

Around Santo Domingo



AROUND SANTO DOMINGO

One of the pleasures of city living is leaving it. And like residents of large cities the world over, residents of Santo Domingo regularly feel the urge to flee the traffic, pollution and chaos of the capital city's streets for stress-free weekend escapes. Boca Chica, within commuting distance not far to the east and just past the airport, isn't far enough removed from the urban milieu – despite the white sand, bathtub-calm waters and seaside restaurants. When the sun goes down, so do the town's inhibitions, and its seedy side – still alive after many years – becomes hard not to notice. Only a little further east is Juan Dolio, more relaxing and comfortable and blessed with a long stretch of soft white sand and several resorts just outside town. For a chance to experience Dominican life in the streets outside of Santo Domingo, head to San Pedro de Macorís, a baseball player-producing factory only a short drive further east.

Basically an extension of Santo Domingo's creeping sprawl to the west, San Cristobal is noteworthy as the birthplace of dictator Rafael Trujillo and the gateway to an anthropological reserve with Taíno cave paintings. For those traveling to the southwestern part of the country, Baní makes a convenient stop. Known as the birthplace of Generalísimo Máximo Gómez y Báez, leader of Cuba's struggle for independence from Spain, Baní is also the turnoff to reach the dunes around Las Salinas or to start the climb north to the mountain village of San José de Ocoa. This route west of the city passes through a textured DR, one not defined by foreigners' needs and tastes but by the lives of ordinary people.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Relax on the soft white sand and mellow seas of **Juan Dolio** (p110), the best beach resort near Santo Domingo
- Cheer for the home team at **Estadio Tetelo Vargas** (p112) in San Pedro de Macorís, the baseball capital of the country
- Slide around the wind-blown sand hills of the **Dunas de las Calderas** (p115) near Las Salinas
- Explore the mountain scenery around **San José de Ocoa** (p116)
- Marvel at the hundreds of Taíno cave paintings at **Reserva Antropológica El Pomier** (p114), outside San Cristobal



AROUND SANTO DOMINGO

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Because several of the destinations in this chapter are best visited as a day or overnight trip, a rental car is the most convenient option and allows you flexibility. This is especially recommended if you're traveling west of Santo Domingo, because many of the sights otherwise would involve multiple trips on multiple versions of public transportation – the effort and trouble would be of questionable value. That being said, it's easy to reach all of the towns by *gua-gua* (local bus) or taxi (the latter option is pricey).

EAST OF SANTO DOMINGO

Cross Río Ozama, the eastern border of the Zona Colonial in Santo Domingo, and the claustrophobia fades, the horizon opens and you remember that you're in the Caribbean. The highway hugs the coast for some time with promising views but then retreats inland once again, passing service stations and shops hugging the roadside until the turnoff for the beach resorts of Boca Chica and Juan Dolio a little further on.

PARQUE NACIONAL SUBMARINO LA CALETA

In the past this underwater park was a park in name only; little was done to protect the 12 sq km of underwater acreage in front of the Aeropuerto Internacional Las Américas. As a result of lax controls and the damage from Hurricane Jean in 2004, the number of coral and fish species here is very low. Only recently has the Ministry of Environment teamed up with Reef Check, a non-profit environmental organization, to try to halt the damage and restore the marine life. It is also the resting place of the *Hickory*, a salvage ship that was scuttled in 1984, the year the park was founded (see boxed text, p107) and now a popular dive site. If you're interested in diving here, contact one of the dive shops in Boca Chica (see p107) or any of the resorts in Juan Dolio.

BOCA CHICA

pop 58,200

Boca Chica is a survivor. After weathering development boom–bust cycles and being overshadowed by resorts further east, it staggers

on, albeit with a healthy trade in sex tourism. It held a certain amount of cachet when the moneyed class built vacation homes here during Trujillo's regime, and in the 1960s when a few bayside hotels were built, and even again in the early 1990s during another construction boom. These days, however, aside from its proximity to the capital and the airport, there's not a lot to recommend it; after all it's not much further to nicer resorts to the east. It does, however, have a long white, sandy beach with waters so calm and shallow it resembles a lagoon.

Orientation

Boca Chica comprises a 10-by-15-block area between Hwy 3 and Bahía de Andrés. From the highway there are three main avenues – 24 de Junio, Juan Bautista Vicini and Caracol – that lead downhill to the oceanfront streets of Av San Rafael and Av Duarte. It's only 8km to Aeropuerto Internacional Las Américas and 33km to Santo Domingo, both to the west.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS & TELEPHONE

Codetel Centro de Comunicaciones (Av San Rafael near Av Caracol; ☎ 8am–10pm) International telephone service; the main entrance is on Av Duarte.

QK Internet Center (Av Duarte near Calle Sánchez; ☎ 9am–10pm Mon–Sat, 9am–6pm Sun) Inexpensive international telephone rates and decent internet rates, too (per hour US\$2.80).

Safe Power Contact (SPC; Av Juan Bautista Vicini; ☎ 9am–10pm) Only a block south of Av Las Américas, this small shop has several computers in good condition with high-speed internet (per hour US\$1); cheap international calling rates as well.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Farmacia Boca Chica (☎ 809-523-4708; Av Duarte near Av Juan Bautista Vicini; ☎ 8:30am–9pm Mon–Sat, 8:30am–8pm Sun)

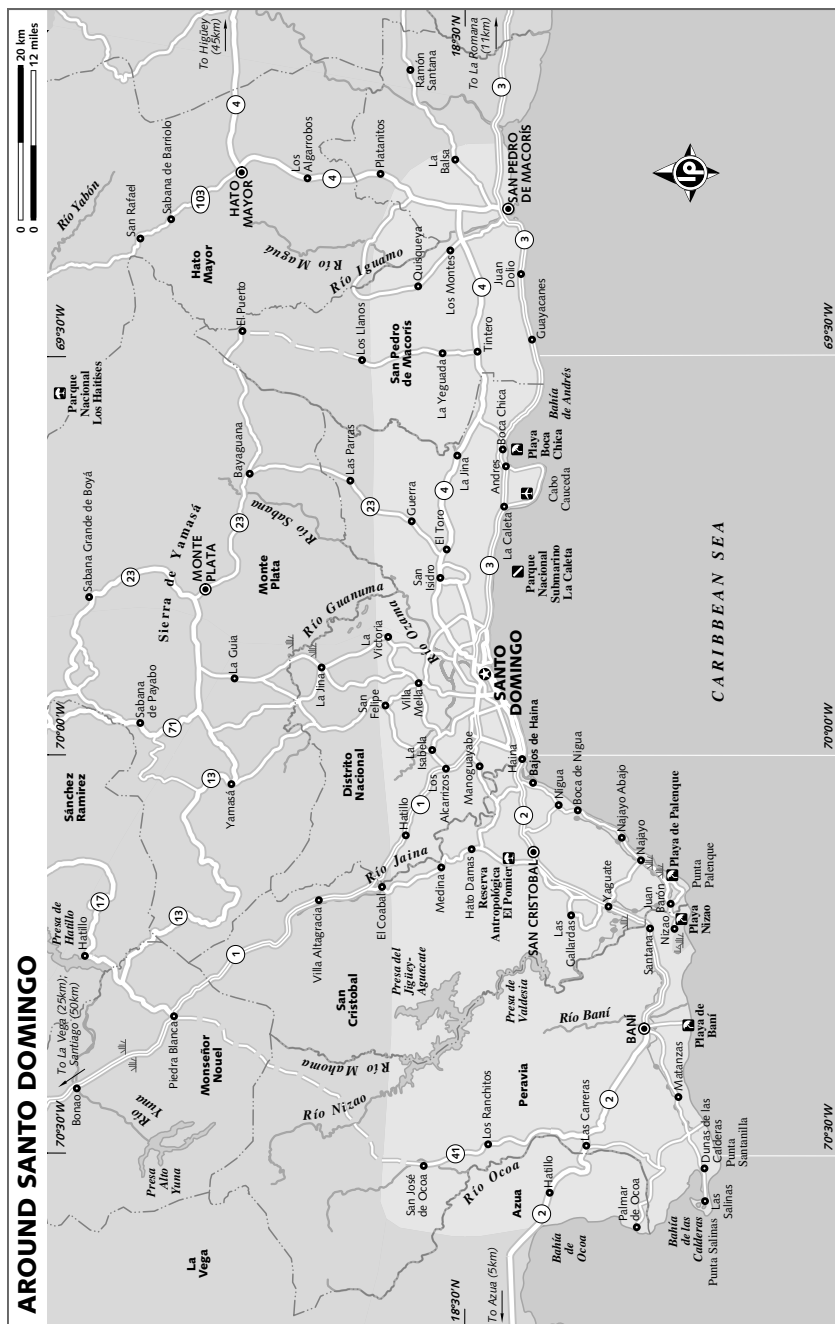
MONEY

Banco Popular (cnr Av Duarte & Av Juan Bautista Vicini; ☎ 8am–3pm Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm Sun) Opposite the southwest corner of Parque Central. One ATM.

BanReservas (cnr Av San Rafael & Calle Juanico García; ☎ 8am–5pm Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm Sat)

POST

Post office (Av Duarte near Av Juan Bautista Vicini; ☎ 8am–5pm Mon–Fri, 8am–noon Sat)



Sights

The thing about the beach at Boca Chica is that it's in Boca Chica. This means that despite the powdery white sand and tranquil waters, it's unlikely to be a relaxing experience. Flanked by Av Caracol and Av 24 de Junio, **Playa Boca Chica** is lined with coconut palms and food stands, restaurants and bars. During the day, the beach is filled with locals and foreigners, and vendors selling everything from fruit to cigars to large canvases of Haitian paintings. The view, not exactly a picture postcard, is of loading cranes and a sugar refinery in the distance.

The beach is effectively divided into three sections: the eastern side has a tiny half-moon section backed by the Hotel Oasis Hamaca that leads past a rusty children's swing set to a narrow stretch clustered with restaurants and bars only a few body lengths from the water; the central area – which is the best place for sunbathing; and the western end, where it widens out and eventually gives way to a sandy parking lot and a row of food stalls selling cheap local food.

Activities

There are over 25 dive sites in the area; most are located in the Parque Nacional Submarino La Caleta, with its two shipwrecks and myriad

coral heads. The water is warm – averaging 25°C – and the visibility ranges between 5m and 28m, depending on the season. Dive trips to a nearby cave are also offered, as are trips to the waters near Bayahibe and Isla Catalina.

There are two reputable dive shops in town – **Treasure Divers** (☎ 809-523-5320; www.treasuredivers.de; Av Abraham Nuñez; ☎ 8:30am-5pm), on Playa Boca Chica near Don Juan Beach Resort, and **Caribbean Divers** (☎ 809-854-3483; www.caribbeandivers.de; enter at Av Duarte 28; ☎ 8:30am-5pm), also on the beach. Dives average US\$40 with equipment, but multiday packages bring the prices down a little. PADI courses (open water diver US\$425) are also offered. English, French and German are spoken at both.

Tours

Cigua Tours (☎ 809-877-1689; www.erika-cigua-tours.com; cnr Av Duarte & Calle Dominguez; ☎ 9am-noon & 4-6pm), a German-run tour company operating out of a clapboard kiosk, also has an office in Juan Dolio. Trips on offer include Santo Domingo (per person US\$30), Isla Saona (per person US\$65), Isla Catalina (per person US\$65) and Los Haitises National Park (per person US\$65).

Sleeping

Villa Marianna (☎ 809-523-4679; Av Juan Bautista Vicini 11; r with/without air-con US\$45/35; ☎ ☎) Old

THE HUNTER BECOMES THE HUNTED

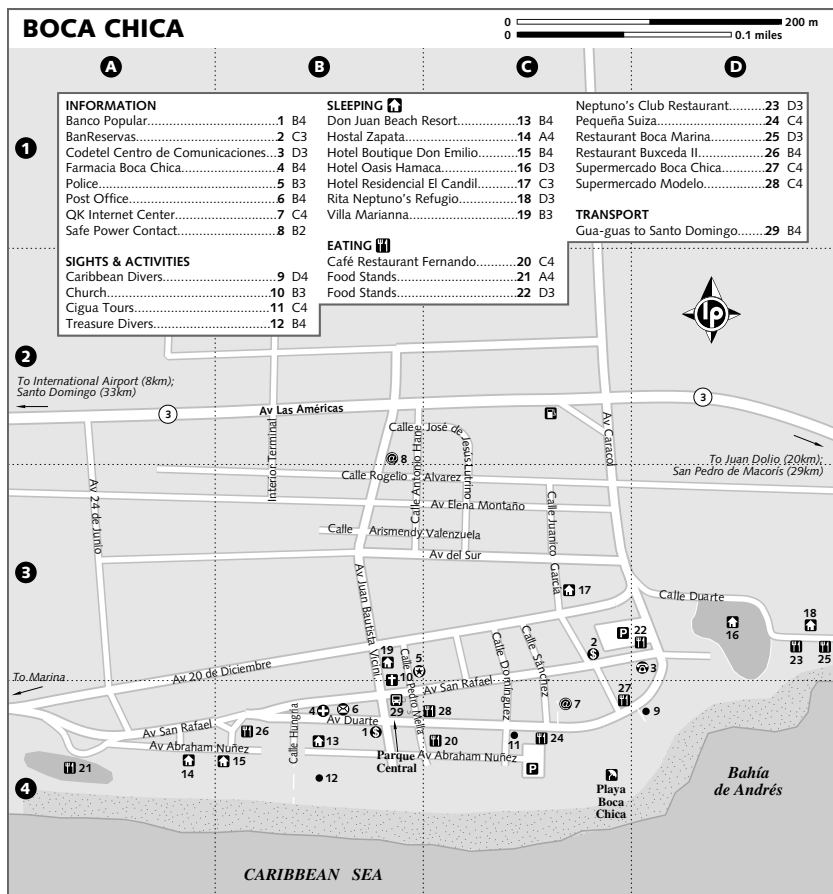
For divers, the main attraction in the Parque Nacional Submarino La Caleta is the *Hickory*, a 39m-long steel ship that was scuttled in 1984. Once a vessel that carried treasure hunters, the tables have now turned and the *Hickory* has become a sought-after underwater destination.

The *Hickory* was the primary vessel used in the recovery of artifacts from the Spanish galleons *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* and *El Conde de Tolosa*, both of which sank in the Bahía de Samaná on 25 August 1724. Both of these galleons were en route to Mexico when a violent storm forced them away from the shore and towards a treacherous coral reef. The captains were unable to steer the galleons to safety and the ships were torn apart and sank, taking the lives of over 600 passengers.

The remains of the ships – and their cargo – were left untouched until 1976 when fishermen discovered the *Guadalupe*. Curious about the wreck, the Dominican government hired Tracy Bowden, president of the Caribe Salvage Company of Texas, to explore the sunken galleon using the *Hickory*.

Bowden and his crew spent over a year digging through the sediment that had accumulated over the galleon before recovering any artifacts. Spanish records also indicated that the *Tolosa* had sunk within hours of the *Guadalupe*; knowing that it had to be nearby, the salvagers searched the Bahía de Samaná for six months before finding it just northwest of Miches.

Among the thousands of items discovered at the two wreck sites were hundreds of silver and gold coins minted in Spain during the early 18th century, a cache of jewelry and hundreds of crystal glasses.



mismatched furniture and less-than-spotless towels and linens aren't great calling cards, but the Marianna is friendlier than others and there's a small pool in the front yard. It's a white two-story building at the top of a steep slope several blocks from the beach.

our pick **Rita Neptuno's Refugio** (☎ 809-523-9934; Calle Duarte; www.dominicana.de/hotel-neptuno.htm; r US\$40-50, 1-bedroom apt US\$50-60, penthouse US\$120; P, ♿, ♿, ♿) Refuge (n.): protection or shelter from danger or hardship. This friendly hotel meets the dictionary definition – perched on a hill with views of the Caribbean in a quiet part of town, Neptuno's is the place to go for a long stay. Relaxed but efficient service and a nice, small pool are bonuses to the comfortable, cozy rooms.

Apartments come with fully equipped kitchens and private balconies. Breakfast isn't included in room rates, but is available for US\$5.

Hotel Residencial El Candil (☎ 809-523-4252; www.comdata.nl/hotel-boca-chica-candil; cnr Calle Juanico García 2 & Av 20 de Diciembre; r from US\$50; P, ♿, ♿, ♿) Although it's located several blocks up from the beachfront on a residential street, El Candil is nevertheless good value. There are 24 apartments in several three-story buildings surrounding a small but well-kept pool and garden area. Each apartment comes with a fully equipped kitchenette, but the old wicker furniture in the sparsely decorated bedrooms feels dated. Wi-fi internet is available throughout the complex.

Hostal Zapata (☎ 809-523-4777; www.hotelzapata.com; Av Abraham Nuñez 27; s US\$60-85, d US\$70-95; P, ♿, ♿) Even a top-end all-inclusive place would envy the Zapata's beachfront real estate – and the private sandy backyard, a retreat from the hassles only a few feet away, is especially valuable. Not much attention is paid to the room furnishings; they're adequate enough but the lighting is dim and the small TVs have flickering pictures. Rooms with balconies facing the ocean obviously get more light and are worth the extra cost. Unfortunately, all of the upside is marred by a management attitude that is all business.

Hotel Boutique Don Emilio (☎ 809-523-4992; done.milio@hotmail.com; Av Abraham Nuñez; r from US\$80; P, ♿) Location, location, location. This real estate mantra is never truer than when talking about this purple behemoth. Rising four stories over the nicest stretch of beach in Boca Chica, the aging Don Emilio rests on this laurel and not much else. True, the modern rooms are clean enough, but the common areas and stairwell need a paint job and the vibe is more mercenary than friendly. Probably not the place for a family. Prices are negotiable.

Hotel Oasis Hamaca (☎ 809-523-4611; www.hotel.esoasis.com; Calle Duarte near Av Caracol; s/d US\$140/190; P, ♿, ♿, ♿) The nicest of Boca Chica's resorts, the Oasis Hamaca occupies a strategic piece of beachfront property on the eastern edge of town. It's a bit of a fortress-like complex, with all amenities and facilities including tennis courts and a popular disco.

Don Juan Beach Resort (☎ 809-687-9157; www.donjuanbeachresort.com; Av Abraham Nuñez 8; s/d per person US\$160/185; P, ♿, ♿, ♿) The kind of Dominican all-inclusive that looks better from a distance, Don Juan is best appreciated with a discount – otherwise the bland food and mediocre rooms, not to mention the lack of privacy on the beach, will feel overpriced.

Eating

Café Restaurant Fernando (☎ 809-523-4939; Calle Pedro Mella near Av Duarte; mains US\$5-11; ♿; lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) The food here is unremarkable – the typical menu of Italian-style and international standards and sandwiches – but it's a more organized and reliable choice than other similar restaurants in town.

Restaurant Buxceda II (☎ 809-527-5320; cnr Av Duarte & Calle Hungria; mains US\$7-10; ♿; breakfast, lunch & dinner) This simple and unpretentious restaurant is willing to please: any fish, any style,

well within reason. Chow down family style at one of the long white tables in the open-air dining room.

Pequeña Suiza (☎ 809-523-4619; Av Duarte 56; mains US\$9-20; ♿; breakfast, lunch & dinner) One of the better places to eat any time of day – English breakfast in the morning (US\$7) and fondue (US\$15), the house specialty at night – the Suiza isn't so *pequeña* (little). It has a great café/bar right on busy Av Duarte and an elegant dining room in the back on the beach.

Restaurant Boca Marina (☎ 809-523-6702; Calle Duarte 12A; mains US\$10-24; ♿; breakfast, lunch & dinner) This restaurant on the eastern edge of town is perched over the water – you're even welcome to take a dip in between courses. And you just might want to cool off, since the service can be frustratingly slow and the fish and international standards only mediocre. Then again, with sunset views like this, there isn't much of a hurry.

Neptuno's Club Restaurant (☎ 809-523-4703; Calle Duarte 12; mains US\$16-25; ♿; breakfast, lunch & dinner) Miami Beach comes to Boca Chica. This swank restaurant/club across the street from Rita Neptuno's Refugio is set on a platform overlooking the water. Lounge-style beds and all-white mini-cabanas set the mood for the party scene. Of course it's also an excellent restaurant, with above-average seafood specialties like lobster lasagna (US\$16) and seafood casserole (US\$25).

For a classic Dominican culinary experience, head to the **food stands** (cnr Av San Rafael & Caracol; ♿; 10am-6pm Fri-Sun) along the parking lot on the eastern end of Av Rafael or those set up on the beach on the western side of town. The former is open weekends only, when Dominican beachgoers line up to order fried whole fish, *plátanos* (fried green plantains) and *casabe* (flat round bread made of cassava). A meal costs US\$5.50 and is often big enough for two.

Supermercado Boca Chica (cnr Av Duarte & Calle Juanico García; ♿; 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-6pm Sun) is the largest grocery store; **Supermercado Modelo** (Av San Rafael) is at the corner of Av Duarte.

Drinking

Boca Chica's reputation for seedy nightlife is well deserved. That being said, there are several pleasant places to kick back with a drink and dance in perfectly salubrious surroundings. Av Duarte is closed to cars from around 7pm and restaurants and bars set up

tables on the street; many of the tables are taken up by older foreign men and younger Dominican women. Any single person, male or female, walking down the street is sure to receive attention.

Getting There & Away

Second-class buses service Boca Chica to Santo Domingo (*caliente/expreso* US\$1/1.25, 30 minutes, *caliente* every 15 minutes, *expreso* every hour, from 6:30am to 8:30pm). *Gua-guas* stop on the north side of Parque Central and along Av San Rafael.

If you're heading east, *gua-guas* stop at the intersection of the highway and Av Caracol. Destinations include Juan Dolio (US\$1.10, 15 minutes, every 30 minutes from 6:30am to 10pm), San Pedro de Macoris (US\$1.30, 30 minutes, every 30 minutes from 6:30am to 10pm), La Romana (*caliente/expreso* US\$1.75/2, 1½ hours, *caliente* every 20 minutes, *expreso* every hour, from 6:30am to 7:30pm) and Higüey (*caliente/expreso* US\$3.25/4, two hours, *caliente* every 20 minutes, *expreso* every hour, from 6:30am to 7:30pm).

If you prefer taxis, you can often find one near the intersection of Av San Rafael and Av Caracol. Alternatively, you can get door-to-door service by calling the **Taxi Turístico Boca Chica** (☎ 809-523-4797). One-way fares include: Aeropuerto Internacional Las Américas (US\$20), Santo Domingo (US\$23), Juan Dolio (US\$20), San Pedro de Macoris (US\$50), Higüey (US\$100) and La Romana (US\$75).

Getting Around

Boca Chica is small and easily covered on foot. Despite this, you'll likely be asked if you need a ride by every passing *motoconcho* (motorcycle taxi). When not cruising the streets, they can be found congregating near the Parque Central. Rides around town cost US\$1.

JUAN DOLIO

Juan Dolio has had its ups and downs, the natural byproducts of real estate speculation and investors hoping to cash in on the next Caribbean hot spot. Much younger, though, in terms of its evolution, the area remained undeveloped as recently as the late 1980s. Today, the small community is in a state of limbo: while the public beach itself is fairly small and cramped, the area in front of the resorts to the east of town is wider and softer than in nearby Boca Chica.

Most tourists stay at one of the several all-inclusive resorts east of town, however there's enough of a trickle of guests, independent travelers, loyal expats and Dominicans to keep a handful of bars and restaurants in town in business.

Orientation

Juan Dolio consists of a long narrow sliver of land between Hwy 3 (aka Boulevard) and the beach. From Hwy 3, there's an access road called Entrada a los Conucos just east of a large Shell gas station. Take this one short block towards the beach to Carretera Local, the main street through town. The intersection of Entrada a los Conucos and Carretera Local is the main area in town, with a number of restaurants, bars, shops and services clustered nearby. The hotels, including all of the resorts, are east of there, and not within walking distance if you're carrying baggage. The exception is the Hotel Fior di Loto, which is 500m west of the main intersection.

Information

The Shell gas station on the boulevard west of Entrada a los Conucos has a 24-hour Banco León ATM. There are also two ATMs on the property of the Coral Costa Caribe Resort.

Banco Popular (Plaza Turística, Carretera Nueva; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sun) Located 400m east of the Barceló Capella Beach Resort.

Cigua Tours (☎ 809-526-2077; Plaza de la Luna, Carretera Local; ☎ 8am-11pm) This small travel agency can book domestic and international air tickets, reserve rental cars, and book hotels around the DR. It also organizes day trips to Santo Domingo (per person US\$30), Isla Saona (per person US\$65), Isla Catalina (per person US\$65), Parque Nacional Los Haitises (per person US\$65) and whale watching (per person US\$95).

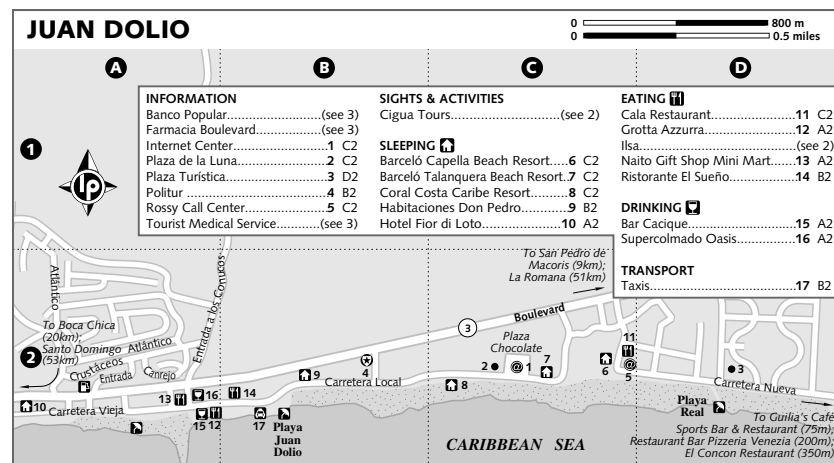
Farmacia Boulevard (☎ 809-526-2041, ext 223; Plaza Turística, Carretera Nueva; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-7pm Sat & Sun) Affiliated with, and next door to, the Tourist Medical Service.

Ilsa (☎ 809-526-2777; Plaza de la Luna, Carretera Local; internet per hr US\$4; ☎ 8am-11pm) Internet access and international calls. It's near the Coral Costa Caribe Resort.

Internet Center (Plaza Chocolate, Carretera Local; per hr US\$2; ☎ 8am-8pm) Internet access.

Politur (☎ 809-526-1048; Av Boulevard; ☎ 24hr) For emergencies; next to the National Police building.

Rosy Call Center (Carretera Nueva; internet per hr US\$3; ☎ 7am-8pm) Several computers with high-speed access; international call center. Barber shop in front.



Tourist Medical Service (☎ 809-526-2041; Plaza Turística, Carretera Nueva; ☎ 24hr) General and specialized medical services. English, German and French spoken.

Sleeping

Hotel Fior di Loto (☎ 809-526-1146; www.fiordilotohotel.com; Carretera Vieja; d US\$10-20, tw US\$30, apt with kitchen US\$40) A little ashrum on the Caribbean, this small idiosyncratic place about 500m west of the main intersection in Juan Dolio is for the traveler looking to mellow out in a backpacker-style hotel. That's not to say the rooms aren't comfortable; they're the equivalent of any mid-range place nearby and have clean, tile floors and overhead fans. And no other place offers regular meditation and yoga classes – and some of the proceeds from the hotel go to supporting a girls foundation in India. Hang out in the heavily cushioned front dining area draped with tapestries, or lounge on the 2nd-floor patio.

Habitaciones Don Pedro (☎ 809-526-2147; Carretera Local; with fan/air-con \$24/36; ☎ ☎) There's little to recommend the dark and uninspiring rooms here over the Fior di Loto, other than the fact that the Don Pedro is directly across from the town beach. A detached apartment with small sitting area and kitchen is a good deal. The bar across the street is part of the Don Pedro family.

Barceló Talanquera Beach Resort (☎ 809-526-1510; www.barcelo.com; Carretera Local; s/d per person US\$59/89; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Popular with the college crowd, this resort has a definite party feel to it: pool volleyball, packed bars and scantily clad guests are the norm. Rooms have seen better days;

ask for one in the 400 and 500 series, which are the most recently renovated. The beach is small and jam-packed with beach chairs, so if you're looking for some quiet time it's best to head east towards the Capella.

Barceló Capella Beach Resort (☎ 809-526-1080; www.barcelo.com; Carretera Nueva; s/d per person US\$120/80; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Larger and more glamorous than its all-inclusive sister, rooms at the Capella are spread out around lush grounds with reflecting pools and the occasional flamingo and peacock. Inevitably for a resort this size, room quality is a bit uneven and the paint on the Caribbean-inspired architecture is peeling. The pool area is a little small considering the number of guests, but it's generally less of a party scene than the Coral Costa Caribe.

Coral Costa Caribe Resort (☎ 809-540-2008; www.coralcostacaribe.com; Carretera Local; s/d US\$150/240; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Certainly every day isn't spring break but this all-inclusive place does have a party scene. Loud music is pumped from giant speakers around the pool area – the center of the action – and though the beach here is nice, it's small for the size of the resort. This high-rise property has fairly good motel-style rooms and several restaurants to choose from. Five bars and a disco round out a lively atmosphere.

Eating & Drinking

Don't worry if you're staying at an all-inclusive with less-than-stellar buffet food – Juan Dolio has several decent restaurants, both in town near the main intersection and strung

out along Carretera Nueva east of the main resort area.

JUAN DOLIO

Ristorante El Sueño (☎ 809-526-3903; Carretera Local; meals US\$4-12; ☎ noon-3:30pm & 7-11pm) Another casual open-air eatery, El Sueño is just east of Habitaciones Don Pedro. Pizzas and standard international mains round out the menu. Good spot for a drink as well.

Grotta Azzurra (☎ 809-526-2031; Carretera Vieja; mains US\$5-10; ☎ lunch & dinner, closed Tue) Boasting a beachfront location – some tables are on the back porch with enviable views – this centrally located restaurant does good grilled fish. Also a good place for a sundowner.

Bar Cacique (Carretera Local; ☎ 9am-3am) This basic bar is popular with German expats and Dominicans alike.

Naito Gift Shop Mini Mart (cnr Carretera Local & Entrada a los Conucos; ☎ 8:15am-7pm) is the largest market in the center of town, with basic groceries and supplies. **Supercolmado Oasis** (cnr Blvd & Entrada a los Conucos) is good for a snack or a drink while waiting for onward transport.

CARRETERA NUEVA

Guilia's Café Sports Bar & Restaurant (Carretera Nueva; sandwiches US\$3/9; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Juan Dolio's interpretation of a sports bar, Guilia's offers a flat-screen TV and pool table and serves up burgers (US\$3).

Restaurant Bar Pizzeria Venezia (☎ 809-526-1815; Carretera Nueva; pizzas US\$5; ☎ lunch & dinner) Opposite the beach among the shells of condo developments, this restaurant has nice outdoor seating and a good selection of pizzas.

El Concon Restaurant (☎ 809-526-2562; mains US\$6; ☎ lunch & dinner, closed Wed) Mostly locals go to this beachside thatched-roof restaurant. Pizza, pastas and grilled fish are served, and there's live music on Saturday nights.

our pick **Cala Restaurant** (☎ 809-526-1108; Carretera Nueva; mains US\$7-20; ☎ lunch & dinner) This sleek and modern restaurant across the street from the Barceló Capella Beach Resort looks like it belongs in a trendy neighborhood in New York City or London. Dining here puts the resort restaurants to shame; the experienced chef serves up delicious interpretations of Dominican specials and Italian cuisine.

Getting There & Around

Gua-guas pass through Juan Dolio all day every day, going westwards to Boca Chica

(US\$1.10) and Santo Domingo (US\$2.10), and east to San Pedro de Macorís (US\$0.75), La Romana (US\$2) and Higüey (US\$3.50). No buses originate here, so there is no fixed schedule, but they pass roughly every 15 minutes from 6am to 7pm – stand on Blvd at the corner of Entrada a los Conucos and flag down any one that passes.

Taxis can be found in front of any of the resorts in town, and at a taxi stand on Carretera Local near the public parking lot for Playa Juan Dolio. Fares for one to four people range from US\$25 (to Boca Chica), US\$40 (Aeropuerto Internacional Las Américas), US\$55 (to Santo Domingo) and up to US\$130 (to Bávaro). You can also call **Juan Dolio Taxi** (☎ 809-526-2006) for door-to-door service.

When driving from Santo Domingo on Hwy 3, take the turnoff marked Playa Guayacanes.

SAN PEDRO DE MACORÍS

pop 251,900

It's hard to believe, as you drive past the harbor's crumbling balustrades, that only 50 years ago San Pedro was a cultural showplace of the Caribbean, with an opera hall where Jenny Lind (the 'Swedish nightingale') sang. Nineteenth-century locomotives carried millions of tons of sugarcane from the dense fields that ringed the city to giant grinders that mashed the cane into pulp, which was then refined into sugar. Today the same relentless humidity that converted the locomotives to heaps of rusting parts has transformed the elegant wooden homes into monuments of dry rot for termites to feast upon.

Sugar is still the basis for San Pedro's existence, but this provincial capital 65km east of Santo Domingo is most famous for producing more major-league baseball players per capita than any other city in the country. It's truly worth coming here to attend a baseball game (mid-November to early February) in the city's most prominent building, Estadio Tetelo Vargas, on the north side of Hwy 3.

Approaching San Pedro de Macorís from the west, you see the steeple of the **Catedral San Pedro Apostol** (☎ 8am-8pm; Calle Charro near Av Independencia) from the bridge leading into town. It's notable only for the fact that the original church built in 1856 was destroyed by a hurricane nine years later, and again after being rebuilt, this time by a fire in

THREE BEST ROADS TO TAKE YOUR FOOT OFF THE ACCELERATOR

Santo Domingo traffic is enough to give the coolest driver road rage. Leave the bumper-to-bumper city behind and open your eyes to the world outside. Here are a few drives that are worth slowing down for:

- San José de Ocoa (p116) to Baní (p115) – open the windows and poke your head out, taking in the beautiful views of the ocean from this mountain road; cycling is even better.
- The Malecón of San Pedro de Macorís (opposite) – crawl slowly along the waterfront, seeing and being seen by Dominicans out for a stroll.
- Around Las Salinas (p115) – plantations, ranches and small villages make up this area, a peninsula southwest of Baní; any of these are a good place to pull over and take in the fresh air and whatever is growing nearby.

1885. The version you see today has been standing for over 120 years.

WEST OF SANTO DOMINGO

Heading west from the city takes you not only in the opposite cardinal direction as the beach resorts to the east but also to a different DR – one whose landscape isn't defined by tourism but by the more haphazard demands of ordinary life. From Santo Domingo Hwy 2 cuts inland to the provincial capital of San Cristobal and from there it continues south to the city of Baní. Hwy 41, north to San José de Ocoa, takes you into the foothills of the Cordillera Central.

SAN CRISTOBAL

pop 220,000

During his authoritative and brutal rule, which lasted from 1930 until his assassination in 1961, Rafael Trujillo showered his hometown with generosity and monuments to his excess, including a never-lived-in mansion and a US\$4 million dollar church, a paragon of Latin American Caudillo high kitsch (see boxed text, p114). The city's name was officially changed in 1934 to 'Meritorious City.' (It was changed back after Trujillo died.) An appropriate symbol and reminder of Trujillo's regime is the empty pedestal across from the church – it used to support a statue of the *commandante* on horseback but was pulled down by enraged Dominicans after Trujillo's death.

Today, this traffic-clogged provincial capital just 30km west of Santo Domingo,

is passed through by most visitors heading west from the capital. There are a few beaches nearby – Playa Palenque and Playa Najayo, popular with families on weekends – and it's also the nearest town to Reserva Antropológica El Pomier, a series of caves that contain the country's largest collection of Taíno cave paintings.

Because of its proximity to Santo Domingo and dearth of quality accommodation, San Cristobal is not a popular choice for staying overnight. The nearby **Rancho Campeche** (☎ 809-686-1053; www.ranchocampeche.com; Calle Leonor de Ovanda 1; tent & 3 meals per person US\$22), however, offers one of the few opportunities to camp in the country. At the end of rough road west of San Cristobal, you can set up tents on this property overlooking the Caribbean. Toilets and shower facilities as well as meals are provided. Definitely arrange in advance since it's not uncommon for the property to be booked by groups or reserved for special occasions. Playa Palenque and Playa Najayo are nearby.

The culinary claim to fame of San Cristobal is the *pastelito en hoja*, literally 'pastry in paper,' basically a doughy empanada stuffed with cheese or meat wrapped in a piece of butcher paper. They cost around US\$0.50 a piece and can be found at most eateries. San Cristobal's main **market**, along Calle María Trinidad Sánchez, is two blocks west of Av Constitución. All of San Cristobal's services are on those two streets, most within a few blocks of Parque Colón, where you'll be dropped if you arrive by bus.

Buses for San Cristobal leave Santo Domingo from Parque Enriqueillo. In San Cristobal, *gua-guas* for the capital (US\$1.40, 45 minutes) leave every 15 to 30 minutes from a stop at the southeast edge of the park.

CAUDILLO KITSCH

San Cristobal's strangest sight is not technically open to the public, but the soldiers guarding the **Castillo del Cerro** are usually happy to take the padlock off the door and let you look around. Trujillo had the structure built for himself and his family in 1947 (at a cost of US\$3 million) but he reportedly hated the finished product and never spent a single night there. The name means 'Castle on the Hill,' which is pretty accurate – it overlooks the city – but the imposing concrete-and-glass structure looks like a medieval office building. Inside, though, huge dining rooms, ballrooms and numerous bedrooms and salons have fantastic ceilings and wall decorations made of plaster and painted in gaudy colors. The bathrooms – of which there must be 20 – have tile mosaics done in reds, blues and even gold leaf. There are six floors in all, and you can spend a half-hour or more just wandering through the abandoned structure.

Any taxi driver or *motoconchista* (motorcycle taxi driver) can take you there – it probably makes sense to ask the driver to come back in 30 to 60 minutes to pick you up. If you've got a vehicle, from Parque Independencia take Calle María Trinidad Sánchez west for 500m. Take a left onto Calle Luperón near the Isla gas station. Follow Calle Luperón for 800m until you reach a fork in the road. There, Calle Luperón veers right and an unsigned street veers left and uphill. Take the unsigned street and proceed another 500m to the top. There are signs saying 'Do Not Enter,' but you can disregard those and pull right into the parking area facing the front doors. A soldier is always posted there.

Atop another hill on the other side of San Cristobal is the house that Trujillo and his family actually used. It is called **Casa de Coaba** (House of Mahogany) and was clearly once splendid, but has been completely gutted since. There's often a caretaker on the premises who will open up a few rooms for a small tip, though there isn't much to see. It's believed it was here that Trujillo confronted the Spanish Columbia University professor Jesús Galíndez, who he had kidnapped from New York City; Galíndez was later murdered. The road to the house is rough, so a SUV is recommended.

Also interesting and slightly strange is the informal **Museo Jamás El Olvido Será tu Recuerdo** (☎ 809-474-8767) in the home of local resident José Miguel Ventura Medina, known to some as 'El Hippie.' The museum's name translates literally to 'Forgetfulness will never be your remembrance,' or simply 'You will never be forgotten.' The 'you' in this case is none other than Generalísimo Trujillo, who, along with John F Kennedy, was Ventura's favorite world leader. Most will not agree with Ventura's assessment of Trujillo as a 'good dictator,' but the extensive collection of photos and other memorabilia – plus a slew of random antiques, from old corn and coffee grinders to early typewriters – is worth poking around. Ventura, who speaks Spanish and English, has plenty of stories to go along with them. The museum is free and open whenever Ventura is home; if he's not there, give him a call. It's located on Calle General Leger several blocks north of the park – look for a small white car perched on the rooftop.

For towns west of San Cristobal, you have to go out to the main highway – under the overpass is a popular place – and flag down a passing bus (to Baní US\$1.40, 45 minutes) to Barahona (US\$3.80, three hours). At the time of research there was extensive road construction west of San Cristobal slowing traffic down significantly.

There are taxis and *motoconchos* in the vicinity of Parque Independencia from sunrise until late at night.

RESERVA ANTROPOLÓGICA EL POMIER

Visiting the Reserva Antropológica El Pomier is like reading a history book written in stone. There are 57 limestone **caves** (☎ 8am-5pm; admission US\$3.50) in the area just 10km north of central

San Cristobal, five of which (containing almost 600 paintings) are open to the public. The caves contain thousands of drawings and carvings that constitute the most extensive example of prehistoric art yet discovered in the Caribbean, including works by Igneri and Caribs as well as the Tainos. The faded drawings, painted with a mix of charcoal and the fat from manatees, depict birds, fish and other animals, as well as figures that may be deities. Relatively little is known about Hispaniola's earliest inhabitants, though the paintings here, believed to be as much as 2000 years old, provide some tantalizing clues. The principal cave was first discovered in 1851 by Sir Robert Schomburgk, who left his name and that of his companions on the wall. Unfortunately, the caves seem to

be consistently closed for renovations; until recently they were also closed as a safety precaution because of nearby explosives blasting, part of a marble-mining operation. Local guides have fought to protect the site, though its future remains uncertain still to this day.

It's a challenge to get to the caves on your own – there are almost no signs marking the road to the caves, and the entrance, also unmarked, is several hundred meters down a mine access road. The easiest way there is to take a taxi or *motoconcho*. Round-trip with an hour wait should cost around US\$5 on a *motoconcho* or US\$15 in a taxi. If you're driving, follow Av Constitución north to La Toma, a small community across the highway from San Cristobal, where there is one easy-to-spot sign. From there, it's another 2.5km to a prominent but unmarked T-intersection, where you turn left and proceed up the hill for several more kilometers to the entrance. Ask as you go, as the turnoffs are easy to miss. Be alert for giant dump trucks coming down the road from the mine – there are a number of blind curves.

BANÍ

pop 73,800

Notable mainly as a convenient stopping point for those driving between Santo Domingo and Barahona, Baní also marks the turnoff for the beach and sand dunes of **Las Salinas** 20km to the southwest. Its historical claim to fame is as the birthplace of Generalísimo Máximo Gómez y Báez who, after serving in the Spanish army in Santo Domingo, moved to Cuba to become a farmer. During the 1860s, Gómez joined the insurgents opposed to Spanish rule and the heavy taxation it imposed, rose to the rank of general of the Cuban forces and, together with José Martí, led the revolution of 1868–78 that culminated in Cuba's independence from Spain.

Orientation

Baní's heart is Parque Duarte and you'll find all relevant services within a few blocks of here. To reach it from the east, turn right just after crossing the Río Baní, just in front of the oncoming one-way street that greets you almost at the foot of the bridge. Go two blocks and make a left onto Calle Máximo Gómez. Go six or seven blocks and make a left onto Calle Mella. After half a block you'll be at the intersection of Calle Sánchez and Calle Mella,

in front of the Iglesia Nuestra Señora de Regla (the city's main church).

To get to Parque Duarte from the west, turn right where Hwy 2 (also known as Sánchez Hwy) confronts an opposing one-way street. Turn left on Calle Sánchez – the first left you can make – and head six blocks to Parque Duarte.

Information

Banco León (cnr Hwy Sánchez & Calle Mella)

Banco Popular (Gómez at Duarte)

Centro Médico Regional (☎ 809-522-3611; Presidente Billini at Restauración) A recommended hospital four blocks east of Parque Duarte.

Farmacia Meniño (☎ 809-522-3344; Gómez btwn Duarte & Mella; ☎ 7:30am-9pm, 8am-noon Sun) A pharmacy on the other side of the church from the park.

Flash Point Ciber Café (☎ 809-522-2436; ☎ 9am-11pm) On Calle Mella, a half-block south of the park; internet access for US\$1.50 per hour, and also operates as a calling center.

Sights

Baní's only tourist attraction, such as it is, is the **Casa de Máximo Gómez** (Calle Máximo Gómez; ☎ 8am-5pm; admission free), essentially a small park built on what was the site of the leader's birthplace and childhood home. Flags of Cuba and the DR, and a mural of Gómez watch over a marble bust of the man in the middle of the park. The site is located two blocks east of Parque Duarte.

Dunas de las Calderas, part of the Península de las Salinas, is 20 sq km of gray-brown sand mounds, some as high as 20m. The brown sandy beach near here gets crowded with Dominican families and windsurfers on Sundays and is not kept especially clean. Weekdays, you'll have it all to yourself. To get to Las Salinas, take any road from Parque Duarte south; eventually they all lead to a single paved though potholed road that passes through several small 'towns', at least one of which has an ATM. There's a naval station at the end of the road; continue past the guard's pillbox and turn left. Follow this road to town and the Salinas Hotel & Restaurant.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Caribani (☎ 809-522-3871; orencio2@hotmail.com; cnr Calles Sánchez 12 & San Tomé; s/d US\$33/45; ☎) Adequate as a place to lay your head for the night, the Caribani is conveniently located only one block from the northwestern edge of

Parque Duarte. The basic dim rooms have cable TV, air-con and the standard safe box in the bathroom – the last place anyone would look, right? Pizzería Yarey is around the corner.

Salinas Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 809-866-8141; www.hotelsalinas.com; 7 Puerto Hermosa; per person US\$75) Not many foreign travelers make it out here, almost the literal end of the road on the peninsula southwest of Bani. If you do, you'll likely be surprised by this hotel, not your standard all-inclusive resort – rates include breakfast, lunch, dinner and drinks. All the rooms in this four-story building with thatched roof have stunning views of the mountains across the bay, as does the restaurant – easily the best place to eat in town: lobster (US\$18), seafood (US\$12) and chicken (US\$6). Rooms are large and comfortable, though the furnishings are fairly dated, and considering there's no beachfront the value is questionable. Sailboats are docked at the attached marina and the hotel has its own helipad, in case you plan on flying in. Otherwise you'll need your own vehicle to make a trip out here worthwhile.

Restaurant y Pizzería Yarey (☎ 809-522-3717; Calle Sánchez 10; mains US\$7-10; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Waiters in bow ties, and a large open-air dining area make this restaurant one of the best in Bani. The pizza is mediocre but there are seafood and meat dishes to choose from as well. Yarey can be found on the north side of Parque Central, directly across from the Palacio del Ayuntamiento.

Supermercado Daneris (☎ 809-522-3410; cnr Calle Mella & Vladislao Guerrero), a small grocery for food and other supplies, is two blocks south of Parque Central.

Getting There & Away

There are express *gua-guas* to Santo Domingo (US\$2.75, 1¼ hours, every 15 minutes from 3:40am to 8pm) leaving from a terminal a half-block west of the main park. Regular *gua-guas* leave even more frequently – every five minutes – and cost US\$0.50 less, but take a half-hour longer to get there.

Gua-guas to San José de Ocoa (US\$1.80, 45 minutes, hourly from 7am to 8pm) leave from a terminal about a kilometer west of the park on Av Máximo Gómez. Buses to Barahona (US\$4.25, two hours) pass by the same terminal roughly every 30 to 60 minutes – they're coming from Santo Domingo and don't have a fixed schedule for Bani. They don't linger long here, so be sure to be on the lookout.

SAN JOSÉ DE OCOA

pop 21,900

San José de Ocoa is a collection of small colorful houses set in the foothills of the Cordillera Central. Ocoa, as it's known to locals who are descendants of Arab immigrants who arrived in the 19th century, is famous for its candied figs and its cooperative farming methods. The road here winds through undeveloped countryside, rising from 200m to nearly 2000m and was ruined after Tropical Storm Noel in October 2007, which cut the town off from the outside world for nearly two weeks.

The area is rich with spring water and a few *balnearios* (swimming holes), including filtered and chlorinated **Rancho Francisco** (☎ 809-558-4099; admission US\$1; ☎ 8am-11pm), 1km south of town. A huge dining area serves standard fish, chicken and meat dishes for around US\$7 to \$10. It's quite busy on weekends, but is all but empty during the week.

There are two banks with ATMs, a post office and pharmacy around the town park. A few basic guesthouses can be found several blocks north of the park; the best is **Casa de Huéspedes San Francisco** (☎ 809-558-2741; cnr Calle Andrés Pimentel & Imbert; s/d US\$18/22; ☎) with clean rooms and cable TV and hot water.

For a chance to get off the road, both in terms of a place to sleep and to explore the surrounding countryside, head to the German-owned **Rancho Cascada** (☎ 809-890-2332; www.ranchocascada.com; per person US\$25; ☎), a collection of six thatched-roof bungalows on the Río Nizao. Meals (US\$5) are available, as are half- and full-day canoeing, horseback-riding, hiking and biking trips.

Getting There & Away

The bus stop (Calle Duarte between 16 de Agosto and Andrés Pimentel) is a half-block west of the park, across the street from the post office. *Gua-guas* for Santo Domingo (US\$4, two hours) leave every 15 minutes from 4:15am to 5:30pm. If you're headed to Barahona, San Juan or other points west, take the Santo Domingo bus to the main highway (US\$1.80) and flag a westbound *gua-gua* there.

For Constanza, pickup trucks make the tough, bumpy trip around three times per week. There is no fixed schedule or bus line, but either hotel can call around to see when the next truck is leaving. They typically leave very early – 5am or 6am – and charge from US\$3 to \$5 for the three- to four-hour trip.

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