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Retirees find their `paradise'
BABY BOOMERS ARE BUYING NEW HOMES IN SUNNY DESTINATIONS ACROSS LATIN AMERICA AND
THE CARIBBEAN

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Sitting behind a massive wooden desk, the **Dominican Republic's** minister of tourism lists the attractions that lure visitors to this Caribbean nation: endless beaches for sun-seekers, white-water rapids for adrenaline junkies, merengue for music lovers, and then there are the condos.

"Real-estate tourism is booming," said F00C3,A00A9,Copr.lix Jim00C3,A00A9,Copr.nez. "Any doctor, dentist or small-business owner from the United States or Canada can afford to live here in paradise."

The **Dominican Republic** -- as well as other sunny destinations in the Americas -- has joined the crush to win the hearts and wallets of the 70 million U.S. baby boomers marching toward retirement.

Beaches along the nation's famous coastlines are studded with as many real-estate signs as palm trees, and construction projects are blooming in once-remote hide-aways as the Internet fuels a global land rush.

With more than 10,000 tourists a day flocking to the island, foreign investment is at a seven-year high of \$1.2 billion. And there are more than \$2.5 billion worth of real-estate projects under development, JimÃ©nez said.

Perhaps nowhere is the shift being felt more than the coastal region known as Bavaro-Punta Cana, where the all-you-can-eat budget beach resort was virtually invented decades ago.

Driving along a busy road shared by tourist buses, bulldozers and backhoes, Emil MontÃ©s points out the dentist office, shopping mall and hardware store that have sprung up over the last few months.

"Five years ago, the only things here were all-inclusive hotels" behind concrete walls, he said. "If you weren't staying at one of them, you couldn't even find a

restaurant."

Montañ's is part of the region's changing face. His company, La Costa Destinations International Realty, manages 2,000 condos across the island and is building 70 of its own in Bavaro-Punta Cana with foreign buyers in mind.

Even as the U.S. real-estate market stumbles, Montañ's said builders like him can't keep up with the demand.

Inspecting a two-bedroom condo that his company is selling for \$123,000, Montañ's said about 40 percent of his buyers never set foot on the property before closing.

"Prices are rising so fast that people are buying property over the Internet sight unseen," Montañ's said. "Right now, I'm talking to a Canadian living in the Middle East who found us on the Internet -- that's how far the reputation of Punta Cana has reached."

While Montañ's' operation is relatively small, just a few miles down the road about 4,000 construction workers and contractors are working on an area twice the size of Manhattan. During the next 15 years, the 30,000-acre Cap Cana project is expected to sprout 5,000 condos and homes, 500 hotel rooms, five golf courses, three schools, dozens of restaurants, a medical center, churches and its own nature reserve. And that's just the first phase of the project.

In May, real-estate impresario Donald Trump sold \$350 million worth of empty lots at Cap Cana in four hours -- establishing a new record for the island.

"By any measure, this is one of the most ambitious projects in Latin America or the Caribbean," said Enrique Marchena, the incoming president of the Caribbean Hotel Association. And what makes that ambition realistic is the "baby boomer boom," he said.

The appeal of living or retiring in places where the weather is milder and dollars stretch further is easy to grasp.

But what makes a good retirement spot is often different than what makes a good tourist destination, said Suzan Haskins, the Latin America editorial director of International Living, a publication with 650,000 subscribers aimed at retiring expats.

While isolated beaches and cheap drinks lure tourists, it's healthcare, accessibility and cheap labor that draw retirees.

"Medical attention and infrastructure are huge factors," Haskins said. "Then there's the ability to afford a maid, a gardener and all those things you can't even think about in the U.S."

The minimum wage in the **Dominican Republic** is \$99 a month, in line with Mexico and far cheaper than Puerto Rico -- the island's two biggest competitors in the Carib-

bean, making domestic help affordable.

And the government and private sector are pouring money into new international airports -- there are six of them -- and multilane highways.

Hidalgo Montesino, 70, and his wife, Sonia, are Miami residents who bought a two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment for \$117,000 near the town of El Cortecito in the Bavaro-Punta Cana region. "The floors are marble, the countertops are granite, and the walls are real cement -- not the Sheetrock that they use [in South Florida]," Montesino said of the home he expects to move into in a few years.

Just a few miles from an airport, a new shopping center and a modern healthcare facility, the condo has all the comforts of home, he said. And it lacks some of the hassles of South Florida living. Because the house was under \$150,000, they don't have to pay property taxes and insurance isn't required.

"I know people who have lived in Miami for years who are going broke because of all the insurance and tax problems," Montesino said.

"And the people there are so much nicer. There's a reason we're putting our money [in the **Dominican Republic**]."

---- INDEX REFERENCES ----

NEWS SUBJECT: (Baby Boomer Market (1BA46); Social Issues (1SO05); Business Management (1BU42); Sales & Marketing (1MA51); Target Markets (1TA03); Demographic Profiles (1DE65); Consumer Profiles (1CO06); Socio Economic Groups (1SO18))

INDUSTRY: (Housing (1HO38); Shopping Malls (1SH59); Travel & Tourism (1TR07); Real Estate (1RE57))

REGION: (**Dominican Republic** (1DO49); Americas (1AM92); North America (1NO39); Latin America (1LA15); USA (1US73); Florida (1FL79); Caribbean (1CA06))

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