

Dominican Republic

The Dominican Republic (DR) is a land of contrasts – the physical kind, like the highest peak and the lowest point in the Caribbean, and the more metaphorical kind, like that between the urban street life of Santo Domingo and the rural villages only a short drive away.

Santo Domingo, or ‘La Capital’ as it’s typically called, is to Dominicans what New York is to Americans, a collage of cultures; or what Havana is to Cubans, a vibrant beating heart that fuels the entire country. It’s also a living museum, offering the sight of New World firsts scattered around the charming cobblestone streets of the Zona Colonial.

The DR is also famous for the large all-inclusive resorts that dominate much of the country’s prime beachfront real estate. However, the result is less like the high-rise congestion of Cancun or Miami and more like low-slung retirement communities, albeit ones populated by families, couples and singles of all ages looking for a hassle-free holiday. Beyond the gated luxury enclaves, the roads lead inland past vast sugar plantations and through small villages.

To get away from the get-away, travelers head to the Peninsula de Samaná, where the European vibe is as strong as an espresso, and where escape is the operative word. Cabarete on the North Coast has winds which draw adrenaline junkies from around the world. And for the anti-Caribbean experience head to the popular mountain retreats of Jarabacoa and Constanza – places where bathing suits are out and sweaters are in.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 48,717 sq km
- **Capital** Santo Domingo de Guzmán
- **Country code** ☎ 809
- **Departure tax** Air: up to US\$20 depending on length of stay; land: US\$20
- **Famous for** Baseball, cockfighting, merengue, cigars, Columbus landing here first
- **Language** Spanish
- **Money** Dominican Republic peso (RD\$); RD\$100 = US\$2.96 = €1.90 = UK£1.50
- **Official name** República Dominicana
- **People** Dominicans
- **Phrase** *Siempre a su orden* (you’re welcome); *gua-gua* (bus)
- **Population** 9 million
- **Visa** Issued on arrival; see p320



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Zona Colonial** (p285) Wander the 500-year-old cobblestone backstreets of the Zona Colonial in Santo Domingo – not much different from the 16th-century version of the city
- **Bávaro & Punta Cana** (p296) Enjoy the miles and miles of beautiful beach and organized beachfront fun
- **Whale-watching** (p301) Feel small – very small – after witnessing the majesty of 30-ton humpbacks breaching and diving on a whale-watching trip from Samaná
- **Kitesurfing** (p311) Strap yourself to the board and pray – for good winds and your safety – and get swept up in the thrill of skimming full speed across the waves
- **Playa Frontón** (p304) Snorkel undisturbed around some of the best reefs the country has to offer

ITINERARIES

- **Five Days** Spend a day in Santo Domingo before zipping up to Samaná for whale-watching, and spend some beach time at Las Galeras.
- **Ten Days** First follow the five-day itinerary, spending a couple of days in Santo Domingo. Then head to Jarabacoa and Cabarete for some adventure tours and Los Haitises National Park for a tour of ancient cave paintings.
- **Two Weeks** Do the 10-day tour, then end your stay with three or four days at an all-inclusive in Bávaro or Punta Cana.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Except in the central mountains, temperatures don't vary much in the Dominican Republic, averaging a summery 81°F (28°C) to 87°F (31°C) in most places for much of the year. Tropical humidity can make the temperatures feel higher, though sea breezes help mitigate the effect. The rainy season is May to October, though in Samaná and on the north coast it can last until December. August and September constitute hurricane season.

The main foreign tourist seasons are December to February and July to August and Semana Santa (the week before Easter). Expect higher prices and more crowded beaches at these times – Semana Santa is especially busy. February has great weather and you can enjoy Carnaval and the whales in

Samaná. November is good, too – you'll miss the whales but catch baseball season.

HISTORY

First Arrivals

Before Christopher Columbus arrived, the indigenous Taínos (meaning 'Friendly People') lived on the island now known as Hispaniola. Taínos gave the world sweet potatoes, peanuts, guava, pineapple and tobacco – even the word 'tobacco' is Taíno in origin. Yet the Taínos themselves were wiped out by Spanish diseases and slavery. Of the 400,000 Taínos that lived on Hispaniola at the time of European arrival, fewer than 1000 were still alive 30 years later. None exist today.

Independence & Occupation

Two colonies grew on Hispaniola, one Spanish and the other French. Both brought thousands of African slaves to work the land. In 1804, after a 70-year struggle, the French colony gained independence. Haiti, the Taíno name for the island, was the first majority-black republic in the New World.

In 1821 colonists in Santo Domingo declared their independence from Spain. Haiti, which had long aspired to unify the island, promptly invaded its neighbor and occupied it for more than two decades. But Dominicans never accepted Haitian rule and on February 27, 1844, Juan Pablo Duarte – considered the father of the country – led a bloodless coup and reclaimed Dominican autonomy. The country resubmitted to Spanish rule shortly thereafter, but became independent for good in 1864.

The young country endured one disreputable *caudillo* (military leader) after the other. In 1916 US President Woodrow Wilson sent the marines to the Dominican Republic, ostensibly to quell a coup attempt, but they ended up occupying the country for eight years. Though imperialistic, this occupation succeeded in stabilizing the DR.

The Rise of the Caudillo

Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, a former security guard and the eventual chief of the Dominican national police, muscled his way into the presidency in February 1930 and dominated the country until his assassination in 1961. He implemented a brutal system of repression, killing and imprisoning political opponents. Though he was himself partly black, Trujillo

was deeply racist and xenophobic. In October 1937 he ordered the extermination of Haitians along the international border. In a matter of days some 20,000 Haitians were hacked to death with machetes and their bodies dumped into the ocean.

During these years Trujillo used his government to amass a personal fortune by establishing monopolies that he and his wife controlled. By 1934 he was the richest man on the island. To this day there are many Dominicans who remember Trujillo's rule with a certain amount of fondness and nostalgia, in part because Trujillo did develop the economy. Factories were opened, a number of grandiose infrastructure and public works projects were carried out, bridges and highways were built and peasants were given state land to cultivate.

Caudillo Redux

Joaquín Balaguer was Trujillo's puppet president at the time of Trujillo's assassination. Civil unrest and another US occupation followed Trujillo's death, but Balaguer eventually regained the presidency, to which he clung fiercely for the next 12 years. And like his mentor, Balaguer remained a major political force long after he gave up official control. In 1986 he became president again, despite frail health and blindness. He was as repressive as ever and his economic policies sent the peso tumbling.

Dominicans whose savings had evaporated protested and were met with violence from the national police. Many fled to the USA. By the end of 1990, 12% of the Dominican population – 900,000 people – had moved to New York.

After rigging the 1990 and 1994 elections, the military had grown weary of Balaguer's rule and he agreed to cut his last term short, hold elections and, most importantly, not run as a candidate. But it wouldn't be his last campaign – he would run once more at the age of 92, winning 23% of the vote in the 2000 presidential election. Thousands would mourn his death two years later, despite the fact that he prolonged the Trujillo-style dictatorship for decades. His most lasting legacy may be the Faro a Colón (see p289), an enormously expensive monument to the discovery of the Americas that drained Santo Domingo of electricity whenever the lighthouse was turned on.

HOW MUCH?

- **Taxi from Las Américas airport to Santo Domingo** US\$25 to US\$35
- **Liter of bottled water** US\$1
- **Day of diving in Las Terrenas (gear included)** US\$35 to US\$45
- **Meal of fresh fish in a touristy restaurant** US\$10 to US\$17
- **Gallon of gas** US\$4.50 to US\$5.50

Breaking with the Past

The Dominican people signaled their desire for change in electing Leonel Fernández, a 42-year-old lawyer who grew up in New York City, as president in the 1996 presidential election; he edged out three-time candidate José Francisco Peña Gómez in a runoff. But would too much change come too quickly? Shocking the nation, Fernández forcibly retired two-dozen generals, encouraged his defense minister to submit to questioning by the civilian attorney general and fired the defense minister for insubordination – all in a single week. In the four years of his presidency, he oversaw strong economic growth, privatization and lowered inflation, unemployment and illiteracy – although endemic corruption remained pervasive.

Hipólito Mejía, a former tobacco farmer, succeeded Fernández in 2000 and immediately cut spending and increased fuel prices – not exactly the platform he ran on. The faltering US economy and World Trade Center attacks ate into Dominican exports as well as cash remittances and foreign tourism. Corruption scandals involving the civil service, unchecked spending, electricity shortages and several bank failures, which cost the government in the form of huge bailouts for depositors, all spelled doom for Mejías' reelection chances.

Familiar faces appear again and again in Dominican politics and Fernandez returned to the national stage by handily defeating Mejía in the 2004 presidential elections. Though he's widely considered competent and even forward thinking, it's not uncommon to hear people talk about him rather unenthusiastically as a typical politician beholden to special interests. The more cynical claim that the Fernandez administration is allied with corrupt business and government

officials who perpetuate a patronage system different from Trujillo's rule in name only. In 2007 the faltering US economy, the devastation wrought by Tropical Storm Noel, the threat of avian bird flu and continued tension with Haiti provided challenges to Fernandez's reelection campaign.

THE CULTURE

History is alive and well in the Dominican Republic. With a past filled by strong-arm dictators and corrupt politicians, the average Dominican approaches the present with a healthy skepticism – why should things change now? Whether it's the Santo Domingo taxi driver's outspoken disbelief that the metro will ever function or the local fisherman's acceptance that the new resort marina is going to take away his livelihood, Dominicans have learned to live through hardships. What is extraordinary to the traveler is that despite this there's a general equanimity, or at the very least an ability to look on the bright side of things. Sure, people complain, they know unfairness and exploitation when they see it, but on the whole they're able to appreciate the good things: family, togetherness, music and laughter. It's not a cliché to say that Dominicans are willing to hope for the best and expect the worst – with a fortitude and patience that isn't common.

In general an accepting and welcoming culture, Dominicans' negative attitudes towards Haitian immigration has only become more pronounced as the country has received more and more international criticism over its treatment of the nearly one million Haitians in the DR. 'If the country could just solve the "Haiti problem" things would work out' is not an unusual sentiment to hear. By the end of 2007 there were 200 UN soldiers, mostly from other Caribbean countries, to help buttress the DR army's attempts to stop the flow of drugs and arms across the Haitian border. In early 2008 there were increased tensions along the border over accusations of cattle rustling and reprisals; and Dominican chickens being turned away because of fears over avian flu.

Almost a quarter of Dominicans live in Santo Domingo, which is without question the country's political, economic and social center. But beyond the capital, much of the DR is distinctly rural and a large percentage of Dominicans still live by agriculture (or by fishing, along the coast). This is evident if you

drive into the DR's vast fertile interior, where you'll see cows and horses grazing alongside the roads, tractors ploughing large fields and trucks and *burros* (donkeys) loaded down with produce.

Dominican families, typical of the stereotypical Latin American kind, are large and very close-knit. Children are expected to stay close to home and help care for their parents as they grow older. That so many young Dominicans go to the United States creates a unique stress in their families. While Americans and Europeans commonly leave home to live and work in another city, this is still troubling for many Dominicans, especially in the older generation – it's no surprise that Dominicans living abroad send so much money home.

The DR is a Catholic country, though not to the degree practiced in other Latin American countries – the churches are well maintained but often empty – and Dominicans have a liberal attitude toward premarital and recreational sex. This does not extend to homosexuality, though, which is still fairly taboo. *Machismo* is strong here but, like in *merengue* dancing, many Dominicans experience the traditional roles of men and women as more complementary than confrontational, as naturally separate spheres of influence. And the physical, mainly in the way a woman looks or dances, is appreciated unashamedly by both sexes.

SPORTS Baseball

This national pastime is in season from October to January. There are six professional teams – *Licey* and *Escojido*, both from Santo Domingo; the *Águilas* from Santiago; the *Gigantes* from San Francisco; the *Estrellas* from San Pedro de Macoris; and the *Azuqueros* from La Romana – and an untold number of formal and semiformal teams around the country. Many Dominican players are stars in the US major leagues, which Dominican fans also follow religiously. The official website for the professional **Dominican winter league** (www.lidom.com) contains game schedules and news from around the league.

Cockfighting

Cockfighting rings (*galleras*) look like mini sports arenas or ancient coliseums, which is appropriate since Dominicans approach these brutal contests between specially bred

roosters as events worthy of the same enthusiasm. There are around 1500 official *gal-leras* throughout the country, but by far the most prestigious – and safe – is the Coliseo Gallístico Alberto Bonetti Burgos (p294), which regularly hosts international competitions. Gambling on fights is part of the sport, all conducted under a strict honor code. That said, some rings are decidedly seedy and tourists should be alert for trouble.

Perhaps it is no surprise that cockfighting – specifically the roosters' intensity and willingness to fight to the death – would resonate in a country that has endured so much civil strife and outside manipulation. Indeed, the fighting cock is the symbol of a number of political parties and social organizations. For those reasons, many travelers see cockfighting as a window into Dominican culture. Others cannot reconcile a night at the *gallera* with the concept of responsible tourism. It is impossible to argue that cockfighting is not a form of cruelty to animals – after all, the point is for one animal to kill the other, sometimes slowly and agonizingly, for the sake of entertainment and monetary gain. Both are justifiable points of view.

ARTS

Literature

Only a few Dominican novels have been translated into English. Viriato Sención's *They Forged the Signature of God* follows three seminary students in the DR suffering oppression at the hands of both the state and the church. Ten years after publishing the short story collection *Drown*, Junot Díaz received critical acclaim for his 2007 novel *The Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, a stylistically inventive story of a self-professed Dominican nerd in New Jersey and the tragic history of his family in the DR. Less well known than Díaz's novel, but maybe a more devastating picture of the Dominican diaspora's rejection of the conventional American Dream is Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of Home*. *In the Time of the Butterflies* is an award-winning novel by Julia Álvarez about three sisters slain for their part in a plot to overthrow Rafael Trujillo. Also by Álvarez is *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* describing an emigrant Dominican family in New York. Other well-known contemporary Dominican writers include José Goudy Pratt, Jeannette Miller and Ivan García Guerra.

Music

Merengue is truly the national music and from the moment you arrive you'll hear it being played on the bus, at the beach, in the taxi, everywhere – and usually at high volume. Top Dominican merengue groups include Los Hermanos Rosario, Coco Band, Milly y Los Vecinos and, perhaps the biggest name of all, Juan Luis Guerra.

If merengue is the DR's urban sound, *bachata* is definitely its 'country.' This is the music of breaking up and losing out, working hard and playing even harder. Top performers include Raulín Rodríguez, Antony Santos, Luis Vargas and Leo Valdez.

ENVIRONMENT

The Land

If a nation's wealth could be measured by its landscape, the Dominican Republic would be the richest country in the Caribbean. Here you can reach the Caribbean's highest point – Pico Duarte at 3087m – and its lowest – Lago Enriquillo at 40m below sea level. Bisecting the country is the mighty Cordillera Central mountain range, which makes up one-third of Hispaniola's landmass. In the lowlands are a series of valleys filled with plantations of coffee, bananas, cacao, rice, tobacco and many other crops. Almost 1000 miles of coastline includes bountiful coral reefs, multitudes of tiny islands and sheltered banks where humpback whales gather to breed.

Wildlife

Over 250 species of bird have been found in the Dominican Republic, including numerous endemics and the country is known for its humpback whales, manatees and other marine mammals. Among a rich variety of reptiles, the most interesting of all has to be the Jaragua lizard, found in 1998, which is the world's smallest terrestrial vertebrate – adults measure only 25mm.

Environmental Issues

The Dominican Republic can easily see, in Haiti, the effects of deforestation – lack of trees and ground cover were largely to blame for the severity of flooding and mudslides that killed more than 1000 Haitians during Tropical Storm Jeanne in September 2004. The Dominican Republic has set aside large areas of forest as national parks and

scientific reserves, but illegal logging remains a problem.

The large-scale tourist development along the coast is another potential environmental problem. While a few resorts have adopted eco-friendly practices, like limited use of plastic cups and not using bleach in laundry – they are the exception, not the rule. Heavy boat traffic – not to mention the construction of piers suitable for large ships – can damage fragile coral reefs.

FOOD & DRINK

The basis of most meals here is rice and beans, which are served separately or mixed together. Bananas and yuca are other popular starches – both are served boiled, though you will also see bananas sliced and fried (*tostones*) or mashed up into a dish called *mangú* (or *mofongo* if it's mixed with pork rind).

As on any island, seafood figures prominently in the national diet. Grouper and snapper are the most common dinner fish and are usually served baked or grilled with a sauce – *al coco* (in coconut sauce) or *a la diabla* (a spicy tomato-based sauce) are favorites. Other seafood dishes include a type of ceviche typically made with octopus and called *pulpo a la vinaigrette*.

Beef, chicken and pork are also part of Dominican cuisine, though the preparations are generally less creative than in other countries. One exception is guinea hen broiled with red wine, a popular dish in the central highlands.

Street food is limited mostly to *empanadas* and *pastelitos* (meat- or cheese-filled pastries), which are sold from carts or bus-station snack shops.

The Dominican Republic makes great fruit drinks. *Batidas* (smoothies) consist of crushed fruit, water, ice and several tablespoons of sugar and sometimes they also contain a little milk. Popular *batidas* include *batida de piña* (pineapple) and *morir soñando* (literally, 'to die dreaming'), an unlikely combination of milk and orange juice.

Other popular nonalcoholic Dominican drinks include *limonada* (lemonade) and *mabí*, a delicious drink made from the bark of the tropical liana vine.

It's tough to beat Dominican *ron* (rum) for quality. Dozens of local brands are available, but the big three are Brugal, Barceló and Bermudez, which all come in *blanco* (clear), *dorado* (golden) and *añejo* (aged) varieties.

There are a handful of locally brewed beers, including Presidente, Quisqueya, Bohemia and Soberante. It's customary for friends to share a Presidente Grande – a 40oz (1.2L) bottle – that's brought to tables in a wood or plastic container with small glass cups.

SANTO DOMINGO

pop 2.9 million

This is a deeply Dominican city – an obvious statement but no less true. It's where the rhythms of the country are on superdrive, where the sounds of life – domino pieces slapped on tables, backfiring mufflers and horns from chaotic traffic, merengue and *bachata* blasting from corner *colmados* – are most intense. At the heart of the city is the Zona Colonial, which contains several New World firsts – the oldest church, the oldest street, the oldest surviving fortress, and so on and so on. Amid the cobblestone streets, reminiscent of the French Quarter in New Orleans, it would be easy to forget Santo Domingo is on the Caribbean – if it weren't for the heat and humidity.

But this is an intensely urban city, home not only to colonial-era relics but to hot clubs packed with trendy 20-somethings, museums and cultural institutions (the best of their kind in the DR), and business people taking long lunches at elegant restaurants. Santo Domingo somehow manages to embody the contradictions central to the Dominican experience: a living museum; a metropolis crossed with a seaside resort; and a business, political and media center with a laid-back casual spirit.

ORIENTATION

For travelers, the Zona Colonial (Hotel Zone) is the heart of Santo Domingo, where most of the museums, churches and other historical sites are located, as well as hotels, restaurants and services. El Conde, the pedestrian mall running the length of the Zona Colonial, is the modern commercial center of the neighborhood. Just west of the Zona Colonial is Gazcue, a residential area where the hotels are better value but the location less ideal. South of Gazcue, the Malecón (officially called Av George Washington) is the broad waterfront avenue where Santo Domingo's high-rise hotels, nightclubs and casinos are located.

Maps

Mapas GAAR (☎ 809-688-8004; www.mapasgaar.com.do; Espailat; ☎ 8:30am-5:30pm Mon-Fri) This is Santo Domingo's best map store, located on the 3rd floor of an aging office building near El Conde.

INFORMATION

Bookstores

Editorial Duarte (☎ 809-689-4832; cnr Arzobispo Meriño & Mercedes; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-6pm Sat) This dusty shop in the Zona Colonial has a good selection of Spanish-language fiction books, foreign-language dictionaries and maps.

Librería Cuesta (☎ 809-473-4020; www.cuestalibros.com; cnr Av 27 de Febrero & Abraham Lincoln; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-3pm Sun) This modern, two-story Dominican version of Barnes & Noble is easily the nicest and largest bookstore in the city.

Cultural Centers

Casa de Teatro (☎ 809-689-3430; www.arte-latino.com/casadeteatro; Arzobispo Meriño 110; admission varies; ☎ 9am-6pm, 8pm-3am Mon-Sat) Housed in a renovated colonial building, this fantastic arts complex features a gallery with rotating exhibits by Dominican artists, an open-air bar and performance space.

Centro Cultural Español (Spanish Cultural Center; ☎ 809-686-8212; www.ccesd.org in Spanish; cnr Av Arzobispo Meriño & Arzobispo Portes; admission free; ☎ 10am-9pm Tue-Sun) This institute regularly hosts art exhibits, film festivals and musical concerts.

Emergency

Politur (Tourist Police; ☎ 809-689-6464; cnr El Conde & José Reyes; ☎ 24hr)

Internet Access, Telephone & Fax

Abel Brawn's Internet World (☎ 809-333-5604; Plaza Lomba, 2nd fl; per hr US\$1; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sat) Fast internet access as well as international phone and fax service.

Caribae (☎ 809-685-2142; General Luperón 106; per hr US\$1.40; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat) Quiet internet café.

Centro de Internet (☎ 809-238-5149; Av Independencia 201; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8:30am-9pm Mon-Sat, 8:30am-3pm Sun) Internet and call center in Gazcue.

Codetel Centro de Comunicaciones (☎ 809-221-4249; El Conde 202; ☎ 8am-9:30pm) Large call center and has internet (per hr US\$1) to boot.

Medical Services

Clínica Abreu (☎ 809-688-4411; cnr Av Independencia & Burgos; ☎ 24hr) Widely regarded as the best hospital in the city.

Farmacia San Judas (☎ 809-685-8165; cnr Av Independencia & Pichardo; ☎ 24hr) Free delivery.

Hospital Padre Billini (☎ 809-221-8272; Av Sánchez btwn Arzobispo Nouel & Padre Billini; ☎ 24hr) The closest public hospital to the Zona Colonial.

Money

Ban Reservas (cnr Isabel la Católica & Las Mercedes)

Banco Popular (cnr Av Abraham Lincoln & Gustavo Mejía Ricart)

Banco Progreso (cnr Av Independencia & Socorro Sánchez)

Sotiabank (cnr Isabel la Católica & Las Mercedes)

Post

Post office (Isabel la Católica; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) Facing Parque Colón.

Tourist Information

Tourist office (☎ 809-686-3858; Isabel la Católica 103; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) Limited selection of brochures and maps at this office, which faces Parque Colón. English and French spoken.

Travel Agencies

Colonial Tour & Travel (☎ 809-688-5285; www.colonialtour.com.do; Arzobispo Meriño 209; ☎ 8:30am-1pm & 2:30-5:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat)

Giada Tours & Travel (☎ 809-686-6994, 809-264-3704; giada@verizon.net.do; Hostal Duque de Wellington, Av Independencia 304; ☎ 8:30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat)

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The Zona Colonial is generally very safe to walk around, day or night, though be alert for pickpockets in crowded areas. On the Malecón be extra cautious if you've been drinking or are leaving a club or casino especially late. Like in any big city, stick to well-lit and well-trafficked areas as much as possible and be inconspicuous with your cash, jewelry, cameras etc.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

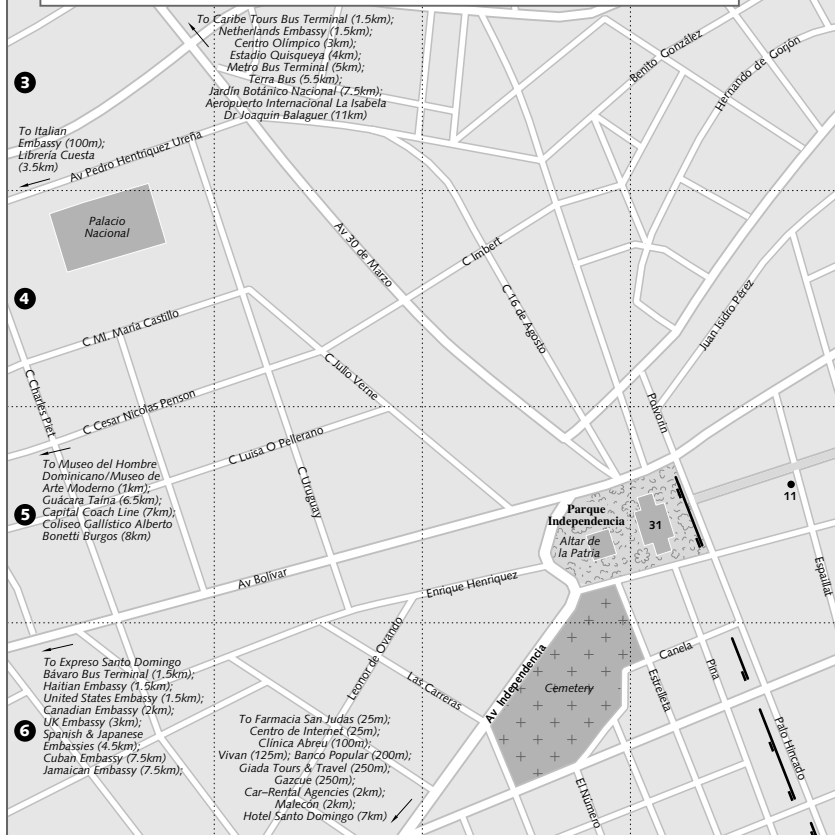
Most of Santo Domingo's historical and interesting sites are in the Zona Colonial and are easily explored on foot. Sites further afield, like the Faro a Colón and Jardín Botánico, are best reached by taxi.

Zona Colonial

For those fascinated by the origin of the 'New World,' by the dramatic and complicated story of the first encounter between native people of the Americas and Europeans, the

CENTRAL SANTO DOMINGO (ZONA COLONIAL)

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Zona Colonial, listed as a Unesco World Heritage site, is a fascinating place to explore. It is 11 square blocks, a mix of cobblestoned and paved streets on the west bank of the Rí Ozama, where the deep river meets the Caribbean Sea.

MUSEUMS

The **Museo de las Casas Reales** (Museum of the Royal Houses; ☎ 809-682-4202; Calle de las Damas; adult/student US\$1/0.15; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun), near Plaza España, showcases colonial-period objects including many treasures recovered from Spanish galleons that foundered in nearby waters. Several walls are covered with excellent maps of various voyages of European explorers and conquistadors. Each room has been restored according to its original style and displays range from Taino artifacts to dozens of hand-blown wine bottles and period furnishings. Also on display is an impressive antique weaponry collection acquired by dictator-president Trujillo from a Mexican general.

Once the home of Columbus' son Diego and his wife, Doña María de Toledo, the beautifully restored **Museo Alcázar de Colón** (Museum Citadel of Columbus; ☎ 809-682-4750; Plaza España; admission US\$2; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sat, 9am-4pm Sun) houses many objects said to have belonged to the Columbus family. The building itself – if not the objects inside – is definitely worth a look.

The DR is one of the world's top sources of amber and the impressive collection at **Museo Mundo de Ambar** (☎ 809-682-3309; www.amberworldmuseum.com; Arzobispo Mériño 452; admission US\$2; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) includes excellent examples of both domestic and international amber. Look for samples containing various critters and bugs – there's an entire room dedicated to ants. Signs in Spanish and English explain amber's origin, mining process and common uses.

Museo de Larimar (☎ 809-689-6605; www.larimar-museum.com; Isabel la Católica 54; admission free; ☎ 8:30am-6pm Mon-Sat) is on the 2nd floor of a jewelry shop and – despite the location – is quite impressive. It contains a remarkable display of the beautiful blue stone and relates just about everything there is to know about the subject. Signage is in English and Spanish.

CHURCHES

Catedral Primada de América (admission free; ☎ 9am-4pm) is the oldest cathedral in operation in the Américas. Diego Columbus set the first

stone in 1514, but construction didn't begin in earnest until the arrival of the first bishop in 1521. Numerous architects worked on the cathedral until 1540, which is why its vault is Gothic, its arches are Romanesque and its ornamentation is baroque. The entrance faces Parque Colón.

Built in 1510, **Convento de la Orden de los Predicadores** (Hostos & Padre Billini; admission free; ☎ irregular hrs) was the first convent of the Dominican order in the Americas. It is also the place where Father Bartolomé de las Casas – the famous chronicler of Spanish atrocities committed against indigenous peoples – did most of his writing. Be sure to take a look at the vault of the chapel; it is remarkable for its stone zodiac wheel, which is carved with mythological and astrological representations.

Constructed during the first half of the 16th century, **Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de los Mercedes** (Church of Our Lady of Mercy; cnr Las Mercedes & José Reyes; admission free; ☎ irregular hrs) was reconstructed on numerous occasions following pirate attacks, earthquakes and hurricanes. The church is remarkable for its pulpit, which is sustained by a support in the shape of a serpent demon.

Other notable churches in the Zona Colonial include **Capilla de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios** (cnr Calle de las Damas & Las Mercedes), **Iglesia de Santa Clara** (cnr Padre Billini & Isabel la Católica) and **Iglesia de la Regina Angelorum** (cnr José Reyes & Padre Billini).

HISTORIC SITES

Beside the cathedral is the historic **Parque Colón**, containing several shade trees and a large statue of Admiral Columbus himself. It is the meeting place for area residents and it's alive all day long with tourists, town-folk, hawkers, guides, taxi drivers, shoeshine boys and tourist police.

The **Plaza España**, in front of the Alcázar de Colón, has been made over many times, most recently during the early 1990s in honor of the 500th anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the New World. The plaza is a large, open area that makes for a lovely afternoon stroll and it has several outdoor restaurants along its west edge.

The **Fortaleza Ozama** (Ozama Fortress; ☎ 809-686-0222; Calle de las Damas; admission US\$1; ☎ 9am-6:30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-4pm Sun), at the south end of Calle de las Damas, is the oldest colonial military edifice in the New World. Construction was

commenced in 1502 and it served as a military garrison and prison until the 1970s, when it was opened to the public for touring. **Torre del Homenaje** (Tower of Homage) is the main structure, with 6ft-thick (1.8m) walls containing dozens of riflemen's embrasures and offering great rooftop views. Near the door there are several guides whose knowledge of the fort is generally quite impressive. A 20-minute tour should cost around US\$3.50 per person.

Originally constructed in 1747 as a Jesuit church, the **Panteón Nacional** (National Mausoleum; Calle de las Damas; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) was also a tobacco warehouse and a theater before dictator Trujillo restored the building in 1958 as the final resting place of the country's most illustrious persons. The mausoleum is next to Plaza de María de Toledo. Shorts and tank tops are discouraged.

The **Monasterio de San Francisco** (Monastery of St Francis; Hostos, btwn Emiliano Tejera & Restauración), the first monastery in the New World, belonged to the first order of Franciscan friars who arrived to evangelize the island. Dating from 1508, the monastery was set ablaze by Sir Francis Drake in 1586, rebuilt, devastated by an earthquake in 1673, rebuilt, ruined by another earthquake in 1751 and rebuilt again. From 1881 until the 1930s it was used as an insane asylum – portions of the chains used to secure inmates can still be seen – until a powerful hurricane shut it down for good.

The ruins of the New World's first hospital, **Ruinas del Hospital San Nicolás de Bari** (Hostos), near Las Mercedes, remain in place as a monument to Governor Nicolás de Ovando, who ordered it built in 1503. So sturdy was the edifice that it survived centuries of attacks by pirates, earthquakes and hurricanes. It remained virtually intact until 1911, when, after being damaged by a hurricane, much of it was knocked down so that it wouldn't pose a threat to pedestrians. Today, visitors can still see several of its high walls and Moorish arches. Note that the hospital's floor plan follows the form of a Latin cross.

The **Puerta del Conde** (Gate of the Count; Calle El Conde) owes its name to the Count of Peñalba, Bernardo de Meneses y Bracamonte, who in 1655 led the successful defense of Santo Domingo against an invading force of 13,000 British troops. The gate is the supreme symbol of Dominican patriotism because right beside it, in February 1844, a handful of brave Dominicans executed a bloodless coup

against occupying Haitian forces; their actions resulted in the creation of a wholly independent Dominican Republic. It also was atop this gate that the very first Dominican flag was raised. The gate is at the west end of Calle El Conde.

Other Neighborhoods

Santo Domingo has a number of interesting sites outside of the Zona Colonial. For most, it's easiest to get to them by taxi.

Resembling a cross between a Soviet-era apartment block and a Las Vegas version of an ancient Mayan ruin, the **Faro a Colón** (Columbus Lighthouse; ☎ 809-592-1492, ext 251; Parque Mirador del Este; admission US\$2.25; ☎ 9am-5:15pm Tue-Sun) is worth visiting for its controversial and complicated history. The Faro's massive cement flanks stretch nearly a block and stand some 10 stories high, forming the shape of a cross. High-powered lights on the roof can project a blinding white cross into the sky, but are rarely turned on because doing so causes blackouts in surrounding neighborhoods. At the intersection of the cross's arms is a guarded tomb that purportedly contains Columbus' remains. However, Spain and Italy dispute that claim, both saying that *they* have the admiral's bones. Inside the monument a long series of exhibition halls display documents (mostly reproductions) relating to Columbus' voyages and the exploration and conquest of the Americas.

The lush grounds of the **Jardín Botánico Nacional** (National Botanical Garden; ☎ 809-385-2611; Av República de Colombia; admission US\$1.25; ☎ 9am-6pm) cover 2 sq km and include vast areas devoted to aquatic plants, orchids, bromeliads, ferns, endemic plants, palm trees, a Japanese garden and much more. An open-air trolley takes passengers on a pleasant half-hour turn about the park (US\$1.25, departures every 30 minutes until 4:30pm) and is especially enjoyable for children.

Several of the country's best museums are clustered on the Plaza de la Cultura; the most extensive of these is the **Museo del Hombre Dominicano** (Museum of the Dominican Man; ☎ 809-689-4672; admission US\$0.75; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun). Highlights here are an impressive collection of Taíno artifacts, including stone axes and intriguing urns. Other displays focus on slavery, the colonial period and Carnival. The explanations are all in Spanish and the displays are very old-fashioned. English-speaking guides

can be requested at the entry – the service is free, but small tips are customary.

The permanent collection at the **Museo de Arte Moderno** (Museum of Modern Art; admission US\$3; ☎ 10am–6pm Tue–Sun) includes paintings and a few sculptures by the Dominican Republic's best-known modern artists, including Luis Desangles, Adriana Billini and Martín Santos, but the temporary exhibits tend to be fresher and more inventive.

SANTO DOMINGO FOR CHILDREN

Santo Domingo isn't particularly kid friendly. Outside of the Zona Colonial, it's not a pedestrian friendly city, there are no beaches and few parks, or at least ones that are well maintained and shady. **Parque Colón** (cnr El Conde & Isabel la Católica) and **Parque Duarte** (cnr Padre Billini & Av Duarte) in the Zona Colonial are basically flagstone plazas where you can sit on a bench and feed pigeons. There are, however, several sights meant to keep youngsters occupied.

Museo Infantil Trampolín (☎ 809-685-5551; www.trampolin.org.do in Spanish; Calle de las Damas; adult/child US\$3.50/1.75; ☎ 9am–6pm Tue–Fri, 10am–7pm Sat & Sun) is a high-tech, hands-on natural history, biology, science, ecology and social museum all wrapped into one. Enthusiastic guides (most are Spanish speaking) lead kids through the touchy-feely exhibits: the earthquake machines and volcano simulations are big hits, less so the exhibit on children's legal rights.

If the kids aren't going to have a chance to snorkel and see underwater creatures in their natural habitat, then the **Acuario Nacional** (National Aquarium; ☎ 809-766-1709; Av España; admission US\$1; ☎ 9:30am–5:30pm Tue–Sun) can substitute. It's quite run-down in parts, however, and algae often covers the viewing windows. That being said, the long, clear underwater walkway where you can watch sea turtles, stingrays and huge fish pass on the sides and overhead can be exciting. Signs in Spanish only. Across the street is **Caribe Parque Acuario** (Av España; adults/children US\$6/4.50; ☎ 11am–7pm Wed–Sun), a not-very-well-taken-care-of water park. It's a lot of concrete and safety probably isn't the best but...

Restaurants in general are probably more relaxed and kid-friendly than elsewhere. Hotels with pools, such as all those along the Malecón (see p292), allow you and the kids to take a break from the sightseeing for several relaxing hours.

TOURS

Interesting and informative walking tours of the Zona Colonial are offered daily by a number of official guides – look for men dressed in khakis and light blue dress shirts but always ask to see their official state tourism license. Tours cover the most important buildings in the zone and can be tailored to your specific interests. Walks typically last 2½ hours and cost between US\$20 and US\$30 depending on the language that the tour is given in (ie Spanish and English are less expensive). To find a guide, head to Parque Colón – you'll find a number of them hanging out under the trees. Also be sure to agree upon a fee before setting out.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Carnaval (or Carnival in English) Celebrated throughout the country every Sunday in February, culminating in a huge blowout in Santo Domingo the last weekend of the month or first weekend of March. Av George Washington (the Malecón) becomes an enormous party scene all day and night. Central to the celebration are the competitions of floats and costumes and masks representing traditional Carnival characters.

Latin Music Festival Held at the Olympic Stadium every October, this huge three-day event attracts the top names in Latin music – jazz, salsa, merengue and *bachata*. Jennifer Lopez and Marc Anthony have performed in the past. **Merengue Festival** The largest in the country, a two-week celebration of the DR's favorite music held every year at the end of July and beginning of August. Most of the activity is on the Malecón, but there are related events across the city.

SLEEPING

The Zona Colonial is the most distinctive part of the city and therefore where most travelers prefer to stay. All of the sights and restaurants are within walking distance and there's an excellent choice of midrange and top-end hotels, some in attractive restored colonial-era buildings. Gazcue (p292), a quiet residential area southwest of Parque Independencia, has several hotels in the midrange category, though there are far fewer eating options. The high-rise hotels on the Malecón (p292) are best if you're looking for resort-style amenities.

Zona Colonial

BUDGET

Betty's Exclusive Guest House (☎ 809-688-7649; bettyemarsall@hotmail.com; Isabel la Católica 163; dm/r US\$22/44; ☎ ☎) Look for the nondescript

iron doorway opening onto Plaza de María de Toledo around the corner from Isabel la Católica. Don't be discouraged by the messy gallery space; there's some method to the madness. The owner, originally from Tennessee, hopes to attract travelers who appreciate the eclectic, laid-back vibe. There are several dorm rooms (only one has a fan) with five to six beds, a mash of antiques and colorful modern art. There's wi-fi, plus access to a common kitchen. For those seeking privacy but not quiet, there's a private room that opens directly onto Isabel la Católica.

Hostal La Colonia (☎ 809-221-0084; hostallacolonia@yahoo.com; Isabel la Católica 110-A; s/d US\$50/60; 🚽) Ideally located just around the corner from Parque Colón, newly opened La Colonia is a good choice. In addition to shiny, polished floors and large rooms with cable TV and refrigerators, each of the three floors has its own spacious street-side sitting area and balcony with armchairs.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Atarazana (☎ 809-688-3693; www.hotel-atarazana.com; Vicente Celestino Duarte 19; s/d with fan US\$50/70, s/d with air-con US\$70/90, all incl breakfast; 🚽 📺) A newly opened boutique hotel for the design conscious only a few feet away from Plaza España. Housed in a beautifully renovated building from the 1860s, all six rooms sport custom-made furniture along with high-concept fixtures and textiles. Each of the light and airy rooms has a balcony. The breakfast buffet is served in a secret patio shaded by lush vegetation; there's even a small Jacuzzi to relax in and the rooftop has fabulous views. High-speed internet access in rooms.

ourpick El Beaterío Guest House (☎ 809-687-8657; elbeaterio.fr; Av Duarte 8; s/d US\$50/60, s/d with air-con US\$60/70, all incl breakfast; 🚽 📺) Take thee to this nunnery – if you're looking for austere elegance. It's easy to imagine the former function of this 16th-century building: the heavy stone façade, the dark and vaulted front room – now a beautiful reading room and dining area – giving way to a lush and sunny inner courtyard, all inspire peacefulness and tranquility. Each of the 11 large rooms is sparsely furnished but the wood-beamed ceilings and stone floors are truly special; the bathrooms are modern and well-maintained. There's also wi-fi.

Hotel Doña Elvira (☎ 809-221-7415; www.dona-elvira.com; Padre Billini 209; loft US\$70, r US\$85-95, ste

US\$105, all incl breakfast; 🚽 📺) Tucked away on a quiet block far from the bustle around Parque Colón, the Doña Elvira is housed in a renovated colonial building, which is a plus. Unfortunately, much of the character seems to have been renovated out as well; the cramped loft room especially is in bad shape. There are 13 rooms in total, most are fairly modern looking, though the exposed stone walls and tile floors in the suite are attractive. You can hang out in the inner courtyard, take a dip in the pool (it's too small for swimming), lounge on the rooftop solarium, use the wi-fi, or read in the lobby-cum-dining-area.

TOP END

Hotel Palacio (☎ 809-682-4730; www.hotel-palacio.com; Av Duarte 106; s US\$78-88, d US\$88-98; 🚽 📺) Cross colonial with a little touch of medieval and you have the Palacio, a mazelike hotel occupying a 17th-century mansion only a block north of the El Conde pedestrian mall. Service is exceptional and you'll need it to find your way past the charming nooks and crannies, which include reading areas, a small bar, a lush interior courtyard and stone-walled walkways. Room design is strictly German-conquistador – that is, minimalist with a few large imposing pieces of furniture. An additional wing and a rooftop pool were under construction at the time of research. There's wi-fi.

Sofitel Nicolás de Ovando (☎ 809-685-9955; www.sofitel.com; Calle de las Damas near Plaza de María de Toledo; s US\$220-336, d US\$238-354, all incl breakfast; 🚽 📺 📺) Even heads of state must thrill when learning they're sleeping in the former home of the first Governor of the Americas. Oozing character, old, old world charm and a historic pedigree tough to beat, the Nicolás de Ovando is as far from a chain hotel as you can get. The 107 rooms are definitely 21st century – flat screen TVs, recessed Jacuzzi, internet cable hookup, luxurious boutique-style fixtures and linens. However, all this modernity is offset by beautifully crafted wood and stone interiors, cobblestone walkways and lushly shaded courtyards – the fabulous pool probably didn't exist during the governor's time. An excellent buffet breakfast is included in the rate; the hotel's superb and elegant restaurant, La Residence has a separate entrance down the street. IT's open for lunch and dinner and mains are about US\$17 to US\$35.

Gazcue

Hotel La Danae (☎ 809-238-5609; www.hoteldanae.com; Danae 18; r US\$24-30; ♿) Dominican-owned La Danae is the best of a number of similar small hotels located on this quiet residential street. Choose from the older, cheaper rooms in the front building and the newer, more modern ones in the back annex. The former have higher ceilings but are subject to what street noise there is. All have cable TV and there's a kitchen area for common use.

Hotel Residencia Venezia (☎ 809-682-5108; www.residencia-venezia.com; Av Independencia 45; s/d US\$45/58; ♿) Within walking distance of the Zona Colonial and the Malecón, the Venezia is a logical and good value option if you choose to stay in Gazcue. Rooms here are immaculate and have large bathrooms; a couple of suites come with balconies and kitchenettes and obviously get more sunlight than the somewhat dim standard rooms. A pleasant surprise is a tiny bistro-bar off the 1st-floor lobby. Two internet-ready computers are available for guests.

Hostal Duque de Wellington (☎ 809-682-4525; www.hostalduque.com; Av Independencia 304; s/d US\$45/90; ♿) Room furnishings and decor at this hotel try terribly to be tasteful but are in the end fairly dowdy. Rooms on the 2nd floor have higher ceilings, and more expensive rooms have balconies, which provide more light. Guests can access the internet (per hour US\$2) from an old computer in the lobby. There's a travel agency on the 1st floor and it's a short walk to the Malecón.

Malecón

Hotel InterContinental (☎ 809-221-0000; www.intercontinental.com/santodomingo; Av George Washington 218; r from US\$120; ♿) Other than the Hilton, the InterContinental has the plushiest lobby of the hotels on the Malecón and an even more hip bar-lounge area. Like all the big hotels on the waterfront, the hotel also has a pool, spa, tennis courts and a casino, popular both with tourists and the Dominicans on weekends.

Hilton Santo Domingo (☎ 809-685-0000; www.hiltoncaribbean.com/santodomingo; Av George Washington 500; r from US\$130; ♿) Easily the nicest of the luxury hotels on the Malecón, the Hilton is part of a huge complex including a casino, movie theaters and several restaurants (although much of it remains vacant). The highest of the high-rises, it's a long elevator ride in the atrium to the top. Rooms here are

nicer and newer than its nearby competitors, and it has a bar and restaurant with stunning ocean views.

EATING

Santo Domingo has a good selection of restaurants in various price ranges. The ones in the Zona Colonial are usually the most convenient.

Zona Colonial

La Cafetera Colonial (☎ 809-682-7122; El Conde btwn Av Duarte & 19 de Marzo; mains US\$2-5; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Everyone knows everyone else's name here. That can seem intimidating at first, especially because the narrow entranceway means new customers can't pull up a stool at the long lunch counter unnoticed. It's a classic greasy spoon menu: eggs and toast, simple sandwiches and super strong espresso.

El Meson de Lu (Hostos; mains US\$5-13; ☺) lunch & dinner) This simple and unpretentious restaurant has loyal locals lining up at the small bar or sitting in the open-air dining room for filling plates of seafood and meat. Even though service isn't with a smile it's a good choice, especially at dinnertime when it's not uncommon for a trio of musicians to serenade your table.

Dajao Restaurant & Bar (☎ 809-686-0712; Arzobispo Nouel 51; mains US\$9-20; ☺) lunch & dinner) There are two Dajaos – a sleek, small, modern side, resembling a European café; and an older, basic side, much like an ordinary *comedor*. The former outshines the latter, not only in terms of style but also in its menu: it serves specials such as conch meat croquettes (US\$10), shrimp crêpes (US\$9) and grilled octopus (US\$10).

ourpick Pat'e Palo (☎ 809-687-8089; Calle la Atarazana 25; mains US\$12-22; ☺) 4:30pm to late Mon-Thu & 1:30pm to late Fri-Sun) Another one of Plaza España's eateries, Pat'e Palo is for gourmands and anyone tired of the same old bland pasta and chicken. Everything here is special but a personal recommendation is the grilled Angus rib eye with *rugula* and parmesan cheese with potato fricassee, mushrooms and bacon.

Gazcue

Ananda (☎ 809-682-7153; Casimiro de Moya 7; mains US\$3-10; ☺) lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, lunch Sun) Hard-core vegetarians will want to try out this cafeteria-style restaurant-cum-yoga-center run by the 'International Society of Divine Realization.'

They may not find the offerings enlightening; Dominican dishes such brown rice and roast beans outnumber the Indian meals.

L'Osteria de Charly y Christian (☎ 809-333-6701; Av George Washington 47; mains US\$6-12; ☎ noon-midnight) A favorite hangout for local expats and Dominicans alike, L'Osteria is a casual open-air restaurant on the Malecón. Aging, albeit with character, it's as much a good place for a drink as a serving of homemade pasta or other Italian and French standards.

Restaurant Train Steak House (☎ 809-686-5961; Calle Pasteur 100; mains US\$12; ☎ 11:30am-midnight Tue-Sun) Not quite a chop house, not quite a sports bar, this restaurant combines a little of both. In the front bar there are several TVs tuned to international sporting events, while uniformed waiters and the enthusiastic owner hustle about the brick walled dining room serving delicious cuts of meat as well as grilled seafood and tapas.

DRINKING

El Conde Restaurant (☎ 809-688-7121; mains US\$3-16; Hotel Conde de Peñalba, cnr El Conde & Arzobispo Meriño; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Hands down, the best place for an afternoon drink. As much a restaurant as a café, El Conde's appeal isn't its large varied menu of decent food, but its commanding location at the busiest corner in the Zona Colonial.

Double's Bar (Arzobispo Meriño; ☎ 6pm to late) Good-looking 20-somethings grind away to loud pop and Latin music at Double's. Others lounge around in groups downing bottles of Presidente, while the classic long wood bar is better for conversation.

1492 (☎ 809-686-6009; Arzobispo Meriño 105; ☎ Tue-Sat) Aptly named, since it feels like a discovery, 1492's horseshoe-shaped wood bar is conducive to conversation, the dim lighting is flattering and the barkeep/owner is friendly.

ENTERTAINMENT

Nightclubs

Guácara Taina (☎ 809-533-0671; Av Mirador del Sur 655; admission US\$10) Still a popular spot for ravers and electronica fans, this giant club-cum-bat-cave does see tourist groups fresh off the bus but live acts, especially merengue and salsa, draw Dominican partygoers. The club is difficult to find, but every taxi driver in the city knows where it is. Gets going after midnight from Thursday to Sunday.

The hotels on the Malecón have Santo Domingo's largest and most popular night clubs: the Jubilee at the **Renaissance Jaragua** (☎ 809-221-2222; Av George Washington 367) and the club at the **InterContinental** (☎ 809-221-0000; Av George Washington 218) draw crowds, especially on weekends. Discos operate from Tuesday through Saturday and open around 9pm, but things don't get hopping until 11pm or later. Admission is US\$3 to US\$5 when there's a DJ (most nights), US\$10 when there's a band. The clubs attract the capital's wealthiest and hippest and they dress up when they go dancing.

Gay & Lesbian Venues

Much like the straight scene, gay and lesbian venues in Santo Domingo don't tend to last for too long. However, the following were open at the time of research.

Amazonia (☎ 809-412-7629; Dr Delgado 71; ☎ 8pm-late Fri-Sun) A mostly lesbian bar in Gazcue.

CHA (Av George Washington 165, btwn Maximo Gomez & Lincoln; ☎ 6pm-3am Fri & Sat, 6pm-1am Sun) A fun place with good music and shows.

Esedeku (☎ 809-869-6322; cnr Las Mercedes 341 & Santome) Only a block from El Conde, Esedeku is an intimate bar with a huge selection of cocktails; not for hustlers.

Casinos

There are casinos at most of the large hotels on the Malecón, including the **Hotel Santo Domingo** (☎ 809-221-1511; cnr Avs Independencia & Abraham Lincoln) and **El Napolitano** (☎ 809-687-1131; Av George Washington 101). They generally open at 4pm and close at 4am.

Sports

BASEBALL

The boys of summer play in the winter here, in this *béisbol*-mad city. Soon after the US major league season ends in October, the 48-game Dominican season kicks off. From mid-November until early February, the top players from the DR with a handful of major and minor leaguers from the US compete all over the country. One of the better places to see a game and experience the madness is the **Estadio Quisqueya** (☎ 809-540-5772; cnr Av Tiradentes & San Cristóbal; tickets US\$2-18; ☎ game times 5pm Sun, 8pm Tue, Wed, Fri & Sat), home field for two of the DR's six professional teams, **Licey** (www.licey.com) and **Escogido** (www.escogido.com). Asking for the best seats available at the box office will likely run

you US\$18 and put you within several feet of either the ballplayers or the between-innings dancers. Scalpers also congregate along the road to the stadium and at the entrance.

COCKFIGHTING

The Madison Square Garden of the Dominican cockfighting world, the **Coliseo Gallístico Alberto Bonetti Burgos** (☎ 809-565-3844; Av Luperón; admission US\$7-17.50; 🕒 matches 6:30pm Wed & Fri, 3pm Sat) is where the best and the fiercest roosters are brought to fight. If you have any interest in experiencing this traditional Dominican spectator sport (for more about cockfighting see p282), this *gallera* (cockfighting ring) is a good choice. Matches are held Wednesday and Friday at 6:30pm and Saturdays at 3pm from November to June, but December to April is the busiest season (the roosters' plumage is fullest then). A match could have 30 or 40 fights and last into the wee hours; betting on cockfights is an intense and complex art. Fights are to the death – some are quick, others are tortuous bloody affairs that can last up to 15 minutes (the official limit before a fight is called off) and so obviously aren't appropriate for everyone.

SHOPPING

Amber & Larimar

Considered national treasures, amber and larimar are sold widely throughout Santo Domingo. For a sure thing, try one of the following.

Swiss Mine (☎ 809-221-1897; El Conde 101; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat) This shop, on Parque Colón, sells some of the finest-quality amber and larimar around; the design work is also unsurpassed. English, French, Italian and German are spoken.

Ambar Maldo Gift Shop (☎ 809-688-0639; Calle La Ataranza; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) With an eclectic selection of amber and larimar jewelry, this makes a great stop if you like to hunt for unique pieces. Prepare to bargain hard – prices have been marked up in anticipation of the ritual.

Art

Santo Domingo's galleries tend to offer more and better Dominican art than Haitian, though you can find good examples of both in the following shops.

Atelier Gallery (☎ 809-688-7038; Arzobispo Portes 120; 🕒 10am-8pm Mon-Sat) Art sold here is of the type

you would expect to see in any fine modern-art museum; traditional work – paintings, sculpture, pottery – is top tier and experimental pieces are the norm. Quite impressive.

Galería de Arte María del Carmen (☎ 809-682-7609; Arzobispo Mériño 207; 🕒 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun) Specializing in paintings, this gallery has been in business long enough to attract a wide range of talented Dominican artists.

Cigars

If you want to sample some of the finest *tabacos* around, drop by the **Boutique del Fumador** (☎ 809-685-6425; El Conde 109; 🕒 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-3:30pm Sun) or the **Museo del Tabaco** (☎ 809-689-7665; El Conde 101; 🕒 9:30am-8pm). Both are located on Parque Colón and are owned by the same tobacco company – Monte Cristi de Tabacos. At either shop you can watch as two workers roll cigars in the shop window. Montecristo, Cohiba and Caoba brand cigars are sold at both shops. Prices vary from US\$2 to US\$6 per cigar and boxes cost up to US\$110.

La Leyenda del Cigarro (☎ 809-686-5489; Hostos 402 at Mercedes) is a small shop with a good selection of premium cigars and the helpful staff are more than willing to answer the naïve questions of cigar novices.

Handicrafts

Encuentro Artesanal (☎ 809-687-1135; Arzobispo Meriño 407; 🕒 10am-8pm Mon-Sat) At this urban-chic shop, you'll find beautiful woodwork, paintings, kitchenware, hip clothing and unique jewelry. Hands down, the best all-around selection of high-end handicrafts in the Zona Colonial.

Artesanía Elisa (☎ 809-682-9653; Arzobispo Nouel 54; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Specializing in traditional faceless dolls, you'll find hundreds of handcrafted porcelain beauties here; all figurines are dressed in late-18th-century garb and are priced according to the size and detail of each (US\$10 to US\$550).

Markets

Mercado Modelo (Av Mella btwn Tomás de la Concha & Del Monte y Tejada; 🕒 9am-5pm) Bargain hard at this local market, which sells everything from love potions to woodcarvings and jewelry. Housed in an aging two-story building just north of the Zona Colonial near a neighborhood of Chinese restaurants and stores. It's best not to dress too sharply or wear any fine jewelry yourself, in part to get a fair deal and in part

because this isn't the best neighborhood to wander around especially after dark.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Santo Domingo has two airports: the main one, **Aeropuerto Internacional Las Américas** (SDQ; ☎ 809-549-0081), is 22km east of town. The smaller **Aeropuerto Internacional La Isabela Dr Joaquin Balaguer** (JBQ, Higuero; ☎ 809-567-3900), north of the city, handles mostly domestic carriers and air taxi companies. **Aerodomca** (☎ 809-826-4141/4242), **Caribair** (☎ 809-542-6688) and **Take Off** (☎ 809-552-1333; www.takeoffweb.com) service both airports.

For details on international air travel to and from the Santo Domingo area, see p321.

Bus

Santo Domingo has no central bus terminal. Instead, the country's two main bus companies – **Caribe Tours** (☎ 809-221-4422; www.caribetours.com.do; cnr Avs 27 de Febrero & Leopoldo Navarro) and **Metro** (☎ 809-227-0101; www.metroserVICIOTURISTICOS.com; Francisco Prats Ramírez) – have individual depots west of the Zona Colonial. Caribe Tours has the most departures and covers more of the smaller towns than Metro does; a taxi is the most convenient way to reach either station.

Expreso Santo Domingo Bávaro (☎ 809-682-9670; cnr Juan Sánchez Ruiz & Máximo Gómez); Bávaro (☎ 809-552-0771) has a direct 1st-class service between the capital and Bávaro, with a stop in La Romana. Departure times in both directions are 7am, 10am, 2pm and 4pm (US\$9, four hours).

There also are four **2nd-class bus depots** near Parque Enriqueillo in the Zona Colonial. All buses make numerous stops en route. Because the buses tend to be small, there can be a scrum for seats, especially for destinations with one to a few departures a day.

To get to Haiti, **Capital Coach Line** (☎ 809-530-8266; www.capitalcoachline.com; 27 de Febrero 455), **Caribe Tours** (☎ 809-221-4422; www.caribetours.com.do; cnr Avs 27 de Febrero & Leopoldo Navarro) and **Terra Bus** (☎ 809-531-0383; Plaza Lama, Avs 27 de Febrero & Av Winston Churchill) offer daily bus services to Port-au-Prince.

Car

Numerous international and domestic car rental companies have more than one office in Santo Domingo proper and at Las Américas International Airport – the majority have a

booth in a small building just across the street from the arrivals exit.

Advantage Rent-a-Car airport (☎ 809-549-0536); Av Independencia (☎ 809-685-4000; Av Independencia btwn José Ma Heredia & Socorro Sánchez)

Avis airport (☎ 809-549-0468); Av Abraham Lincoln (☎ 809-535-7191; cnr Avs Abraham Lincoln & Sarasota)

Budget airport (☎ 809-549-0351); Av John F Kennedy (☎ 809-566-6666; cnr Avs John F Kennedy & Lope de Vega)

Dollar airport (☎ 809-549-0738); Av Independencia (☎ 809-221-7368; Av Independencia 366)

Europcar airport (☎ 809-549-0942); Av Independencia (☎ 809-688-2121; Av Independencia 354)

Hertz airport (☎ 809-549-0454); Av José Ma Heredia (☎ 809-221-5333; Av José Ma Heredia 1)

National/Alamo Av Independencia (☎ 809-221-0805; cnr Av Independencia & Máximo Gómez; airport (☎ 809-549-8303)

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

There are no buses to or from Aeropuerto Internacional Las Américas or Aeropuerto Internacional La Isabela Dr Joaquin Balaguer. From Las Américas, a taxi into town costs US\$25 to US\$35, with little room for negotiation. The fare from Herrera is US\$10 to US\$15 – there's no permanent taxi stand, but a couple of cabs meet every flight.

Bus

City buses (US\$0.25) tend to follow major thoroughfares, including Av Independencia (eastbound) and Av Bolívar (westbound), both of which intersect with Parque Independencia in the Zona Colonial.

Car

Driving can be difficult in Santo Domingo due to traffic and aggressive drivers, especially those of taxis and buses. Many midrange and top-end hotels have parking with 24-hour guards. Otherwise you'll probably have to leave your rental on the street. Do not leave any valuables inside in either case.

Público

More numerous than buses are *públicos* – mostly beat-up minivans and private cars that follow the same main routes but stop anywhere that someone flags them down (US\$0.35). Be prepared for a tight squeeze – drivers will cram seven or even eight passengers into an ordinary four-door car.

Taxi

Taxis in Santo Domingo don't have meters, so you should always agree on the price before climbing in. The standard fare is US\$4, less within the Zona Colonial. Taxi drivers don't typically cruise the streets, but you can always find one at Parque Colón and Parque Independencia. You can also call a cab; try **Apolo Taxi** (☎ 809-537-7771), **Super Taxi** (☎ 809-536-7014) or **Taxi Express** (☎ 809-537-7777).

THE SOUTHEAST

This iconic region, synonymous with sun, sand and binge eating, is rightly popular with the hundreds of thousands of visitors who make the southeast the economic engine of the tourism industry in the Dominican Republic. Sprawling resort developments, some like city-states unto themselves, line much of the beachfront from Punta Cana to Bávaro.

The fishing village of Bayahibe is the departure point for trips to the nearby islands in the Parque Nacional del Este. North of Bávaro is Playa Limón, an isolated stretch of beach backed by palm trees but also more unusually, a lagoon and several mountain peaks. Those committed to carrying on west to Sabana de la Mar are rewarded with the Parque Los Haitises, a protected maze of caves and mangroves.

BÁVARO & PUNTA CANA

Ground zero of DR tourism. The epicenter of the all-inclusive. Where buffet items seem to outnumber grains of sand. If you were to tell a Dominican anywhere in the world that you visited their country, this is where they would assume you came. Deservedly popular because its beaches rival those anywhere else in the Caribbean, both for their soft, white texture and their warm aquamarine waters, a trip here nevertheless involves as much a love for swim-up pool bars and rubbing sun-tanned elbows with like-minded people.

Orientation

Most of Bávaro's services are located in one of several outdoor plazas (malls) just north of El Cortecito, the small one-road enclave where there's another cluster of shops and tour companies.

Punta Cana actually refers to the area just east and south of the airport. It's much more isolated than Bávaro as there is really only one coastal road that eventually peters out further south and doesn't connect with the highway to Higüey. There are few services here and no towns in the immediate area.

Information

EMERGENCY

Politur (Tourist Police; ☎ 809-686-8227) Next to the bus terminal in Bávaro and at Plaza Bolera in Punta Cana.

INTERNET ACCESS & TELEPHONE

Cone Xion.com (Plaza Punta Cana, Bávaro; per hr US\$2; ☎ 8am-11pm Mon-Sat, 9am-11pm Sun) A small dual internet/call center.

Cyber Cafe (Plaza Riviera/Estrella, Bávaro; per hr US\$2; ☎ 10am-10pm) Towards the back of Plaza Estrella; a call center as well.

Tricom/Cyber Beach (El Cortecito; per hr US\$3; ☎ 8am-11pm) Along the main beach road in Cortecito proper.

LAUNDRY

Most hotels offer laundry service but you pay by the piece, which can make washing your clothes more expensive than the clothes themselves.

Laundry Euro (☎ 809-552-1820; Plaza Riviera/Estrella, Bávaro; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-5pm Sun) Charges by the piece with same-day service if you drop off in the morning.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Every all-inclusive hotel has a small on-site clinic and medical staff, which can provide first aid and basic care.

Centro Médico Caribe Bávaro (☎ 809-552-1415; www.caribeasistencia.com/cmcb; Plaza las Brisas, Bávaro; ☎ 8:30am-6pm) Open 24 hours for emergencies.

Centro Médico Punta Cana (☎ 809-552-1506; btwn Plaza Bávaro & the bus terminal, Bávaro) The name notwithstanding, this is the main private hospital in Bávaro, with a multilingual staff, a 24-hour emergency room and an in-house pharmacy.

Farmacia Estrella (☎ 809-552-0344; Plaza Estrella, Bávaro; ☎ 8am-10pm)

Hospitén Bávaro (☎ 809-686-1414; bavaro@hospiten.com; btwn airport & turn-off to Bávaro) Best private hospital in Punta Cana, with English-, French- and German-speaking doctors and a 24-hour emergency room.

Pharma Cana (☎ 809-959-0025; Plaza Bolera, Punta Cana; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat, 8am-11pm Sun) Punta Cana's main pharmacy.

MONEY**Banco BHD** (Plaza Caney 1, Bávaro)**Banco Popular** (Plaza Bávaro, Bávaro; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri)**Banco Progreso** El Cortecito supermarket (☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat); Plaza Bolera, Bávaro (☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri)**Scotiabank** (Plaza Las Brisas, Bávaro; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat)**Sights****BEACHES**

Superlatives to describe the beaches here are bandied about like free drinks at a pool bar but they're mostly deserved.

Public access is ingrained in the law so you can stroll from less exclusive parts like **Playa El Cortecito**, which tends to be crowded with vendors, to nicer spots in front of resorts. Playa El Cortecito, though, is a good place to **parasail** (12-15min US\$40) or to find a boat operator to take you fishing or snorkeling.

North of El Cortecito is Playa Arena Gorda, lined with all-inclusives and their guests. A further 9km north of here is **Playa del Macao**, a gorgeous stretch of beach best reached by car. It's also a stop-off for a slew of ATV (All-Terrain Vehicle) tours that tear up and down the beach every day.

In the other direction, south of Bávaro and El Cortecito, is **Playa Cabo Engaño** – an isolated beach you'll need a car, preferably an SUV, to reach.

PARQUE ECOLÓGICO PUNTA CANA

A half-kilometer south of Punta Cana Resort and Club, the **Punta Cana Ecological Park** (☎ 809-959-8483; www.puntacana.org; ☎ 8am-4pm) covers almost 2000 acres of protected coastal and inland habitat and is home to some 80 bird

species, 160 insect species and 500 plant species. Visitors can take very worthwhile 1½-hour **guided tours** (adult/child US\$10/5) through a lush 45-acre portion of the reserve known as Parque Ojos Indígenas (Indigenous Eyes Park), so named for its 11 freshwater lagoons all fed by an underground river that flows into the ocean. **Horseback riding tours** (1-2hr tour US\$20/30) through the park and along the coast can also be arranged with advance notice. Unfortunately, there is no hotel pick-up service; a cab here will cost around US\$25 each way from Bávaro or El Cortecito.

Activities

Virtually every water activity is available, but in exchange a long commute to the actual site. Every hotel has a tour desk offering snorkeling, diving and boat trips to destinations such as Isla Saona, a large island with picturesque beaches off the southeastern tip of the DR. Parasailing is done from the beach all over Punta Cana and Bávaro.

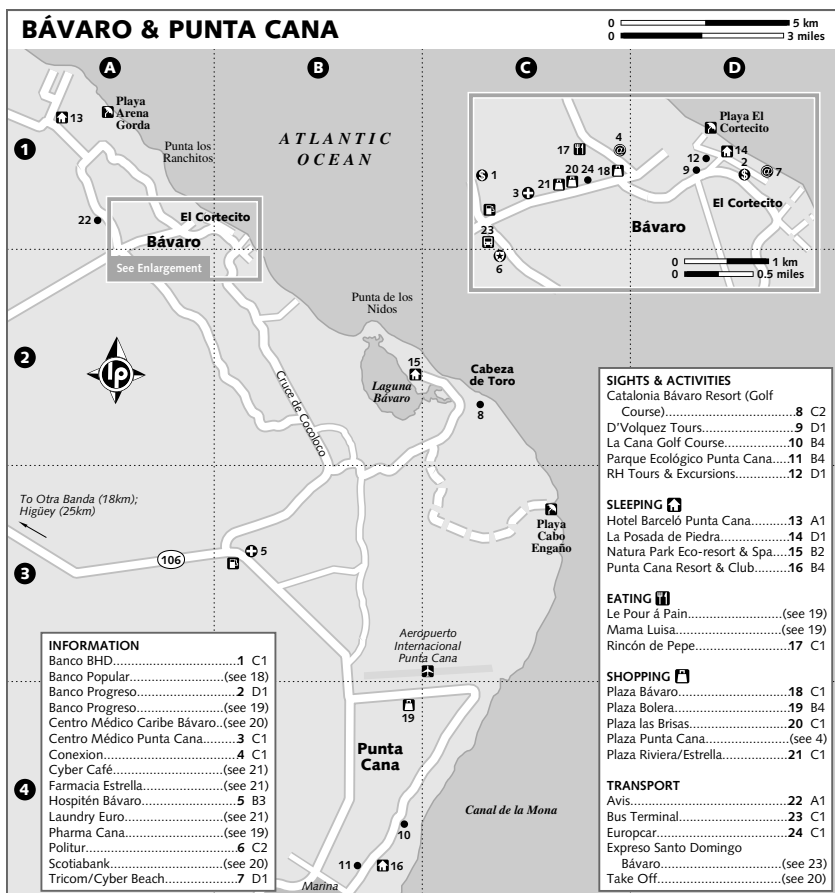
La Cana Golf Course (☎ 809-959-2262; www.punta-cana.com; Punta Cana Resort & Club, Punta Cana; ☎ 7:30am-6pm) is one of Punta Cana's top golf courses and is located at the area's top resort. Green fees are guest/nonguest US\$115/156 for 18 holes or guest/nonguest US\$71/96 for nine, including a golf cart. A new Tom Fazio-designed course is scheduled to open the summer of 2008.

If you'd like to get in a round of golf but La Cana is somewhat rich for your blood, the **Catalonia Bávaro Resort** (☎ 809-412-0000; Cabeza de Toro; ☎ 8:30am-5pm) has a decent nine-hole par-three course that costs US\$45 for one round and US\$60 for two. Carts are US\$25 for 18 holes and US\$20 for nine and club rental just US\$10.

TWIST MY ARM: THE PLACES THE AUTHORS WANTED TO KEEP SECRET

The drive alone justifies the trip. Hwy 104 passes through rolling mountain scenery and past bucolic ranches, where any unrecognized vehicle is sure to turn the heads of locals walking with friends or on horseback; it practically qualifies as an event in the sleepy villages along the way. **Playa Limón** itself, about 20km east of Miches and just outside the hamlet of El Cedro, is a 3km-long, isolated beach lined with coconut trees leaning into the ocean, coveted property that you're likely to have to yourself for much of the day.

There's a saying in the mountains of the Dominican Republic: 'God is everywhere, but he lives in Constanza.' Set at 1200m in a fertile valley and walled in by towering mountains, you can see why – it's a breathtaking spot. **Constanza** makes a fine weekend getaway but during the week you're likely to be the only one there. There isn't a whole lot to do here, though, and the tourist attractions are of far less interest than the cooler climate and the sheer remoteness of it all.



Tours

Every resort has a separate tour desk that can arrange all variety of trips, from snorkeling and deep-sea fishing to the popular Isla Saona trip. A handful of locals set up on El Cortecito beach offer **snorkel trips** (2½hr trip per person US\$20-25) and **glass-bottom boat rides** (2hr trip per person US\$25-30) to a nearby reef. Most also offer **deep-sea fishing trips** (min 4 people, per person US\$80-90).

If you're looking to explore the region, **D'Volquez Tours** (☎ 809-552-1861, 776-3823; El Cortecito) and **RH Tours and Excursions** (☎ 809-552-1568; www.rhtours.com; El Cortecito; ☎ 9am-7pm) offer a number of decent day trips. Popular excursions include exploring Parque Nacional Los Haitises (US\$88), boat trips to Isla Saona

(US\$79) and tours of Santo Domingo's Zona Colonial (US\$58).

Sleeping

For resorts in the area, walk-in-guests are about as common as snowstorms; if you can convince the suspicious security guards that your intentions are innocent and make it to the front desk, you'll be quoted rates that absolutely nobody staying at the resort is paying. Instead, book all-inclusive vacations online or through a travel agent, as they can offer discounts of up to 50% off rack rates. Bear in mind that most resorts cater to a particular niche, whether it's families, honeymooners, golfers or the spring-break crowd.

BÁVARO

La Posada de Piedra (☎ 809-221-0754; www.laposada.depiedra.com; El Cortecito; r with shared/private bathroom US\$25/45) The only budget accommodation with a beachfront location, this privately owned stone house is smack in the middle of busy Cortecito. Those with only primitive needs will be happy in one of the two beachfront cabanas. Inside the owner's home are two comfortable rooms with private bathrooms and a shared balcony with views of the ocean. Breakfast, drinks and sandwiches are served at a few small tables set up on the street in front of the house.

Hotel Barceló Punta Cana (☎ 809-476-7777; www.barcelopuntacana.com; Playa Arena Gorda; r from US\$150; 📶 📺 🚿) Ideally located at the end of a strip of all-inclusives but only a short drive from the commercial plazas of Bávaro, this resort (also known as Barceló Premium) is a good choice considering the reasonable rates. A mix of young families and singles, the Premium exudes a Club Med-like atmosphere. Some of the bathrooms of this huge complex could stand an update but the rooms are comfortable nevertheless – each has a balcony. Wireless access is per day US\$10. Don't confuse this with the several other Barceló resorts in the area or with the fact that it's not in Punta Cana despite the name.

Natura Park Eco-Resort & Spa (☎ 809-221-2626; www.blau-hotels.com; Cabeza de Toro; d per person US\$150; 📶 📺 🚿) Located midway between Bávaro and Punta Cana, Natura Park has a narrow beach outside the village of Cabeza de Toro. This is an isolated area nowhere near busy El Cortecito and Bávaro so not the best choice for people looking to hop in and out of different resort clubs at night. Egrets and flamingos wander the property, which has won awards for its efforts to reduce its environmental impact. Large glass doors open out onto balconies or terraces. The pool is a bit small, but the beach quite nice.

PUNTA CANA

Punta Cana Resort & Club (☎ 809-959-2262; www.puntacana.com; Punta Cana; d incl breakfast US\$140; 📶 📺 🚿) Famous for its part time residents like Julio Iglesias, Oscar de la Renta and Mikhail Baryshnikov, this resort is also notable for its environmental efforts, especially the associated ecological park across the street from the entrance to the resort. Newly opened Tortuga Bay, an enclave of 15 luxurious villas is part

of the main resort property of 15,000-acres and 400 rooms. Three-story buildings line a beautiful beach and there are nine restaurants to choose from, though unlike the typical resort lunch, dinner and drinks aren't included. It's a low-key resort for people happier to read a book on the beach rather than do aquaerobics to loud disco music in the pool.

Eating

Most visitors are hardly hungry after gorging themselves at their resort's buffets but there are enough condos, villas and locals to support a handful of eateries. Most are in various shopping centers in the area.

Le Pour á Pain (Plaza Bolera, Bávaro; mains US\$6; ☎ 10am-10pm) This small, pleasant café with outdoor patio seating is in Plaza Bolera, not exactly picturesque but a good spot if you're in town. Good coffee as well as crêpes (US\$6), salads (US\$8) and sandwiches (US\$6) are served.

Mama Luisa (☎ 809-959-2013; Plaza Bolera; mains US\$8-15; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) The food and service at this friendly and pleasant restaurant outshine its prosaic setting – it's in a mini-mall a half-kilometer west of the airport. Pastas (US\$8) of course are good but the paella for two (US\$35) is especially recommended.

Rincón de Pepe (☎ 809-552-0603; Bávaro shopping center; mains US\$8-15; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) A classy but low-key restaurant that serves quality Spanish food at sunny outdoor tables or inside an airy, hot-pink dining area. You may even forget you're in a mall.

Getting There & Away**AIR**

The **Aeropuerto Internacional Punta Cana** is on the road to Punta Cana about 9km east of the turn-off to Bávaro.

American Airlines (☎ 809-959-2420), **Air France** (☎ 809-959-3002), **LAN** (☎ 809-959-0144) all have offices at the airport. Other international airlines serving the Punta Cana airport include US Airways, Air Canada, Air France, Continental, Northwest, Corsair, LTU, Iberworld and USA3000.

For domestic air connections, check out the airline/travel agency **Takeoff** (☎ 809-552-1333; www.takeoffweb.com; Plaza las Brisas; ☎ 6am-8pm).

None of the international rental car agencies have booths here; a representative will pick you up upon arrival if reservations are made in advance.

Resort minivans transport the majority of tourists to nearby resorts; however, taxis are plentiful. Fares between the airport and area resorts and hotels range from US\$10 to US\$35 depending on the destination.

BUS

The bus terminal is located at the main intersection in Bávaro near the Texaco gas station, almost 2km inland from El Cortecito.

Expreso Santo Domingo Bávaro (Bávaro ☎ 809-552-1678; Santo Domingo ☎ 809-682-9670; cnr Juan Sánchez Ruiz & Máximo Gómez) has services between Bávaro and the capital, with a stop in La Romana. Departure times in both directions are 7am, 10am, 2pm and 4pm (US\$9, four hours).

For other destinations, take a local bus (marked Sitrabapu) to Higüey and transfer there. *Caliente* buses to Higüey leave Bávaro's main terminal (US\$2.50, 1½ hours, every 20 minutes), as does the express service (US\$3, 1¼ hours, every hour).

Getting Around

Local buses pass all the outdoor malls on the way to El Cortecito. Buses have the drivers' union acronym – Sitrabapu – printed in front and cost US\$0.75. They are supposed to pass every 15 to 30 minutes, but can sometimes take up to an hour.

Day time traffic is sometimes gridlocked between the resorts clustered just north of Bávaro and El Cortecito. Despite the stop-and-go pace of driving, renting a car for a day or two is recommended if you prefer to see the surrounding area independently. Rental agencies include **Avis** (☎ 809-688-1354; Plaza Caney, Carretera Arena Gorda) and **Europcar** (☎ 809-686-2861; near Plaza Punta Cana, Bávaro).

Otherwise, there are numerous taxis in the area – look for stands at El Cortecito, Plaza Bávaro and at most all-inclusives. You can also call a cab – try **Arena Gorda taxi** (☎ 809-552-0786). Fares vary depending on distance, but are typically US\$5 to US\$35.

PENÍNSULA DE SAMANÁ

The Península de Samaná (Samaná Peninsula) is only a sliver – just 40km long and 15km wide – of rolling mountains, a sea of hillocks pushing their way to a long coastline of protected beaches and picturesque coves. A new international airport and a new highway to

the capital, either ominous signs of development or economic lifelines to the rest of the country and the world, suggest that Samaná's character, defined in part by its relative inaccessibility, is trending more to the mainland and the mainstream. However, for now it's still a place where the stereotypical image of a vacation in the Dominican Republic need not apply, where French and Italian are at least as useful as Spanish and it's only a short *moto-concho* ride from a luxurious second home to an open-air disco pumping merengue.

Tens of thousands of tourists follow the migratory pattern of the North Atlantic humpback whale, busing and flying in to Samaná from mid-January to mid-March, seeing little else of the peninsula – though if there's time for only one thing, this is definitely it. Las Terrenas, the most developed in terms of tourism, is the place to base yourself if you crave a lively social scene; and Las Galeras, a sleepy one road town, boasts several of the best beaches in the DR, their beauty enhanced by the effort it takes to get there.

SAMANÁ

pop 50,000

For much of the year, Samaná follows the slow daily rhythms of an ordinary Dominican town – it's a compact place built on a series of bluffs overlooking Bahía de Samaná. In fact, it remained an isolated fishing village until 1985, when the first whale-watching expedition set out. Because North Atlantic humpbacks find the bay water particularly suitable for their annual version of speed dating from mid-January to mid-March, Samaná is transformed by tens of thousands of tourists who flock here to go on a whale-watching tour, a natural spectacle with few equals.

Orientation

Arriving in town from the direction of El Limón or Sánchez, the main street, Av Malecón or Av la Marina, is about a kilometer downhill past the municipal market (where the *gua-gua* station is). Most of the restaurants, banks and bus stations are located on the main street. The port is across the street from a small shady park near where the buses leave from.

Information

Banco Popular (Av Malecón; ☎ 8:15am-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat)

BanReservas (Santa Barbara; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat)

CompuCentro Samaná (☎ 809-538-3146; cnr Labandier & Santa Barbara; per hr US\$2.10; ☎ 9am-midday, 3-6pm Mon-Fri)

Farmacía Giselle (☎ 809-538-2303; cnr Santa Barbara & Julio Labandier; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, 8am-noon Sun)

Hospital Municipal (San Juan; ☎ 24hr) A very basic hospital near the Palacio de Justicia.

Sights & Activities

WHALE-WATCHING

For sheer awe-inspiring 'the natural world is an amazing thing' impact, a whale-watching trip is hard to beat. Around 45,000 people travel to Samaná every year from January 15 to March 15 to see the majestic acrobatics of these massive creatures. Try to avoid coming here during Carnival, a holiday for Dominicans, making it the busiest day of the year. Most of the companies have a morning and afternoon trip. There are around 43 vessels in total, eight companies, all owned or at least partly owned by Dominicans from Samaná and around 12 independent operators. See *A Whale of a Time* (p302) for more about the whales.

Victoria Marine (☎ 809-538-2494; www.whalesama.com; cnr Mella & Av Malecón; adult/under 5yr/5-10yr US\$55/free/30; ☎ 9am-1pm, 3-6pm) is Samaná's most-recommended whale-watching outfit.

Moto Marina (☎ 809-538-2302; motomarina@yahoo.com; Av la Marina 3; ☎ 8am-6pm) and **Samaná Tourist Service** (☎ 809-538-2848; samana.tour@codotel.net.do; Av la Marina 6; ☎ 8:30am-12:30pm & 2:30-6pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-12:30pm Sat) can also arrange trips for independent travelers.

CAYO LEVANTADO

Only the western third of this lush island 7km from Samaná is open to the public; the eastern two-thirds is now occupied by a five-star hotel development. The public beach here is gorgeous, with white sand and turquoise waters, but don't expect much peace and quiet. Large cruise ships dock here regularly and the facilities include a restaurant and bar – and 2000 lounge chairs. Boatmen at the pier make the trip for US\$10 to US\$15 per person round-trip; if you have a group of six to eight people you can negotiate the round-trip for US\$60.

CASCADA EL LIMÓN

A trip to this 50m **waterfall**, a short distance from the town of El Limón, is a chance to

revel in some breathtaking mountain scenery. Travel agencies in Samaná offer trips there for around US\$45, including transport, horses, guide and lunch. However, it's perfectly easy and much cheaper to do the trip yourself by taking a *gua-gua* to El Limón. See p306 for more details.

Sleeping

Hotel Chino (☎ 809-538-2215; San Juan 1; s/d US\$60/75; 🏠) Located on top of a Chinese restaurant on top of a hill, Hotel Chino's rooms have balconies with fantastic views of town and the waterfront. And while the rooms are shiny and clean with cable TV and air-con, it's of questionable value considering there's no lounge area or other amenities and no beach within walking distance.

There are two resorts in the Bahía Principe area. **Gran Bahía Principe Cayacoa** (☎ 809-538-3131; www.bahiaprincipeusa.com; per person US\$100; 🏠 🏠 🏠) is the older of the two, and is perched on a cliff 6km east of Samaná with spectacular views of the bay and maybe even of humpbacks during whale season. Food and rooms however are mediocre.

The other resort is **Gran Bahía Principe Cayo Levantado** (☎ 809-538-3131; www.bahiaprincipeusa.com; Cayo Levantado; r from US\$200; 🏠 🏠 🏠). If the beach at Cayacoa (which is accessed from an outdoor elevator) isn't to your liking, there are free daily shuttles to this new five-star resort, which is situated on a beautiful beach. It's a step above the Cayacoa in every category including cuisine and room decor; the downside is you're on an island and need to take a boat to get there (provided by the hotel). Well, that's the upside too.

Eating & Drinking

The majority of restaurants are along Av Malecón. The following are fairly interchangeable in terms of menu and cost.

Restaurant Mate Rosada (Av Malecón; mains US\$4-11; ☎ lunch & dinner)

Cayacoa Restaurant (Av Malecón; mains US\$6-12; ☎ lunch & dinner)

L'Hacienda Restaurant (Calle Santa Barbara; mains US\$3-12; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner)

Beginning around 6pm and lasting until the early hours of the morning, you can also get cheap eats at a series of food stands that line Av Malecón near Calle María Trinidad Sánchez.

A WHALE OF A TIME

Canadian Kim Beddall, a marine mammal specialist since 1983 and the pioneer of the whale-watching industry in the Dominican Republic, has devoted herself to maintaining a healthy environment for the whales and a healthy living for the people of Samaná.

How many North Atlantic humpbacks come to these waters every year?

The estimated population is 10,000 to 12,000 and almost all these whales spend part of the winter in Dominican waters. During the peak months here from January to March, there are maybe 200 to 300 whales in the bay itself but they don't hang out in large groups, they're spread out and others are in transit.

Why do the humpbacks come to these waters?

It's like the world's largest singles bar, they come to mate and calve – we see an average of 12 new calves a year in Samaná Bay. We think humpbacks come specifically to Samaná because they like certain depths, around 60ft to 80ft; within 2km outside the bay it drops to 600m to 700m. The wind conditions are right, as is the salinity of the bay mouth.

Are the humpbacks found in other waters around the DR?

Samaná Bay is part of the National Marine Mammal Sanctuary of the Dominican Republic, approximately 27,000 sq km and one of the largest in the world, which includes Silver Bank, Navidad Bank and Samaná Bay. Silver Bank is around 70 miles north of Puerto Plata and Navidad Bank is 45 miles northeast of Cape Samaná. The rest of the year these whales can be found feeding anywhere from the eastern seaboard of the US to the Arctic Circle, including Greenland and all the way to Norway. We are the sister sanctuary to Stellwagon Bank, in front of Boston, and are the first sanctuaries in the world to protect humpbacks on both ends of an annual migration.

What is the DR's official position concerning the whale-watching industry?

The DR has no whaling history, and promotes responsible whale-watching as an economic alternative to whaling in the wider Caribbean. The country is in the process of becoming a proconservation member of the International Whaling Commission (IWC). To date, six countries vote with

Getting There & Away

AIR

The nearest airport in regular operation is Aeropuerto Internacional El Portillo, just outside of Las Terrenas. Aeropuerto El Catey is another option and receives some international flights. See p321 and p322 for information on domestic and international flights.

BOAT

Transporte Marítimo (☎ 809-538-2556; Av Malecón) provides the only ferry service – passengers only, no vehicles – across the Bahía de Samaná to Sabana de la Mar (US\$4.25, one hour plus, four daily at 7am, 9am, 11am and 3pm). From there, it's possible to catch *gua-guas* to several destinations in the southeast and then on to Santo Domingo.

BUS

Facing the pier, **Caribe Tours** (☎ 809-538-2229; Av Malecón) offers services to Santo Domingo at 7am, 8:30am, 10am, 1pm, 2:30pm and 4pm (US\$8.50, 4½ hours, daily). The same bus

stops along the way at Sánchez (US\$2, 30 minutes), Nagua (US\$2.15, one hour) and San Francisco de Macorís (US\$3, 1½ hours). A block west, **Metro** (☎ 809-538-2851; cr Av Malecón & Rubio y Peñaranda) offers a similar service (US\$8, 4½ hours, twice daily, 7:30am and 3:30pm). Like its competitor, it stops at Sánchez (US\$2.30, 30 minutes), Nagua (US\$2.30, one hour) and San Francisco de Macorís (US\$3.50, 1½ hours). Tickets are sold in the Western Union office next door to Caribe Tours.

For direct service to Puerto Plata 210km to the west, there are two options: **El Canario** (☎ 809-291-5594; Av Malecón) buses leave at 10am (US\$7, 3½ to four hours) beside the Banco Popular; while **Papagayo** (☎ 809-970-2991) has a service at 1:30pm from under the mango tree on the eastern side of the little park next to Banco Popular on the *malecón*.

For service to towns nearby, head to the **gua-gua terminal** (Av Malecón) at the *mercado municipal*, 90m west of the Politur station near Angel Mesina. From here, trucks and minivans head to Las Galeras (US\$2, 45 minutes to one hour, every 15 minutes, 6am to 6pm), El Limón (US\$3, 30 minutes,

Japan in favor of reinstating commercial whaling: Antigua, St Lucia, St Kitts, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Commonwealth of Dominica and Grenada. These countries' waters are part of the general migratory area for North Atlantic humpbacks. These countries receive economic assistance from Japan – the assumption of many people is they are being rewarded for their vote. Starting in 1982 there was a 10-year moratorium on whale hunting, and this was extended in 1992 but there's no real way to enforce the ban other than through voluntary compliance.

What's the most immediate threat to the health of the North Atlantic humpback population?

Considering that humpbacks are coastal species and so brush up against humans and everything that comes with us, they are surprisingly tolerant and resilient animals, but are still classified as a vulnerable species by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Being coastal animals, they like to occupy shallow waters close to shore, areas of intense human activity. Entanglement in fishing gear, ship strikes, contamination of feeding and reproductive habitats, uncontrolled coastal development with resulting erosion affecting water quality, solid and liquid waste, high concentrations of vessel traffic, unregulated whale-watching and the rapidly developing cruise-ship market in the Caribbean, along with sound contamination, may all have impacts on humpbacks that we do not yet fully understand. Global warming and climate change may effect migratory routes, feeding and reproductive grounds, forcing species to move to other areas they previously have not occupied.

What's your advice for tourists?

Whale-watch responsibly everywhere you go on vacation; only in this way can you give local communities an economic alternative to whaling. Only whale-watch with permitted vessels. Here in Samaná, all have numbered yellow flags from the Ministry of the Environment and a permit they can show you. Learn what the regulations are and ask your captain to comply. Ask if there is a naturalist on board, and also just ask as many questions as possible to reinforce the idea that tourists are concerned and they want people with expertise.

every 15 minutes, 6am to 6pm) and Sánchez (US\$1.75, 45 minutes, every 15 minutes, 6am to 4:30pm).

Getting Around

Samaná is walkable but if you're carrying luggage *motoconchos* are everywhere. 4WD vehicles are your only option in terms of car rental – roads on the peninsula are bad enough to warrant the extra expense. Rates run from US\$70 to US\$90 per day (tax and insurance included). Try **Xamaná Rent Motors** (☎ 809-538-2380; Av Malecón; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm).

LAS GALERAS

The road to this small fishing community 28km northeast of Samaná ends at a fish shack on the beach. So does everything else, metaphorically speaking. Las Galeras, as much as anywhere else on the peninsula, offers terrestrial and subaquatic adventures for those with wills strong enough to ignore the pull of inertia. Or you can do nothing more than lie around your bungalow or while away the day at a restaurant watching others do the same.

Orientation

The road coming from Samaná winds along the coast and through lovely, often-forested countryside before reaching the outskirts of Las Galeras. There's one main intersection in town (about 50m before the highway dead-ends at the beach) and most hotels, restaurants and services are walking distance from there.

Information

Most of the relevant services are located on or around the main intersection, a short walk from the beach.

Consultoria Las Galeras (☎ 829-918-3233; Plaza Lusitania; ☎ 8:30am-noon & 3-6pm Mon-Fri, 3-6pm Sat)
Plaza Lusitania Internet & Call Center (internet per hr US\$2.50; ☎ 8:30am-8pm Mon-Sat)

Sights

PLAYA RINCÓN

Playa Rincón is a pitch-perfect beach. Stretching uninterrupted for almost 3km of nearly white, soft sand and multihued water good for swimming, the beach even has a small stream at its far western end, great for

a quick freshwater dip at the end of a long, sunny day. Rincón is large enough for every day tripper to claim their own piece of real estate. A thick palm forest provides the backdrop. Several small restaurants serve mostly seafood dishes and rent beach chairs, making this a great place to spend the entire day. Most people arrive by boat. The standard option is to leave around 9am and boats return to pick you up at 4pm – it's around 20 minutes each way. If you join up with other beachgoers, it costs per person about US\$12 to US\$15. You can also drive there, though the last kilometer or so is too rough for small or midsize cars. A taxi to Rincón should cost US\$55 round-trip.

PLAYITA

Better than the beach in town, Playita (Little Beach) is easy to get to on foot or by *motoconcho*. It's a swath of tannish sand, with mellow surf, backed by tall palm trees. There are two informal outdoor restaurants, basically thatched-roof shelters, where you can get grilled fish or chicken. On the main road just south of Las Galeras, look for signs for Hotel La Playita pointing down a dirt road headed west.

PLAYAS MADAMA & FRONTÓN

Preferred by some locals over Playa Rincón, 750m-long Playa Frontón boasts some of the best snorkeling in the area. Playa Madama is a small beach framed by high bluffs; keep in mind there's not much sunlight in the afternoon.

The trail to both begins at the far east end of the Casa Marina Bay beach, about 200m past the resort's entrance, near a private house which most people know as 'La Casa de los Ingleses' (House of the English) after its original owners. Coming from town, the house and the trail will be on your right. There are several turn-offs that are easy to miss; it's much simpler to take a boat to either of these beaches for around US\$15 per person round-trip, with a pick-up in the afternoon.

BOCA DEL DIABLO

'Mouth of the Devil' is an impressive vent or blowhole, where waves rush up a natural channel and blast out of a hole in the rocks. Car or motorcycle is the best way to get there – look for an unmarked dirt road 7km south

of town and about 100m beyond the well-marked turnoff to Playa Rincón. Follow the road eastward for about 8km, then walk the last 100m or so.

Activities

DIVING & SNORKELING

For experienced divers, Cabo Cabrón (Bastard Point) is one of the north coast's best dive sites. Other popular sites in the area include Piedra Bonita, a 50m stone tower that's good for spotting jacks, barracudas and sea turtles; Cathedral, an enormous underwater cave opening to sunlight; and a sunken 55m-container ship haunted by big green morays. Several large, shallow coral patches, including Los Carriles, a series of small underwater hills, are good for beginner divers. Playa Frontón has excellent snorkeling.

Grand Paradise Samaná Dive Center (Dive Samaná; ☎ 809-538-2000; www.lacompaniadeicaraibi.com; Grand Paradise Samaná resort; ☼ 7am-6pm) is located at the far end of Casa Marina Bay's beach. One-/two-tank dives are, including all equipment, US\$60/114 (US\$5 to US\$12 less if you have your own). Also on offer are snorkeling trips (US\$12).

HORSEBACK RIDING

The Belgian owners of Bungalows Karin y Ronald offer well-recommended **horseback riding tours** (from US\$52) to various spots around Las Galeras, including Boca del Diablo, El Punto lookout and Playas Madama and Frontón. Casa Marina Bay resort offers similarly priced but somewhat less-personalized horseback tours as well.

WATER SPORTS

Grand Paradise Samaná Dive Center (Dive Samaná; ☎ 809-538-2000; www.lacompaniadeicaraibi.com; Grand Paradise Samaná resort; ☼ 7am-6pm) has windsurf and sailboat rental and instruction (US\$10 to US\$15 per hour), all available to guests and nonguests alike.

Tours

You can visit many of the beaches and sights on your own or hire a *motoconcho* driver to act as your chauffeur and guide. Organized tour operators include **ATM-Tours** (☎ 809-324-1696; Calle Principal), **R-azor Tours** (☎ 809-538-0218; www.azortour.eu; Calle Principal) and **Grand Paradise Samaná Dive Center** (Dive Samaná; ☎ 809-538-2000; www.lacompaniadeicaraibi.com; Grand Paradise Samaná

resort; ☎ 7am-6pm). The numerous day trips on offer include whale-watching in Bahía de Samaná (per person US\$80), trips to Playa Rincón (US\$10), land and boat excursions through Parque Nacional Los Haitises (per person US\$70) and hikes to the area's isolated beaches (per person US\$20). Village tours that include a cock fight, and stops in a typical home and primary school, and overnight trips further afield can also be arranged.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Bungalows Karin y Ronald (☎ 829-878-0637; www.larancheta.com; r US\$30, bungalow US\$54) Buried in the lush jungle 2.5km east of the main intersection is this unique hotel with a number of funky and simple two-storied bungalows that can accommodate four to six people comfortably. Semioutdoor rustic kitchens lend an eclectic, if not cabin-in-the-woods, feel to this out-of-the-way hotel. Take full advantage of Karin's knowledge – she's an expert tour guide who leads day and overnight hiking and horseback trips to out of the way beaches and mountain tops (opposite).

Casa Por Qué No? (☎ /fax 809-712-5631; s/d incl breakfast US\$32/45; ☎) Pierre and Monick, the charming owners of this bed and breakfast, rent out two rooms on either side of their cozy home – each has a separate entrance and hammock. Only 25m or so north of the main intersection on your right as you're walking towards the beach, the house is fronted by a long, well groomed garden where delicious breakfasts are served (US\$6 breakfast for nonguests). Open from November to the end of April.

MIDRANGE

Plaza Lusitania Hotel (☎ 809-538-0093; www.plaza.lusitania.com; r US\$60; 1-bedroom apt US\$75-100, all incl breakfast; ☎) This hotel is downtown Las Galeras – it's situated on the main intersection on the 2nd floor of a tiny mall, complete with an internet and telephone center, good Italian restaurant, medical office and shop. A stay at Plaza Lusitania is as urban as Las Galeras gets, which is to say not at all. Rooms are large and extremely comfortable and even boast small balconies and kitchenettes.

Todo Blanco (☎ 809-538-0201; www.hoteltodo.blanco.com; r US\$75; ☎) In a wash of white, Todo Blanco, a well-established inn run by a cheerful Dominican-Italian couple, sits atop a small hillock a short walk from the end of the

main drag in Las Galeras. The multi-leveled grounds are nicely appointed with gardens and a gazebo and wrap-around porches, all with views of the ocean. The rooms are large and airy, with high ceilings and private terraces. A homey living room area has a TV and DVD player and wi-fi internet access. Meals can be provided if ordered and arranged ahead of time.

TOP END

Villa Serena (☎ 809-538-0000; www.villaserena.com; r without/with air-con US\$140/150, all incl breakfast; ☎) A cross between a Victorian manor home and a Caribbean villa, this hotel, 300m east of the main intersection, has gorgeous ocean views and is probably the nicest place in Las Galeras. That being said, the room furnishings are a little worn and kitsch. Each has a balcony, some face the ocean directly and others open on to the meticulously landscaped garden and swimming pool area. Off the main lobby, where there is a free wi-fi signal, is a peaceful terrace with rocking chairs.

Eating

El Kiosko (Calle Principal; mains US\$5-7; ☎ 7am-midnight) Chow down on freshly caught fish, seafood and grilled meats at this basic thatch-roofed restaurant on the beach at the end of the main road.

Plaza Lusitania Italian Restaurant (☎ 809-538-0093; Calle Principal; mains US\$6-12; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Tue-Mon, dinner only May-Oct) Easily the nicest restaurant in town both in terms of cuisine and ambience, Plaza Lusitania has a varied menu of Italian dishes, an extensive selection of pastas, excellent large pizzas, grilled fish and even a Chinese dish or two (chicken fried rice US\$8). A fruit shake (US\$3) and a banana split (US\$4.25) can round out a nice meal.

Grigiri (Calle Principal; mains US\$5.75-11; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) and **Chez Denise** (☎ 809-538-0219; Calle Principal; mains US\$4-14; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat), two other restaurants located at the main intersection, have similar menus including crepes with various toppings. Grigiri is a better value than Chez Denise where service can be very slow.

Getting There & Around

Gua-guas head to Samaná (US\$2, 45 minutes, every 15 minutes, 7am to 5pm) from the beach end of Calle Principal but also cruise slowly out of town picking up passengers. There's also a daily 5:30am bus with service to Santo

Domingo (US\$8, six hours). Locals refer to it as the Bluebird Express, though it's neither blue nor express.

You can pretty much walk everywhere in Las Galeras proper. For outlying areas, a *motococho* ride costs around US\$0.50 to US\$1 – sometimes arranging with the driver to pick you up if you know when you'll be returning.

Taxis (☎ 829-380-0775) are available as well; some sample fares are Aeropuerto Catey (US\$85), Las Terrenas (US\$85), Samaná (US\$30) and Santo Domingo (US\$200).

Renting a car is an excellent way to explore the peninsula on your own. **Caribe Fun Rentals** (☎ 809-912-2440; 🕒 9am-1pm & 3-6:30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun) and **Xamaná Rent Moto** (☎ 809-538-0208; per day US\$25; 🕒 9am-noon & 3-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat & Sun), 50m west of the intersection, rent motorcycles as well.

LAS TERRENAS

pop 15,000

No longer a rustic fishing village, today Las Terrenas is a cosmopolitan town, seemingly as much French and Italian as Dominican. It's a balancing act between locals and expats, one that has produced a lively mix of styles and a social scene more vibrant than anywhere else on the peninsula. Either way you walk along the beach road leads to beachfront scattered with hotels, high palm trees and calm aquamarine waters.

Orientation

The main road in town, Av Duarte (also known as Calle Principal), begins at the beach, and passes several small shopping plazas, restaurants, stores, banks etc before leaving the resort area. Calle del Carmen, a dirt road version of Av Duarte, runs parallel to the latter until it too ends at the beach and veers left to Pueblo de los Pescadores (Fishermen's Village), a collection of beachside bars and restaurants. Turning east at the intersection of Av Duarte and Calle 27 de Febrero or Carretera a Portillo takes you past another cluster of restaurants, bars and hotels and eventually leads to the airport, a large all-inclusive resort, El Limón and finally Samaná.

Information

Banco Leon (Av Duarte) Has a 24-hour ATM.

Banco Popular (Av Duarte; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Has a 24-hour ATM.

Centro de Especialidades Medicas (☎ 809-240-6817; Av Duarte; 🕒 24hr) Small private hospital.

Internet café & call center (internet per hr US\$2.25; 🕒 9am-1pm & 2-9pm Mon-Sat) Next door to Lavandería Tu Net.

Internet Point (Plaza Taína, Av Duarte; 🕒 8:30am-1pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) Fast internet connections.

Lavandería Tu Net (Lavandería Pat y Memo; ☎ 809-848-1661; Centro Colonial, Calle del Carmen; 🕒 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-3pm Sat) Wash and dry US\$1.50 per 1lb.

Sights & Activities

CASCADA EL LIMÓN

Tucked away in surprisingly rough landscape, and surrounded by peaks covered in lush greenery, is the 52m-high **El Limón Waterfall**. A beautiful swimming hole is at the bottom. The departure point for the falls is the small town of El Limón, only a half-hour from Las Terrenas.

Just about everyone who visits does so on horseback and almost a dozen *paradas* (horseback riding operations) in town and on the highway toward Samaná offer tours. (It is not recommended that you hire someone off the street, as there's little saving and the service is consistently substandard.) All outfits offer essentially the same thing: a 30- to 60-minute ride up the hill to the waterfalls, 30 to 60 minutes to take a dip and enjoy the scene and a 30- to 60-minute return trip, with lunch at the end. Your guide – who you should tip, by the way – will be walking, not riding, which can feel a little weird but is the custom.

Otherwise it's a minimum 40-minute walk, sometimes up a very steep trail over rough terrain with even a river or two to ford. It's not especially difficult to follow the path once you find it, especially if there are groups out on the trail.

Spanish-owned **Santí** (☎ 809-452-0776; limon.santi@terra.es; per person without/with lunch US\$14/23; 🕒 8am-7pm), at the main intersection in El Limón, is the most popular of the *paradas* and also the most expensive. The lunch is excellent and the guides and staff (all adults) are better paid than elsewhere. If you book with a tour company in Las Terrenas, transportation to/from El Limón is not included (*gua-gua* US\$1.50). Typically it costs per person from US\$22 to US\$24. Most other operators charge without/with lunch around US\$7/14.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Because of Bahía de Samaná's fortuitous geography – its deep channel, eastward orientation and easy-to-defend mouth, perfect for a naval installation – the Peninsula de Samaná has been coveted and fought over and bought several times over.

Founded as a Spanish outpost in 1756, Samaná was first settled by émigrés from the Canary Islands but the political turmoil of Hispaniola – the sale of the island to the French, a Haitian revolution and two British invasions – kept Samaná town's population growing and changing. It was deemed a prize even as early as 1807 during the brief French possession of Hispaniola – France's commander in Santo Domingo, an ambitious leader no doubt, proposed building a city named Port Napoleon in Samaná but France was dispossessed of the island before the plan could move forward.

After its independence from Spain, the DR was taken over by Haiti, which controlled Hispaniola from 1822 to 1844. During this period Haiti invited more than 5000 freed and escaped slaves from the US to settle on the island. About half moved to the Samaná area. Today, a community of their descendants still speak a form of English.

During Haitian rule, France pressured its former colony to cede the Península de Samaná in return for a reduction in the debt Haiti owed it. Incredibly, Haiti had been forced to pay restitution to France for land taken from French colonists in order to gain international recognition. Of course, France never paid restitution to former slaves for their ordeal.

After Dominican independence from Haiti in 1844, the new Dominican government feared Haiti would reinvade and sought foreign assistance from France, England and Spain. The Dominican Republic eventually resubmitted to Spanish rule in 1861 and Spain immediately sent a contingent of settlers to the Samaná area and reinforced the military installations on Cayo Levantado, a large island (and the site of a luxury resort today) near the mouth of the bay.

Even after independence in 1864, the Península de Samaná remained a tempting prize for other countries. Beginning in 1868 the US, under President Ulysses S Grant, sought to purchase the peninsula from the DR in order to build a naval base there. Dominican president and strongman Buenaventura Baéz agreed to the sale in order to obtain the money and weapons he needed to stay in power. However, the US Senate, under pressure from Dominican exile groups and strong opposition from France and the UK, rejected the proposal in 1871. A year later, Baéz arranged to lease the area to the US-based Samaná Bay Company for 99 years. To the relief of most Dominicans, the company fell behind on its payments and Baéz's successor, Ignacio María González, rescinded the contract in 1874. The US revisited the idea of annexing Samaná in 1897 as the Spanish-American War loomed, but decided to build its Caribbean base in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, after it quickly defeated Spain.

DIVING & SNORKELING

Las Terrenas has reasonably good diving and snorkeling and at least three shops in town to take you out. Favorite dive spots include a wreck in 28m of water and Isla Las Ballenas, visible from shore, with a large underwater cave. Most shops also offer special trips to Cabo Cabrón (p304) near Las Galeras and Dudu cave near Río San Juan. Standard one-tank dives average US\$45 with equipment, around US\$35 if you have your own. Two-tank Cabo Cabrón and Dudu trips run from about US\$80 to US\$100, including gear, lunch and transport.

Snorkelers also go to Isla Las Ballenas, which has good shallow coral flats (one hour; per person US\$20). A popular full-day snorkel

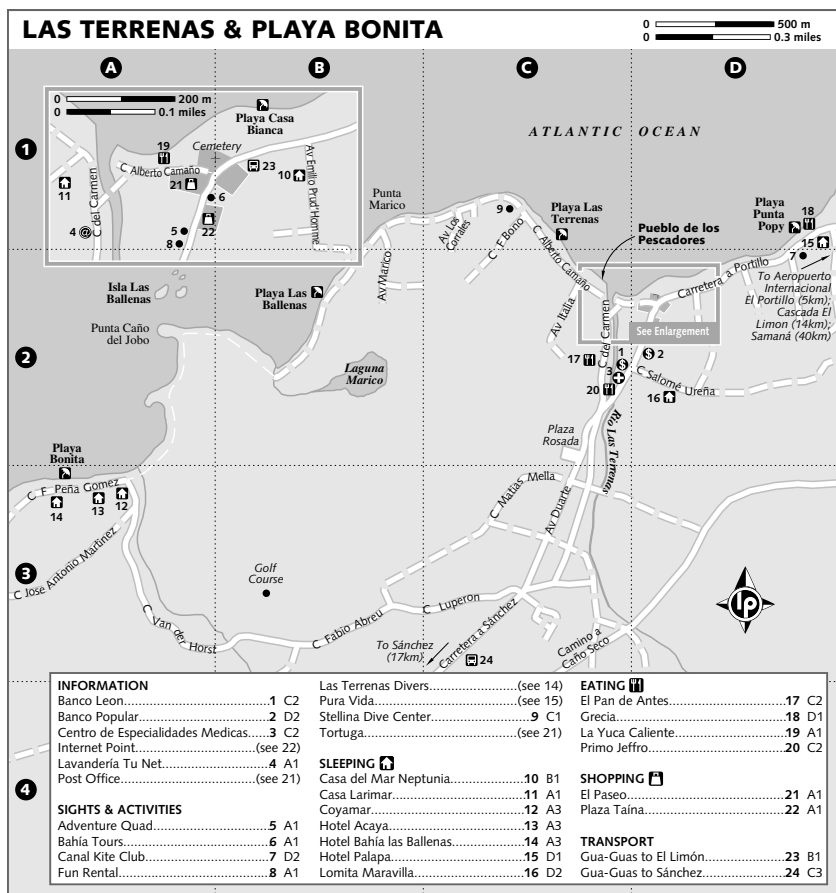
trip is to Playa Jackson, several kilometers west of town, reached by boat with stops in two or three locations along the way (per person including lunch, minimum six people US\$60).

Stellina Dive Center (☎ 809-868-4415; www.stellina diving.com; Kari Beach Hotel; ☎ 9am-noon)

Las Terrenas Divers (☎ 809-889-2422; www.lt-divers.com; Hotel Bahía las Ballenas, Playa Bonita; ☎ 9am-noon) Well respected German-run operation.

WATERSPORTS

Second to Cabarete, Las Terrenas is nevertheless a good place to try out a windsport in the DR. The beach at Punta Popy, only a kilometer or so east of the main intersection, is a popular place for kitesurfers and windsurfers. Two recommended outfits,



both near each other and Punta Popy, are the long-established **Pura Vida** (☎ 809-878-6640; www.puravidacaribes.com; Hotel Palapa, Calle 27 de Febrero; ☎ 10am-5:30pm) and **Canal Kite Club** (☎ 809-240-6556, 829-933-9325; www.canalkite.com; Calle 27 de Febrero). Both rent windsurf boards, body boards, surfboards, kitesurfing equipment and provide lessons for all these activities.

Tours

Along with booking airline tickets and hotels, and arranging car rentals, the full-service travel agency **Bahía Tours** (☎ 809-240-6088; www.bahia-tours.com; Av Duarte 237; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3:30-7pm Mon-Fri, 9:30am-1pm & 4:30-6:30pm Sat) organizes many tours in the area. Popular day trips include whale-watching in Bahía de Samaná

(per person US\$70), excursions to Los Haitises National Park (per person US\$60), jeep tours to El Rincón beach (per person US\$70) and horseback riding to El Limón waterfalls (per person US\$25).

There are several other recommended tour companies in town:

Adventure Quad (☎ 809-657-8766; aventurequad@hotmail.com; Calle Principal 165) Half-day excursions one four-wheel for two people US\$80.

Fun Rental (☎ 809-240-6784; www.funrental.fr; Calle Principal 258, Plaza Creole) Quad rentals (per day US\$55) and trips to Los Haitises (US\$58).

Tortuga (☎ 829-808-2233; tropicoodelsol@yahoo.fr; El Paseo) In addition to trips to Los Haitises, Tortuga offers catamaran excursions to Playa Rincon, Playa Jackson and elsewhere.

Sleeping

Casa del Mar Neptunia (☎ 809-240-6617; www.casadel-mar-neptunia.com; Av Emilio Prud'Homme; s/d incl breakfast US\$35/45; 🍷) This whitewashed hotel is equally homey and quiet with 12 large, airy rooms. Maybe the only downside is that each of the little porches faces a lush interior garden and so lacks privacy and views. Breakfast can be served here or in the comfortable lounge area in front.

Casa Larimar (☎ 809-240-6539; www.casa-larimar.com; Pueblo de los Pescadores; r incl breakfast US\$50-55; 🍷 🍷) This French-owned hotel, the first you come to walking west along the path in Pueblo de los Pescadores, is more notable for its spectacular rooftop patio and Jacuzzi and charming little garden pool than for its rooms. The latter are sparsely furnished with concrete floors. Cable TV and wi-fi are included. Not much Spanish is spoken so bring your French dictionary.

Hotel Palapa (☎ 809-240-6797; www.palapabeach.com; cnr Calle 27 de Febrero & Av España; r US\$65, q US\$85, all incl breakfast; 🍷 🍷) Across the road from Punta Popy, the Palapa is especially good for families and groups because the rooms are large and have loft spaces serving as an extra bedroom. Mostly everything is white, other than the thatched roofs of the bungalows, which surround a little pond – in the far back is a peaceful pool area. Look for the hotel behind Pura Vida, the water-sports company.

our pick Lomita Maravilla (☎ 809-240-6345; www.lomitamaravilla.com; Salome Ureña; villas US\$100, with private Jacuzzi US\$150, with private pool US\$200; 🍷 🍷 🍷) A short walk down a dirt road – often muddy – off Av Duarte, you'll find one of the gems of Las Terrenas. This European-inspired boutique hotel consists entirely of thatched-roof private bungalows set along palmed paths and around a swimming pool. Rooms verge on swanky, with TVs, DVD players and fully loaded kitchens ready for a make-it-yourself Caribbean meal. Offers wi-fi access.

Eating & Drinking

Most of the restaurants along Pueblo de Pescadores are fairly interchangeable – a mix of pizza, pasta, fish, grilled meats and a sprinkling of Dominican specials. And most have bars and stay open well after the kitchen has closed.

El Pan de Antes (☎ 809-994-3282; Calle del Carmen; 🍷 8am-7pm Tue-Sat, 8am-5pm Sun) Delicious pastries are made fresh daily at this French owned

patisserie. Croissants go fast on Sunday mornings.

Primo Jeffro (☎ 829-352-7654; Calle del Carmen 143; mains US\$2-7; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) For a change of pace, both in terms of cuisine and decor, head to this no-nonsense American-owned Mexican eatery. The open-air dining room couldn't be simpler, and unpretentious but the hearty tacos (US\$1.25), burritos and *chimichangas* hit the spot. *Almuerzos* (US\$4) and combo dinners (US\$4.75) are great deals.

Grecia (Punta Popy, Carretera a Portillo; mains US\$10; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This restaurant-café-bar by the beach is popular with Dominicans and expats and it's no wonder – there's even a shower and faucet to clean off the sand after a dip in the ocean. Sandwiches and grilled meats and fish are served to diners on picnic tables.

La Yuca Caliente (☎ 809-240-6634; Calle Libertad 6; mains US\$10-23; 🍷 lunch & dinner) A stand-out along Las Terrenas' restaurant row, Spanish-themed La Yuca Caliente combines professional service, a sophisticated ambience and a conversation-friendly sound system. Tables are set out on the beach, a romantic and serene spot for a late night meal. It's a wi-fi hot spot.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The Península de Samaná is now more easily accessible because of the new **Aeropuerto Internacional El Catey** (AZS; ☎ 809-338-0094), which receives international flights from San Juan, Puerto Rico (American Eagle), and various cities in Europe (Air Comet, Condor, LTU, CanJet, Corsair, Skyservice, Neos, Sunwing and Air Transat). Located 8km west of Sánchez and a 35-minute taxi ride (US\$50) from Las Terrenas, this airport will likely transform tourism on the peninsula.

Domestic airlines service **Aeropuerto Internacional El Portillo** (EPS; ☎ 809-248-2289), a one-strip airport located a few kilometers east of Las Terrenas.

Takeoff (☎ 809-552-1333, 809-481-0707; www.takeoffweb.com; El Paseo, Las Terrenas) and **Aerodomca** (☎ 809-240-6571, in Santo Domingo 809-567-1195; www.aerodomca.com) operate propeller planes between El Portillo and Santo Domingo.

There are minivan taxis (US\$9) waiting at El Portillo for arriving flights.

BUS

Las Terrenas has two *gua-gua* stops at opposite ends of Av Duarte. *Gua-guas* headed

to Sánchez (US\$1.40, 30 minutes, every 25 minutes, 7am to 6pm) take on passengers at a stop 500m south of Calle Luperón. From Sánchez you can connect to an El Caribe bus to Santo Domingo.

Those going to El Limón, 14km away (US\$1.75, 20 minutes, every 15 minutes, 7am to 5pm), leave from the corner of Av Duarte and the coastal road.

Getting Around

You can walk to and from most places in La Terrenas, though getting from one end to the other can take a half-hour or more. Taxis charge US\$10 each way to Playa Bonita and US\$15 to US\$20 to El Limón. *Motoconchos* are cheaper – US\$1.75 to Playa Bonita – but are less comfortable.

PLAYA BONITA

A get-away from a get-away, this appropriately named beach only a few kilometers west of Las Terrenas is a better alternative for those seeking a more peaceful, reclusive vacation. The half-moon shaped beach is fairly steep and narrow and parts are strewn with palm tree detritus. However, backed by a handful of tastefully landscaped hotels, many with well-manicured lawns that rival the beach in terms of attractiveness, this is an enticing spot.

Las Terrenas Divers (☎ 809-240-6066; www.lt-divers.com; Hotel Bahía Las Ballenas; ☎ 9:30am-noon, 3-5pm) offers dive trips and courses (one tank US\$34, equipment US\$7, five tanks US\$155), and snorkel trips to Isla Ballenas (US\$15, one hour) and Playa Jackson (per person US\$25 to US\$30, minimum three people).

Sleeping & Eating

Coyamar (☎ 809-240-5130; www.coyamar.com; cnr Calles F Peña Gomez & Van der Horst; s/d US\$45/60; 🍷) Located at the corner of Calle Van der Horst and the beach road, Coyamar is the least luxurious of the Playa Bonita hotels. The vibe is casual and friendly, especially good for families, and the restaurant near the front of the property and the pool are good places to hang out. Batiks and bright colors rule the day here and there.

Hotel Acaya (☎ 809-240-6161; www.hotelacaya.com; Calle F Peña Gomez; r US\$65-85; 🍷 🍷) Evocative of times gone by, this sophisticated French-owned hotel is a rebuke to the big box all-inclusives. Rooms in the two-story colonial building are simple and comfortable and everything is tastefully done, from the ceiling fans (air-con

available for US\$10 extra) to the lounge/restaurant in front. Offers wi-fi access.

ourpick Hotel Bahía las Ballenas (☎ 809-240-6066; www.bahia-las-ballenas.net; Calle José Antonio Martínez; d US\$95-130; 🍷 🍷) Spread out over a meticulously landscaped property, the Bahía las Ballenas has huge airy villas – all unique and some with interesting touches like roofless bathrooms. All have large wooden decks looking out over the lawn and garden and there's a large well-maintained pool lined with towering palm trees.

Getting There & Away

By car, Playa Bonita is reachable by a single dirt road that turns off from the Sánchez–Las Terrenas highway. A taxi ride here is US\$10, a *motoconcho* around US\$1.75.

NORTH COAST

Within two hours drive of Puerto Plata airport you'll find all the best the North Coast has to offer – watersports and beach nightlife in Cabarete, mountain biking in the coastal hills, the celebrated 27 waterfalls of Damajagua, sleepy little Dominican towns where it's still possible to escape the tourist hordes and mile after mile of that famous Caribbean sand.

CABARETE

pop 15,000

Cities gentrify; surf towns grow up. So it's been here in Cabarete – this one-time farming hamlet is now the adventure-sports capital of the country, booming with condos and new development. You'll find a sophisticated, grown-up beach town, with top-notch hotels and a beach dining experience second to none (not to mention the best winds and waves on the island).

Orientation

Cabarete is a one-street town, built up around the highway that runs right through the middle. Virtually all hotels, restaurants and shops are on the main drag, making it a congested, though easy-to-navigate place.

Information

All City (☎ 809-571-0112; per hr US\$1; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun) Fast internet, headphones. Also a call center.

Banco Progreso Right in the center of town.

Servi-Med (☎ 809-571-0964; 🕒 24hr) Highly recommended clinic.

Sights

Cabarete's beaches are its main attractions and not just for sun and sand. They're each home to a different water sport and are great places to watch beginner and advanced athletes alike.

Playa Cabarete, the main beach in front of town, is the best place for watching windsurfing, though the very best windsurfers are well offshore at the reef line. Look for them performing huge high-speed jumps and even end-over-end flips.

Bozo Beach is the western downwind side of Playa Cabarete and so named because of all the beginner windsurfers and kitesurfers who don't yet know how to tack upwind and so wash up on Bozo's shore. There are more kitesurfers at Bozo and the surf here is better for boogie boarding.

Kite Beach, 2km west of town, is a sight to behold on windy days, when scores of kites of all skill levels negotiate huge sails and 30m lines amid the waves and traffic. On those days, there's no swimming here, as you're liable to get run over.

Playa Encuentro, 4km west of town, is the place to go for surfing, though top windsurfers and kitesurfers sometimes go there to take advantage of the larger waves. The beach itself is OK, but the strong tide and rocky shallows make swimming here difficult.

La Boca, at the mouth of the Río Yasica, 7km east of town, is an ideal spot for wakeboarding – more than 2km of straight, flat river water to practice your latest trick.

Activities

KITESURFING

Cabarete is one of the top places in the world to kitesurf and the sport has eclipsed windsurfing as the town's sport *du jour*. Kite Beach has ideal conditions for the sport, which entails strapping yourself to a modified surfboard and a huge inflatable wind foil then skimming and soaring across the water. A number of kitesurfing schools offer multi-day courses for those who want to learn – just to go out by yourself you'll need at least three to four days of instruction (two to three hours instruction per day).

Expect to pay US\$50 to US\$70 per hour for private instruction, or roughly US\$400 to US\$500 for a three- to four-day course.

About half of the schools are on Kite Beach.

Kite Club (☎ 809-571-9748; www.kiteclubcabarete.com)

This well-run club is at the top of Kite Beach.

Kitexcite (☎ 809-571-9509; www.kitexcite.com; Kite Beach) Award-winning school uses radio helmets and optional off-shore sessions to maximize instruction.

Laurel Eastman Kiteboarding (☎ 809-571-0564; www.laureleastman.com) Friendly, safety-conscious shop located on Bozo Beach and run by one of the world's top kitesurfers.

WINDSURFING

The combination of strong, steady winds, relatively shallow water and a rockless shore creates perfect conditions for windsurfing here.

Board and sail rentals cost US\$30 to US\$35 per hour, US\$60 to US\$65 per day or US\$280 to US\$300 per week. Renters are usually required to purchase damage insurance for an additional US\$50 per week. Private lessons cost around US\$50 for an hour, US\$200 for a four-session course, with discounts for groups.

Carib Bic Wind Center (☎ 809-571-0640; caribwind.com) With more than 20 years of experience, the Bic Center is the oldest in town. It also rents bodyboards and Lasers (for those of you who prefer an actual boat attached to your sail).

Happy Surfpool (☎ 809-571-0784; www.happycabarete.com; Villa Taina Hotel) This friendly shop also sells quality windsurfing equipment.

Vela Windsurf Center (☎ 809-571-0805; velacabarete.com; main beach) One of the best choices for windsurfing in Cabarete. It uses excellent gear and can also rent sea kayaks (US\$10 to US\$15 per hour).

SURFING

Some of the best waves for surfing on the entire island – up to 4m – break over reefs 4km west of Cabarete on Playa Encuentro. Several outfits in town and on Playa Encuentro rent surfboards and offer instruction. Surfboard rental for a day is around US\$25 to US\$30; a three-hour course costs US\$45 to US\$50 per person and five-day surf camps costs US\$200 to US\$225 per person. All the surf schools have small offices on Playa Encuentro.

Ali's Surf Camp (☎ 809-571-0733; alissurfcamp.com) Part of the hotel of the same name. Frequent shuttle service from Cabarete to Encuentro for surfers.

No Work Team (☎ 809-571-0820; www.noworkteamcabarete.com) In the center of town. Also has a surf school on Encuentro.

Take Off (☎ 809-963-7873; www.321takeoff.com; Playa Encuentro) The German owner also organizes the Master of the Ocean competition.

DIVING

Northern Coast Diving (☎ 809-571-1028; www.northerncoastdiving.com) This well-respected Sosúa-based dive shop has a representative in the offices of Iguana Mama and can organize excursions from Río San Juan in the east to Monte Cristi in the west.

You're better off, though, popping over to Sosúa to compare prices and services.

Tours

Iguana Mama (☎ 809-571-0908; www.iguanamama.com) In a class of its own, Iguana Mama is the leading adventure-sports tour operator on the north coast. Its specialties are mountain-biking (easy to insanely difficult, US\$65) and cascading. It is the only operator that takes you to the 27th waterfall at Damajagua (US\$85) and it's pioneered a new cascading tour to Ciguapa Falls. There's also a variety of hiking trips, including one to Pico Duarte; the trek is expensive, but handy if you want transportation to and from Cabarete (US\$450 per person). It can also arrange a number of half-day and full-day canyoning opportunities in the area (US\$90 to US\$125).

Festivals & Events

Master of the Ocean (☎ 809-963-7873; www.masteroftheocean.com) is a triathlon of surfing, wind-surfing and kitesurfing held the final week of February. From the beach you can watch some spectacular performances.

The last week of February sand sculpture enthusiasts convene in Cabarete for the **International Sand Castle Competition**.

Held in Santiago and Cabarete in early November, the **Dominican Jazz Festival** (www.drjazzfestival.com) attracts top musical talent from around the country and even abroad. A large stage and beer tent is set up at the western end of the beach and the players trumpet jazz into the night.

Sleeping

Ali's Surf Camp (☎ 809-571-0733; alissurfcamp.com; s/d US\$29-44/33-66, apt US\$75-120; 🏠 📺 📺) The closest thing Cabarete has to a backpackers, this place rocks – the German owner serves up great portions of barbecued meat for dinner, where guests sit at picnic tables and, as he put it, 'are forced to make friends.' The rooms are rustic, there's no air-con and you'll want to use the

mosquito net provided (it's south of town adjacent to the lagoon). Surf school on site.

Kite Beach Hotel (☎ 809-571-0878; www.kitebeachhotel.com; Kite Beach; s/d US\$60/66, studio s/d US\$70/80, apt US\$90-240, penthouse US\$450-600, all incl breakfast; 🏠 📺 📺) This oceanfront hotel boasts well-appointed rooms with gleaming tile floors, good-sized bathrooms and satellite TV. All suites and apartments have balconies that afford at least partial ocean views. The laid-back pool area makes a great place to watch the action in the sky and on the water. An extensive breakfast buffet is included.

Agualina Kite Resort (☎ 809-571-0787; www.agualina.com; Kite Beach; r US\$70, studio US\$85, apt US\$150; 🏠 📺 📺) Opened in 2004, this is the most comfortable lodging on Kite Beach. Studios and apartments have stylish, well-equipped kitchens – stainless steel refrigerators are an especially nice touch – and large modern bathrooms with glass showers and gleaming fixtures. Offers wi-fi access.

our pick **Natura Cabañas** (☎ 809-571-1507; www.naturacabana.com; s/d/tr/q US\$120/160/210/240; 🏠 📺) Buried at the end of a McMansion subdivision just west of Cabarete, these marvellous eco-themed bungalows (think exposed freestone bathrooms) are right on the beach. Even if you aren't staying here, come for its day spa – yoga and massage are both on offer. The Chilean owners also serve excellent seafood in the on-site restaurant (mains US\$15 to US\$30).

Eating

Dining out on Cabarete's beach is the quintessential Caribbean experience – paper lanterns hanging from palm trees, a gentle ocean breeze and excellent food (even if it does cost the same you'd pay back home). You can also find good, cheap Dominican set meals on the main street.

Panadería Repostería Dick (☎ 809-571-0612; breakfast US\$4-7; 🕒 7am-3pm, closed Wed) The undisputed champion of breakfast in Cabarete, Dick serves large set breakfasts with juice and strong coffee. Its bakery does whole wheat bread and mind-blowing vanilla-cream Danishes.

Hexenkessel (☎ 809-571-0493; mains US\$5-14; 🕒 24hr) After a night of debauchery, nothing hits the spot like a monstrous schnitzel (US\$5) at this never-closes German eatery. Clients sit side by side at picnic tables and other house specialties include potato pancakes with ground beef (US\$6.50) and fried Bavarian bratwurst (US\$4).

TWENTY-SEVEN WATERFALLS

Travelers routinely describe the tour of the waterfalls at Damajagua as 'the coolest thing they did in the DR.' We agree. Guides lead you up, swimming and climbing through the waterfalls. To get down you jump – as much as 5m – into the sparkling pools below.

These days it's mandatory to go with a guide and wear a helmet and life jacket, but there's no minimum group size, so you can go by yourself if you wish. You'll need around four hours to make it to the 27th waterfall and back. The falls are open 8:30am to 4pm, but go early, before the crowds arrive and you might just have the whole place to yourself.

To get to the falls, go south from Imbert on the highway for 3.3km until you see a sign on your left with pictures of a waterfall. From there it's about 1km down to the visitors center. Alternatively, take a *gua-gua* from Puerto Plata and ask to get off at the entrance.

You can go up to the 7th, 12th, or 27th waterfall. Most 'jeep safari' package tours only go to the 7th waterfall. You should be in good shape and over the age of 12. The entrance fee varies depending on your nationality and how far you go. Foreigners pay US\$8 to the 7th waterfall, US\$10 to the 12th and US\$14 to the highest waterfall.

US\$1 of every entrance fee goes to a community development fund – plans are underway to build a library for the local school, fix a local church and build foot bridges over a nearby river.

Casanova (☎ 809-571-0806; mains US\$12-25; 🍽 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This Asian-decorated restaurant has Buddha statues about the place and plays funky house music. The food is the best you'll find directly on the beach – the usual suspects like surf-n-turf, but also a goat's cheese salad and some mighty fine pizza, too.

ourpick Otra Cosa (☎ 809-571-0607; La Punta; mains US\$15-35; 🍽 dinner, closed Tue) This French-Caribbean restaurant, just across from Velero and with marvellous sea breezes at dusk, does some of the choicest food in town. *Foie gras* (\$20) – features prominently on the menu, as does *filet mignon* with duck liver, morels and cognac (\$33). There's good fish, lobster and steak dishes, too. It has wi-fi access.

Drinking

Lax (<http://lax-cabarete.com>; 🍷 9am-1am) This melow bar and restaurant serves food until 10:30pm. In many ways it's the social headquarters of Cabarete. Try the *chinola mojito* – surprisingly good.

Onno's (☎ 809-571-0461; 🍷 9am-late) This edgy, foreign-owned restaurant and nightclub serves some of the cheapest food on the beach – a basic breakfast goes for just US\$2. At night a DJ spins a decent set and the party spills out onto the beach.

Bambú (🍷 6pm-late) Just 100m west of Onno's, this bar and disco plays loud house music and reggaeton, and the crowd spills

out onto the beach until it merges with those at Onno's.

Getting There & Around

None of the main bus companies offers service to Cabarete – the closest bus depots are in Sosúa, where you can get a *gua-gua* (US\$0.30, 20 minutes) or taxi (US\$12) to Cabarete. Heaps of *gua-guas* ply this coastal road, including to Río San Juan (US\$2.25, one hour) and Puerto Plata (US\$1.75, one hour).

Transportation in town is dominated by *motoconchos*; a ride out to Encuentro should cost US\$1.50 but will probably cost more like US\$3.

A popular option for the many visitors who stay a week or longer is to rent a scooter or motorcycle. Expect to pay around US\$10 to US\$15 per day.

The motorcycle-shy can call a **taxi** (☎ 809-571-0767), which will charge you US\$8 to Encuentro, US\$20 to the airport and US\$35 to Puerto Plata.

CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

Even the most die-hard beach fan will eventually tire of sun and sand, and when you do, the cool mountainous playground of the Central Highlands is the place to come. Here you'll find the popular mountain retreat of Jarabacoa (500m) – the Cabarete of the interior – a tourist town and the center of a booming adventure-tour trade. Here you

can go white-water rafting, visit waterfalls on horseback and still party till the sun comes up, if you've a mind to do so. Economic life in the area revolves around Santiago, the DR's second-largest city and the capital of a vast tobacco and sugarcane-growing region.

JARABACOA

pop 57,000

Nestled in the low foothills of the mountains at 500m, Jarabacoa likes to call itself the 'City of Eternal Spring.' This may be an exaggeration – you can still happily tan poolside if you wish – but in the evenings the climate is noticeably cooler. More importantly, Jarabacoa is the outdoor capital of the Central Highlands, a place to go white-water rafting, horseback riding or canyoning and the base most people use to hike to Pico Duarte.

There's some excellent value hotels in Jarabacoa and a couple of good restaurants. Those wanting to party hearty can join the locals in the many *colmados* that ring Parque Central, or practice your merengue steps in the handful of nightclubs in town.

Orientation

Av Independencia and Calle María N Galán, one block over, are Jarabacoa's main north-south streets – Parque Central is at one end of Av Independencia and the Caribe Tours bus terminal at the other. The city's major east-west street is Calle El Carmen, which borders Parque Central.

Information

A&G Servicios Múltiples (☎ 809-574-4044; genaotours@hotmail.com; Av Independencia 43; 🕒 8am-10pm) This travel agency doubles as telephone center.

Banco Popular (Av Independencia near Herrera)

Banco Progreso (Calle Uribe near Av Independencia)

Clínica Dr Terrero (☎ 809-574-4597; Av Independencia 2-A)

New York Net Café (Plaza Ramirez; US\$0.75/hr; 🕒 8am-12midnight) Best hours and prices in town.

Politur (☎ 809-754-3216; cnr José Durán & Mario Galán) Behind the Caribe Tours terminal.

Sights & Activities

White-water rafting is the star of the show here, followed closely by visiting the three

CLIMBING PICO DUARTE

Pico Duarte (3087m) was first climbed in 1944 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Dominican independence. These days about 3000 people a year ascend Pico Duarte.

For all the effort involved to summit the mountain, there actually isn't a great deal to see. Up to around 2000m you travel through rainforest, passing foliage thick with ferns and some good bird life. You quickly pass above this limit, however, and spend most of the trip in a wasteland; numerous forest fire have left the landscape barren and the only animals you're likely to see are marauding bands of cawing crows.

There are **ranger stations** (admission Dominicans/foreigners US\$1.50/3; 🕒 8am-5pm) near the start of the major trails into the parks – at La Ciénaga, Sabaneta, Mata Grande, Las Lagunas and Constanza. As a safety precaution, everyone entering the park, even for a short hike, must be accompanied by a guide.

While the average temperature ranges between 12°C and 20°C most of the year, lows of -5°C are not uncommon, especially in December and January. Rainstorms can happen at any time during the year. While the soil is sandy and drains well, you'll still want a good raincoat plus sturdy shoes or boots.

Routes to the Top

There are two popular routes up Pico Duarte.

The shortest and easiest route (and by far the most utilized) is from **La Ciénaga**, reached via Jarabacoa. It is 23km in each direction and involves approximately 2275m of vertical ascent en route to the peak. It's recommended to do this route in three days – one long day to arrive at the La Compartición campground, one easy day to summit and enjoy the views and one long day back out again. Consider also adding a fourth day to your trip to do the side-trip to the **Valle de Tetero**, a beautiful valley at the base of the mountain.

The second most popular route is from **Mata Grande**. It's 45km to the summit and involves approximately 3800m of vertical ascent, including going over La Pelona, a peak only slightly lower

waterfalls nearby. You can also go canyoning and there are a few short hikes in the area. See p316 for tour information.

WHITE-WATER RAFTING

The Río Yaque del Norte is the longest river in the country and rafting a portion of it can be a fun day trip. The rapids are rated two's and three's (including sections nicknamed 'Mike Tyson' and 'the Cemetery') and part of the thrill is the risk your raft may turn over, dumping you into a rock-infested river.

WATERFALLS

So picturesque are the waterfalls near Jarabacoa that an opening scene of the movie *Jurassic Park* was filmed here, using **Salto Jimenoa Uno** as the backdrop. It's definitely the prettiest, a 60m waterfall that pours from a gaping hole in an otherwise solid rock cliff. (A lake feeds the waterfall via a subsurface drain.) There's a nice swimming hole, but the water is icy cold. The trail to the waterfall is 7.1km from the Shell station in Jarabacoa along Calle El Carmen, the road to Constanza.

Salto de Jimenoa Dos is a 40m cascade with an appealing bathing pool – but don't, the currents are sometimes quite strong. The turnoff to the falls is 4km northwest of Jarabacoa on the road to Hwy Duarte and a portion of the trail includes walking over a series of narrow suspension bridges and trails flanked by densely forested canyon walls.

Salto de Baiguarte is also in a lush canyon but isn't nearly as impressive as the others, nor is the pool as inviting. To get there, take Calle El Carmen east out of Jarabacoa for 3km until you see a sign for the waterfalls on the right-hand side of the road. It's a pleasant walk from town, if you're not in a hurry.

The falls are easy to visit if you've got your own transportation. If not, a *motoconcho* tour to all three falls will cost around US\$15 to US\$20 and a taxi US\$60 to US\$80. Either way you'll have to pay the park entrance fee (Dominicans/foreigners US\$0.60/1.50).

HIKING

There's a number of half-day and full-day walks you can take in the area. The best day

than Pico Duarte itself. You'll spend the first night at the Río La Guácara campground and the second at the Valle de Bao campground. You can walk this route return in five days, but far more interesting is to walk out via the Valle de Tetero and La Ciénega (also five days).

Tours & Guides

The easiest way to summit Pico Duarte is to take an organized tour. Prices vary widely and depend on how many people are going and for how long. Expect to pay roughly US\$80 to US\$100 per person per day. Be sure to book at least a month in advance.

Rancho Baiguarte (p316) is the best overall choice for non-Spanish speakers, as it is based in Jarabacoa and also offers the detour through Valle de Tetero. Iguana Mama (see p312) in Cabarete is good if you're in a hurry and want transportation to and from the north coast.

Your other option – assuming you speak good Spanish and you're not in a hurry – is to go to the trailhead in person and organize mules, food and a guide on your own. Mules and muleteers go for around US\$10 per day each and the lead guide around US\$15 per day (minimum one guide for every five hikers). Guides can organize basic provisions for you.

Attempting to summit Pico Duarte without mules is neither possible nor desirable – you can't enter the park without a guide and a guide won't go without mules. Plus walking with a full pack in this heat would drain whatever enjoyment you might get from the walk. Mules are also essential in case someone gets injured.

Sleeping

There are approximately 14 campgrounds in the parks, each with a first-come first-served cabin that hikers can use for free. Each cabin holds 20 or more people and consists of wood floors, wood walls and a wood ceiling (and rats), but no beds, mats or lockers – if you have a tent, consider bringing it along so you can avoid using the cabins altogether. Most of the cabins also have a stand-alone 'kitchen': an open-sided structure with concrete wood-burning stoves.

walk is to **El Mogote**, a short peak just 2km west of town. To get there, hop a *motoconcho* (US\$3) or taxi (US\$7) to the entrance. Just past the entrance you'll encounter a Salesian monastery; from here it's a stiff 2½- to three-hour walk to the summit. It's a slippery walk, nay, slide, down from the top.

Tours

Jarabacoa's biggest and best tour operator, **Rancho Baiguate** (☎ 809-574-6890; www.ranchobaiguate.com; Carretera a Constanza) dominates the stage, leaving but crumbs for the rest. While its main clientele are Dominican groups from the capital and foreign guests from the all-inclusives near Puerto Plata, independent travelers are always free to join any of the trips (call as far in advance as possible).

Prices are as follows: rafting (US\$50), canyoning (US\$50), mountain biking (US\$25), all with breakfast and lunch included. It also offers horseback/jeep tours to the waterfalls (US\$16 to US\$21 with lunch). Its Pico Duarte trips range in price depending on the number of people and the side trips you take; a group

of four people for three days with no side trips pay US\$300 per person.

Sleeping

Hotel Brisas del Yaque II (☎ 809-574-2100; Independencia 13; d/tw US\$45/75; ♿) Although it shares the same ownership and has a similar name with another hotel in town, this newer version has 20 comfortable and modern rooms. The twin rooms have two bathrooms, one for each guest. Ask for a mountain-facing room, if only to avoid the noisy street-side market.

Hotel Gran Jimenoa (☎ 809-574-6304; www.granjimenoa.com; Av La Confluencia; s/d/tr/ste incl breakfast US\$50/74/95/117; ♿) Set several kilometers from Jarabacoa directly on the roaring Río Jimenoa, this is easily the best hotel in town. It may be neither on the beach nor an all-inclusive, but you could easily spend a week here without leaving the grounds (the restaurant is excellent). A new wing was under construction when we were there.

Rancho Baiguate (☎ 809-574-6890; www.ranchobaiguate.com; Carretera a Constanza; s US\$77-107, d US\$126-163, tr US\$170-220, q US\$252; ♿) A cross between

RESERVA CIENTÍFICA LOMA QUITA ESPUELA

The 'Mountain of the Missing Spur' – a reference to the dense underbrush that ripped boot spurs from cowboys, not the 'espuela' or fighting claw of a cock (also frequently removed) – is a remote and lovely (and definitely off the beaten track) national park. The NGO **Fundación Loma Quita Espuela** (☎ 809-588-4156; www.flqe.org.do; Urbanización Almánzar, cnr Calle Luis Carrón & Av del Jaya; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm) runs the national park on behalf of the government and is actively involved in developing sustainable ways for the local farmers to use this natural resource.

Many of the local, small cocoa growers whose land borders the national park now produce organic cocoa and the foundation helps them achieve organic certification. A beekeeping project is also encouraging locals to keep bees in the national park – more bees helps the endemic plants fertilize better and it's extra income for the locals at minimal cost to the environment.

The national park contains the largest rainforest on the island and is full of endemic species, both plant and animal, that are on the point of extinction. Additionally, more than 60 streams flow from these mountains and provide water to the cities and towns surrounding, making the foundation's efforts critical to the survival not only of the park but also the hundreds of thousands of people who live nearby.

Visiting Quita Espuela makes a pleasant day trip from Santiago or Santo Domingo. The foundation offers a number of tours, including the hike to the top of **Loma Quita Espuela** (942m, 2½ hours), where an observation tower commands excellent views out over the Valle de Cibao. A guide is mandatory (Spanish-only) and can explain the flora and fauna you see along the way. The tour costs US\$12 for a group of up to 15 people. You'll also have to pay the park entrance fee (Dominicans/foreigners US\$0.60/1.50).

For those less actively inclined, there's a shorter walk that tours several cocoa plantations, where you can buy *bola de cacao* – crude chocolate balls the local housewives grate and sweeten to make hot chocolate. The tour ends at a local *balneario*, where you can swim.

The entrance to Loma Quita Espuela is 14km (30 minutes) northeast of San Francisco de Macorís on a rough road that gets progressively worse. Don't try this without a good 4WD.

a summer camp and an all-inclusive resort, Rancho Baiguat offers plain but comfortable accommodations on its 72-sq-km complex about 5km east of town. Three meals are included in the price. An on-site veggie garden supplies the competent Dominican cook, and a worm farm and grey-water treatment plant reduce its impact on the environment. Bring mosquito repellent. Staff can pick you up from town.

Eating

Restaurant Del Parque Galería (☎ 809-574-6749; cr Duarte & Mirabal; mains US\$8-15; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Overlooking Parque Central, this open-air restaurant-bar serves up traditional Dominican meals as well as international favorites. This is a great place to people watch – feel free to just order a drink and check out the goings-on in the park.

Restaurante El Rancho (☎ 809-574-4557; Calle Independencia 1; mains US\$8-15; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Part of the Baiguat empire, El Rancho offers a varied menu of chicken and beef dishes, sushi-style wraps and excellent pizzas. The

walls of this semi-dressy, open-sided restaurant are graced with handsome local paintings although the *motoconcho* traffic outside detracts somewhat from the setting.

Hotel Gran Jimenoa (☎ 809-574-6304; www.granjimenoa.com; Av La Confluencia; mains US\$14-35; ☺ 7am-11pm) Jarabacoa's best hotel also offers one of the town's most unique dining experiences. The restaurant here occupies an open-air deck, perched right alongside the roaring Río Jimenoa. Dishes are fairly standard, though well-prepared; try the local Jarabacoa specialty, chicken breast stuffed with cream cheese.

Getting There & Away

Caribe Tours (☎ 809-574-4796; Calle Duran near Av Independencia) offers the only 1st-class bus service to Jarabacoa. Four daily departures to Santo Domingo (US\$5.40, three hours, 7am, 10am, 1:30pm and 4:30pm) include a stop in La Vega (US\$2.30, 1½ hours).

Next door a **gua-gua terminal** (Av Independencia at Duran) provides service to La Vega (US\$1.40, 45 minutes, every 10 to 30 minutes, 7am to

BEST OF THE REST

Bayahibe, originally founded by fishermen from Puerto Rico in the 19th century, is like an actor playing many roles in the same performance. In the morning it's the proverbial tourist gateway, when busloads of tourists from resorts further east hop into boats bound for Isla Saona. But once this morning rush hour is over it turns back into a drowsy village. Another buzz of activity when they return and then after sunset another transformation. What sets Bayahibe apart is that it manages to maintain its character despite the continued encroachment of big tourism

Meaning 'Land of the Mountains,' **Parque Nacional Los Haitises** (admission US\$3.50; ☺ 7am-8pm) is a 1375-sq-km park at the southwestern end of the Bahía de Samaná containing scores of lush hills jutting some 30m to 50m from the water and coastal wetlands. The knolls were formed one to two million years ago, when tectonic drift buckled the thick limestone shelf that had formed underwater. The area receives a tremendous amount of rainfall, creating perfect conditions for subtropical humid forest plants such as bamboo, ferns and bromeliads. In fact, Los Haitises contains over 700 species of flora, including four types of mangrove, making it one of the most highly bio-diverse regions in the Caribbean. Los Haitises also is home to 110 species of bird, 13 of which are endemic to the island. The park also contains a series of limestone caves, some of which contain intriguing Taíno pictographs.

With its scores of tiny, jungly islands and thick mangrove forests, the park makes for great exploring by boat. Victoria Marine (p301) and other tour outfits in Samaná offer trips here for around US\$45 per person, including guide and transportation to, and inside, the park.

Fortunately, the area around the park has one of the more special places to stay anywhere in the DR. A stay at **Paraíso Caño Hondo** (☎ 809-248-5995; www.paraisocanoondo.com in Spanish; r US\$48) couldn't be further from the typical beach resort experience. The Jivales River, which runs through the property, has been channeled into 10 magical waterfall-fed pools, perfect for a soak any time of the day. Rooms are large and rustic, made mostly of wood, though extremely comfortable. Signs from the center of Sabana de la Mar direct you to the turn-off for the hotel – the same one as for the entrance to Parque Los Haitises.

6pm). If you prefer to hire a cab to La Vega, the ride costs around US\$22.

Públicos to Constanza (cnr Deligne & El Carmen) leave from in front of the Shell gasoline station at around 9am and 1pm daily (US\$2.80, two hours). It's a scenic but rough ride in the back of a pickup truck.

Getting Around

The town of Jarabacoa is easily managed on foot but to get to outlying hotels and sights you can easily flag down a *motoconcho* on any street corner during the day. If you prefer a cab, try **Taxi Jarabacoa** (☎ 809-574-7474) or just catch a cab at the corner of José Durán and Av Independencia.

DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATIONS

Compared to other destinations in the Caribbean, lodging in the Dominican Republic is relatively affordable. That being said, there is a dearth of options for independent travelers wishing to make decisions on-the-fly and for whom cost is a concern. All the room rates listed in this book are for the high season, which varies slightly from region to region. More so than other destinations, hotel rooms booked a minimum of three days in advance on the internet are shockingly cheaper (especially at the DR's famous all-inclusive resorts), than if you book by phone or, worst case scenario, simply show up without a reservation. Much of the prime beachfront property throughout the country is occupied by all-inclusives. The largest concentrations are at Bávaro–Punta

Cana in the east and Playa Dorada in the north, though their numbers are growing in areas around Bayahibe, Río San Juan, Sosúa and Luperón.

ACTIVITIES

Cycling

Several tour operators – like Iguana Mama in Cabarete (p312) – offer highly recommended mountain-bike tours ranging from half-day downhill rides to 12-day cross-country excursions.

Diving & Snorkeling

On the southern coast, warm Caribbean waters and abundant tropical fish make for fun, easy dives. On the north coast, the Atlantic waters are cooler and less transparent but the terrain includes more canyons, swim-throughs, caverns and rock outcrops; Sosúa is the north coast's dive capital, and excursions can be organized from there to all points along the coast. A variety of underwater sights around Las Galeras (p304) are popular.

Hiking

The town of Jarabacoa is the jumping-off point for ascents of the Caribbean's tallest peak, Pico Duarte at 3087m. Hiking through the Valle de Tétero, a beautiful valley with rivers and indigenous petroglyphs, makes a rewarding side trip.

Golf

Known as one of the premier golf destinations in the Caribbean, the Dominican Republic has more than two dozen courses to choose from.

PRACTICALITIES

- **Newspapers & Magazines** You'll find *Listín Diario*, *Hoy*, *Ultima Hora*, *Siglo* and *Nacional*, plus *International Herald Tribune*, *New York Times* and *Miami Herald* in many tourist areas.
- **Radio & TV** There are some 150 radio stations, most playing merengue and *bachata* (the DR's 'country'-style music); there are also seven local TV networks, though cable and satellite programming is very popular for baseball, movies and American soap operas.
- **Electricity** The Dominican Republic uses the same electrical system as the USA and Canada (110V to 125V AC, 60Hz, North American-style plugs). Power outages are common but many hotels and shops have backup generators.
- **Video Systems** NTSC
- **Weights & Measures** The metric system is used for everything except gasoline, which is in gallons and at laundromats, where pounds are used.

Signature courses by high-profile designers are being built at a steady pace. The majority are affiliated with (or located nearby) the top all-inclusive resorts, but are open to guests and nonguests alike.

Whale-Watching

From mid-January to mid-March, thousands of humpback whales congregate in and around the Bay of Samaná, making it one of the best whale-watching spots in the world.

Windsurfing & Kitesurfing

The DR is one of the top places in the world for windsurfing and kitesurfing. The wind blows hardest in Cabarete, a town on the north coast given over almost wholly to the two sports. Cabarete has numerous schools for those interested in either. Las Terrenas on the Península de Samaná is a growing destination for both sports.

BOOKS

Lonely Planet's *Dominican Republic & Haiti* has more information on traveling in the DR. Baseball fans should pick up *Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream*. For more on the DR's music, try *Bachata: A Social History of Dominican Popular Music*, by Deborah Pacini Hernandez and *Merengue: Dominican Music and Dominican Identity*, by Paul Austerlitz. *Why the Cocks Fight*, by Michele Wucker, examines Dominican-Haitian relations through the metaphor of cockfighting. *Death in Paradise* by JB Mackinnon is perhaps the best contemporary account of the DR; it's also an investigation into the Trujillo regime.

BUSINESS HOURS

The following hours are standard for the DR. Exceptions are noted in individual listings.

Banks ☎ 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday, 9am to 1pm Saturday

Government offices ☎ 7:30am to 2:30pm Monday to Friday

Restaurants ☎ 9am to 10pm Monday to Saturday; most close between lunch and dinner

Shops ☎ 9am to 7:30pm Monday to Saturday

Supermarkets ☎ 8am to 10pm Monday to Saturday

Tourist attractions ☎ 9am to 6pm; many museums and galleries close one day per week (usually Monday)

Liquor licensing laws, and hence bar opening and closing times, were in flux at the time of

research. However, expect bars, nightclubs and casinos to be open from 6pm to late.

CHILDREN

All-inclusive resorts can be a convenient and affordable way for families to travel, as they do away with decisions on when and where to eat, what to do and where to stay. For independent-minded families, the DR has plenty of family-friendly beaches and outdoor activities.

There are few kid-specific parks or attractions, however.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Some guests at all-inclusive resorts report having items stolen from their rooms. As in any hotel, don't leave money or valuables in plain view.

Use the room safe (if one is available) or lock items in an inside pocket of your suitcase.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

For the contact information of all Dominican embassies and consulates, check out the website of the **Secretaría de Estado de Relaciones Exteriores** (www.serex.gov.do). When it's functioning, it's a good resource.

Canada (☎ 809-685-1136; sdgo@dfai-maeci.gc.ca; Av Eugenio de Marchena 39)

Cuba (☎ 809-537-2113; Calle FP Ramírez 809)

France (☎ 809-687-5270; www.ambafrance-do.org; Calle de las Damas 42 btwn Luperón & El Conde)

Germany (☎ 809-542-8949; 16th fl, Torre Piantini, cnr Avs Gustavo A Mejía Ricart & Abraham Lincoln)

Haiti (☎ 809-686-5778; cnr Calle Juan Sánchez Ramírez 33 & Av Máximo Gómez)

Italy (☎ 809-682-0830; Calle Rodríguez Objío 4)

Japan (☎ 809-567-3365; 8th fl, Torre BHD office bldg, cnr Calle Luis Thomen & Av Jiménez Moya)

Netherlands (☎ 809-565-5240; Mayor Enrique Valverde)

Spain (☎ 809-535-6500; 4th fl, Torre BHD office bldg, cnr Calle Luis Thomen & Av Jiménez Moya)

Trinidad & Tobago (☎ 809-687-1202; Isabel La Católica 171)

UK (☎ 809-472 7111; cnr Av 27 de Febrero 233 & Av Máximo Gómez)

USA (☎ 809-221-2171; www.usemb.gov.do; cnr Av César Nicolás Penson & Av Máximo Gómez)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

If there's any generalization to be made about Dominicans, it is that they take holidays and celebrations very seriously.

Carnaval (February) Celebrated with great fervor throughout the country every Sunday in February, culminating in

a huge blowout in Santo Domingo the last weekend of the month or the first weekend of March. Masks and costumes figure prominently in every town's celebration – Santiago even hosts an international Carnival mask competition.

Independence Day (February 27) On this day in 1844 the Dominican Republic gained independence from Haiti, which had occupied the DR shortly after the latter declared independence from Spain. The day is marked by street celebrations and military parades.

Semana Santa 'Holy Week,' in March, is the biggest travel holiday in the country and much of Latin America. Everyone heads to the water – expect crowded beaches, innumerable temporary food stands and music day and night.

Santo Domingo Merengue Festival Santo Domingo hosts the country's largest and most raucous merengue festival. For two weeks at the end of July and beginning of August, the world's top merengue bands play for the world's best merengue dancers.

HOLIDAYS

New Year's Day January 1

Epiphany/Three Kings Day January 6

Our Lady of Altigracia January 21

Duarte Day January 26

Independence Day February 27

Holy Thursday, Holy Friday, Easter Sunday
March/April

Pan-American Day April 14

Labor Day May 1

Foundation of Sociedad la Trinitaria July 16

Restoration Day August 16

Our Lady of Mercedes September 24

Columbus Day October 12

UN Day October 24

All Saints' Day November 1

Christmas Day December 25

MONEY

The Dominican monetary unit is the peso, indicated by the symbol RD\$. There are one- and five-peso coins, while paper money comes in denominations of 10, 20, 50, 100, 500 and 1000 pesos.

ATMs

Banco Popular, Banco Progreso, Banco de Reservas, Banco León and Scotiabank all have ATMs that accept most foreign debit cards.

Black Market

Moneychangers will approach you in a number of tourist centers, but you get equally favorable rates and a much securer transaction at an ATM, bank or exchange office.

Credit Cards

Visa and MasterCard are accepted widely (Amex a little less so), especially in areas frequented by tourists. Some businesses add a surcharge for credit card purchases (typically 16%).

Taxes & Tipping

There are two taxes on food and drink sales: a 16% sales tax (ITBIS) and a 10% service charge. The latter is supposed to be divided among the wait and kitchen staff; some people choose to leave an additional 10% tip for exceptional service. There's a 23% tax on hotel rooms – ask whether the listed rates include taxes.

TELEPHONE

The Dominican Republic country code is ☎ 809, and you need to dial this number even when making calls with the DR. To call from North America, dial ☎ 1-809 + the local number. From elsewhere, dial you country's international dialing code + ☎ 809 + the local number. We've included the full 10-digit number in the DR listings in this chapter.

Call centers are the easiest and cheapest way to make international phone calls (average rates per minute to USA US\$0.20; per minute to Europe US\$0.50; per minute to Haiti US\$0.50).

Phone cards are available at many hotels and mini-marts; follow the Spanish/English instructions printed on the back.

Mobile phones are very popular and travelers with global roaming-enabled phones can often receive and make cell phone calls – be aware that per-minute fees can be exorbitant. If you have a GSM phone that you can unlock you can use a SIM card bought from Orange or Claro (prepaid startup kit US\$10). New cell phones can be bought at Orange with a prepaid SIM card for less than US\$30.

VISAS

Tourist cards, available upon arrival for US\$10, are issued to foreign visitors from Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, South Africa the UK and USA, among many others.

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

- **Ambulance** ☎ 911
- **Fire** ☎ 911
- **Police** ☎ 911

TRANSPORTATION

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Entering the Dominican Republic

All foreign visitors must have a valid passport to enter the Dominican Republic. A tourist card is purchased on arrival – see opposite.

At airports, neither immigration nor customs officials pay much attention to tourists carrying an ordinary amount of luggage. Border officials may be more vigilant.

Air

Santo Domingo's **Aeropuerto Internacional Las Américas** (SDQ; ☎ 809-549-0081) is easily the largest and most modern airport in the country; however, **Aeropuerto Internacional Punta Cana** (PUJ; ☎ 809-959-2473), serving Bávaro and Punta Cana, actually handles more passengers. Puerto Plata's **Aeropuerto Internacional Gregorio Luperón** (POP; ☎ 809-586-1992) and Santiago's **Aeropuerto Internacional Cibao** (STI; ☎ 809-581-8072) also handle a good number of international flights.

The following airports also service international flights:

Aeropuerto Internacional El Catey (AZS; ☎ 809-338-0094) New airport 40km west of Samaná that handles international flights from various European cities and San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Aeropuerto Internacional La Romana (LRM, Casa de Campo; ☎ 809-689-1548) Modern airport near La Romana and Casa de Campo; handles primarily charter flights from the US, Canada and Europe.

The following airlines service the DR:

Aerpostal (☎ 809-549-8067; www.aerpostal.com) Caracas

Air Canada (☎ 809-541-2929; www.aircanada.ca) Toronto

Air Europa (☎ 809-683-8020; www.aireuropa.com) Mallorca

Air France (☎ 809-686-8432; www.airfrance.com) Paris

Air Jamaica (☎ 809-872-0080; www.airjamaica.com) Kingston

American Airlines (☎ 809-542-5151; www.aa.com) New York, San Juan

Condor (☎ 809-689-9625; www.condor.com) Munich
Continental Airlines (☎ 809-262-1060; www.continental.com) Newark

COPA Airlines (☎ 809-472-2672; www.copaair.com) Havana, Kingston, Panama City, Port of Spain

Cubana Air (☎ 809-227-2040; www.cubana.cu) Havana

Delta (☎ 809-200-9191; www.delta.com) Atlanta

Iberia (☎ 809-508-7979; www.iberia.com) Madrid

Jet Blue (☎ 809-549-1793; www.jetblue.com) New York, Orlando

Lan Chile (☎ 809-689-2116; www.lan.com) Santiago

LTU (☎ 809-586-4075; www.ltu.com) Dusseldorf

Lufthansa (☎ 809-689-9625; www.lufthansa.com) Frankfurt

Martinair Holland (☎ 809-621-7777; www.martinair.com) Amsterdam, Frankfurt

Mexicana (☎ 809-541-1016; www.mexicana.com) Mexico City

Spirit Airlines (☎ 809-381-4111; www.spiritair.com) Fort Lauderdale

US Airways (☎ 809-540-0505; www.usair.com) Philadelphia

Varig (☎ 809-563-3434; www.varig.com) São Paulo

Land

BORDER CROSSINGS

There are three main border crossings between the Dominican Republic and Haiti: Jimaní/Malpasé in the south on the road between Port-au-Prince and Santo Domingo; in the north at Dajabón/Ouanaminthe between Cap-Haïtien and Santiago; and further south at Elías Piña/Belladère. Borders open 8am to 6pm but it is always a good idea to arrive early.

When leaving the Dominican Republic, travelers will be asked to produce their passports and tourist cards. From Haiti, you must have your passport and the yellow entry card you received upon arrival.

BUS

If you want to travel to Haiti, **Capital Coach Line** (☎ 809-530-8266; www.capitalcoachline.com; 27 de Febrero 455), **Caribe Tours** (☎ 809-221-4422; www.caribetours.com.do; cnr Avs 27 de Febrero & Leopoldo Navarro) and **Terra Bus** (☎ 809-531-0383; Plaza Lama, cnr Avs 27 de Febrero & Winston Churchill) offer daily bus services to Port-au-Prince. Capital Coach Line has one departure daily at 10am and Caribe and Terra at 11am and 11:30am, respectively. All three use comfortable, air-con coaches and the trip takes from six to nine hours and costs US\$40.

Sea

Ferries del Caribe (☎ in Santo Domingo 809-688-4400, in Santiago 809-724-8771, in Mayagüez 787-832-4400, in San Juan 787-725-2643) offers the DR's only international ferry service, connecting Santo Domingo and Mayagüez, Puerto Rico. The ticket office and boarding area are on Av del Puerto opposite Fortaleza Ozama in Zona Colonial. The ferry departs Santo Domingo Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday at 8pm and returns from Mayagüez on Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 8pm. The trip takes 12 hours and costs around US\$129/189 one-way/return in an airplane-style seat, or around per person single/double US\$182/311 one-way or single/double US\$295/474 return in a private cabin with an exterior window.

GETTING AROUND

Air

Along with the airports listed previously (p321), the following airports handle domestic flights:

Aeropuerto Internacional Arroyo Barril (ABA; ☎ 809-248-2718) West of Samaná. Used mostly during whale-watching season (January to March) and handles only propeller aircraft. Serves Santiago and the interior.

Aeropuerto Internacional El Portillo (EPS) Airstrip only a few kilometers from Las Terrenas, used mostly for domestic flights and gets busiest during whale-watching season.

Aeropuerto Internacional La Isabela (JBQ, Dr Joaquin Balaguer; ☎ 809-567-3900) Located 16km north of Santo Domingo in Higuero, this airport services domestic airlines.

Aeropuerto Internacional María Montez (BRX; ☎ 809-524-4144) Five kilometers from Barahona; does not have a regular commercial passenger service.

The main domestic carriers and air taxi companies:

AeroDomca (☎ 809-567-1195; www.aerodomca.com) Scheduled flights between La Isabela outside Santo Domingo to El Portillo near Las Terrenas (US\$75). Charter flights can be booked to almost any airport.

Air Century (☎ 809-826-4222; www.aircentury.com) Charter flights from La Isabela outside Santo Domingo.

Take Off (☎ 809-552-1333; www.takeoffweb.com) Offers the widest selection of scheduled flights, including Santo Domingo to El Portillo (\$80). There's a small, efficient office with English speakers in the Plaza Brisas in Bávaro.

Bicycle

The DR's under-maintained highways are not well suited for cycling, though mountain

biking on back roads can be rewarding. There are a number of recommended tours available from Jarabacoa (p316) and Cabarete (p312).

Bus

FIRST-CLASS SERVICE

First-class buses are comfortable, have air-con, and often also have TVs and a movie. Fares are low – the most expensive is less than US\$10. Reservations aren't usually necessary.

The following companies have 1st-class services:

Caribe Tours (☎ in Santo Domingo 809-221-4422; cnr Avs 27 de Febrero & Leopoldo Navarro) The most extensive bus line, with service everywhere but the south east.

Expreso Santo Domingo Bávaro (☎ in Santo Domingo 809-682-9670; cnr Juan Sánchez Ruiz & Máximo Gómez) Connects Santo Domingo and Bávaro with a stop in La Romana.

El Canario (☎ 809-291-5594) Not exactly 1st-class vehicles, but the only daily direct service between Puerto Plata and Samaná (US\$7, 3½ to 4 hours, with stops in Nagua and Sánchez.

Metro (☎ in Santo Domingo 809-566-7126; Calle Francisco Prats Ramírez) Located behind Plaza Central Mall in Santo Domingo, Metro serves nine cities, mostly along the Santo Domingo–Puerto Plata corridor.

Terra Bus (☎ 809-531-0383; Plaza Lama, cnr Avs 27 de Febrero & Winston Churchill) Air-con service from Santo Domingo to Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

GUA-GUAS

Gua-guas vary in size, from minivans to midsize buses with room for around 30 passengers. They don't have toilet facilities and only occasionally have air-con. Unlike regular buses, *gua-guas* stop all along the route to pick up and drop off passengers. Wherever long-distance buses don't go, you can be sure a *gua-gua* does. *Gua-guas* rarely have signs, so ask a local if you're unsure which one to take. Most pass every 15 to 30 minutes and cost US\$1 to US\$2. Simply wave to be picked up.

LOCAL BUS

Large cities like Santo Domingo have public bus systems that operate as they do in most places around the world. However, *públicos* (see opposite) pass much more frequently.

Car & Motorcycle

RENTAL

Renting a car is a great way to see the country without wasting time waiting for buses.

Prices range from US\$40 to US\$100 per day. Motorcycles can also be rented, but only experienced drivers should do so because of poor road conditions. If you bust a tire – the most common car trouble here – a *gomera* is a tire repair and retail shop.

You must have a valid driver's license and be at least 25 years old to rent a car. You will be required to show a major credit card or leave your passport as a deposit. Be sure to ask about the 'deductible' (the amount you pay out-of-pocket before insurance kicks in) and whether the insurance covers damage to your tires or windows.

ROAD HAZARDS

Roads in the DR range from excellent to awful, sometimes along the same highway over a very short distance. Be alert for potholes, speed bumps and people walking along the roadside, especially near populated areas. On all roads, large or small, watch for slow-moving cars and especially motorcycles. Be particularly careful when driving at night, better yet, *never drive at night*. Even the most skilled person with the reflexes of a superhero will probably end up in a ditch by the side of the road.

ROAD RULES

First rule is there are none. In theory, road rules in the DR are the same as for most countries in the Americas and the lights and signs are the same shape and color you find in the US or Canada. Seatbelts are required at all times. That said, driving in the DR is pretty much a free-for-all, a test of one's nerves and will, a continuous game of chicken where the loser is the one who decides to give way just before the moment of impact.

Motoconchos

Cheaper and easier to find than taxis, *motoconchos* (motorcycle taxis) are the best and sometimes only way to get around in many towns. An average ride should cost you no more than US\$1.50. However, a high number of riders have been injured or killed in *motoconcho* accidents; ask the driver to slow down (*¡Más despacio por favor!*) if you think he's driving dangerously. Avoid two passengers on a bike since not only is the price the same as taking separate bikes but the extra weight makes most scooters harder to control. For longer trips, or if you have any sort of bag or luggage, *motoconchos* are usually impractical and certainly less comfortable than the alternatives.

Públicos

These are banged-up cars, minivans or small pickup trucks that pick up passengers along set routes in towns. *Públicos* (also called *conchos* or *carros*) don't have signs but the drivers hold their hands out the window to solicit potential fares. They are also identifiable by the crush of people inside them – up to seven in a midsize car! To flag one down simply hold out your hand – the fare is around US\$0.30. If there is no one else in the car, be sure to tell the driver you want *servicio público* (public service) to avoid paying private taxi rates.

Taxis

Dominican taxis rarely cruise for passengers – instead they wait at designated *sitios* (stops), which are located at hotels, bus terminals, tourist areas and main public parks. You also can phone a taxi service (or ask your hotel receptionist to call for you). Taxis do not have meters – agree on a price beforehand.

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