



Whale watching in Dominican Republic

Report by Sonia Kausele, Sciences Po student



Key Info

Dominican Republic is a world-class whale watching destination. The best time is from mid-January to late March. This is the peak of the humpback whale migration to Samaná Bay.



Why here?

North Atlantic humpback whales migrate from the cold waters of North America to the warm Caribbean to mate and give birth.

Samaná Bay and the nearby Silver Bank are key locations for this, protected as marine sanctuaries.

Species in Dominican Republic

Species	Country / Region	Towns or Harbours	Platform	Peak time of year to observe
Humpback whale (<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>)	DR / North, Northeast	Samaná Bay, Silver and Navidad Banks	Boat-based	January–March
Common bottlenose dolphin (<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>)	DR / Southeast	Bayahibe	Boat-based	Year-round – but trips usually limited to Jan-Mar
Antillean manatee (<i>Trichechus manatus</i>)	DR / Northwest	Estero Hondo	Land-based viewpoint	Year-round
Antillean manatee	DR / Northeast	Las Terrenas	Land-based viewpoint (under construction)	Year-round

Major whale-watching companies



3 Categories of tours

- Tours on small wooden or fiberglass vessels with outboard engines called yolas. At a maximum length of 9 metres, and maximum capacity for 10 passengers, these trips are informal, with no fixed departure times, and no formal guides or interpreters.
- Marine tours that involve short interactions with whales and then continue to take tourists to the local resort island of Cayo Levantado for lunch, shopping and beach time. These tours are offered on lanchas (9 -11 m) or barcos (>11m). These operators tend to be licensed and are often engaged through tour companies or cruise ships as part of pre-packaged tours.
- A dedicated whale watching tour with trained naturalists on board, a strong educational element and interpretation during whale encounters. Currently only one company in Samaná offers this type of tour.

Biggest companies

Company	Website	Key Features / Comments
Moto Marina Tours	motomarinatours.com	Largest whale-watching operator in Samaná since 1986. Offers excursions to see humpback whales, plus Cayo Levantado and Los Haitises. Includes food, drinks, and transfers.
Tour Whales Samaná	tourwhales.com	Samaná-based tours with certified naturalist guides. Includes optional visit to Cayo Levantado (“Bacardi Island”) and eco-focused narration.
Whale Sabana de La Mar	whalesabanadelamar.com	Operates from Sabana de la Mar, crossing the Samaná Bay. Focus on small groups, respectful whale encounters, and local captains.
Whale Samaná (Kim Beddall)	whalesamana.com	Founded by marine biologist Kim Beddall. Runs January–March whale tours with bilingual narration, hydrophone listening, and research-based commentary.
DDD Whale Watching Tour (Samana Whale Tours)	samanawhaletours.com	Medium-sized operator departing from the main dock in Samaná. Affordable, family-friendly tours with options for private charters.

Company	Website	Key Features / Comments
Cayo Levantado Whale Watching (Bacardi Island)	tourwhales.com	Combo trip — whale watching + beach time on Cayo Levantado. Open 24/7 booking, highly rated by local travelers.
El Patrón Tour Operador	elpatrontour.com	Full-service Dominican Republic tour operator offering day trips from Punta Cana to Samaná for whale watching. Includes transport, meals, and bilingual guides.
Ms Dreamers – Excursiones Punta Cana Tours	msdreamers.com	Punta Cana-based agency offering curated whale-watching excursions in Samaná. Hotel pickup, small groups, English-speaking guides.
Whale Watching Dominican Republic – Samaná & Punta Cana	puntacanawhalewatching.com	Focused on coordinating humpback whale watching for visitors across both regions; features booking info and seasonal updates.

Risks of whale watching industry?

- Boat Collisions – risk of injury or death from close approaches.
- Stress & Disturbance – too many boats disrupt resting, nursing, and mating.
- Noise Pollution – engines interfere with whale songs and communication.
- Habitat Pressure – overcrowding in sanctuaries threatens calves and mothers.



Law: Resolution 0030-2017

- How many boats can approach whales (max 3 at a time).
- Safe distances: at least 50 m from adults, 80 m from mother + calf.
- Time limits: max 30 minutes with one group if other boats are waiting.
- Speed limits: no faster than 9 km/h (5 knots) near whales or inside the sanctuary.
- Operating hours: all boats must leave the sanctuary by 16:00 daily.
- Prohibitions: swimming with whales in Samaná Bay is banned.
- Permits: 43 boats allowed to operate in Samaná Bay; 3 licensed in Silver Bank.
- Safety requirements: inspections by the Navy & Ministry (VHF radio, life jackets, hull integrity).
- Sanctions: fines, suspensions, or permanent loss of permits for violations.

Who is in charge of control?

- The Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales) is the main authority that issues permits, makes regulations (e.g. Resolution 0030-2017), and enforces rules.
- The Dominican Navy has enforcement powers: they help inspect vessels, patrol sanctuary areas, and can issue sanctions.
- The Ministry of Tourism plays a supporting/regulatory role, especially in approving tour-operators and coordinating with environmental rules.
- The Port Authority ensures no vessel departs for the Silver Bank without proper permits.

+ local and non-profit organisations



- **ASDUBAHISA (Association of whale watching boat owners)** - a local NGO-style association representing whale-watching boat owners in Samaná. It co-manages the whale-watching area with CEBSE and the Ministry of Environment, ensuring safe, sustainable, and regulated tourism.

+ local and non-profit organisations

- **CEBSE (El Centro para la Conservación y Ecodesarrollo de la Bahía de Samaná y su Entorno)**
 - founded in 1991, this Dominican NGO works to protect the marine and coastal ecosystems of Samaná Bay. It focuses on environmental research, community education, and sustainable tourism, and co-manages whale-watching operations with ASDUBAHISA and the Ministry of Environment.

Website: <https://www.cebse.org.do>



Consequences for Violating Regulations

1. Tourists without life jackets, no VHF radio, approaching whales too closely: **3 days** enforced in port
2. Violations of waiting turns to approach whales, or whale watching without a permit: **5 days** in port
3. Three of one of the above sanctions within one season: **Permit rescinded** for the rest of the season
4. Aggression towards an observer or enforcement personnel or collision with whale due to reckless boat handling: **permanent cancellation of permit.**

<https://wwhandbook.iwc.int/en/case-studies/dominican-republic-samaná-bay>

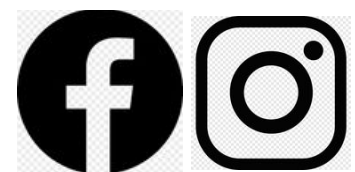
Whale Watching Boat Tourism Numbers (Visitors) in MMDR (Marine Mammal Sanctuary DR)

Year	National tourists	Foreign tourists	Total
2011	15,541	23,312	38,853
2012	14,355	21,532	35,887
2013	15,920	29,531	45,451
2014	17,832	26,747	44,579
2015	17,961	26,941	44,902
2016	6,107	49,412	55,519
2017	8,038	49,670	57,708
2018	7,819	46,225	54,044
2019	—	—	71,261
2020	—	—	— (no official season total found)
2021	—	—	32,984
2022	—	—	100,336
2023	—	—	— (no official total found)
2024	—	—	61,558 (season total)



Conclusion - Key Challenges for Whale Watching in the Dominican Republic

1. **Sustainable Tourism vs. Conservation** – balancing economic benefits of whale watching with the long-term protection of humpback populations.
2. **Regulatory Enforcement** – ensuring compliance with Resolution 0030-2017 despite limited monitoring capacity.
3. **Environmental Change** – climate variability and warming seas may alter migration timing and habitat use.
4. **Socioeconomic Pressures** – reliance on whale watching as a local income source can drive competition and risk unsustainable practices.



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