DATE 2009: Broadening the Dominican Republic Vacation Experience

Emphasizing highly competitive resorts in a destination maintaining natural beauty and culture.

D. O. CHRISTIAN RIEGER IV

The tenth Annual Dominican Tourism Exchange (DATE) met April 20th-22nd. For the third consecutive year, it convened at the Barceló Bavaro Convention Center in Punta Cana at the eastern end of the Dominican Republic.

The exchange provided a venue in which wholesalers, travel agents and tour operators met and conducted business sessions with Dominican Republic suppliers.

DATE was conceived and organized by The National Hotel and Restaurant Association and the Tourism Promotion Council with the collaboration of the Caribbean Hotel Association and the Ministry of Tourism of the Dominican Republic.

Although DATE does not have themes as such, the underlying theme of the exposition could be characterized by: consistency, expansion and improving quality.

Competitive Steps

Margarita Cedeno de Fernandez, First Lady of the DR, presented the DR’s innovative National Responsible Tourism program at the conference. She asked the tourism industry "to stress quality over quantity."

It is a road that the Dominican Republic has been traveling for the last seven years when it began to seriously court the American tourist. And it has paid off. By having more luxury hotels at affordable prices, the DR’s recent decrease in tourist numbers has not been as serious as in other Caribbean destinations.

The First Lady said the DR’s “responsible tourism efforts will continue to incorporate public and private sectors to encourage the country’s growing tourism industry to create and support programs that . . . sustain the DR's unspoiled natural beauty.”

The Minister of Tourism, Francisco Javier Garcia, said that the Dominican Republic is the “it” destination for natural beauty, amazing eco-tourism and a growing wealth of sophisticated hotels and resorts.

He said that the U.S. was its most important source of tourism and the DR is working to improve the relationship by opening nine new tourist offices there. "In a time of crisis, you have two options," he said. "You sit down and cry, or you take firm steps forward."

"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."

In consideration of these steps forward, Garcia emphasized “The government will continue its strong investment in the DR tourism infrastructure including building the Atlantic Boulevard in Puerto Plata, the revitalization and development of major highways and roads, and an even deeper commitment to ensuring that the natural beauty of the DR is sustained for generations to come.”

More Resorts to Come

Expansion of the number of resorts is a sign that the importance of the DR as a vacation destination continues strong, he added. “Our country continues to attract international projects and capital from around the world. Savvy investors realize the DR is a very safe investment for tourism business.”

“Our tropical sunny climate, world class seaports and marinas, eight international airports and growing list of upscale hotels and resorts are not going away. Our stunning coastal areas and the annual appearance of humpback whales in Samana, our unspoiled beaches, pristine mountains, and inland rivers and waterfalls are not going to go away."

Eight airports. How many countries of the DR’s size has that many? This enables tourists to pin point what area they want to vacation at without long transfer rides.

Garcia also highlighted a special approach to sustainable tourism developments in the DR’s southwest region, noting
the area is the most bio diverse territory in the Caribbean. “There are plans for an educational institution near Baharona that will study the wealth of species, fauna and flora in the southwest with over $900 million being invested into innovative sustainable tourism developments in the southwest that could serve as global models.”

Punta Cana

The Dominican Republic tourism products continue to grow at a rapid rate, even in the face of a sobering, world-wide, economic punch-in-the-nose. And the east coast region of Punta Cana continues to be the fastest growing area in the Caribbean. The area has 31,500 rooms in 62 resorts, which accounts for 48% of the rooms in the Dominican Republic.

Ernesto Veloz, president of the Bavaro chapter of The National Hotel and Restaurant Association, at a press conference said that the Punto Cana hoteliers are working to continue that lead.

New hotels for the 2008-2009 tourist season include the Iberostar Grand Hotel Bavaro, Moon Palace, The Reserve at Palma Real and the Majestic Elegance.

“There are several large hotel and residential complexes that are under construction, including the expansion of the Royal Catalonia, Westin Roco Ki, Bahia Principe Esmeralda, Punta Cana Village, Hacienda Punta Cana, expansion at the Palladium, and works at iguana in Cap Cana.” He added the area is adding 11 more golf courses to its already strong position of nine.

He predicted that by 2010 there would be 51,000 rooms in the Punta Cana region. Veloz added that this year “we are seeing a 1% decline in travel compared to 2008, minimal at times when many destinations are seeing double-digit declines.”

To maintain its powerful competitive position, the DR continues to diversify its markets. The Sans Souci cruise ship terminal in Santo Domingo, which opened its first phase in January, plays a major role in that direction. The 2007-2008 season ended with 82,000 visitors more than twice the previous year’s.

Cruise ships also call at Samana and La Romana. There are also plans 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.

Besides having unique Victorian architecture brought to it by English settlers in the 1800’s, the area surrounding Puerto Plata has an abundance of rain-forest, eco-tourism sites; historic sites such as Isabella, the first permanent European settlement in the New World (and the only place where Columbus owned land); and eco-participation sites such as Ocean World.

DATE 2010, membresia@asonahores.com
young couple stood midway down on the curving stairway leading from the upper entrance lobby to the vast lower lobby whose open arches lead to the gardens, wedding chapel and outdoor nightly jazz club. A little back from the base of the stairs, a tall, slim man in a light blue shirt and dark slacks took a picture of the couple.

It is a friendly gesture for staff members to help guests take home photo memories. When he returned the camera, I asked if he were a security guard. I was thinking that this was mighty well-mannered person in such a low-level job. He said, “No, I am the manager.”

My jaw went slack. I was taken back by the fact that a manager would be doing something so mundane and trivial as taking a photo of guests.

That is how I met Jose Gutierez, the general manager of the five star Majestic Elegance in Punta Cana, the Dominican Republic — a French-trained chef and a son of Spanish parents living in Paris.

As it ended up, it is his casually helpful manner and cuisine skills around which revolve the workings and success of this resort.

Service in the Service Industry

Gutierez spends most of his working hours in the front of the house.

Most of us in the travel business think of a manager spending most of his time in his office. Of this Gutierez says, “In the service business you can not receive second hand information from your staff. It is always better to be there and know exactly what is going on. Besides the rules of this house are against management spending most of the time in an office when the show is running. We respect the way others manage their properties, but we think they do not have the same results.”

Over the past seven years, I have stayed and/or dined at many of the high-end and large resorts in the DR. There were times when the beds were more like used military cots, pancakes were served burnt and even the Dominican staple at breakfast, mangu (supposed to be hot), was served cold. Two of those single cot-beds would be pushed together for a honeymooning couple who requested a king size bed. That does not quite make it for American standards, does it?

Most of those resorts are closed, upgraded themselves in the face of honest competition or vacationers have moved to the newly built, modern, luxury resorts, particularly on the Dominican Republic’s east coast. Of which the Majestic Elegance is one.

6.5 Restaurants, Plus One What?

The “point five” derives from the all-day lounge with continental breakfast and light lunch in each of the two sections of the adults-only Elegance Club. These are on the beach end of the two wings of the resort.

Each Elegance Club wing has one bedroom suites on the beach, a roped-off private beach area, an exclusive-use pool with Bali beds and swim-up suites for garden level units. Each suite has a Jacuzzi, as do all the units at the resort. Better than home.

The problem with such a set up is it makes life so much better than home, so much more replete with creature comforts, that home seems entirely inadequate. On the plus side, you
wanna come back for this sort of treatment real soon. Hence the origin of the word: re-sort. Makes sense, yes?

The plus one: to have five stars, a resort has gotta have a 24-hour restaurant. And these guys got one that cannot be beat — it is comfy, cozy, and very private. It is the guests’ own room. Late night champagne supper in the Jacuzzi would do, yes? 24-hour room service included. Yes, included. Spoil yourself rotten.

One thing that makes for luxury is not only escaping the hum-drum of our day to day routine, but also getting more than we expect. So it is with the restaurants, of which there are six — sort of.

By way of example, breakfast and lunch in Flavours international buffet restaurant.

At home breakfast is fast-food time. Emphasis on fast. There is a continental breakfast on the beach in the palapa hut and breakfast for the club guests in a private table-service dining room.

But most guests eat at the buffet. And for good reason: variety, quality and speed. Find what you want at ten stations. No waiting. OK, sounds like other buffets. So what is the big deal? Well, success lies in the details.

One of the details here is the omelets. At most resorts there is an omelet station with a line. Who wants to wait for eggs while the rest of your food on the plate gets cold? Or show up at the table and others have finished their meal while you were online? The cooks make a variety of mini omelets which are on the warm table for you to chose from “now.” Take two or three different kinds. No waiting. Nice touch.

Nice Touches

The main dining room and the restaurant on the beach both have paella. None of the “only for two and it will be 45 minutes before you get it,” routine. It is there every day, on the buffet, ready to eat now. As much as you want. How many resorts can you count that have paella served like this?

And for dinner, chose the buffet and a man can go in wearing shorts. A bathing suit and a shirt, if you wish. As a rule, resorts require slacks for men at dinner, even in the buffet. My question is: Whose vacation is this anyway?

Apparently it is the Majestic Elegance’s question as well. They have decided it is ours. So, no slacks it is. But for the other dining rooms, the steak house, the continental, the Italian, the Japanese, have a dress code.

The Suite Side of Life

The Majestic Elegance has 600 rooms distributed in two different wings with 4 room types in each section.

Majestic Elegance has pool and garden view rooms accommodating up to four adults and and children. It is for adults 18 years and older.

Have a dog or cat whose middle name is Spoiled Rotten?

Now it is your turn. The Majestic Jr. Suite is on the first floor of the club sections with direct access to the swimming pool and small garden and an indoor and outdoor Jacuzzi. Max equals two people.

All suites throughout the resort have walk in showers with European style hose type shower and an overhead, rain type showerhead with three side shoots that actually work. The latter will be everyone’s favorite because you are immersed in water, like a strong rain shower, but warm and very comfortable. And heady. All units have flat screen TV’s and Internet connection (pay for use).

There are nine bars (All scheduled for different times of the day), including the fast service, swim up bar in the 1300 foot lagoon style, zig zag pool. Not a day went by that people were not having a grand time among friends and new friends. Wanna speak with the manager? Chose tea time at the main lobby bar.

And of course there is the casino, located at the Majestic Colonial at a two-minute walk, gym, spa, golf near by (328 yards away from the hotel), a very large, better-than-Las-Vegas theater with over-stuffed wicker chairs, supervised kids club for children, Nintendo’s for children in kids club, Caribbean street with boutiques (jewelry, cigars, souvenirs, mini market, photo shop, pharmacy, clothes), gazebo for weddings, 24-hour medical center, two integrated Jacuzzis within the main swimming pool, ATM machine, lighted tennis courts, ping pong, pool tables, darts and a soccer field. Elevators in each building. Handicap rooms available.

July and august rates per couple per room range from $1560.00 for a standard junior suite to $2820.00 for a elegance club ocean front suite

FRENCHMANS LOOKOUT PRESENTS SUMMER SIZZLE PACKAGE

This summer, visitors will be able to rent Frenchmans Lookout, a luxury five-bedroom villa in Tortola, British Virgin Islands, during low season for only $11,500 per week for up to ten guests. This very affordable package translates to only $164 per person per day based on 10 guests and $205 based on eight guests.

Included are two full days on a 35-foot powerboat with Captain Simon, who will take guests to all the private spots and best beaches. Guests can snorkel the Virgin Gorda Baths, visit the uninhabited Sandy Cay, experience the famous “Willy-T’s,” Jost Van Dyke and more to explore on the boat ride.

Also featured are freshly prepared-to-order daily breakfasts; courteous, experienced staff; round-trip transfers from the airport; concierge and managerial assistance; and housekeeping. A four-percent gratuity, seven-percent BVI tax and gas for the boat are not included in the price.

When not cruising, guests may relax in the sun by a 50-foot fresh water pool (and shallow children’s cove) or in the gazebo, shaded by specimen trees. Frenchmans Lookout has five en-suite, air-conditioned bedrooms, fully-equipped kitchen, WiFi, entertainment area, fitness center, outside gazebo, barbecue area, and more.

Other amenities available are spa services, a chef to prepare meals, scuba diving, deep-sea fishing, sunset sails, dinner reservations and babysitting.


NEW MOON PALACE CASINO, GOLF AND SPA RESORT ALL-INCLUSIVE LUXURY IN DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Palace Resorts has announced the soft opening of its first all-inclusive luxury property in the Dominican Republic—Moon Palace Casino, Golf & Spa Resort on Macao Beach. When all of the 1,791 rooms are open at the end of the year, the magnificent oceanfront resort will be the largest in Punta Cana.

Palace Resorts invites guests to be the first to experience its luxury with an exclusive soft opening rate of 20 percent off the per-person, per-night rate for all new reservations, now through December 23, 2009. This can also be combined with the Palace Passport and the Kids Stay Free Summer Promotion. The Palace Passport includes a 25-percent daily discount on select spa treatments, 25-percent discount on one round of golf daily at the Cana Bay Palace Golf Club (available when the course opens early fall 2009), unlimited select tours and more. The Kids Stay & Eat Free Summer Promotion is valid for all trips booked now through August 28 for travel June 1 through August 31, 2009, for two children 17 years and younger per room, when sharing a room with at least one adult.

Aquatic facilities include eight outdoor pools overlooking the ocean, three outdoor pools overlooking the canal, submerged lounge chairs in most pools to enjoy the Caribbean sun in a cool atmosphere, one kids pools with water toboggan and toys, four swim up bars, and a lazy river that meanders through the resort. The Kids Club, open until 11, offers long hours of kid-friendly entertainment.

Scheduled to open in fall 2009, the 45,000 square-foot Moon Palace Casino will be the largest casino in Punta Cana. The Cana Bay Palace Golf Club offers a challenging, par-72 Jack Nicklaus designed golf course. The Palace Resorts Signature Spa is an incredible 60,000 square-foot facility with 48 spa suites, including 11 total indoor and outdoor couples’ suites and two Golden VIP Suites.

Moon Palace Casino, Golf & Spa Resort offers 11 restaurants and 12 bars, all included in the rate. All restaurants, bars and lounges serve premium beer, mixed drinks with top-shelf liquors and international wines from the Palace Resorts wine cellar, a collection of vintages all with Wine Spectator rating of 85 or higher.


THE FLAMBOYANT HOTEL & VILLAS MARKS 20TH ANNIVERSARY WITH CREDIT CRUNCH WINNER

The Flamboyant Hotel & Villas, Grenada, West Indies, is celebrating its 20th Anniversary by automatically entering all guests staying at the hotel during 2009 into a prize draw to win 20 days on all-inclusive for two!

Credit Crunch Special Offers for families also include: Stay One Week, Get One Week Free available for June and July arrivals.

Warmed by the bright Caribbean sun and genuine Grenadian Hospitality, the Flamboyant Hotel offers an ideal vacation destination. Fine meals and sumptuous buffets are offered in the open-air dining room, and snacks and barbecues at the beachside cabana, just steps from the water.

There are comfortable rooms or self-catering studios, one-bedroom suites and two-bedroom villas, all with air conditioning and vistas of Grand Anse and the lush mountains of Grenada.

The Flamboyant Hotel & Villas, 866-978-8013, flambo@spiceisle.com, www.flamboyant.com
PABLO TORRES NAMED GENERAL MANAGER OF THE BRITISH COLONIAL HILTON NASSAU

Hilton Hotels Corporation has appointed Pablo Torres as General Manager of the 288-guestroom British Colonial Hilton Nassau, downtown Nassau’s only hotel with a secluded beach. Pablo most recently served as director of operations at the Caribe Hilton in San Juan, Puerto Rico, where he also began his hospitality career. Pablo joins the British Colonial Hilton Nassau in time to finalize and debut the property’s multimillion-dollar makeover, featuring upgrades to rooms, public areas, and meetings space, as well as new restaurant and bar concepts.

A 17-year hospitality professional, Pablo started off as a food and beverage management trainee at the Caribe Hilton. Since then, he has held key roles with an array of internationally recognized hotel brands throughout the Caribbean and Latin America. He also spent a term at Hilton’s international corporate office in the UK as a corporate food and beverage trainer and system installer, giving him an opportunity to work on projects globally from the UK and Europe to Asia and the Middle East. Pablo holds a degree in Hotel and Restaurant Management from Hocking College in Ohio and has also attended Cornell University’s hospitality programs.

He has a wife, Rita, and two children.

British Colonial Hilton Nassau is said to be built on the site of what was once the infamous Blackbeard the pirate’s residence and served as the setting for the James Bond movies “Never Say Never Again” and “Thunderball.”


CARIBBEAN EXPERIENCES DISCOVERS MORE THAN SUN AND SAND VACATIONS

The Organization of American States–Department of Trade and Tourism (OAS/DTT), through its Caribbean STEP Program (Small Tourism Enterprises Program), has unveiled the new Caribbean Experiences website featuring properties that demonstrate innovation, high quality vacation experiences and environmental stewardship. Travelers can now seek out true Caribbean attractions including adventure activities, cultural interactions, and off-the-beaten path experiences, while staying at small, handpicked properties as an alternative to large chain resorts.

The website provides travelers a site to search for various STEP recognized properties while also featuring details of top attractions in each of the participating Caribbean destinations.

“The Caribbean Experiences website offers an exciting new way for travelers to discover the authentic features of the Caribbean. By staying at these leading small properties visitors have an exceptional vacation and can feel confident that they have been part of a product that reflects responsible tourism practices,” says Richard Campbell, Tourism Section Chief at the Department of Trade and Tourism (DTT) of the Organization of American States (OAS). The STEP program, which is run through the OAS, is expanding at a time of growing interest in the experiential sector of travel. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) reports: “There is a shift from active holiday to holidays as an experience. The point is to achieve a complete participative experience that provides new knowledge and authentic experiences.” The STEP Program is a standard designed for small properties (less than 75 rooms). So far the following countries have participated in the program: Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname and, Trinidad and Tobago.

Caribbean Experiences, www.caribbean-experiences.com

BOLONGO BAY BEACH RESORT OFFERS ‘ADULTS STAY FREE’ PROMOTION

Bolongo Bay Beach Resort in St. Thomas is bringing back its popular Adults Stay Free Promotion where a third and fourth adult can stay free when sharing a room with two paying adults staying on the resort’s European Plan (EP). As an added bonus, Bolongo has reduced the price of its nightly EP rates for 25-percent savings.

The Adults Stay Free Promotion is valid on all reservations made by June 30, 2009 for travel now through October 31, 2009.

“Bolongo is a great getaway choice for adults. We are a fun, lively and active place with exceptional dining plus a wide array of watersports, land activities, and live entertainment including steel pan, calypso and karaoke,” said Paul Doumeng, owner and general manager of Bolongo.

As part of Bolongo’s Adults Stay Free EP vacation, travelers will enjoy accommodations in an ocean view room; a “discover scuba diving” in-pool lesson; and complimentary use of non-motorized watersports equipment (snorkel gear, paddle boats, sunfish sailboats, windsurfing equipment, kayaks and more).

Nightly EP rates in an oceanview room during the Adults Stay Free Promotion are $199 per room, now through August 31, and $182 per room, September 1 through October 31. Rates quoted reflect the 25-percent savings. Tax and service charges of 15-percent tax and $5 per day energy surcharge are additional.

The name of the promotion must be mentioned at the time of booking. This program is valid on new bookings only and cannot be combined with any other offer. The four adults must work with the existing bedding in their room, which consists of either two double beds or a queen bed with a day bed.

Travelers making reservations at Bolongo do not have to worry about having a passport. As a territory of the United States, the U.S. Virgin Islands (St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix) does not require American citizens to possess a passport to enter the destination or return to the U.S. mainland.

Bolongo Bay Beach Resort, 800-524-4746, reservations@bolongobay.com, www.bolongobay.com
Wyndham Hotels and Resorts has appointed Danna Holck as General Manager of the 600-room Rio Mar Beach Resort & Spa, a Wyndham Grand Resort in Rio Grande, Puerto Rico.

Holck, who brings nearly 25 years of hospitality management experience to her new role, is responsible for the operation of the 500-acre, AAA four-diamond rated resort including oversight and management of the 750-member staff, golf facilities, spa, casino, food and beverage outlets, rooms, sales and marketing.

Holck previously held a variety of management roles with Wyndham Hotels and Resorts as well as with the Westin, Adam’s Marks and Hyatt brands.

Most recently, Holck was General Manager of the 676-room Westin San Francisco Market Street hotel. Prior to that, Holck managed several award-winning hotels and resorts including: The Boulders Resort & Golden Door Spa in Carefree, Ariz.; Enchantment Resort & Mii amo Spa in Sedona, Ariz.; Miramonte Resort & Spa in Indian Wells, Calif.; and Naples Grande Resort & Spa in Naples, Fla.

“Danna’s wealth of experience catering to discriminating guests made her an obvious choice for us,” said Jeff Wagoner, Wyndham Hotels and Resorts president. “Her years of experience in resort management coupled with her proven track record in operations and sales and keen understanding of the Wyndham brand will ensure her success at Wyndham Rio Mar.”

She began her career as a sales manager for Hyatt Hotels and Resorts, eventually becoming the director of sales and marketing of two Hyatt hotels in West Hollywood and Los Angeles.

Holck earned her bachelor of science in hotel and restaurant management from University of Hawaii’s College of Travel Industry Management where she minored in the Japanese language.

Wyndham Rio Mar, 800-4-RIOMAR (800-474-6627), www.wyndhamriomar.com

ALL-INCLUSIVE JOLLY BEACH RESORT & SPA LAUNCHES NEW WEBSITE

Jolly Beach Resort & Spa in Antigua’s has launched a new website targeting the resort’s niche leisure travel customers including families, honeymooners and couples planning a destination wedding, as well as meeting and event planners.

“This enhanced website will be the first look at Jolly Beach Resort & Spa for many customers, and as with anything, a first impression is very important,” says Patrice Christian, Marketing Analyst and Coordinator of Marketing Services for Jolly Beach Resort & Spa. “Our new site has a fresh, open design and an easy-to-navigate layout, and it will be an integrated part of our day-to-day sales and marketing and customer outreach, and will also be a gateway for our social media and media sharing outlets.”

The revamped website includes a secure booking engine for air and an all-inclusive Jolly Beach Resort & Spa packages; a secure, resort-only booking engine; Live Chat with a Jolly Beach Resort & Spa Reservations Specialist; online submission forms to facilitate destination wedding requests; and brochures that can be downloaded or emailed directly from the site.

There is a photo gallery with 360-degree views and new images available for download, as well as a Travel Partners area devoted to travel agents and industry professionals that lists FAM trips, and the resort’s Loyalty Program incentives.

Now through December 15, 2009 all-inclusive rates start at $128 ppd; up to two children ages three to 11 stay free with two adults in a Queen Superior room, or one child stays free with two adults in a Standard room; and there is no supplement for a single parent sharing with up to two kids in a Standard room: the parent pays the ppd rate and children stay for $56 per night. Kids two and younger always stay free.

Jolly Beach Resort & Spa is located on a stunning, mile-long white-sand beach and sports five bars and restaurants; four night-lit tennis courts; two swimming pools; two full-court basketball courts; games room; Jolly Kidz and Teenz Clubs; Think Jolly Family Program; and the Palms Wellness Centre, Spa, Gym and Salon.

Jolly Beach Resort & Spa, www.jollybeachresort.com

AIR JAMAICA CELEBRATES 40TH ANNIVERSARY

Jamaica’s Minister of Tourism Edmund Bartlett greets Air Jamaica’s Senior Director, Government & Community Affairs Will Rodgers ahead of the special Thanksgiving Service on Sunday, April 26, to mark the airline’s 40th anniversary, at the Christway Baptist Church in Miramar, Florida. A capacity-sized congregation including city officials, representatives of the diplomatic corps, members of staff of Air Jamaica and well wishers were on hand to celebrate the milestone.

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The Diversity of Sandos Hotels & Resorts

Full of inspired fun for the upcoming months, the deluxe hotel lineup presents creative options for vacationers to the beautiful, sunny coast.

Sandos has two resort complexes on Mexico’s glorious Riviera Maya—Caracol complex, which consists of Sandos Caracol Eco-Resort & Spa and the Select Club Beach section, and the Playacar complex containing Sandos Playacar Beach Resort & Spa and the Playacar Riviera Hotel section. Specials and events are planned to add to the allure of this luxury spot.

**Cultural Cuisine & Dance Theme Weeks** Sandos has established complimentary Mexican Cuisine & Folklore and Salsa & Merengue theme weeks taking place through December 2009.

For the Mexican Cuisine & Folklore theme week, guests will learn the preparation of main dishes and drinks of the Mexican culture by experienced Sandos chefs. Participants will also enjoy three evenings filled with traditional Mexican dance such as Mariachi and Marimba. Guests may participate in an evening out at the famous eco-park Xcaret, followed by a Mexican show for an additional $60 per person, which includes roundtrip transportation and entrance to the show (food/beverages not included). Scheduled weeks are July 6–13, September 14–20 and October 19–26.

For the Salsa & Merengue theme week, participants will learn these two Caribbean dance styles and have the opportunity to take part in a dance contest at the end of the week. Guests can enjoy an evening out at Mambo Café nearby for an extra $25, which includes roundtrip transportation and entrance to the restaurant (beverages not included).

Scheduled weeks are August 7–14, September 18–25 and October 30–November 6.

The specific theme “package” must be reserved at booking.

**Fitness Weeks** Fitness trainer to the stars, Steve Jordan, has partnered with Sandos to offer a mind and body makeover June through December 2009, with more dates in 2010. Each Fitness Week package features a four-day program to teach the philosophy, tools and strategies to daily fitness routines as well as provide choices that create a healthier lifestyle. As a result, guests will feel tremendous transformation, gaining energy and endurance. The program features daily stretching, jogs, walks, team challenges, educational forums and more. A minimum four-night stay is required.

Registration fee is $200 per person, which is added on to the cost of an all-inclusive stay. For an additional $50, there’s a Natural Energy dinner at the end of the week with Jordan and his team of professionals (limited space).

The weeks scheduled at Sandos Caracol Eco Resort & Spa and Sandos Select Club are June 26 through July 3 and October 16–23; Sandos Playacar Beach Resort & Spa and Sandos Playacar Riviera Hotel weeks are August 28 through September 4 and December 11–18. Package must be added at booking.

**Bride & Groom Spa Package** Further expanding its spa menu offerings, Sandos Hotels & Resorts has debuted a Bride & Groom spa package designed to add romance and relaxation to any vacation package—especially for newlyweds.

The Bride & Groom package, $294 per couple added to the cost of an all-inclusive stay, includes:

- **Groom**—facial treatment using antioxidants to give firmness and elasticity to the skin while detoxifying and eliminating the sensitivity caused by shaving; and a marine exfoliation that nourishes the skin using properties of the sea.
- **Bride**—a Pearl Essence powder facial and body wrap giving moisture, tone and elasticity to the skin.

Travelers should include the package at booking.

**Ensemble Travel Group Member** As a testament to its high-caliber vacation experience, Sandos Playacar Beach Resort & Spa has been accepted into the exclusive Ensemble Travel Group and its Hotel & Resort Collection.

To be included in the Collection, the resort had to meet specific criteria including being rated as a four-star property, located in a desirable vacation destination or cosmopolitan city, and offer superlative service.

As one of the few preferred Ensemble hotels in the Riviera Maya, the hotel will offer exclusive amenities for Ensemble guests designed to enhance their vacation experience, including a room upgrade (based on availability), early check-in/late checkout, and a personalized note on behalf of the booking agent with an exclusive value-added amenity.

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HOTEL FLAMINGO COZUMEL RECEIVES DISTINGUISHED CERTIFICATION FROM MEXICO SECRETARY OF TOURISM

Hotel Flamingo located in Cozumel, Mexico, recently received the distinguished “M” certification from the Mexico Secretary of Tourism. “M,” otherwise known as the Professionalism and Modernization certificate program, provides instruction on how to improve customer satisfaction, staff performance and waste reduction efforts. The eight-week program requires intensive staff training along with regular inspections by “M” consultants to assure that elements of the program are being implemented. A certification score is given at the end with a minimal score of 80 percent needed to pass the program. Hotel Flamingo received a score of 96 percent.

In addition to achieving the “M” certification, Hotel Flamingo has recently completed an upgrade of their Superior category guest rooms, including the installation of mini split unit air conditioners, iPod alarm clocks, mini bars and feather beds.

Hotel Flamingo is a 22-room boutique hotel with tastefully decorated accommodations and a high level of guest services. The Aqua Restaurant and Bar located at Hotel Flamingo offers complimentary breakfast with all stays, and serves lunch along with cocktails throughout the day and into the evening. Live jazz is available on Thursday and Friday nights.

Scuba Diving, horseback riding, snorkeling, sailing, parasailing, fishing, and tours of Mayan ruins are also available for booking by Hotel Flamingo’s English-speaking staff.

Hotel Flamingo is offering 25 percent off nightly room rates with a minimum stay of two nights for travel through July 1, 2009. Hotel Flamingo, 800-806-1601, info@hotelflamingo.com, www.hotelflamingo.com

CANCUN REMAINS AN ATTRACTIVE DESTINATION FOR GROUP TOURISM

The Groups and Conventions segment reports the largest worldwide growth according to data from the World Tourism Organization, and represents 18 percent of the total occupation of this destination.

The eighth edition of the Mexico Showcase & Travel Expo concluded with the participation of 80 international buyers and 40 national buyers. “The event was a success,” commented its organizer, Andy Ortiz. One of the participants Cindy Ford, Manager of Travel Leaders/Atlas Travel wrote about her experience: “I just want to thank you for the beneficial and ‘timely’ experience I just had at the eighth Annual Mexico Showcase & Travel Expo, after the health and travel advisories were released just prior to departing for the trip, I like most, wondered if I should go ahead with the travel plans or avoid the area. I must say, I consider myself as an adventure traveler, so with that mindset, I continued on with the itinerary... and thankfully so. Immediately upon my return I contacted one of our local radio stations to advise them that I had just returned from Mexico and would be glad to share my experience with listeners. I was invited to speak briefly the next day. This is what I told the listeners: This is a wonderful time to travel to Cancun/Riviera Maya. After arriving and seeing that there were not hundreds in masks, running for cover, I observed just how normal things still were at this destination. I shared how impeccable the service was at all the resorts and restaurants, how attentive everyone was, and just what a great value Cancun/Riviera Maya is for travelers. Your dollars will get you some of the best resorts, beaches, service, and food that you can find right now in the world. And, for one, would go back in a second.”

As part of the Mexico Showcase there was an educational program called “Green Meeting Strategies,” which committed itself to adopting various ‘green principles’ during the event, with the aim of reducing the carbon footprint.

In turn this emphasized interest and commitment for Cancun to place itself as the first eco-friendly tourist destination in Mexico, due to the combined development of good practice by groups and conventions and incentive programs together with both venues and meeting planners.

Fernando Cervantes, Director of Groups and Conventions from the Cancun Convention and Visitors Bureau CVB in Cancun, confirmed that the MPI (Meeting Professional International) executives will be visiting Cancun during the first few days of June and confirmed that Cancun will host Meet Different 2010, which brings together more than 2000 visitors including 900 meeting planners next February.

Following the health emergency, 95 percent of group events in May and June in Cancun and Puerto Morelos were rescheduled, like the XII Paediatric National Congress CONAPEME and the III Mesoamerican and Caribbean Paediatric Congress.

Cancun Convention and Visitors Bureau, www.cancun.travel.com

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CEIBA DEL MAR DAZZLES DESTINATION WEDDINGS, OFFERS AIRFARE CREDIT EASING FAMILY TRAVEL

There’s an option to meet every destination desire with the wedding packages offered at Riviera Maya’s glorious Ceiba del Mar—combining powder beaches, relaxing Caribbean waters, and suites offering ocean views with a unique holistic spa and unparalleled amenities.

Excellent indoor and outdoor venues are available, with customizable ballrooms, spacious terraces and lounges, plus over a half mile of private beach.

The Gold package is perfect for those desiring a simple, elegant celebration, and includes the ceremony venue as well as a special wedding dinner and wedding cake for 20 at one restaurant. It also provides: judge, legal permission, and blood test at hotel; wedding organization and coordination; marriage certificate (available only in Spanish); bridal bouquet; boutonniere for groom; two floral options for the witnesses (one per witness); a ceremonial table; flower arrangements for centerpieces; a bottle of Moet champagne for toast; a 15-percent discount on all spa treatments; a photographer for one hour; 36 gloss-printed wedding photos; handmade wedding albums for the prints; a romantic beach dinner for two; a one-night gift certificate to stay again for the couple’s anniversary, and a free upgrade to master suites. The Diamond package begins at $21,801.

For the ultimate destination wedding, Ceiba del Mar’s Diamond package offers everything in the Gold/Platinum packages with the following additions/changes: three bottles of Moet champagne for toast; Mexican Mariachi band for 45 minutes during cocktail reception; a 60-minute DVD comprised of footage from four hours of shooting including editing, personalized label and casing, main menu, titles, music and special effects; 50 photos and two handmade wedding albums for the prints; a romantic beach dinner for two; a one-night gift certificate to stay again for the couple’s anniversary, and a free upgrade to master suites. The Diamond package begins at $21,801.

All are based on 10 Rooms for two nights. Inclusions cannot be exchanged for additional services, with reservations at least 14 business days in advance. Additional room nights are available. Eighty percent of guests must be registered at Ceiba del Mar; those staying in other hotels must purchase a day pass.

FAMILIES CAN TRAVEL LIGHTER WITH AIR TICKET BONUS

With Ceiba Del Mar’s Air Ticket Bonus Special, travelers receive a $500 credit towards airfare—and take one step closer to a luxurious retreat that leaves the entire family refreshed and rejuvenated.

The Air Ticket Bonus Special includes: a six-day/five-night stay in the luxurious Ocean View master suite (two children, under 12, stay and eat free, sharing the room with their parents); welcome champagne cocktail; two 50-minute massages per suite per stay (gratuities not included); $500 air ticket bonus (maximum) deducted from final bill at check-out; daily breakfast a la carte; daily in-room “eye opener;” in-suite organic bath amenities; afternoon tea time; complimentary use of the spa humid areas; sauna, indoor heated Jacuzzi, steam room and gym; yoga, Pilates and Aquafit classes; and complimentary use of water and land toys, such as bicycles, kayaks and snorkel equipment.

The Air Ticket Bonus Special package starts at $3,651 per couple ($1,825.50 per person), plus taxes (12 percent) and a service charge (5 percent) based on double occupancy. This package incorporates the luxury gourmet meal plan, which includes all meals, snacks and top-brand beverages in the resort’s fabulous restaurants and bars. Packages and specials are not available for group reservations.

Perfect scores for the resort’s rooms and service on Conde Nast Traveler’s Reader’s Choice Survey earned Ceiba del Mar a spot on the 2009 Gold List for the “Best by Rooms” and “Best by Service” categories.

Ceiba Del Mar Beach & Spa Resort, www.ceibadelmar.com
FIRST GOLF TOURNAMENT HOSTED BY PRESIDENTE INTERCONTINENTAL COZUMEL RESORT & SPA

Presidente InterContinental Cozumel Resort & Spa held its First Presidente InterContinental Golf Tournament at the Cozumel Country Club on May 2.

The tournament was organized by Guillermo Valencia, General Manager of the resort, to offer guests a new world-class golf experience in Cozumel.

Participants numbered 104, representing Mexico and the United States. The day before the golf tournament, a welcoming cocktail party by the sea was held, sponsored by the Miami Baptist Hospital. The next day, the tournament began with the first tee-offs at 8 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. A simultaneous, individual tee-off style was used to open the event.

The Cozumel Country Club, host to the tournament, features an 18-hole, par-72 course situated among spectacular lagoons, dense jungle, and a variety of plants and wildlife. It was designed by Nicklaus Design Group.

Players were offered a first-rate prize package: a jewelry item from Ultrajewels valued at $10,000. Mulligans were sold for around $15, contributing to a fund donated to the City of Angels Foundation.

The tournament winners within distinct categories were awarded accommodations in InterContinental Hotels & Resorts, including airline tickets from the following sponsors: Mexicana, Continental Airlines, American Airlines, and COPA Airlines.

The General Manager of the Hotel, Guillermo Valencia, thanked the participants and sponsors for their great help with the event. During the awards dinner, he mentioned: “Cozumel Island is one of the most beautiful destinations in our country—especially attractive given its privileged Caribbean location, its exotic vegetation and wildlife, its world-famous coral reefs, and its ancient Mayan ruins.” He then invited everyone present to attend the Second Golf Tournament, to be held in 2010.

Participants also enjoyed spa treatments at the Mandara Spa, and savored first-class world gastronomy at the El Caribeño and Alfredo di Roma restaurants.


DELUXE SERVICES AT HOTEL VILLA ROLANDI
THALASSO SPA–GOURMET & BEACH CLUB

Hotel Villa Rolandi, Thalasso SPA–Gourmet & Beach Club, is located on the beach in the Southern zone of Isla Mujeres overlooking the impressive Caribbean Sea, with a marvelous view of Cancun. The Hotel is strategically located five minutes away from the ferry terminal in Isla Mujeres and only 20 minutes from the mainland. A unique experience in Spa treatments is offered here—“Thalasso Therapy,” right beside the ocean. The treatment is applied professionally by a Thalasso team trained in this form of relaxation, to allow visitors to take advantage of treatments that help cure problems in the circulatory system, skin and muscle. Spa facilities repair the tired body and mind, rewarding them with the youthfulness that can easily be taken away by stress and air contamination from busy cities.

Hotel Villa Rolandi Thalasso is a member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World. Its market niche is men and women (nationals and international) 45–60 years of age, with high purchasing power.

Hotel Villa Rolandi Isla Mujeres, www.villarolandi.com

BANYAN TREE MAYAKOBA OPENS ON MEXICO’S RIVIERA MAYA

Singapore-based Banyan Tree Hotels and Resorts officially enters the American market with the opening of Mexico’s Banyan Tree Mayakoba, on a stretch of pristine tropical mangrove located within the Mayakoba ecological development of Riviera Maya.

Garden Pool Villas, Spa Pool Villas, Terrace Residences and Beachfront Pool Villas cater to visitors needing one-, two- and three-bedroom villas with perfect proportions of space, garden pavilions and view.

At Banyan Tree Spa Mayakoba, guests may experience signature treatments delivered by professional spa therapists trained at the Banyan Tree Spa Academy in Phuket, Thailand. As a spa innovator, Banyan Tree Spa introduces The Rainforest to Mayakoba, a hydrothermal circuit, comprising alternating hot and cold thermal cabins, for couples to embark on a trail of wellness treatments.

Among its superb culinary choices are Saffron, its contemporary signature Thai restaurant; Tamarind, the spa cuisine purveyor serving an organic menu of special juices and fine dining cuisine; and Oriente, a must-visit for daily breakfast buffet in the mornings, and modern Mexican dinner in the evenings. Banyan Tree Mayakoba will soon offer its Ixchel destination dining experience: an intimate dinner set onboard a trajinera, a traditional Mexican flat bottom boat decorated with indigenous motifs and cloths.

Soft-opened since March, a special introductory rate is offered—$655++ per night in a Garden Pool Villa, inclusive of daily breakfast for two. Guests who book a villa for a minimum of three consecutive nights will enjoy one 90-minute Banyan Tree Spa massage session (worth $100) per booking.

The offer is valid for stays through June 30, 2009.

Banyan Tree Mayakoba, 800-591-0439, mayakoba@banyantree.com, www.banyantree.com