



BEST PLACES TO GOLF IN PUNTA CANA, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC



The Dominican Republic has long been the 800-pound gorilla of Caribbean golf, with a wide array of courses by famed designers dotting the nation's coasts. But the single greatest concentration of high-quality golf and associated lodging is in and around Punta Cana, a broad peninsula on the nation's easternmost point with extensive resorts, its own international airport and a high-speed motorway to the capital, Santo Domingo. Punta Cana features over 20 miles of powdery white beaches, offshore fishing and every conceivable water sport, plus highly lauded golf courses by the likes of Tom Fazio, Jack Nicklaus, PB Dye, and Nick Faldo.

The largest golf collection is at the upscale Punta Cana Resort & Club, with 45 world-class holes and numerous lodging options. The resort's owners and residents include singer Julio Iglesias and designer Oscar de la Renta, who helped outfit its boutique luxury hotel, Tortuga Bay. The original resort course is a beautiful beachfront design by PB Dye. Long-rated among the island's best and renowned for its extensive and creative hazards, La Cana has stark waste areas and every imaginable type of bunker: pot, grass, flat-bottomed deep ones, and those flashed with high mounds of rough. Last year, the course was expanded to 27 holes with the addition of the new Hacienda nine, also designed by Dye. Fourteen of the 27 holes boast sea views and several play right to the water's edge. La Cana is open to public play for all visitors to the region. This is typically not the case for the resort's premium Tom Fazio-designed Corales course, which is just for homeowners and guests of the resort's two most upscale properties — the Punta Cana Hotel and Tortuga Bay. However, outside play is available seasonally when demand for tee times is lower, and it's worth making the effort, as Corales is a stunner on and off the coast. Even its inland holes are exquisite, winding through old quarries, along stone cliffs and past inland lakes; it also features six holes along the Caribbean, including the final three collectively known as the "Devil's Elbow." The grand finale is 18, which requires a dramatic forced carry tee shot across ocean surf and cliffs.

Cap Cana is a more recent master-planned resort community spanning 29,000 acres, including almost 3.5 miles of beach. Long-term plans call for five courses, but the development has struggled to sell homes, and there is currently just one — Punta Espada — open, with a second — Las Iguanas — nearly finished and expected to open shortly. Both are Jack Nicklaus Signature designs, and Punta Espada has been ranked among the World's Top 100 (non-U.S.) courses by Golf Digest and the Best in the Caribbean & Mexico by Golfweek. It has hosted a PGA Champions Tour event and its signature 13th hole is one of the most memorable in the Caribbean — a par-3 with the tee shot over water to a near island green, stretching all the way to 249-yards from the tips. Eight holes play along — or over — the waters of the Caribbean. There are two luxury boutique resorts open for lodging within Cap Cana: the Eden Roc and the Sanctuary.

Roco Kí was the newest major development in Punta Cana, but has been beset with financial trouble and most work on homes and hotels is currently suspended. It occupies its own peninsula at the northern end of the region's tourist corridor, with 3 miles of beaches and coastal cliffs, which are the setting for the Nick Faldo-designed golf course. The course is complete and has been open to public play for a couple of years, but is now "temporarily" closed as the surrounding development goes through its legal woes. Should it reopen, it is worth the trip. The high bluffs over the Caribbean are similar to those of the famed Pebble Beach Golf Links and the showcase here is the best views on the island (the first three and last three holes will stun; the final two playing right along the water).

One of the region's most accessible courses is the Jack Nicklaus-designed Cana Bay Golf Club at the all-inclusive (excluding golf) Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Punta Cana. The inland course lacks the seaside drama of its brethren, but at 7,253 yards, it is a stout test for any golfer and showcases the island's rich tropical flora. There are two more affordable courses in nearby Bavaro. The 27-hole Cocotal Golf Club is an undistinguished inland design incorporating lakes and tropical vegetation. The region's oldest course, Golf de Bavaro, was extensively redesigned by PB Dye in 2010 and is now known as The Lakes — part of the large Barceló Bávaro Beach Resort. The course is much improved, taking full advantage of some 25 lakes to provide plenty of faux "coastal" golf, as well as winding through an impressive mangrove forest.