

CARIBBEAN (/CARIBBEAN-TRAVEL) ADVENTURE TRAVEL

## Uncharted adventures in Dominican Republic

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A guestroom at Casa Bonita, a luxury boutique hotel in Barahona province.

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The southwest coast of the Dominican Republic is a far cry from the resort-packed beaches of Punta Cana. The wild and uncharted coast, specifically Barahona province, is a world all its own, with hidden beaches,

## boutique mountainside hotels and forgotten trails that twist through rivers and jungle

The journey starts in Santo Domingo. The colonial, romantic city is known for its Old World Caribbean charm: pastel-colored buildings, historical cathedrals and relics of its Spanish-influenced past. The city has also undergone a modern renaissance, with small cocktail bars, fine dining and boutique hotels.

But for the more adventurous traveler, a wealth of off-the-beaten-path experiences are waiting to be discovered if you head west out of Santo Domingo, toward the border with Haiti.

The journey to Barahona is not a small undertaking. Although the roads are in good condition, the journey twists along the coastline and can take around five hours.

But it is certainly worth the effort. The coastal highway is peppered with sun-drenched vistas over perfect slices of Dominican beachscape. Highlights are Playa San Rafael, a crescent-shaped corner of white sand and pale-blue water surrounded by towering cliffs carpeted with jungle; and Playa Paraiso, located in the town for which it's named, with small beachside seafood shacks, cascades for swimming and ample pebbled beaches.

When visiting Barahona, be sure to book a stay at Casa Bonita (<http://www.slh.com/hotels/c/casa-bonita-hotel>), a luxury boutique hotel and member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World nestled on a hill between the sea and mountains.

The resort owner took the setting of his family summer home and transformed it into a retreat for visitors to enjoy organic cuisine, a jungle spa environment and views from the infinity pool out to the Caribbean Sea.

Accommodations begin with the Deluxe Rooms, each in its own small bungalow, accented with white linens, wood and wicker. Each room has views of both the sea and the Sierra Barahuco from the private balcony. Ocean View Suites have the premier views of the Caribbean Sea in a private area as well as private infinity plunge pools.

But the room to beat is the Villa Bonita, a luxury home away from home with two bedrooms, living room, dining room, kitchen, private pool and barbecue.

The on-site Tanaka Eco Spa, tucked in the woods behind the resort, uses natural elements like coffee, chocolate, coconut, basil, bamboo, noni, mango and pineapple for its treatments. A steam bath, candlelit Jacuzzi and outdoor treatment areas next to the nearby river complete the natural spa vibe.

For the outdoorsy and active traveler, ask about the river trail on the property that winds into the jungle and lets out at a secluded cave system with private swimming holes, all open to the sky. Rates begin at \$205 per room, per night.

On the journey back to Santo Domingo, don't miss a stop at Ocoa Bay in the Azua province, one of the few wineries in the Caribbean.

Today the Ocoa Bay vineyard and surrounding property is an agrotourism project that features villas surrounded by vineyards, a boutique hotel, a clubhouse with infinity pool and restaurant and other facilities.

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