

Touring for Profit in Samaná, D.R.

By Yana Beranek

WHETHER IT'S THE ACTION-FILLED fun of ATV excursions to remote beaches or horse-back riding to towering waterfalls, Terry Bandi enjoys running his business on the Samaná Peninsula in the Dominican Republic.

His enthusiasm for life here is contagious as he explains local customs and points out things of interest all around.

Originally from Kittanning, Pennsylvania, a small town outside Pittsburgh, 34-year-old Terry moved to Samaná City in 2002 to learn Spanish and do volunteer work. His original plan was to stay six months but nine years later he's as happy as ever.

And these days, his tour business is thriving. The simpler side of his tour offerings includes a visit to his family's land, where you can see a tropical bounty of fruits and vegetables growing. Then you can visit Terry's neighbors to see how a typical Dominican family lives in the countryside and how their home is constructed. Regardless of the destination or activity, though, Terry's tours all include a good dose of information about local customs and culture. That's the secret sauce that's getting him rave reviews online.

Samaná City, though it has a population of just over 50,000, feels like a charming small town. Palm trees sway in the light Caribbean breeze. Colorful houses are stacked on the hills above the harbor. It's a popular port-of-call for cruisers who stop to take in the white-sand beaches of the Samaná Peninsula.

Terry noticed that as many as 19 cruise ships a month dock in Samaná during the high season. That's more than 185,000 potential customers each year.

His first attempt to capitalize on the tourist market began with a restaurant on the main boardwalk. By offering free WiFi and a U.S. phone service, Terry hoped he would appeal to cruisers who were paying up to \$5 per minute for satellite phone and Internet connections aboard ship.

For Terry, though, the Internet was both a blessing and a curse. Infrastructure problems and aggressive local salesmen had disenchanted some tourists, who promptly reported it to the world via the Internet.

So Terry began reaching out to visitors on *Tripadvisor.com*. He was surprised to find so many negative reviews about the town. So he began responding to people posting concerns and questions. He did his best to answer inquiries from tourists headed to Samaná City. Unexpectedly, Terry became an expert on a variety of vacation subjects, including topics as mundane as which hotels had irons in

every room. In the process of helping others, Terry laid the groundwork for a business he hadn't anticipated.

Some of the postings turned into dialogues with cruisers bound for Samaná City on an upcoming vacation. Before he knew it, Terry had people asking him to take them to his favorite beach. Curious travelers recognized a kindred spirit who could help them get more out of their travel dollar. Instead of wasting money and time on a disappointing cruise-ship bus tour to the usual tourist haunts, they could get an insider's perspective on the Dominican Republic.

Terry finally agreed to meet some cruisers at the embarkation port. Soon he had six tours lined up with various cruise ship parties. A new business was born.

He has done very little traditional advertising since he started his business two years ago. Instead, he relies on referrals to send customers his way. By sharing his knowledge of the Dominican Republic, Terry has been able to develop a loyal following of fans.

Terry says his success stems from his focus on two areas. Firstly, he works to make sure visitors feel comfortable from the moment they step off the cruise-ship tender. His guides put people at ease right away with a big smile and the offer of a cold beverage.

Throughout the day, they give tips on how to have a safe visit. They explain how to manage the horses on the way to El Limón Waterfall, for instance.

Secondly, Terry makes sure his groups are having fun. He doesn't just take folks to the beach; he jumps in the waves with them.

Terry charges between \$55 and \$85 per person, depending on the type of excursion. His tours are slightly more expensive than others offered in the area, but don't be fooled. The reviews he gets from his customers prove that you get what you pay for.

He now employs up to seven tour guides during the high season. He also keeps several tour bus drivers busy to help meet the demand. A good day may have Terry and his team running six to eight tours.

And Terry has launched his own website, to promote his business, here: Toursamanawithterry.com. ■



El Limón Waterfall is one the highlights of a visit to the Dominican Republic's Samaná Peninsula.

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