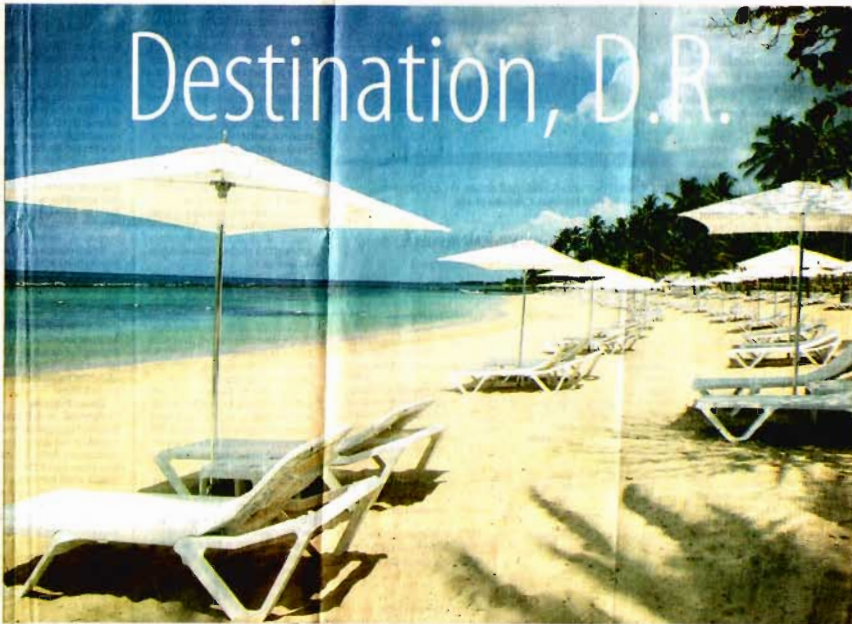


BUSINESS & MONEY

Destination, D.R.



60,000 hotel rooms.
World-class service.
Six airports.
Americans are making
the Dominican Republic
a No. 1 vacation spot.

ON THE BEACH: Casa de Campo, an upscale, all-inclusive resort on the Dominican Republic's south coast, includes such attractions as Minitas Beach. Casa de Campo photos

BY DOREEN HEMLOCK
STAFF WRITER

When lawyer Stefani Schaeffer won the latest round of Donald Trump's TV show *The Apprentice*, she had a choice of two Trump developments to run, in Atlanta or the Dominican Republic. She selected the Caribbean nation, lured by the azure hues of the ocean and a golf course on beachside cliffs.

With Trump signing up this year for a \$1 billion-plus resort and residential development, the Dominican Republic is fast gaining recognition as a travel destination for Americans.

The tropical country of 9 million people already boasts the most hotel rooms of any Caribbean nation — at least 60,000 rooms, more than Broward and Palm Beach counties combined. But for decades, it has focused on luring Europeans, Canadians and Latin Americans for longer stays at low-cost, all-inclusive properties.

Trump's entry at the sprawling Cap Cana project underscores a recent shift to more upscale offerings, geared more to U.S. visitors with less time and more buying power.

"The Dominican Republic has truly gone through a transformation," said Scott Berman, who leads hospitality consulting for **PriceWaterhouseCoopers** in Miami. "The rest of the Caribbean became so expensive from a land perspective that the Dominican Republic was in a class by itself."

South Florida, as the business hub for the Caribbean, is cashing in.

Professional service providers such as architects, golf course designers and marina managers are busy on Dominican contracts. Transport companies are hauling down construction materials, furniture and varied supplies.

American, Spirit and other airlines are adding flights to the country's half-dozen international airports, especially Punta Cana on the east coast where Trump is investing. And South Floridians are taking trips and even buying vacation homes in the nation just a two-hour jet ride away.

■ DOMINICAN CONTINUES ON 2D



FOOD FEST: Chef Paul Scordino, formerly of LeCirque, helped design the menu for Casa de Campo. The resort has more than a dozen bars and restaurants.

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Resorts lure U.S. tourists

■ DOMINICAN

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1D

Alan Treff, owner of travel agency **Happy Trails Travel of Boca Raton**, said he has seen a surge in his business to the Dominican Republic in the past year or so, especially to the more upscale all-inclusive resorts with golf such as Casa de Campo on the south coast. He visited this spring and found the nation "has come quite a way."

Lawyer Carol Ferrero, of Plantation, recently vacationed with her family at La Romana at a Spanish-owned, all-inclusive chain named Iberostar. With its wide range of activities, including theater performances that her daughter eagerly joined in, Ferrero said she'd "go back in one minute."

Even Eric Trump, a vice president with his father's Trump Group, said his family plans to buy at least one of the 70 estate lots they're developing as the Trump Faralón Estates at the Cap Cana resort.

"This is a place I see myself spending a lot of time in," said Eric Trump, lauding the resort for its top-notch service and modern airport nearby, with frequent U.S. flights.

Trump said his family had been eyeing projects in the Dominican Republic for years, as its tourism soared. But the group decided to invest only after they saw the Hazoury family, local developers of the Cap Cana project, succeed in offering high-quality lodging, marina and golf in the first phase of their \$3 billion-plus venture.

Several other factors converged to lure high-end U.S. real estate groups like Trump and **Westin** to the Dominican Republic, analysts say.

For starters, the country's tourism industry grew big enough — and mature enough — to spin off a sizable high-end



TEE TIME: The Punta Espada golf course at Cap Cana was designed by Jack Nicklaus. **Cap Cana photo**

S. FLORIDA AND THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Some South Florida companies with Dominican projects:

Company	Headquarters	Business
EDSA	Fort Lauderdale	Helped on master plan for \$2 billion-plus Cap Cana resort project.
Coastal Systems International	Coral Gables	Helped design the shorelines for Cap Cana.
International Marinas	Fort Lauderdale	Manages the marina at Cap Cana.
Jack Nicklaus Cos.	North Palm Beach	Designing three Nicklaus signature golf courses at Cap Cana.
EcoPlan	Fort Lauderdale	Developed master plan for the \$1 billion-plus Roco-Ki resort project featuring a Westin hotel.
OBM International	Coral Gables	Designing Westin Roco-Ki Beach & Golf Resort.
Tropical Shipping	Riviera Beach	Hauls construction materials and other supplies.
Spirit Airlines	Miramar	Flies daily from Fort Lauderdale to Punta Cana.

SOURCE: SUN-SENTINEL RESEARCH

segment.

More than 4 million tourists visited last year, a record. Those included some Americans who aimed to visit Mexico's Cancún, but rebooked while Cancún rebuilt from the ravages of Hurricane Wilma in 2005, officials said.

Furthermore, the Dominican government, led by New York-raised lawyer Leonel Fernandez, has been encouraging investment in upscale resorts to increase its tourism income. The government offers tax breaks and is improving roads and other infrastructure, said

Rogério Basso, a hospitality analyst with Ernst & Young in Miami.

Yet despite its progress, the Dominican Republic still has drawbacks. Outside its beachfront resort areas, especially in the slums of major cities, problems persist with electricity shortages and crime. More than 30 percent of residents live in poverty, and almost a third of people age 15 to 24 lack jobs, studies show.

But officials say the beach resorts, with their own power plants and security, are largely isolated from urban woes, and they offer hope for jobs and cash to stem the nation's problems. They're helping fuel economic growth, which topped 10 percent last year and should reach 6 percent this year, among the highest rates in the Americas.

The government push comes as the Caribbean enjoys a surge in tourism investment overall.

Lots of cash is available these days for resort projects targeting Americans, but U.S. hotels are becoming "very expensive," analyst Basso said.

The nearby Dominican Republic entices, because it is relatively big — more than four times the area of Jamaica, for instance — with lots of undeveloped beachfront. It's also cheaper than the Bahamas, Aruba and many other destinations near U.S. shores.

Eric Trump summed it up this way: "What's happening is so many of the Baby Boomers are really getting priced out of the Miamis and the Key Biscaynes, and they're looking outside the country. It's really about cost-benefit. ... And in the world we live in today, with security issues, people want to stay close to home."

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