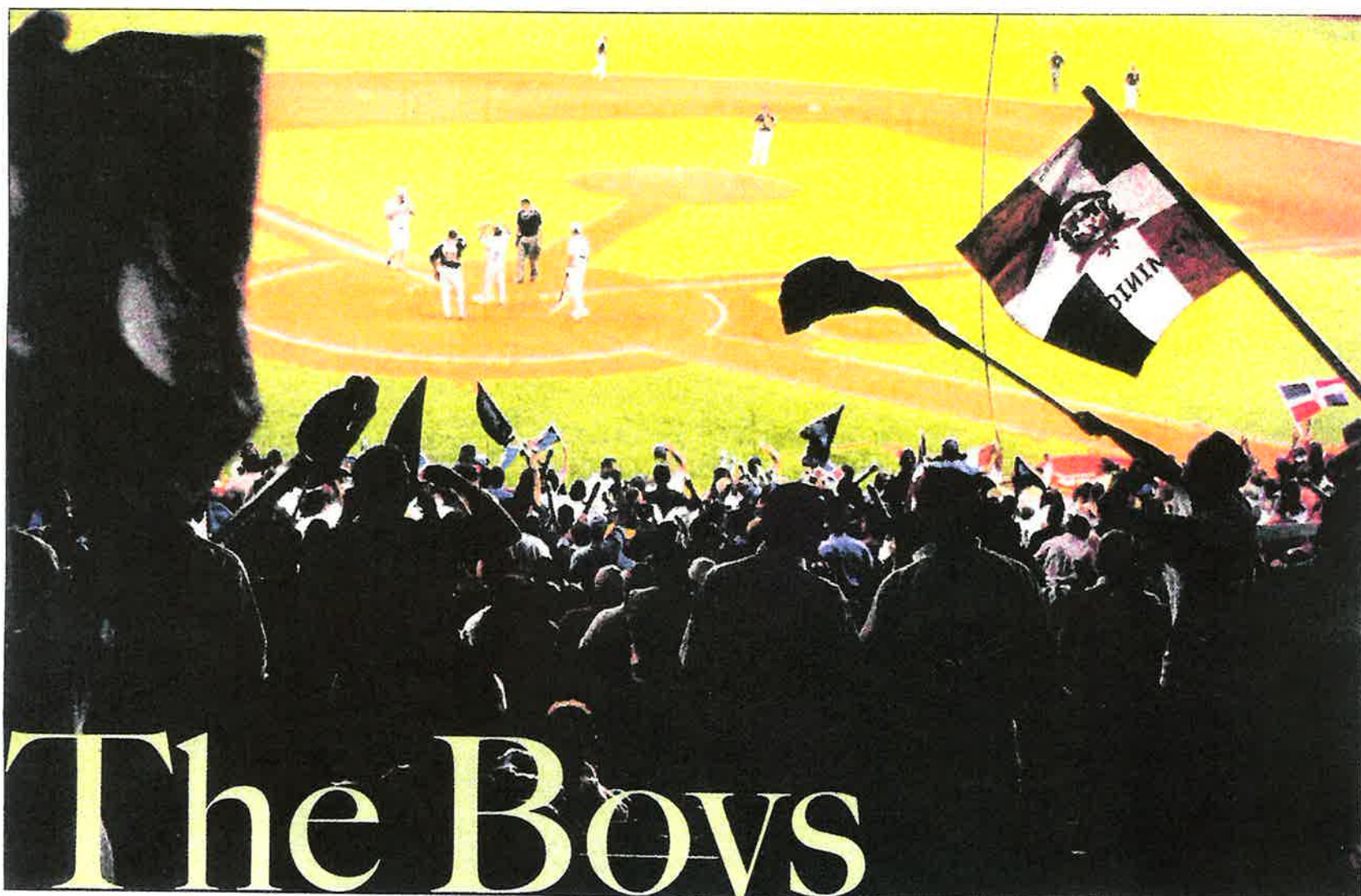


TRAVEL

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2004

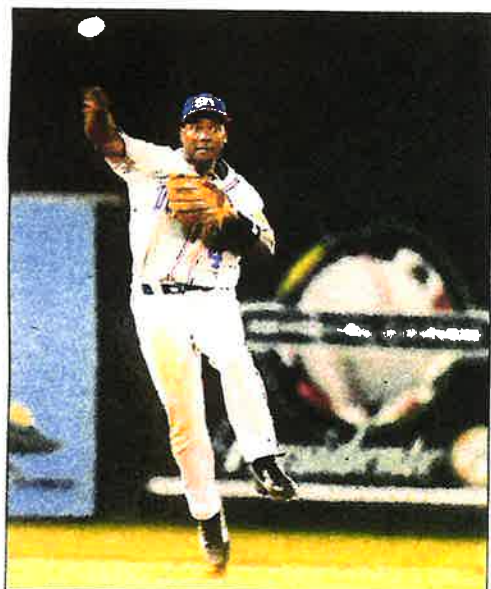
The Caribbean



GENE SWEENEY JR.: SUN STAFF

The Boys of Winter

The Dominican Republic offers a welcome respite from the cold and a chance to see major league ballplayers in action.



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Flags fly and drums pound amid the festive atmosphere of the Dominican Winter League, where All-Star shortstop Miguel Tejada (above) tuned up for his Oriole debut last year.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID PEARSON ASSOCIATES

The beaches, breezes and boats of Punta Cana have lured the likes of Julio Iglesias and Oscar de la Renta.

By BO SMOLKA
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

It's 18 degrees and snowing as I leave Baltimore, and forecasters are calling for the coldest weather of the winter over the next three days. Ten hours later, I'm sitting in shorts and a T-shirt at a ballpark in the Dominican Republic, sipping a cold beer and watching major leaguers from the front row.

Now that's what I call fantasy baseball.

While Oriole fans wait out the long winter, the Caribbean sun is shining, and the Dominican Winter League is in full swing. And the action on the field is only half of it: In the capital city of Santo Domingo, where my brother is stationed with the U.S. Foreign Service, our party of eight found the national passion of this baseball-crazed nation on vivid display.

In the Dominican Republic, you go to a festival and a baseball game breaks out.

Toss in white-sand beaches and tropical breezes, and a Dominican baseball vacation is an ideal winter getaway. Plus, the Dominican Republic is hot now — and that's not referring to the weather.

The number of Americans visiting the Dominican Republic rose to more than 865,000 in 2003 — up 63 percent from 1999 — according to national tourism figures. And the beaches of Punta Cana, on the eastern tip of the island, and relatively cheap real estate have lured celebrities such as Dominican-born designer Oscar de la Renta, Julio Iglesias and Mikhail Baryshnikov, all of whom [See *Baseball*, 4R]

COVER STORY

Baseball's a hit in Dominican Republic

[Baseball, from Page 1R]

have built houses there.

Like many of its Caribbean neighbors, the Dominican Republic was roughed up this hurricane season, but did not suffer the catastrophic damage of Grenada or neighboring Haiti. Most Dominican resorts that sustained damage from Tropical Storm Jeanne are expected to be fully operational this month.

A Dominican baseball trip, however, requires a traveler to venture outside the often insular world of the seaside resorts that drive Dominican tourism. The reward is a colorful look at everyday Dominican life and the country's love affair with baseball.

Cubans introduced *el beisbol* to this country, teaching the game to Dominican sugar-mill workers in the late 1800s. Local teams cropped up at various mills, and by the early 1920s, four professional teams had been established.

Today, you can find Dominican boys playing ball in city parks, on dusty, sun-scorched fields or in any clearing that, with a little imagination, can resemble a baseball diamond. Gloves and other equipment are a luxury, but passion for the game appears to be a national birthright.

"Everybody wants to be like Sammy [Sosa], everybody wants to be like Pedro [Martínez], everybody wants to be like Vladimir Guerrero," says Oriole shortstop Miguel Tejada, citing some of his fellow Dominican legends. "They really just love baseball."

Ozzie Virgil became the first Dominican-born player in the major leagues in 1956. During the next decade, Hall of Fame pitcher Juan Marichal and the Alou brothers — Felipe, Matty and Jesus — began a trickle that has since become a flood of major-league talent migrating north from this Caribbean nation, which shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti.

Fortunately, the Dominican Republic does not share Haiti's political trouble. A democratic presidential election in May returned Leonel Fernández to office after he lost the presidency four years earlier.

That's not to say there aren't problems. Wide gaps between electrical demand and supply have created frequent blackouts, lasting as long as 20 hours. (Most resorts, however, have their own utility sources and thus have been immune from these outages.)

A series of bank failures last year crippled the economy. With annual per capita income at roughly \$2,100 and unemployment above 16 percent, it's easy to see why Dominican boys dream of making it to *las grandes ligas*.

In fact, opening-day Major League Baseball rosters in 2004 included 79 Dominicans, meaning that roughly 10 percent of all major leaguers — and nearly 25 percent of all minor leaguers — hail from a country smaller than West Virginia.

After competing in the United States all summer, many players return home to play in the winter league. More than 25 major leaguers, including Tejada, suited up last year, joining Dominican hopefuls and a smattering of American-born minor leaguers who head south to refine their skills and boost their stock for spring training.

Our visit during the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday weekend coincided with the league play-



A group of youngsters plays on the dusty, hot field in the town of Bani where Oriole star Miguel Tejada honed his skills.

GENE SWEENEY JR. : SUN STAFF



The Punta Cana Resort offers a relatively inexpensive place to enjoy the beaches of the eastern part of the island.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID PEARSON ASSOCIATES

offs. After a 50-game regular season, which begins in late October, the top four teams compete in an 18-game round-robin play-off in January. Two of the four advance to the league championship series, with the winner representing the Dominican Republic in the Caribbean World Series, featuring champions from Venezuela, Mexico and Puerto Rico. The 2005 series will be held Feb. 1-6 in Mazatlan, Mexico.

Game time

Hours after leaving the snow and ice behind in Baltimore, we were sitting in a modest stadium in La Romana, a seaside city of 135,000 best known for its swanky Casa de Campo resort.

The local team, the Azucareros del Este — whose roster included a few current major leaguers along with former Oriole

pitcher Rick Krivda and Oriole farmhand Eddy Garabito — had squeaked into the playoffs with a 26-24 record but had lost nine of its first 10 playoff games.

Judging by the sparse crowd, it seemed the locals were already waiting for next year. Their loss of interest was our gain; although our 200-peso tickets (about \$5) — purchased 10 minutes before the game — entitled us to sit 20 rows up the first base side, no one minded when we moved to the first row behind the first-base dugout.

We watched as first baseman Carlos Pena (Detroit Tigers), second baseman Luis Castillo (Florida Marlins), shortstop D'Angelo Jimenez (Cincinnati Reds) and third baseman Ronnie Belliard (Cleveland Indians) took the field for the visiting Tigres del Licey (pronounced Lee-SAY), a league powerhouse

from Santo Domingo.

Buy me some peanuts and Cracker Jack? Not here. But the fried plantain and chicken were capable pinch-hitters, as was the ice-cold Presidente beer — especially for about 75 cents.

The ballpark in La Romana is just a long fly ball from Casa de Campo, a sprawling, five-star resort popular with the jet set. Its three golf courses include one called Teeth of the Dog, regularly ranked among the best in the world.

Within the Casa de Campo complex — and open to nonguests — is Altos de Chavon, a collection of boutiques, galleries, restaurants and an architectural museum built in the style of a 16th-century Mediterranean village along cobblestone streets high above the Chavon River.

"That's a neat little place that a lot of people forget about," said

Dorothy Bereson, an agent with Roeder Travel in Cockeysville who regularly books trips to the Dominican Republic.

City of shortstops

About 30 miles west of La Romana along Highway 3, past ramshackle houses and sugarcane fields, lies San Pedro de Macoris, perhaps the most fertile baseball ground in all the world.

For years, this port city of 150,000 was a sugar-mill hub. Today its most precious export is its ballplayers, a fact boldly proclaimed on a billboard on the outskirts of town: "Welcome to San Pedro de Macoris: The City Which Has Given the Most Major Leaguers to the World."

It came to be known as "the city of shortstops" after a string of its smooth-fielding middle infielders reached the big leagues in the 1980s. Overall, more than

An ideal day

9 a.m.: Tour the Colonial Zone in Santo Domingo, the oldest European city in the New World. You can walk along the first paved road in the New World and see the city's first cathedral and remains of its first hospital. You can also shop for Lari-mar, a semiprecious sky-blue gemstone found only on the island of Hispaniola.

Noon: Sample Dominican cuisine at Meson d'Bari in the Colonial Zone.

1 p.m.: Get a quick beach fix at Playa Boca Chica, about half an hour from Santo Domingo. Note: If you give attention to any of the various trinket vendors roaming the beach, prepare to be inundated by competitors.

6 p.m.: Have dinner at Restaurant Vesuvio, a highly regarded Italian restaurant in Santo Domingo.

8 p.m.: Hit Estadio Quisqueya for that night's ballgame. Keep in mind that baseball games are held at 5 p.m. on Sundays and at 8 p.m. on other days. In general, there are no games scheduled Mondays or Thursdays.

10:30 p.m.: After the game, take a stroll along the Malecon, the oceanfront boulevard lined with hotels, casinos, restaurants and nightclubs.

— Bo Smolka

80 San Pedro de Macoris natives have made it to the major leagues, including all-stars Sammy Sosa, Alfonso Soriano and Luis Castillo and, more recently, Oriole rookie pitchers Daniel Cabrera and Eddy Rodriguez.

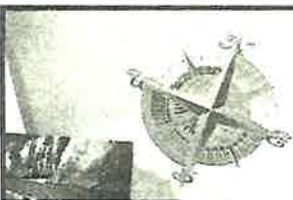
About 10 miles away, the Orioles are building a new \$2 million baseball academy to scout for the next generation of Dominican stars.

On our brief visit, though, it was obvious that the baseball wealth doesn't extend to all. Sosa has built a mansion for his mother and a three-story mall complex here, but many streets are lined by tin-roof huts, and one road was flooded with what appeared to be raw sewage.

As we stopped for a group photo outside the city's most prominent building — its baseball stadium, home of the winter-league Estrellas Orientales — a lanky boy of about 15 eyed us curiously. He was wearing a mismatched baseball uniform, topped by an Indianapolis Colts cap, and had bat, glove and baseball spikes in hand. In Spanish, he said he was on his way to a game just down the road.

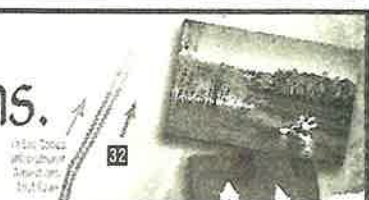
Was I staring at the next Tejada or Sosa? I never got his name, so I guess I'll never know. Maybe that's just as well. For in his anonymous smile, his white teeth set against coffee-colored skin, he could have been every Dominican boy, hoping his penchant for gobbling up grounders and hitting a two-strike curveball could be his ticket to the greener pastures of the major leagues.

Although fans in La Romana had seemingly lost interest in their team, [See Baseball, 5R]



Choose from a 20-mile range of accommodations.

Want to coast for a while along quiet coves and pristine beaches, palapas and hangouts to,





GENE SWEENEY JR. : SUN STAFF PHOTOS

Miguel Tejada's sister lives in this remodeled home in Bani, where the Oriole plans to spend the winter visiting his family.

Dominican baseball: intense, noisy, fun

[Baseball, from Page 4R]

two days later in Santo Domingo, Licey fans had a full-blown case of playoff fever. Its symptoms include flag-waving, drum-pounding, and foot-stomping hysteria that lasts at least nine innings.

Battling afternoon traffic in this capital city of 2 million, we arrived at Estadio Quisqueya minutes before a key playoff game between Licey and Los Gigantes, from the Cibao region in the north. Fans streamed into the 16,000-seat ballpark pledging their allegiance in hats, shirts and flags of royal blue — Licey's color.

We had splurged for 150-peso tickets (about \$4) 25 rows behind the third-base dugout, but tickets further down the baselines could be had for less than a dollar.

Ads for Coca-Cola, Texaco and Gatorade along the outfield wall mirrored minor-league ballparks all over America, but the similarities ended there.

High behind home plate, where the top of the stadium meets an overhang, about a dozen teenage fans stood on the rafters, dancing and waving flags throughout the game. Two rows behind me, an elderly man held an electronic megaphone, interjecting sirens and staccato bursts with his own amplified cheers. A fan nearby pounded away on a bass drum.

Between innings, four curvaceous Licey cheerleaders danced on the home dugout, and their gyrations even drew players from the dugout to watch. On virtually every pitch, every hit, every call favorable to Licey, the stadium erupted in a flag-waving, drum-pounding sea of blue.

My guidebook said Estadio Quisqueya "may be the best place in the Western hemisphere to watch baseball."

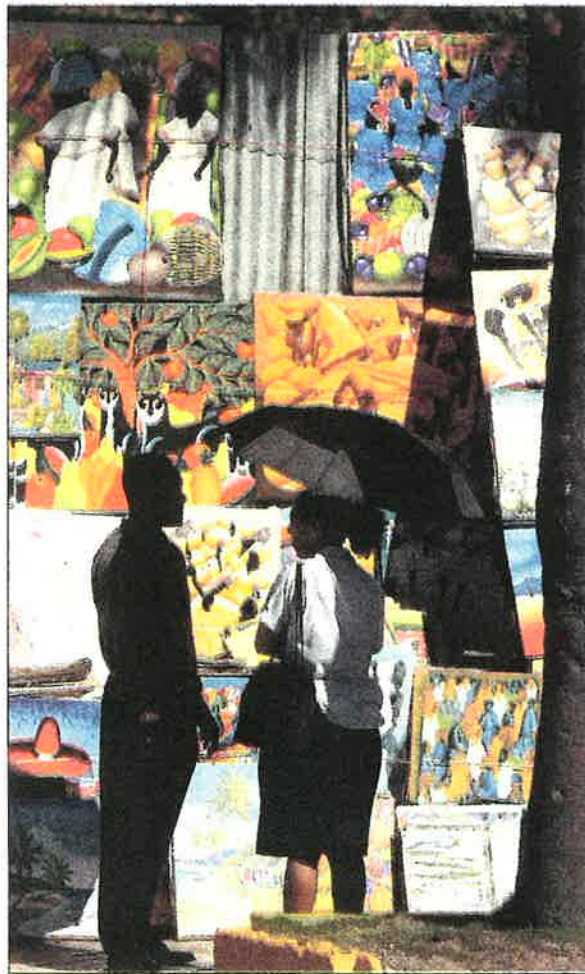
Our seats were scattered in one section of the stadium, but we claimed empty seats together, figuring we would move if the proper ticket-holders arrived. When one did and my brother was displaced, a beer vendor — who also sold rum and offered to run a tab for us during the game — came to the rescue.

"No problem," he said with a smile. He placed the cardboard bottom of a beer case on the concrete steps in the aisle and motioned for my brother to sit there, next to the rest of us. A box seat if ever there was one.

A festival of baseball

Estadio Quisqueya was only about 75 percent full that night. The next night, when the hated Aguilas from Santiago came to town, fans would shoehorn into the stadium's every nook and cranny.

Two days earlier, I had met diehard Licey fan Alexis Santana, an engaging man in his 30s



Artwork adds color to the streets of the capital, Santo Domingo, which is home to baseball powerhouse Tigres del Licey.

working in the pro shop of a golf course in Punta Cana.

As my brother walked into the pro shop in his crisp, new Licey hat, Santana said excitedly, "You are wearing the hat of my favorite team! I am going to the game next week." Then he added with emphasis: "Against Aguilas."

"Those two teams," he says, shaking his head and pushing his fists into each other in front of his chest, "they just hate each other."

It is a rivalry born of success that has no equal in this country. The teams come from the two largest cities and are among the league's oldest, richest and most successful. Whenever they play, thousands of fans make the

roughly 100-mile trip between the two cities for the game.

Until last year, each team had won 17 league titles. After Licey won its 18th crown in January, the Licey Web site carried a cartoon poking fun at Aguilas.

Hours before the game, signs of the impending duel were everywhere. Fans walking the narrow streets of Santo Domingo's picturesque Colonial Zone — where some buildings date to the 16th century — were already decked out in their Licey blue or Aguilas yellow. Small team flags flew from many cars.

Dan Furth, a computer consultant from Calvert County who was part of our travel party, remarked, "I've never seen a baseball game like it."

When you go

Getting there: U.S. airlines fly into Santo Domingo and to the resort cities of La Romana and Punta Cana. We drove from Baltimore to Philadelphia and took a non-stop U.S. Airways flight to Santo Domingo for about \$425.

Getting around: We used a rental van (and paid for a driver/guide) during our five-day stay. The Dominican Republic is smaller than West Virginia, so driving from Santo Domingo to virtually anywhere else in the country takes less than four hours.

Where to stay: In Santo Domingo, the Sofitel Nicolas de Ovando (www.sofitel.com), from \$105 a night, is in the heart of the Colonial Zone. Other options include the Courtyard by Marriott (marriott.com), from \$99 a night, and Clarion (www.naco.com.do), from \$95 a night.

■ For more information about the Casa de Campo resort: www.casacampo.com.

■ For more information about resorts in Punta Cana: dri.com/travel/puntacana.

When to go: The Dominican winter baseball league runs from mid-October to late December, with playoffs in January. Winter is tourism high season, so expect to pay peak prices after mid-December. Early fall offers the best deals, but that is also hurricane season.

Money: The Dominican Republic uses the Dominican peso, which can be exchanged



through banks, exchange offices or through automated teller machines. Casinos and some souvenir shops accept pesos or dollars, but in general, money goes further when you use pesos.

Information:

■ The Web site www.dri.com is a comprehensive English-language Dominican news and information service.

■ www.dominicanrepublic.com is the official site of the Ministry of Tourism.

■ For a sampling of baseball information (in Spanish only), check out the Licey team Web site at www.licey.com. To view the 2004-05 league schedule, click on the "Ver Calendario" link.

■ Dominican Baseball Tours (Dominican-baseball.com) offers four- and five-day baseball tours.

— Bo Smolka

