



May, 2009

What Panama Needs to Learn From the Dominican Republic

Dominican Republic

By Rebecca Tyre

Panama Travels

Countless times we have compared Panama to its neighbor to the west, Costa Rica. Sorry Panama, but you're about to be compared again - this time to the Dominican Republic. It would really serve you some good to listen up this time.

After an extended trip to the Dominican Republic I couldn't help but notice the vast differences between that country and Panama. I didn't spend my entire vacation in the Dominican Republic in a walled off resort compound, but instead rented a car and drove around the beautiful country. I hung out with locals, expats, and tourists.

The Dominican Republic has figured out a few things that Panama has yet to:

- * Tourist Friendly - Dominicans want visitors to enjoy their stay in the country. They make an effort to ensure tourists are well taken care of. Everything from great service to an incredible tourism industry. In the DR they strive to make sure the visitor gets what they want, when they want it. They will do whatever it takes to please.

- * Environmentalism - Panamanians and Dominicans share the same love of beer (granted, Panama's brews are much better). In Panama you can buy two sizes of beer in bottles, regular and grande (Atlas only). In the Dominican Republic they offer three beer bottle sizes - regular, large and jumbo. Their reasoning? They know people always drink more than one beer. Make the bottles bigger and it reduces the amount of bottles cluttering up the gutters. Panamanians love to drink beers from cans. You'd be hard pressed to find a can of beer in the DR. They know they take up landfill space.

- * Cleanliness - Panama's streets, fields and beaches are littered with trash. You do not see this in the Dominican Republic. The streets are remarkably clean. Unlike Panama, I didn't see one person throw garbage out the window of their car as it sped down the highway.

- * Quiet - Panama is loud - very loud. The car horn is their best friend. After

spending weeks in the Dominican Republic and not hearing one horn honk, I was in sensory overload within 10 minutes of arriving back in Panama. Panama, you don't have to be loud all of the time. Silence is highly underrated.

* Catcalls - Any women walking down a street in Panama, whether she be foreign or a local, is very familiar with the hissing, whistling and catcalls of Panamanian men. Once again, I did not experience that or witness that the entire time I was in the Dominican Republic. Note to Panamanian men: Why bother? You know it has never worked, and never will.

* Services - In the Dominican Republic, if they know there is a certain service lacking for tourists and expats, they provide it. The government will allow foreigners to open businesses geared towards expats and tourists, no questions asked. There are no rules about how much you need to invest or how many locals you need to hire (of course they employ mainly locals anyway). The government earns their money by taxing these businesses higher than a local owned business. Because of this, you can find specialty items and food in the most remote corners of the Dominican Republic, when I have yet to see them even in Panama City.

* Get Out Mentality - If a tourist or expat says anything remotely negative about Panama or offers a suggestion, the immediate response seems to be "If you don't like it, get out". Stop being so damn sensitive Panama! We're just commenting or suggesting, not telling you your baby is ugly! I spoke with 20-year expats in the Dominican Republic who have never heard that phrase in their entire time in the country, no matter how many times they have commented about their new country.

* Corruption - Corruption happens everywhere. It's just really obvious in Panama. Police in the Dominican Republic don't stand by the side of the road waiting to pull someone over just so they can line their pockets with \$5 bills. My expat friends there tell me they have never experienced any type of shakedown because they are foreign.

* Stay As Long As You Want - Dominican tourist cards are valid for 60 days, compared to 90 days in Panama. Want to stay longer in the Dominican Republic? No problem. Stay as long as you want. Just pay a \$80 fine when you leave, even if you've been there for 5 years. Immigration officials do not haunt the tourist hot spots checking passports. They don't care. They know the tourists and expats are spending money in their country, so they see no need to bother them.

* Real Estate - Like Panama, in the Dominican Republic, foreigners have the same land ownership rights as locals. Unlike Panama, the Dominican Republic is not crazy when it comes to prices. While looking at real estate with an agent friend of mine in the Dominican Republic, I noticed a very beautiful house (more like a mansion) on a cliff just meters from a pristine Caribbean beach. The real

estate agent told me the owner was crazy asking \$350,000 for the house. He later admitted you could probably buy it for about \$200,000. I've seen similar houses like that in Panama and the owner is (still) asking \$1.8-million. In the DR you can buy a beachfront condo for less than \$100,000.

Panama and the Dominican Republic have a lot in common but are also very different. Panama is beautiful, but I've now seen an even more beautiful country. A country that welcomes expats and tourists with open arms and throws down no roadblocks.

The huge difference between the two countries is that the Dominican Republic relies on tourism and expats to survive. They treat them well so they tell their friends and make return trips. They respect the tourist because if we weren't there, they wouldn't eat.

Panama on the other hand seems to view tourism as a necessary evil. Panama has other things going for it. The canal, banking, the Colon Free Zone. Panama probably wouldn't care if tourists and expats were kicked out tomorrow. Panama would survive. They don't need us, and unfortunately, sometimes that's all too clear.

For Panama to really take tourism seriously, the canal would have to dry up, all the banks would have to go broke, and the free zone shut down. Until then, tourism in Panama will always take 4th place in the collective priority.

Author Profile: Rebecca is from Ontario, Canada but has been calling Panama home since 2005. Rebecca has lived in numerous areas of Panama but now resides in the Azuero peninsula.