

Casa Macoris, one of the colonial houses to rent at Casas del XVI, a hotel in Santo Domingo.



## The Dominican Republic Dresses Up

Santo Domingo's most stylish and creative power players are turning the historic Zona Colonial into a new Caribbean hot spot. *by Jacqueline Gifford*

**ON A STIFLINGLY HOT** September afternoon in the Dominican Republic—humidity hovering at, oh, 99.9 percent—I found myself toting around a huge ginger margarita on my way to get a pair of espadrilles in Santo Domingo's Zona Colonial.

Ricardo Fernandez, the Spanish-born owner of **La Alpargatería** (*laalpargateria.com.do*), a company selling handcrafted shoes, was walking me from his first boutique, set on the tiny Calle Salome Ureña, to his newer atelier on the wider Calle Las Mercedes. The original is a low-key affair,

with a few rows for display and a courtyard out back where thick vines cover decaying stone walls and twentysomethings sip cocktails around low-slung tables. Think part Brooklyn, part New Orleans, with a dash of downtown L.A.

The atelier, however, is a more polished shop in an early-20th-century building, its façade painted an electric blue. There, you can pick from among the endless fabric swatches—cheerful florals, bold stripes and plaids—and walk out with a pair of espadrilles for under \$50.

There are many boutiques like La Alpargatería in this utterly charming, centuries-old part of Santo Domingo—which is having a bit of a moment. Government money is sprucing up the streets. Artists are settling here. Interiors guru Carlos Mota, a world traveler who has put down roots in the Dominican Republic, bought an apartment in the Zona two years ago and recently decorated the new branch of **Mesón de Bari** (302 Calle Hostos; 809/687-4091), a café beloved by well-heeled locals. He calls

the town “a hidden treasure, an undiscovered Cartagena. You walk around and you find layers.”

I’ve been covering the Caribbean for years, yet Santo Domingo—the capital of the Dominican Republic and home to some 2.6 million people—was entirely new to me. Which is somewhat of a surprise, given that it’s a four-hour flight from New York and the oldest European city in the Americas, established in 1496 by Bartholomeo Columbus (yes, brother of Christopher).

“Most people don’t think of visiting Caribbean cities, but from a style standpoint, Santo Domingo is brimming with boutiques,” said Andria Mitsakos, founder of lifestyle brand Wanderlista, who produces furniture here. Like Mota, Mitsakos is an inveterate traveler. She recently gave up her Manhattan apartment to live a more nomadic lifestyle, renting in Athens and the Zona, where she’ll spend weeks at a time designing rattan furniture and scouting crafts. “The architecture is inspiring,” she told me. Hundreds of 16th-century Spanish colonial buildings still stand here, now reimaged as

contemporary shops, galleries, even hotels.

Interior designer Patricia Reid, longtime Zona resident and friend of Oscar de la Renta, has seen this area go in and out of fashion. (Most business still takes place in the modern city center.) “One hundred years ago, this was the ‘in’ place to live,” explained Reid, who designed Julio Iglesias’s homes in Punta Cana and Marbella, Spain. “It’s coming back. I don’t want it to be a museum. I want it to be a living city.”



From left: Santo Domingo’s Zona Colonial dates to the 16th century; a cana palm hat by Natalia Ortega, the artisan behind Los Tejedores.



From left: Mamey Galeria shows contemporary Dominican artists; variations on the espadrille at La Alpargateria.

Reid is a master at mixing found objects from Bali and Morocco with mahogany furniture made in the Dominican Republic and then layering in her own paintings and drawings of nature. You can get a feel for her eclectic, colorful work at **Casas del XVI** (rooms from \$450; [casasdelxvi.net](http://casasdelxvi.net)), which consists of six colonial-era mansions in the Zona with features like open-air courtyards and pools. In the coming years, more houses—which, with their brick archways, terra-cotta floors, and wood-beamed ceilings, can take up to a year to renovate—will be added, so that the hotel will feel like a sort of mini village. The star attraction right now is the two-bedroom, exclusive-use Casa del Diseñador, a former home of de la Renta (other houses can be rented by the room).

One morning, over cups of rich, tar-thick Dominican coffee at the Casa del Macorís, one of the houses in the Casas del XVI collection, I chatted with Amelia Vicini, whose family is responsible for the project as well as numerous other properties in the Zona. Beside economic investment, she credited the area’s resurgence to the young diaspora moving back: people like Carolina Contreras, an influencer and founder of Miss Rizos, a blog and salon that encourages women to embrace their curls.



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With her statement glasses and natural hair, Parsons-educated Natalia Ortega, who grew up in Santo Domingo and returned after college, may be the most emblematic of this new creative set. She works with Dominican and Haitian artists to weave beautiful straw hats for her line **Los Tejedores** ([lostejedores.com](http://lostejedores.com)), started with her boyfriend, Ricardo Ariel Toribio. Ortega now moves between studios, meeting clients in person and selling her pieces online.

Santo Domingo is nothing if not social: After speaking with one artist, they'd connect me to another, and so on. Through Mota, I met fashion designer **Oriett Domenech** ([oriettdomenech.com](http://oriettdomenech.com)), who has dressed Kylie Jenner. At her atelier in the city center, I fell hard for one of her hand-cut, body-hugging shift dresses—made entirely out of cork. And through Domenech's husband, investor Miguel Angel Gonzalez, I ran into

Vanessa Gaviria, whose SBG restaurant group owns the Mediterranean-influenced **La Cassina** ([fb.com/lacassina.santo.domingo](https://fb.com/lacassina.santo.domingo)). Power-lunching may be a thing of the past in New York, but it's alive and well at this low-lit, formal spot in the neighborhood of Evaristo Morales, where businessmen took their calls and ordered rounds of martinis as waiters shaved off slices of jamón ibérico tableside.

But this current wave of artists is mainly based in the Zona. There, you'll find Ysabela Molini, creator of **Casa Alfarera** ([casaalfarera.com](http://casaalfarera.com)) and a brilliant ceramist who sources all her clay on the island (no easy feat) and makes massive pineapple-shaped urns as well as delicate sconces, plates, and vases.



From top: Pineapple-shaped planters and vases made by Ysabela Molini under her Casa Alfarera brand; Molini in her office; a new outpost of Mesón de Bari, a café serving traditional Dominican food that was designed by decorator Carlos Mota.



And Alejandro Ruiz and Eddy Guzmán, the owner and curator, respectively, of **Mamey Galería** ([mamey.co](http://mamey.co)), which combines a café, bookshop, and cinema with two galleries showcasing historical and contemporary works by Dominican artists.

At times, I felt like the Zona was one big roving street party. When the heat had subsided, I set out early on a Friday evening, passing through the Parque Colón, to see the soaring Cathedral of Our Lady of the Annunciation, which dates back to 1512. Children were chasing balloons; men gathered to play dominoes. After dinner, I circled back to the Parque, now alive with music, as Dominicans spilled out of the bars to drink and talk and celebrate a hard-fought week.