windiest season, with breezes kicking up every afternoon. Cooler temperatures and lower humidity make winter months more popular, but you may get wet: Most rain falls between November and March.

**STAY** Tucked into the jungle above a remote beach, **Amanera**’s 25 private casitas make it feel like you’re the only guest at the resort. Last November, the property

opened a golf course, with ten of its 18 holes on a 100-foot-high bluff directly above the ocean. *Doubles from \$1,750, including breakfast daily and lunch once during stay.*

**Casa Colonial Beach & Spa** sits on a quiet bay on the outskirts of Puerto Plata, the north coast’s largest city. Its 50 suites are steps from Playa Dorada’s tranquil shallows, but for many the big draw is Bagua Spa’s

indigenous treatments, such as the amber, royal jelly, and honey wrap. *Doubles from \$250, including breakfast daily and a \$100 dining credit.*

Beachfront Villa Seabreeze is one of six **Luxury Retreats** homes placing travelers a ten-minute drive from both Cabarete and Sosúa. The four-bedroom, four-bath villa features a private pool, an alfresco dining area and formal dining room for ten,

and daily housekeeping. *From \$2,500 per night.*

**CRUISE** Set sail for the north coast on **Holland America Line**’s 2,106-passenger *Nieuw Amsterdam*. The ship calls at the DR’s Amber Cove cruise terminal during its seven-day sailing round-trip from Fort Lauderdale, with stops in the Bahamas, Grand Turk, and Key West. *Departures: Multiple dates, October 26, 2019, through March 28, 2020; from \$749. VI.*