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DR Tourism Faces the Future

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As with every other region in the world, these are tough times in the Caribbean. According to statistics on 12 destinations released just a few days ago by the Caribbean Tourism Organization, only Jamaica and Cuba are holding their own in arrivals through the first quarter. Five of the 12 mentioned member states are reporting double-digit losses, including [Anguilla](#), Antigua and Barbuda, St. Lucia, the Cayman Islands and Montserrat. Even though the [Dominican Republic](#) (DR) dropped by 4.4 percent, the country is pushing forward with its program of aggressive investment.

“Life will always have its ups and downs, and those ups and downs compel you to look backward and forward,” says Haydee Kuret, president of Asonahores (the DR’s hotel and restaurant association). “When you do that, you see that crises are a normal part of history and so you can’t stop moving forward.” Kuret made her comments at the recently completed DATE (Dominican Annual Tourism Exchange), which was held at the Barceló Bavaro Convention Center from April 20 to 22.

For the DR to fully realize its ambition to become a destination firing on all pistons, Minister of Tourism Francisco Javier Garcia says he realizes it will need a cultural component that is more than Salsa bands and handicraft markets at the resorts. The island needs a vital city and town life that is appealing and safe for tourists. It also needs to put its rural areas in the mix as well as ecologically pristine areas.

At his DATE press conference, Garcia promised to maintain a long-term commitment to developing attractive, well-lit urban spaces in such destinations as Punta Cana, Puerto Plata, Santo Domingo and Samana. He also promised to continue to revitalize roads and build new highways, including a highway from Santo Domingo to Samana that would shorten drive time from 5.5 to two hours and a planned highway from Santo Domingo to Punta Cana that will shorten the drive from 3.5 to two hours.

The DR also needs to diversify its markets. That's why Sans Souci terminal in the port of Santo Domingo, which opened its first phase in January, plays a major strategic role in the country's planning. The 2007-2008 season ended with 82,000 visitors more than twice the previous year's. Cruise ships also are calling in Samana and La Romana, and the hope is to re-establish cruise calls at Puerto Plata, which used to be an attractive magnet for passenger ships. Garcia announced a study to see what can be done to revitalize Puerto Plata's cruise business.

Last year, the DR received roughly 3.4 million visitors, giving it a slight increase (1.4 percent) over 2007, about a million of them from North America. After rocketing into the upper echelons of tourism over the last several years, the DR continues to catch the tourism industry by surprise. It does exceedingly well in [Canada](#) and Garcia expressed the belief that its success north of the border was largely due to a more successful effort at getting the word out.

Garcia promised to accelerate the DR's promotional efforts in the U.S. by adding more tourist offices around the country. Currently, the DR maintains offices in [New York](#), Miami and Chicago. Though he would not specify where those offices would open, Garcia suggested that the Midwest with its cold winters would be receptive to the kind of marketing that has worked so well in [Canada](#) and the Northeastern U.S.

With a sophisticated road network, the DR could evolve from its current status as a beach and golf experience into a multi-dimensional vacation with eco-tourism as well as historic and cultural dimensions. A strong road network would bring Santo Domingo, the oldest city in the New World, into the range of excursions available to guests sunning and putting in Punta Cana. At DATE, there was also talk among the Dominican press corps of an investment group from the Balearic Islands that was interested in developing a rail link between Santo Domingo and Santiago. Such a link would not only connect the two largest cities in the country but also the two most historic areas.

For the time being, however, the east coast of the DR, the area generically known as Punta Cana, remains the main driver for DR tourism. In 2008, its international airport was the busiest of the country's eight international airports, receiving nearly 1.9 million arrivals. The second busiest airport is Las Americas International Airport in Santo Domingo with nearly one million arrivals, followed by Puerto Plata International Airport on the North Coast.

At DATE, events were held to display the Barceló Bávaro Palace Junior Suites Deluxe (www.barcelo.com), the newly-opened Iberostar Grand Hotel Bavaro and The Reserve at Paradisus Palma Real (www.paradisuspalmareal.travel/reserve). These properties each showed why the DR is right to maintain its optimism. A pool side soirée for 400 at the opulent Iberostar Grand Hotel Bávaro (www.iberostar.com) was especially impressive. The hotel, which opened last

December, is the newest addition to the Iberostar Bávaro Golf & Spa Resort, which includes the Iberostar Bávaro Hotel, Iberostar Punta Cana and Iberostar Dominicana.

In February, with Garcia in attendance, DR President Leonel Fernández broke ground on the \$2.5 billion Punta Perla Caribbean Golf, Marina & Resort tourist complex (www.PuntaPerlaSales.com), the third tourism initiative to be launched in the country since November. The beachfront resort will include four boutique hotels, 8,800 residential units, three golf courses, an inland marina, a beach club, an amphitheater, sports installations, commercial units, a shopping mall open to the public, a museum and staff accommodation. Punta Perla is expected to be completed within a 10- to 12-year period.

Ironically, the DR's acceleration in tourism was probably helped enormously by the success Cancun has had in convincing the U.S. market that a beach holiday in a Spanish speaking culture is just as enjoyable as vacations on English-speaking islands. Now Mexico is dealing with terrible publicity surrounding border drug wars and now swine flu. These factors could drive some of Mexico's tourists to the DR, DR officials believe. On the other hand, the DR has to be just a little nervous about the increasing likelihood that Cuba will soon be a major tourism competitor. For more information, visit www.godominicanrepublic.com.