



Neighborhood towards South
Photo Credit: Ron Savage

PARQUE MIRADOR DEL SUR

Mirador del Sur City Park
Ron Savage

Parque Mirador del Sur (Mirador del Sur city park) is to Santo Domingo, the Dominican Republic, what Central Park is to New York City. Santo Domingo, with a population of more than 3.2 million people and a footprint of approximately 1,200 square kilometers, sits on the south-central coast of the island of Hispaniola. Santo Domingo was the first successful permanent settlement in the New World, established by Bartholomew Colon in the year 1496. Today, Santo Domingo is not only the nation's capital, but also the economic center of the entire Caribbean region. The city is a magnet for people from all over the country, contributing to the Dominican Republic's

very high rate of urbanization, and drawing migrants from other countries such as Venezuela, Italy and the United States. Parque Mirador del Sur, meaning "southern viewpoint park" in Spanish, is probably the foremost urban park in the Caribbean, and one that "Santo Dominicans" are rightfully proud of.

The Parque Mirador del Sur (PMdS) was established in 1970 and designed by Dominican architect Christian Martinez. Measuring approximately 6 kilometers (km) in length by .5 km in width, PMdS is a longitudinal park, straddled by major boulevards and

surrounded by towering modern high-rise apartment buildings, lower income housing, and industrial zones. It sits approximately one kilometer inland from the ocean and from various locations in the park one can see over the older residential neighborhoods and industries to the ocean. One very interesting feature of the park is that a major through street, Avenida Mirador del Sur, which traverses the length of the park is closed to cars from 5 pm to 7 am weekdays and 24 hours a day during the weekends, permitting only bicycling, skating, and walking instead. The routine closing of the boulevard resolves what would have been a fatal flaw in the design of the park and allows it to be used safely throughout the day. The city and local police departments have also coordinated closely to ensure the security of park visitors by establishing a small police station in the park, stationing police officers at critical locations throughout the park and conducting roving patrols. The addition of around-the-clock security has been key to encouraging park use. Park infrastructure is minimal and consists of an administrative office, a small police station, a handful of parking areas, a small lake and restaurant complex, a small miniature golf-snack bar complex and a concert shell. The park houses a small municipal composting facility and tree nursery, which provides various ornamental plants for planting around the city and within the park itself. It also has a small educational center and interpretative facility that was funded by the Japanese Government, that is often visited by school groups. Nonetheless, there is considerable potential to upgrade this facility to make it more relevant as a "hub" for environmental education.

Ironically, while the park now exists within the confines of a large modern metropolitan area, one of the initial reasons for preserving the land in this part of the city had to do with the vestiges of Taino indian rock drawings and dwellings that could be found within the caves and limestone sinkholes in the area. Thus the PMdS continues to contain several important archaeological sites where the original residents of the island, the Tainos, lived until the arrival of Europeans. Today, however, the park is frequented by a mix of people from all social and ethnic groups, particularly those that live in the diverse neighborhoods surrounding the park. Interestingly, the fact that the PMdS lies towards the southwestern part of the city, away from the Colonial Zone, and lacks museums, means that it is rarely visited by tourists. Nonetheless, the PMdS has something to offer just about everyone and contributes to the wellbeing of city residents in many ways.



Cyclists on path in Parque Mirador del Sur
Photo Credit: Ron Savage

When it comes to recreation the park offers something for virtually everyone. The park includes a variety of outdoor recreational features including children's play areas, basketball courts, baseball fields, walking and cycling routes, and bicycle, skate and peddle boat rentals. Most of the trails are wheelchair and handicapped friendly, thus increasing the park's appeal to people using wheeled transport modes. When it comes to amenities there are a number of small restaurants around the periphery, including a couple that are nestled underground in limestone sinkholes, and a handful of roaming coconut and ice cream vendors. There are a variety of permanent exercise areas (with weatherproof equipment) and a number of enterprising individuals give yoga, Zumba, and a variety of exercise classes for young and old alike. This means that the park attracts a variety of people and that visitation continues to grow.

The Mirador del Sur city park is vital from ecological and environmental perspectives as well. Much of the park sits upon a karst geological formation that is highly porous thus absorbing much of the water that runs off the city streets to the north of the park. In addition, the park is home to a variety of flora and fauna, much of it native, but also many introduced species, that are only able to exist in the few fragments of green space that remain in Santo Domingo. In the park one can easily observe endemic species of palms and shrubs, as well as unique birds such as the Vervain and Emerald Hummingbirds, Hispaniolan Parakeet and palm chats, as well as a number of reptile and insect species that are characteristic of the coastal plains of Hispaniola. Also, small populations of bats continue to reside in several

of the limestone sinkholes; these fan out over the city nightly, consuming untold millions of mosquitos, and contributing to reducing the risk of serious vector borne diseases such as dengue, chikungunya and zika for city residents.

While offering many amenities and services, PMdS is not without a number of significant challenges. Unfortunately, PMdS is a victim of its own popularity and is suffering from many of the ailments from which popular public parks are likely to suffer. For example, the lack of parking space at the park means that visitors often tend to park on green spaces or in other inappropriate locations. The park also has been suffering from inappropriate trash disposal, due to the lack of trash bins and recycling options; however, the recent installation of a large number of bins has helped remedy the problem. Nonetheless, many park visitors tend to not exert themselves while looking for trash bins and tend to throw trash in any convenient location. The park is also suffering from trampling in many areas, particularly in locations where visitors have tended to regularly set up baseball and soccer fields. In addition, the park staff lack training and incentives to manage the park's vegetation properly, often planting trees in inappropriate locations and not taking proper care of the plants that are there. Finally, the day-to-day management of the park has suffered from inconsistent resourcing and supervision.

It was with considerable wisdom and foresight that Parque Mirador del Sur was first established in 1970. Since then the city of Santo Domingo has mushroomed into a sprawling metropolitan mass,



View Towards Restaurant
Photo Credit: Ron Savage

characterized by an overall lack of green space, limited recreation areas, extremely poor walking conditions for pedestrians and significant concerns about citizen security. Indeed, the lack of urban planning, a bias towards automobiles, and an over-reliance on concrete and asphalt instead of green infrastructure, means that Parque Mirador del Sur has become increasingly vital for maintaining the quality of life and wellbeing of city residents, particularly those who live within its area of influence. Indeed, the park is a vibrant, green oasis; "a relative sea of tranquillity", that helps to mitigate the "urban heat island effect" that a large built up mass like Santo Domingo is bound to produce. It is also offers a respite from the madness of

the sprawl and traffic of Santo Domingo, thus attracting thousands of people of all shapes and sizes that frequent the park for relaxation, recreation and enjoyment. I'm sure that all would agree that it has become an important part of the daily cycle of life for many city residents and helps to make their lives so much better. Hopefully all stakeholders will continue to manage the park as the invaluable and irreplaceable resource that it is.

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