Tourismus

Categories : Investitionsreport 2006

Even President Leonel Fernández likes to compare the potential of the Samaná area in the north-east with that of Monte Carlo.

It is easy to understand the emphasis. Over the past 25 years the industry has grown apace. Tourist arrivals have soared since charter flights brought long-haul package holidaymakers from Italy, Spain, Germany and the UK in the 1980s. Last year they exceeded 3m.

Investment has been growing quickly too, with the number of hotel rooms doubling from 30,000 in 1994 to nearly 60,000 in 2005. And tourism's economic importance as an earner of foreign exchange has also risen sharply, with revenues rising from $1.57bn in 1995 to $3.18bn in 2004.

The problem is that not enough revenue stays in the country. All-inclusive resorts, where operators import food, drink and even entertainment, dominate the sector. Even though 49,000 Dominicans work in the industry and tourism generates a further 122,000 jobs indirectly, officials believe the country is not benefiting enough.

"We want to focus away from all-inclusives so that we can link hotels to local communities and give them some of the benefits," says Hans Dannenberg, deputy tourism minister until a recent move to be ambassador to India.
One of the first tasks is to get tourists to stay longer and spend more. The amount they spend has risen over the past 10 years, but is still only $106 a day. For that reason, officials have been stressing attractions other than the excellent beaches that border a 1,400km coastline. The national parks preserved by successive Dominican governments are one attraction. Santo Domingo, the capital and first city in the Americas to be colonised by the Spanish, is another.

The city's historic core has been restored and is much safer than it was in the mid-1990s. Although crime levels have risen generally, the government has moved to protect tourists, with the formation of dedicated English-speaking police units.

It is also doing more to co-ordinate efforts to improve the image of tourism areas, ensuring for example that refuse is collected promptly and roads linking resorts to airports are good.

A newly-established special tourism cabinet – set up by President Fernández following his election in 2004 – brings together ministers of foreign affairs, security, public works and other affected areas to add an executive push to this effort. The authorities have been marketing the country's attractions widely, winning some success in bringing visitors from eastern Europe and Russia. But because they believe US visitors tend to spend more, special efforts are being made to bring in more visitors from the US. Hotels are beginning to meet the demands of US visitors.

"Many hotels in Punta Cana didn't have ice machines, coffee makers and other facilities

Americans take for granted," explains Mr Dannenberg. "And they are starting to make CNN and HBO available in their hotel rooms. Germans and Italians were just not so bothered about that."

Mr Dannenberg has also been keen to promote competition on air routes from the US. With carriers such as Continental, American and Delta, and low-cost lines such as Spirit, regularly flying Dominican routes, prices have fallen sharply in recent years, especially when compared with the 1990s when American Airlines enjoyed a virtual monopoly.

This seems to have paid off with visitors from the US up 8.5 per cent in the first 11 months of 2005, so nearly 36 per cent of arrivals come from the US. It is a focus that operators of big developments such as Cap Cana share.

Ellis Pérez, vice-president for communications at the project, says: "We are an evolving market but our natural market has to be the US." And in the long run, whether the Dominican Republic can really "add more value" to its tourist "product" will depend on whether projects such as Cap Cana, and similarly ambitious enterprises, can succeed in the demanding high-end US market.

Certainly, Cap Cana is cutting no corners. Along 8.5km of coast it plans a giant marina, golf courses, luxury hotels and gourmet restaurants. In addition, capitalising on the liberalisation 10 years ago of rules permitting foreigners to buy property, Cap Cana is building several hundred beachfront properties.

If projects such as this succeed, the Dominican Republic could move quickly up the tourism value-chain. Although operators of La Romana and Casa del Campo in the south achieved something similar, these enclaves were built over a long time.

As Enrique de Marchena, head of the local hotel association puts it: "[Cap Cana] has a very aggressive vision. They want to do in 10 years what the developers of Punta Cana and Casa de Campo did in 35 years."