

North Coast



Within two hours' drive of Puerto Plata's international airport, you'll find all the best that the north coast has to offer – water sports 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.

Puerto Plata's all-inclusive resorts continue to draw a steady stream of package tourists, but it's Cabarete that shines as the north coast's center for independent travelers. This one-street town hit the big time when the winds were judged world class for kitesurfing, and up and down the street you'll hear half a dozen languages chasing the latest adrenaline-pumping activities – kitesurfing, of course, but also surfing, wakeboarding, windsurfing, mountain biking, and followed always by dinner and drinks on the beach.

Those looking for less action and more beach time – and who don't mind renting a condo – will find Cofresí or Costambar to their taste. Both sit just a few kilometers outside of Puerto Plata, and their large, condo-dwelling expat populations have the beaches almost entirely to themselves. Theme park fans will enjoy Ocean World, on Cofresí beach, where you can swim with the dolphins, but still gamble at the casino till dawn.

The north coast is bookended by two completely different towns: Río San Juan to the east and Monte Cristi to the west. Set amid the dry desert scrub near the border, Monte Cristi is the obvious launching pad for an expedition to Haiti, but otherwise holds little of interest. Río San Juan is a sleepy little town that sees few tourists, and yet is a good base for spending time on Playa Grande, one of the most beautiful beaches on the island.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Climb up through the **27 waterfalls of Damajagua** (p196), then leap and slide down into crystal-blue pools
- Dig your toes into the sand and your fork into some great grub while dining on the beach in **Cabarete** (p184)
- Marvel at the many shades of amber in Puerto Plata's **Museo del Ambar Dominicano** (p168), the museum that inspired the movie *Jurassic Park*
- Find tranquility in the typical small-town Dominican atmosphere of **Río San Juan** (p192)
- Worship the sun as the waves crash nearby on beautiful **Playa Grande** (p193)



HISTORY

Cabarete is the tourism capital of the north coast, but until about 20 years ago, the town existed only as a small farming hamlet. It was only the discovery by a pioneering windsurfer in the 1980s that the wind and waves were perfect for the sport that marked the beginning of Cabarete as we know it today.

Sosúa, Cabarete's seedy neighbor, was populated in 1940 by around 350 Jewish families fleeing Germany and other parts of Europe. Most left after just a few years, but not before building many fine homes and establishing what is to this day the DR's most recognizable cheese and dairy company.

Puerto Plata, the largest city on the coast, has a much older past – Columbus founded the city in 1493. As he approached the bay, the sunlight reflected off the water so brilliantly it resembled a sea of sparkling silver coins. Columbus named the bay Puerto Plata (Silver Port). He also named the mountain that looms over the city Pico Isabel de Torres (799m), in honor of the Spanish queen who sponsored his voyages.

An important port for the fertile north coast, Puerto Plata – and, indeed, the entire north coast – was plagued by pirates. It eventually became more lucrative for colonists to trade with the pirates (who were supported by Spain's enemies, England and France) rather than risk losing their goods on Spanish galleons. Such trade was forbidden and enraged the Spanish crown. In 1605 the crown ordered the evacuation of Puerto Plata – as well as the trading centers of Monte Cristi, La Yaguana and Bayajá – rather than have its subjects trading with the enemy.

The north coast remained virtually abandoned for more than a century, until the Spanish crown decided to repopulate the area to prevent settlers from other countries – namely the French from present-day Haiti – from moving in. Puerto Plata slowly regained importance, suffering during the Trujillo period, but eventually reinvented itself as a tourist destination. The early 1990s were golden years for the city, and for the first time tourism revenues surpassed those of its three main industries – sugar, tobacco and cattle hides – combined.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Aeropuerto Internacional Gregorio Luperón is the second-largest airport in the country,

and within two hours' driving distance from almost everywhere on the north coast. It's also your best place to rent a car, although you'll probably want an SUV, considering the state of the roads. Buses and *gua-guas* (small buses) offer frequent service all along this coast – it's as easy as sticking your hand in the air – although you may find the cost of the fare to be inversely proportional to your Spanish language ability.

PUERTO PLATA

pop 147,000

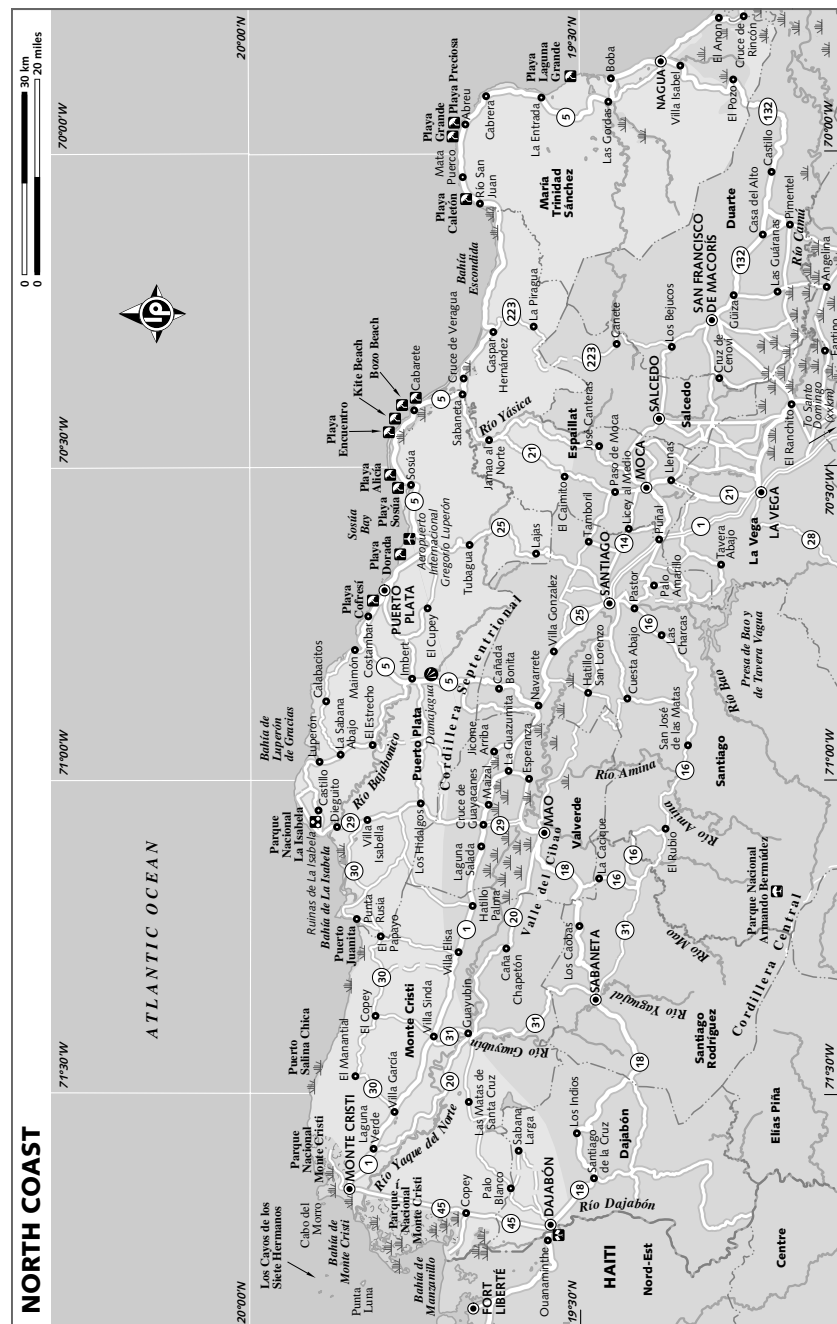
A wag in a bar put it this way: Puerto Plata is a charmless city, yes, but it's a city full of charming people. We agree.

While the Puerto Plata region boasts some of the best the country has to offer, the city itself is a working port town. It has a few interesting museums, and the cable car ride to the nearby bluff is worth the trip, but the accommodation options are poor – make Puerto Plata a day trip, and stay elsewhere, in the many welcoming towns along the coast.

A 2006 city project saw new sand dredged in and deposited along the coast, making the city beach and the beaches at Playa Dorada and Cofresí significantly more attractive. In a less welcome development, the government kicked all the street vendors off the oceanside boulevard and bulldozed the beach shacks at Long Beach, laying down pretty new paving stones but producing a character-free, sterile beach environment.

ORIENTATION

The center of town is Parque Central, which was under rigorous renovation when we were there – the park had been torn out and new, sterile red pavers were being laid. Most of the trees had been cut down too, but there might be some flowers and benches when they finish. Five blocks north of the park is the Malecón (main street; literally 'sea wall') and beyond that the ocean. The Malecón (also known as Av General Luperón and Av Circunvalación Norte) runs along the shore – Long Beach, the main city beach, is located 2km east along the center, but is nothing special. The other main east-west street is Av Beller (pronounced, oddly, 'Bell-AIR'), which runs along the north side of the park and feeds onto Av Luis Ginebra.



Take this road to go to the airport, Playa Dorada and beyond.

INFORMATION

Emergency

Politur (tourist police; ☎ 809-582-2331; cnr Av Hermanas Mirabal & Malecón; 🕒 24hr) Near Long Beach.

Internet Access & Telephone

Codetel (☎ 809-586-4393; cnr Av Beller & Padre Castellanos; per hr US\$1) Doubles as a call center.
Dot Com (☎ 809-261-6165; Calle 12 de Julio 69; per hr US\$0.70)
Internet Flash (cnr Separación & Margarita; per hr US\$1.25) Friendly service and a relatively fast connection.

Internet Resources

Puerto Plata Report (www.popreport.com) Regional news and travel information from the north coast of the DR.

Laundry

D'Cast Lavandería (☎ 809-261-5900; Calle Camino Real 6) Per piece only – expect to pay as much as US\$10 for a small load of washing. Also does dry cleaning.

Medical Services

Centro Médico Dr Bournigal (☎ 809-586-2342; Antera Mota; 🕒 24hr) A highly recommended clinic.
Clinica Brugal (☎ 809-586-2519; José del Carmen Ariza; 🕒 24hr) The heart specialist here is recommended by many.
Decompression chamber (☎ 809-586-2210; Hospital Dr Ricardo Limardo, cnr Av Manolo Taveres Busto 1 & Hugo Kundhart)
Farmacia Carmen (☎ 809-586-2525; Calle 12 de Julio) Offers free delivery.

Money

Banco BHD (JF Kennedy)
Banco León (JF Kennedy)
Banco Mercantil (Separación) On Parque Central.

Post

Post office (cnr Calle 12 de Julio & Separación) Two blocks north of Parque Central.

Tourist Information

Tourism office (☎ 809-586-5059; cnr Av Hermanas Mirabal & Malecón) On Long Beach, on the second floor of the Politur station. Moderately helpful.

Travel Agencies

Cafemba Tours (☎ 809-586-2177; cafembatours@hotmail.com; Calle Separación 12) Half a block north of

Parque Central, Cafemba can arrange plane tickets and package tours.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Museo del Ambar Dominicano

The **Museo del Ambar Dominicano** (Dominican Amber Museum; ☎ 809-586-3910; www.ambermuseum.com; Calle Duarte 61; admission US\$1.50; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) presents an excellent exhibit on this prized resin. Guides walk visitors through the display, explaining the origins and history of amber and answering any questions. They claim a visit here by Steven Spielberg was the inspiration for the movie *Jurassic Park*. The collection is impressive and includes valuable pieces with such rare inclusions as a small lizard and a 30cm-long feather (the longest one found to date). Tours are offered in English and Spanish. A gift shop on the ground floor has a fine selection of amber jewelry, but is open only in high season (December to March).

Galería de Ambar

Equally as impressive as the Museo del Ambar, the **Galería de Ambar** (☎ 809-586-6467; www.ambercollection.itgo.com; Calle 12 de Julio; admission US\$1; 🕒 8:30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat), near José del Carmen Ariza, would be almost indistinguishable from its competitor were it not for its exhibits on rum, sugar, tobacco and coffee. Guides speak English, French, German and Spanish.

Teleférico

Just south of Puerto Plata is Pico Isabel de Torres (799m), an enormous flat-topped mountain Columbus named in 1493. A **teleférico** (cable car; ☎ 809-586-2122; Camino a los Dominguez; US\$3 one way; 🕒 8am-5pm, closed Wed) takes visitors to the top. On clear days there are spectacular views of the city and coastline – go early, before the mountain clouds up. The botanical gardens at the top are good for an hour's stroll. There's also a large statue of Christ the Redeemer (similar to but smaller than its counterpart in Rio de Janeiro), an overpriced restaurant, and aggressive knick-knack sellers.

Board the *teleférico* at its base at the southern end of Camino a los Dominguez, 800m uphill from Av José Ginebra. A *motoconcho* (motorcycle taxi) here costs US\$1.30, a taxi US\$7. The ride is notorious for opening late or closing early, so cross your fingers before heading up there.

You can also walk up (or down) the mountain, paying only a one-way fare to return. Follow the trail under the cable-car lines up to the midpoint tower (there is only one), then turn right and follow the ridgeline to the right. It's a tough two- to three-hour walk (we estimate about 7km) uphill – leave granny at home. **Iguana Mama** (see p188) offers this tour. Alternatively, on weekends local guides sometimes hang out at the ticket office (US\$10).

Cockfighting

There's a small **club gallístico** (US\$10), with fights most Saturdays and Sundays at around 2pm. Expect crowds of 300 and more to elbow their way into this tiny space near the Malecón. There's no bookie – bets are shouted across the room based on the color of the corner the bird's fighting from. Ask any *motoconcho* if it's on.

Fuerte de San Felipe

Located right on the bay, at the western end of the Malecón, **Fuerte de San Felipe** (San Felipe Fort; admission US\$1.20; 🕒 9am-5pm) is the only remnant of Puerto Plata's early colonial days. Built in the mid-16th century to prevent pirates from seizing one of the only protected bays on the entire north coast, the fort never saw any action. For much of its life its massive walls and interior moat were used as a prison. Today there's a small museum, but its exhibits – a few rusty hand-cuffs, a handful of bayonets and a stack of cannonballs – are far from remarkable. The views of the bay are impressive, though, and a large grassy area in front of the fort makes for a restful stop.

Also at the fort is Puerto Plata's **lighthouse**, which first lit up on September 9, 1879, and was restored in 2000. The white-and-yellow tower – 24.4m tall, 6.2m in diameter – is a melding of neoclassical style with industrial construction.

Casa de la Cultura

In addition to dance and music workshops, the **Casa de la Cultura** (Cultural Center; ☎ 809-261-2731; Parque Central, Calle Duarte; admission free; 🕒 9am-noon & 3-5pm Mon-Fri) often showcases work by Dominican artists in its first-floor gallery. It was closed for renovation when we were there, but should be open by the time you read this.

Iglesia San Felipe

The twin-steepled **Iglesia San Felipe** (Parque Central, Calle Duarte; 🕒 8am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Sat, 7am-8pm Sun) had been completely gutted and was under renovation when we passed through, but should be spiffed up by the time you get there. The principal attraction here is the Italian stained-glass windows. Small but beautiful, they were donated to the church by area families in 1998 after Hurricane George blew through town and devastated the church. At the base of each window is the name of the family that contributed it.

Brugal Rum Plant

The local joke has it that everyone wants to be the quality-assurance tester here at this **rum distillery and bottling facility** (☎ 809-586-2531; Carretera a Playa Dorada; admission free; 🕒 8am-4pm Mon-Fri). Lots of package tours come through here, but it's a pretty underwhelming 15-minute tour from a 2nd-floor gangway. Of more interest are the complimentary rum-based cocktails at the end.

TOURS

There are no tour operators based in Puerto Plata, for the simple reason that almost no tourists stay in the city itself. All the nearby all-inclusive resorts listed in this book organize tours for their guests. For independent travelers: tour operators in Cabarete and Sosúa are generally happy to pick you up or provide transportation for you.

That said, there is one recommended deep-sea fishing company based in Puerto Plata, **Gone Fishing** (www.gonefishingdominicanrepublic.com). There's no office, or telephone – it's a boating business after all – but it does come highly recommended. You'll pay around US\$100 (US\$70 for watchers) per half-day trip in larger groups, or you can charter a boat for US\$700/900 per half-/full day. Gone Fishing also operates out of Punta Cana.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The third week in June brings a week-long **cultural festival**, which features merengue, blues, jazz and folk concerts at Fuerte de San Felipe. Troupes from Santo Domingo perform traditional dances that range from African spirituals to sexy salsa tunes. At the same time, the town hosts an arts-and-crafts fair for local artisans at nearby Parque Central.

PUERTO PLATA

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ATLANTIC OCEAN

LONG BEACH

Puerto Plata hosts a popular **merengue festival** in early November. During the festival the entire length of the Malecón is closed to vehicular traffic, food stalls are set up on both sides of the oceanside boulevard and a stage is erected for merengue performances.

SLEEPING

Unless you're after budget accommodation there's no real reason to spend the night in Puerto Plata, considering that there are much better options elsewhere on the coast.

Hotel Ilra (☎ 809-586-2337; Calle Villanueva 25; r with fan per person US\$14) Housed in a Victorian-style home that's over a century old (and starting to show it), rooms here have whitewashed wood walls and mosquito nets over the beds. All share a large but aging bathroom. There's a small sitting room downstairs, and a restaurant (mains US\$4 to US\$8; open for breakfast, lunch and dinner Monday to Saturday) downstairs occupies the cheeriest room in the house and is a pleasant place to start your day.

Hotel Atlantico (☎ 809-586-6108; Calle 12 de Julio 24; r with fan US\$15, with air-con & TV US\$20;) The beds here have seen better days, and having padlocks instead of doorknobs is always a red flag, but the Atlantic remains a reliable and popular budget hotel. There are eight very basic rooms organized around a narrow interior courtyard; all have high ceilings and wood walls, and tolerable private bathrooms. Several rooms have air-con and cable TV.

Portofino Guest House (☎ 809-586-2858; Av Hermanas Mirabal 12; r US\$26/32;) About a block from Long Beach, you get the feeling you're out in the boonies - this is a long way from the center. There are 20 clean rooms here - they're fading fast, but have hot water, air-con and cable TV. A well-tended swimming pool under a flourishing mango tree is a plus. An excellent pizzeria (p172) by the same name is next door.

Hotel Mountain View (☎ 809-586-5757; www.mountainviewdr.com; cnr J Kunhardt & Villanueva; r US\$36;) Indisputably the best hotel in Puerto Plata, the Mountain View (which does, incidentally, have an excellent view of the mountains) offers super standard motel rooms with firm mattresses, cable TV and spanking-clean bathrooms. There's free wi-fi, a computer in the lobby, plus a bar and restaurant on site. The location is not walking distance to the center, but is accessible by *motoconcho* and taxi.

Aparta-Hotel Lomar (☎ 809-586-3966; Malecón 8; s/d US\$35/43, 1-bedroom apt US\$55-70; 📍 🚻) Rooms and apartments in this hotel are spacious and clean, and feature cable TV and telephones. Kitchens in the apartments are small but adequate. Some also have balconies with ocean views. For the outlay, this place is excellent value, and your best choice on the Malecón. Same owners as the Portofino (p171).

EATING

The best restaurants in the area cluster in and around Cofresí (see p178).

Heladería Mariposa (☎ 809-970-1785; Av Beller; mains US\$3-8; 📍 8am-11pm) A block north of the park, this cute ice-cream shop and bakery serves simple but good sandwiches and homemade ice cream.

Barco's (☎ 829-210-3922; Malecón 6; mains US\$3-15; 📍 8am-12midnight) On the Malecón, this restaurant has a breezy, open-sided dining room, but the mostly expat clientele prefers the sidewalk tables in front. The menu has a little of everything, from Dominican-style egg breakfasts to sandwiches and burgers, to pasta and pizza. There are also seafood dishes, of course, and daily specials that are a good deal off the regular prices. Main dishes come with a choice of potatoes, fries or *mangú* (mashed plantains).

Sam's Bar & Grill (☎ 809-586-7267; www.samsbar.tk; Calle José del Carmen Ariza 34; mains US\$4-9; 📍 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun; 📍) With ragged flags flying over a clapboard façade, Sam's is the favored watering hole of the area's heavy-drinking resident gringos. The food here is great value, though – there's French toast, chicken Kiev, Mexican scramble, Philly cheese steak and Tijuana-style chili – all reliable. Free wi-fi (for you internet addicts) with purchase.

Jamvi's (☎ 809-320-7265; cnr Malecón & Calle López; mains US\$5-12; 📍 10am-late) This gargantuan open-air pizza joint sits above street level on the Malecón, offering a pleasant sea breeze and great views. Good for a pizza and wine fix (there's a decent wine list); from 10pm onwards it pumps the merengue and reggaeton till late.

Restaurant Pizzeria Portofino (☎ 809-261-2423; Av Hermanas Mirabal 12; mains US\$7-11; 📍) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Near the eastern end of the Malecón, Portofino's is a thatch-roofed, open-sided restaurant that offers excellent pizzas. Pasta dishes are also quite good. Handy if you're hanging out on Long Beach and want some grub.

our pick Café Cito (☎ 809-586-7923; www.cafecito.info; mains US\$7-15; 📍) lunch & dinner; 📍) Just 500m west of Playa Dorada and an easy walk from your resort, this laid-back eatery is your salvation from bad buffet food. The kitchen serves up solid American (or rather, Canadian) food, including hearty breakfasts, Philly cheese steak, pork chops, and for homesick Quebecers, *poutine*. There's free wi-fi with your meal, the bar does drink specials till late, and the cigar-chomping owner (who is also the Canadian consul) sells good smokes at budget prices. Ask about his 'Nite on the Town' bar-hopping tours.

El Manguito Restaurant & Liquor Store (☎ 809-586-4392; mains US\$7-18; 📍) lunch & dinner) Nestled at the side of the highway just east of the Costa Dorada complex (and just west of Playa Dorada) is this great-value seafood joint, a short walk from your resort. Beers here are only US\$2, and the lobster (US\$14) is great value. Service is excellent, and there's also a variety of desserts.

La Parrillada (☎ 809-586-1401; cnr Av Luis Ginebra & Circunvalación Sur; mains US\$8-18; 📍) lunch & dinner) At the eastern end of town, this popular meat-lovers' restaurant serves quality grilled dishes in a classy, understated setting. Iron tables are covered with tablecloths and set with ceramic plates and wine glasses, either on an open-air patio or in the small, comfortable dining area. The *churrasco* (grilled or barbecued beef) is a house favorite, as is the shrimp, and on Sundays an outdoor barbecue brings flocks of people, locals and foreigners alike.

Aguceros Bar & Grill (☎ 809-586-2796; Malecón 32; US\$10-15; 📍) lunch & dinner) This open-sided, thatch-roofed, fan-cooled bar and grill is pleasant for its casual-Caribbean, low-light ambience and its location on the Malecón. Tex-Mex is the specialty here, including fajitas, burritos and a combo plate with nachos, quesadillas, soft tacos, clamichangas, flautas and more for under US\$15. Great for a Mexican fix if you've been without for awhile.

The monster-sized **Tropical Supermarket** (☎ 809-586-6464; cnr Av 27 de Febrero & Beller) is the best place in the center for groceries.

Mercado Municipal (cnr Calles 2 & López; 📍) 7am-3pm Mon-Sat) is housed in what looks like an enormous, crown-shaped, reinforced-concrete gas station from the 1960s. Here you'll find a large variety of meat and vegetables, and pushy salesmen selling tourist knick-knacks.

IS IT REALLY AMBER & IS IT REALLY DOMINICAN?

Dominican amber is widely regarded as the finest in the world. It not only exhibits the largest range of colors – from clear and pale lemon to warm oranges, gold, brown, and even green, blue and black – but it contains the greatest number of 'inclusions': insects, tiny reptiles and plant matter that became trapped in the resin before it fossilized. Such inclusions add character to a piece of amber and increase its value.

Fake amber (made of plastic) is occasionally sold in the DR, especially by street and beachside vendors. You're advised to buy only from a reputable shop, which will always permit you the following tests to satisfy yourself that it is genuine:

- Examine the amber under a fluorescent lamp. If the glow changes, it's amber; if it doesn't, it's plastic.
- Rub the piece against cotton and bring it close to your hair. If the hair moves, it's real. Amber acquires static electricity; plastic doesn't.
- Place unadorned amber in a glass of salt water. If it floats, it's amber. If it sinks, it's plastic. Remember: this won't work if the piece is in a setting.
- Ask the salesperson to hold a match to the amber. Heated amber gives off a natural resin, plastic smells like a chemical.

Be aware also that a significant amount of the amber sold in the DR is actually imported from Europe, especially Poland. This amber is often good value, and will satisfy all of the above tests. While only experts can tell for sure where a particular piece comes from, one thing to look for is 'spangles' – flashes of light embedded inside the amber. This is typical of Polish amber and normally absent from the Dominican gem.

Finally, blue amber is mined exclusively in the DR. It is the most spectacular and most expensive form of amber, and if it passes the above tests you can be sure it is, in fact, Dominican.

DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT

our pick Irish Tavern (☎ 809-708-5205; irish.tavern@comcast.com; Calle 12 de Julio 22; 📍) 8am-8pm Mon-Sat) This friendly Irish-owned bar does the best US\$2.50 Dominican lunch in town. It also does fish and chips and shepherd's pie. A Guinness will set you back a mere US\$4, and there's sometimes Bushmill's behind the bar. It has one of the best book swaps in the country.

Terraza Las Almendras (☎ 809-854-0092; www.puertoplatalasalmenndras.info; cnr Malecón & Calle A Brugal Montanez; 📍) 8am-late) With pleasant outdoor seating under bright umbrellas, this sea-facing restaurant makes a good place to kick back and drink a couple of beers. The food consists almost entirely of *pinchos* – if it once roamed the earth (or sea), you can get it here served on a stick.

Cine Teatro Roma (☎ 809-320-7010; Av Beller 39; admission US\$5) The only movie theater convenient to the center.

SHOPPING

La Canoa (☎ 809-586-3604; Av Beller 18; 📍) 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun) This rambling gift shop is

the biggest and best in town. There's an enormous amber exhibit – almost a museum – and a good selection of amber and larimar jewelry. It also sells the usual acrylic Haitian paintings, boxes of cigars, and postcards.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Puerto Plata is served by **Aeropuerto Internacional Gregorio Luperón** (☎ 809-586-0107), 18km east of town along the coastal highway (past Playa Dorada), and just a few kilometers west of Sosúa. Numerous charter airlines use the airport, mostly in conjunction with the all-inclusive resorts. A taxi to or from the airport costs US\$25. Cheapskates can also walk 500m from the terminal to the main highway, where they can flag down a *gua-gua* to Puerto Plata (US\$1.20, 45 minutes) or Sosúa (US\$0.30, 10 minutes).

Some of the airlines with international service here include:

Air Canada (☎ 809-541-5151; www.aircanada.com)

American Airlines (toll free ☎ 809-200-5151; www.aa.com)

Continental (toll free ☎ 809-200-1062; www.continental.com)

Delta (☎ 809-586-0973; www.delta.com)

LTU (☎ 809-586-4075; www.ltu.com)

Lufthansa (toll free ☎ 809-200-1133; www.lufthansa.com)

Martinair (toll free ☎ 809-200-1200; www.martinair.com)

Car

Your best bet for renting a car is to pick one up at the airport when you arrive. There are also a couple of international rent-a-car agencies on the road leading east out of town toward Playa Dorada. Rates start at US\$50 to US\$60 per day, with taxes and insurance included. Discounts are available in low season (May to October) and if you rent for several days or weeks.

All of the following also have offices at the airport, where they are open 7am to 10pm (and are usually on call overnight, but charge extra for late pickup or delivery).

Alamo (☎ 809-586-1366, airport 809-586-0285; www.alamo.com; ☎ 8am-6pm) East of town on the road to Playa Dorada.

Avis (☎ 809-586-4436, airport 809-586-7007; www.avis.com; ☎ 8am-6pm) Located next to Café Cito restaurant, 500m west of Playa Dorada.

Europcar (☎ 809-586-7979, airport 809-586-0215; www.europcar.com; cnr Av Hermanas Mirabal & Luis Ginebra; ☎ 8am-6pm) Located near the state tourism office.

National (☎ 809-586-1366, airport 809-586-0285; www.nationalcar.com; Playa Dorada; ☎ 8am-5pm) In the Playa Dorada shopping center.

Bus

Caribe Tours (☎ 809-576-0790; btwn Real and Kunhardt) has a depot 1km south of Parque Central. The terminal provides hourly service, on the hour from 6am to 7pm, to Santo Domingo (US\$8.20, four hours), and stops along the way at Santiago (US\$6.70, 1½ hours) and La Vega (US\$4.55, two hours).

Metro (☎ 809-586-6062; Calle 16 de Agosto) is located eight blocks east of Parque Central, between Beller and JF Kennedy. The company serves Santo Domingo (US\$8.65, 3½ hours) with a stop in Santiago (US\$6.80, 1¼ hours). Buses depart daily at 6am, 7am, 9am, 11am, 2pm, 4pm and 6:30pm. There are additional departures on Sunday at 9:30am and 3pm.

Javilla Tours (☎ 809-970-2412; cnr Camino Real & Av Colón; ☎ every 15min, 5am-7:30pm) provides bus service to Santiago (US\$5.30, 1½ hours) with

stops along the way at Imbert (US\$1.20, 20 minutes) and Navarrete (US\$2.20, 50 minutes). To get to Monte Cristi, take Javilla's bus to Navarrete and tell the driver to let you off at the junction, where you can change for the **Expresos Linieros** bus (US\$2.10, 1½ hours) to Monte Cristi.

El Canario (☎ 809-291-5594) is a Spanish-operated bus that leaves daily for Samaná (US\$6.05, 3½ to four hours) at 5am from near the public hospital. This is your only option, as neither Metro nor Caribe Tours has direct service to Samaná. Make two calls the day before – one to the bus line to reserve a spot and the other to a taxi line to arrange an early-morning pickup.

For points east and west of town, *gua-guas* are a cheap and reliable option. Eastbound *gua-guas* leave from a stop on the north side of Parque Central, passing by the entrance of Playa Dorada and through Sosúa (US\$0.60, 30 minutes), Cabarete (US\$2.10, one hour) and Río San Juan (US\$3.50, two hours). From Río San Juan, you can catch another van to Nagua and then another to Samaná.

GETTING AROUND

Puerto Plata looks temptingly small on our map – until you get here and realize just how big the place really is. While you can walk around the old town and parts of the Malecón, you're going to have to either get comfortable taking *motoconchos*, or rent a car – locals generally don't use regular taxis, and taxi fares can easily wind up costing as much as a rental car, especially if you're doing a lot of sightseeing.

The main trunk roads in Puerto Plata are serviced by *gua-guas* following lettered routes, which cost US\$0.30. Lines C and F will be of most interest to you: they run from as far west as Cofresí, through town and past Playa Dorada in the east. Line C runs direct; line F makes lots of twists and turns as it barrels through town.

Taxi & Motoconcho

Motoconchos rule the streets here. Thankfully, a successful effort is underway to tame Puerto Plata's once-infamous motorcycle taxis. Drivers must now be licensed and pass a driving test and inspection of their motorcycle – these drivers wear numbered, colored vests. Licensed *motoconchos*, in our experience, were noticeably more cautious in traffic. If you're going to take a *concho*, do yourself

a favor and take one wearing a vest. The in-town fare was between US\$0.65 and US\$1.40 when we were there.

For those squeamish of helmetless motorcycle joy, you'll find taxi fares priced almost exclusively for tourists – the in-town fare is around US\$5 to US\$8. Taxis don't generally cruise the streets looking for customers, so either ask your hotel to call you one, or try **Taxi Pollito** (☎ 809-261-2995). There's normally a taxi stand on the main park, but it had shifted to the western end of the Malecón when we were there – it may have resumed its normal location by the time you read this.

AROUND PUERTO PLATA

Just outside Puerto Plata proper lies Playa Dorada, a string of all-inclusive resorts. To the west of town, the beach hamlets of Costambar and Cofresí are home to many expat condo-dwellers (principally Canadians escaping their winter heating bills). Both have a good community feel, but regular hotels are in short supply – you'll get better value renting a condo by the week or month.

PLAYA DORADA & COSTA DORADA

These two adjacent beaches string together a total of 16 all-inclusive resorts and one five-star hotel. If you're after an all-inclusive, also check out Sun Village and Hacienda resorts in Cofresí. For a complete list of resorts and businesses in the area see www.playadorada.com.do.

Most of the all-inclusive places on Playa Dorada and Costa Dorada offer both day and night passes (US\$45 to US\$60), which entitle you to unlimited access to their facilities for either a buffet lunch, drinks and beach/pool access, or buffet dinner and access to their bars and disco (if they have one).

Activities

Playa Dorada Golf Club (☎ 809-320-3472; www.playadoradagolf.com; ☎ 7am-7pm), designed by Robert Trent Jones, is an attractive 6218m, par-72 course that is the centerpiece of the massive Playa Dorada hotel complex (which incorporates 14 resorts). The greens fee for nine holes is US\$50, for 18 holes, US\$75; caddies (US\$8/15 for nine/18 holes) are obligatory,

golf carts (US\$20/25 for nine/18 holes) are not. Some resorts offer discounted rates for their guests – be sure to ask at your hotel before you reserve your tee time.

Sleeping & Eating

Prices listed are rack rates.

Grand Oasis Marien Resort (☎ in the US 888-774-0040; www.oasismarienresort.com; s/d US\$131/169) Also part of the Costa Dorada complex, this newish resort gets rave reviews for its well-manicured grounds, friendly staff and better-than-average food. It often offers specials that take the price well below the rack rate listed here. An additional two buildings were under construction when we passed through.

Hotel Iberostar Costa Dorada (☎ 809-320-1000; www.iberostar.com; s/d US\$135/165; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Consistently well rated by travelers, this is one of the best-value all-inclusive places in the Puerto Plata region. There's a certain Disneyland cheesiness about the place – you'll be greeted at reception by a porter wearing a pith helmet, for instance – but the grounds are enormous and well kept, the pool is immense, and the food (always a sticking point) is definitely better than average. The rooms are not luxurious, but for what you're paying, still good value.

Occidental Allegro Playa Dorada (☎ 809-320-3988; www.occidentalhotels.com; per person US\$150/216; ☎ ☎ ☎) This satisfactory option has more than 500 rooms, half of which have sea views. There's an enormous pool with a small island in the middle, five restaurants, plus a tennis court, a Jacuzzi, and a beauty parlor.

Gran Ventana Beach Resort (☎ 809-320-2111; www.granventanahotel.com; s/d US\$180/260; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Part of the VH Hotels and Resorts chain, the Gran Ventana is a decent midrange option on Playa Dorada. There are 506 tastefully decorated rooms, all with balcony or terrace, and there's direct beach access under a string of almond and beach grape trees.

our pick Casa Colonial Beach & Spa (☎ 809-320-3232; www.casacolonialhotel.com; r US\$450-1450; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This extraordinary hotel is arguably the best in the country. It offers 50 indulgent suites, each with marble floors, sparkling fixtures, canopied beds, ample balconies, a cedar-lined closet, plus plush bathrobes and slippers. There's even a claw-foot bathtub on some of the balconies, should you want a romantic bubble bath with a view. The grounds are set in a sprawling mansion and

boast a tropical garden with orchids growing at seemingly every turn. An infinity pool with four Jacuzzis is located on the roof, providing a spectacular view of the blue ocean beyond. A high-end spa and two elegant restaurants are also on site. Unlike those of its neighbors, the rates at the Casa Colonial are not all-inclusive.

Getting There & Around

The taxi association of Playa Dorada gouges guests for many times the price you'd pay if you hailed a regular taxi on the street. Don't let management at your hotel scare you with stories of danger lurking outside the complex – this is complete rubbish.

Taxis can be found at any of the hotel entrances and also in front of Playa Dorada Plaza. A taxi to the airport will cost you US\$50, to Sosúa US\$45, to Cabarete US\$55, and within the hotel complex US\$10. If you're going into Puerto Plata (US\$25), refuse the taxi's invitation to wait for you, and take a regular taxi home (US\$8).

For a taste of local life, walk to the front entrance and hail down a *gua-gua* to Puerto Plata (US\$0.60) – when you want to get off, just bang on the side of the van.

COSTAMBAR

Less a traveler's destination than an expat hideaway, Costambar is still worth a look – it's got a beautiful, secluded beach (with a view of the ships leaving harbor to the east), and a couple of good restaurants. It's finding a hotel that's the challenge – this is a private community (see www.apc-costambar.com) that consists entirely of time-share units and vacation homes, many occupied for six months of the year by Canadians on the run from winter.

Some of the condo associations will rent by the week and occasionally by the night in low season, though, and you'll find a grocery store here, plus internet access (but no ATM). If you decide to come here you'll enjoy your stay a great deal more with a car – Costambar is a little spread out. A local monthly newsletter (www.costambarmonthly.com) can keep you up to date with the goings-on.

Information

All of Costambar's main services are in the small village just past the gated entrance. There is no hospital in town.

Aqua Marina Tours (☎ 809-970-7615; www.domini-can-holiday.com) Provides tourist information and also manages several rental properties and arranges area tours.

Farmacia de los Trópicos (☎ 809-970-7607) Advertises Viagra, Cialis and Levitra (and presumably sells aspirin as well).

Jenny's Market (☎ 809-970-7503; Calle Principal; internet per hr US1.70) Offers internet and phone services.

Sleeping & Eating

There are no standard hotels in Costambar, which is instead dominated by condos and time-share places. If you're after up-to-the-minute eating and sleeping info, log on to www.incostambar.com.

Club Villas Jazmin (☎ 809-970-7010; www.villasjazmin.com; apt up to 4 people US\$100; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) A small time-share club with an extremely loyal clientele, the Jazmin will rent apartments to independent travelers during the low season, roughly April to June and September to December. Like many time-share places, the units are large and comfortable if not exactly alluring, including full kitchens, cable TV, CD players and firm beds. The club, a five- to 10-minute walk from the beach, has a small pool, tennis court and even a resident tennis pro.

Aqua Marina Tours (☎ 809-970-7615; www.domini-can-holiday.com) This company manages a number of condos and vacation homes of various sizes and prices in Costambar. Contact them for information on renting.

Pizza Plus (☎ 809-970-7497; Calle Central; mains US\$7-14; ☎ 24hr) As the name suggests, you can get pizzas here – there are a dozen different varieties, all reasonably priced – plus a slew of other Dominican and international dishes. There's also a full bar, and karaoke on Sundays at 9pm.

Harley y Rock Ristocafé (☎ 829-447-3704; mains US\$5-15; ☎ lunch & dinner) *Easy Rider* posters and Harley Davidson paraphernalia litter the walls of this groovy, beachside eatery. It does a quality set meal for US\$5 to US\$7, and Fridays draws crowds for the popular barbecue (US\$12). There's a small pool that customers can dip into, and an apartment upstairs that's occasionally for rent.

Jenny's Market (☎ 809-970-7503; Calle Principal) is a medium-sized market located just as you enter town. There's also a call center and internet café, and a small fast-food eatery that pumps out good drunk food – fried fish, club sandwiches, tacos and burritos. Delivery available.

Getting There & Around

You'll be happiest in Costambar if you have your own vehicle. If not, a *motoconcho* from Puerto Plata will cost you US\$3, and a taxi US\$7. If you're already in Costambar, try the local **taxi association** (☎ 809-970-7318).

Gua-gua lines C and F from Puerto Plata pass the front gate (every 15 minutes from 6am to 6pm), although the village is a good kilometer from the highway, and the beach another kilometer past that.

PLAYA COFRESÍ

Five kilometers west of Puerto Plata lies the quiet, condo-dwelling hamlet of Cofresi. You'll see no sign of the town's namesake – a Puerto Rican pirate who ravaged this coast – although some of the locals may remind you of extras in the movie *Love Wrecked* (2005), which was filmed here.

At one end of town sprawl two enormous (and excellent) all-inclusive resorts; at the other, Ocean World. In the middle, sandwiched between the two on a 500m stretch of beach road, is a tiny community of expats and condo dwellers, and a small, beautiful beach. It's a pleasant stop for a day or two, and also a tranquil place to base yourself for exploring Puerto Plata and the surrounding region.

Information

ATMs and exchange booths are located at the entrance of both all-inclusive resorts.

Medical center (☎ 809-970-7518; Sun Village Resort & Spa; ☎ 8am-1pm & 1:30-6pm, 24hr emergency service) Clearly visible from the main road into town; staff are multilingual and will treat nonguests.

Plaza Taina (☎ 809-970-7504) Has an internet café (per hour US\$3), and sells hats, sunscreen and film. It's right on the main beach road.

Tourist Medical Services (☎ 809-586-1227; ☎ 24hr) A medical clinic affiliated with the Hacienda resorts. There's a pharmacy (open 9am to noon and 1pm to 6pm) next door. Has multilingual staff and serves guests and nonguests alike; for more serious cases.

Sights & Activities

With an enormous sign at the western end of the beach, it's impossible to miss Cofresi's main attraction, **Ocean World** (☎ 809-291-1000; www.oceanworld.net; adult/4-12yr/under 4yr US\$60/45/free; ☎ 9am-6pm). The main attractions are the sea lions, dolphins, sharks and manta rays, the aviary, and the tiger pool and show. You can also swim with the dolphins (per person

US\$140) or the sharks (US\$60). There are several restaurants, a disco, and a casino on site, and boaters who tie up at the new marina get free entrance to the park as part of their mooring fee. The all-you-can-eat Sunday brunch (US\$35) includes prime rib and lobster, and is reportedly excellent.

The **Dominican International Film Festival** (www.dominicaninternationalfilmfestival.com) is hosted each year in early November at Sun Village resort. It attracts a sizable gaggle of Hollywood B-list actors, and although admission is not cheap – US\$35 for a day pass, up to US\$250 for the VIP 'All-Access Pass' – the price includes buffet dinner and open bar.

Sleeping

There are two good all-inclusive resorts in Cofresi, but no hotels as such. There are plenty of condos for rent by the week, though, and a local restaurant rents rooms to independent travelers.

Chris & Mady's (☎ 809-970-7502; www.chrisandmady.com; r US\$50-80, apt US\$120) The focal point of social life in Cofresi, Chris & Mady's now rents rooms in the building next door to the restaurant. The larger rooms have kitchens, living rooms, and oceanfront balconies, and are excellent value, and the best option for the independent traveler looking to check out Cofresi. There was also a large luxury condo development underway nearby when we were there, and Chris will be handling the rentals; two- and three-bedroom apartments will go for around US\$1000 to US\$1500 per week.

Lifestyle Hacienda Resorts (☎ 809-586-1227; www.hacienda-resorts.com; r per person US\$150; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This enormous resort is so large you'll need a golf cart to get around. It's bright and shiny and new and completely over the top – but then that's the idea, right? There are four hotel buildings and some cabins and villas, and style and price vary widely. More downscale than Sun Village, Hacienda is also going the time-share route – expect a salesperson to hassle you at some point during your stay.

Sun Village Resort & Spa (☎ 809-970-3364; www.sunvillageresorts.com; r per person US\$210-260; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) One of the best all-inclusive places on the north coast, Sun Village sprawls over the hillside, with the lobby, bar-restaurant and main pool area perched well above the beach. Pathways lead down past large units where biggish rooms have red-tile floors, air-con and comfortable beds; some have ocean views.

The heart of the town is the intersection of Calles Duarte and Pedro Clisante. From there the beaches and most hotels, restaurants, bars and other services are a short walk away.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Alf's Tours (☎ 809-571-1734; www.alfour.com; Calle Pedro Clisante 12; per hr US\$1.50; ☎ 9am-6pm) This internet café is run by the tour operator next door.

Caribe Internet (☎ 809-915-2688; Calle Duarte 5; per hr US\$2) The biggest and most modern email café in town; it also has webcams and scanners.

V@net (☎ 809-571-1708; Calle Dr Rosen 24; ☎ 9:30am-midnight; per hr US\$1.30) Inside a small supermarket.

LAUNDRY

Family Laundry (☎ 809-324-7922; cnr Calles Dr Rosen & Dr Alejo Martínez; per load US\$5) 'Mores cheaper (sic) than your own house,' this family-owned and -run laundromat charges US\$8 per load or US\$1.30 per kilo.

Lavandería Club Residencial (per load US\$6.80) Same-day service US\$3 extra. Located behind Plaza Médica, near Calle Pedro Clisante.

MEDICAL SERVICES

The best medical center on the coast is 20 minutes away in neighboring Cabarete.

Farmacia KH3 (☎ 809-571-2350; Calle Pedro Clisante)

Plaza Médica (☎ 809-571-3007; emergency 809-854-1633; Calle Pedro Clisante 30; ☎ 24hr) Medical clinic staffed by a general practitioner. Spanish-speaking only.

MONEY

Banco Popular (cnr Calles Dr Alejo Martínez & Sánchez)

Banco Progreso (Calle Pedro Clisante)

Scotiabank (Calle Pedro Clisante)

TELEPHONE

Call Center Sosúa (☎ 809-571-3464; Beachway Plaza;

☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat & Sun)

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Melissa Tours (☎ 809-571-2567; www.melissatours.com.do; Calle Duarte 2) A long-time locally owned agency, and one of the few bricks-and-mortar places left for you old-school types wanting to buy plane tickets.

Sights & Activities

BEACHES

Sosúa has two beaches. **Playa Sosúa** is the main beach, a long stretch of tawny sand backed by palm trees and often crowded with Dominican families and long-term visitors staying in local hotels and condos. To get there take the

downhill road between the Ruby Lounge and La Roca. A much better beach is **Playa Alicia**, located just around the corner at the end of Calle Dr Rosen. A broad half-moon of yellow sand lapped by blue water, it began to appear spontaneously around 2003 below the Hotel Waterfront – it's named after that hotel owner's mother. To get there, walk to the Sosúa By The Sea hotel and enter the parking lot. At the end on the left is a door, and a narrow alleyway provides beach access to the public.

MUSEO DE LA COMUNIDAD JUDÍA DE SOSÚA

The **Museo de la Comunidad Judía de Sosúa** (Jewish Community Museum of Sosúa; ☎ 809-571-1386; Calle Dr Alejo Martínez; admission US\$3; ☎ 9am-1pm, 2-4pm Mon-Fri), near Calle Dr Rosen, has exhibits describing the Jewish presence in the DR. At the multinational Evian conference in 1938 the DR was the only country to officially accept Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi repression in Germany. Around 350 families of refugees were settled in and around Sosúa. Most stayed only a few years – few were farmers by trade – but those who remained have been very successful in the dairy business, and Sosúa cheese is well known throughout the country. The museum has signs in Spanish and English, and is worth a stop.

DIVING & SNORKELING

Sosúa is generally considered the diving capital of the north coast. In addition to the dozen or so dive sites within boating range of Sosúa Bay, dive shops also organize excursions as far afield as Río San Juan and Cayo Arena. There's a good variety of fish here – 200 different kinds, according to some – plus hard and soft corals, drop-offs and sponges.

Among the popular dive spots nearby are Airport Wall, featuring a wall and tunnels in 12m to 35m of water; Zingara Wreck, an upright 45m ship sunk in 1993 as an artificial reef in around 35m of water; and Coral Gardens and Coral Wall, both offering excellent coral formations in depths ranging from 14m to 53m.

Prices vary somewhat from shop to shop, but are generally US\$30 to US\$35 for a one-tank dive, plus US\$5 to US\$10 for rental equipment. Booking a dive package brings the price down considerably – with a 10-dive package, the per-dive price can be as low as US\$25 if you have your own gear. All

of Sosúa's shops offer certification courses. Snorkeling trips are available at all shops, and cost US\$30 to US\$45 per person, depending on the length and number of stops; equipment is always included.

One big difference among the shops is that the predominant language among the staff is German, though English and Spanish are spoken by all. Some of Sosúa's most established dive outfits:

Big Blue Dive Center (☎ 809-571-2916; Playa Sosúa; ☎ 9am-5pm) At the end of the road to Playa Sosúa. Also does mountain-biking trips.

Dive Center Merlin (☎ 809-571-2963, 809-571-4309; www.divecenter-merlin.com; Playa Sosúa; ☎ 9am-5pm) At the end of the road to Playa Sosúa. Offers PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors) certification courses.

Dolphin Dive Center (☎ 809-571-3589; www.dolphin-divecenter.com; Playa Sosúa; ☎ 9am-5pm) This operation has its office at the Sosúa Bay Resort (p182).

ourpick Northern Coast Diving (☎ 809-571-1028; www.northerncoastdiving.com; Calle Pedro Clisante 8; ☎ 8am-6pm) This well-respected dive shop is one of the best, and the most willing to create customized excursions to little-visited dive sites (although it'll cost you).

Courses

There are two places in town you can learn Spanish. Expect to pay roughly US\$10 to US\$12 per hour depending on the length of the course.

ourpick Casa Goethe (☎ 809-571-3185; www.edase.com; La Puntilla 2; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) offers German and English classes to locals, and Spanish classes to foreigners. This German-run outfit has private and group classes, both on ordinary (four hours per day) and intensive (six hours per day) schedules. Classes are held in the mornings, and the center can organize activities like scuba diving or salsa-dancing classes in the afternoon. Long-term housing can be arranged either at the center itself or in area hotels, and rates usually include breakfast.

Spanish classes by the week are offered at **Holiday Spanish School** (☎ 809-571-1847; www.holiday-spanish-school.com; Calle Pedro Clisante 141) in El Colibri Resort, a small hotel east of the town center. Lessons are offered to beginners and advanced students alike and are given in two-hour increments; the first hour typically focuses on grammar and vocabulary, the second is centered around speaking. Prices vary according to the length of the course and the number of students. Housing packages are available.

Tours

There are a lot of cheesy package tours on offer at numerous agencies along the north coast. Many involve spending the majority of your day on a bus getting to and from your destination. Be especially wary of any tour that purports to show you 'Dominican culture' – the 'local school' you'll visit will be more a Potemkin village than an authentic place of youth learning.

Tours that are most worth doing include rafting in Jarabacoa (four hours each way, US\$70 to US\$80), Cayo Arena for snorkeling (three hours each way, US\$50 to US\$60), whale-watching in Samaná (from mid-January to mid-March, four hours each way, US\$120 to US\$140), and anything involving a boat – catamaran tours (US\$70 to US\$80) and deep-sea fishing (US\$70 to US\$100) are hard to fake, and are generally good value.

Alf's Tours (☎ 809-571-1734; www.alfour.com; Calle Pedro Clisante 12) Run by a friendly operator with staff who speak Spanish, French, English and German.

Melissa Tours (☎ 809-571-2567; www.melissatours.com.do; Calle Duarte 2) Also sells plane tickets.

Mel Tours (☎ 809-571-2057; www.mel-tour.com) On the road to Playa Sosúa.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Rocky's Rock & Blues Bar Hotel (☎ 809-571-2951; www.rockysbar.com; Calle Dr Rosen 22; r US\$22; ☎ ☎) Basic but comfortable, the five rooms at Rocky's are a great deal. All are spotless, breezy and have cable TV. A mellow lounge with couches and tables spills into the bar/restaurant area, where locals and travelers hang out most of the afternoon and evening. The free wi-fi attracts laptop-laden loungers throughout the day. The Canadian owner is friendly and especially knowledgeable about the area.

Pension Anneliese (☎ 809-571-2208; Calle Dr Rosen; s/d US\$35/50; P ☎ ☎) If parrots were cats, then the crusty German widow who runs this aging hotel at the western end of Calle Dr Rosen would surely be an old cat lady. She's been renting 10 rooms in this sprawling house for nearly 30 years, and still maintains a certain Teutonic spotlessness. The rooms all have fans and either one king- or two queen-sized beds, and there are ocean views from the front terrace. A small pool mitigates the lack of air-con.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Casa Valeria (☎ 809-571-3565; www.hotelcasavale.com; Calle Dr Rosen 28; unit with/without kitchen US\$50/45; 🍷 🍷 🍷) All nine rooms at this cozy hotel are slightly different, whether in size, furnishings or decor. Three units have kitchens (with gas burners), the others are hotel-like rooms with comfortable beds, brand-new furnishings and painted pink. Rooms are set around a leafy courtyard with a kidney-shaped pool in the middle; all have cable TV, fans and new ceramic-tiled bathrooms. The new Dutch owners have opened a tasty tapas bar next door.

Hotel Waterfront (☎ 809-571-2670; www.hotelwaterfrontdr.com; Calle Dr Rosen 1; s/d/t US\$45/50/55, with air-con US\$55/60/65; 🍷 🍷 🍷) The Waterfront offers 27 plain but comfortable rooms – 10 in stand-alone bungalows, the rest in a two-story building. All have a terrace or balcony, overhead fan, clean hot-water bathroom, fridge and up to three firm beds. All rooms are in a leafy garden tucked behind the inviting pool, with a great seaside restaurant and Sosúa's best beach right in front. Who cares if there's no TV?

Hotel Casa Cayena (☎ 809-571-2651; www.hotelcasacayena.com; Calle Dr Rosen 25; s/d US\$65/85; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This hotel contains 24 rooms on two floors, connected by broad breezy corridors. All rooms have red-tile floors, clean modern bathrooms with hot water, cable TV and security boxes. It's a bit faded – think shiny motel bedspreads – but there's a pretty L-shaped pool, and Playa Alicia is just down the street. A small outdoor restaurant serves breakfast.

our pick **Sosúa By The Sea** (☎ 809-571-3222; www.sosubyythesea.com; cnr Calles B Phillips & David Stern; s/d/ste incl breakfast US\$70/120/165; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This crisp, beautiful, eye-dropping resort has the best lodging in Sosúa. Set on a coral spit on the aptly named Playa Chiquita, rooms are recently renovated in a minimalist style – think black and white, and shiny chrome. In addition to its 58 studios, there are 33 fully equipped apartments with kitchen. All-inclusive service is available for a US\$20 surcharge. One of Sosúa's best restaurants, Josef's Grill & Grape (see opposite), is part of the complex.

PierGiorgio Palace Hotel (☎ 809-571-2626; www.piergiorgioplace.com; Calle La Puntilla; s incl breakfast US\$85-105, d US\$85-195, penthouse US\$295; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Popular with wedding planners, the PierGiorgio is built on a rocky cliff overlooking the ocean. It's lavishness – red carpet, ostentatious deco-

ration, grand wooden staircase – will appeal to some, but others may find it a bit tacky. The rooms are spotless, though, and the sea views magnificent – ask for a room on the 3rd floor. Room rate includes breakfast, and the cliffside restaurant (mains from US\$7 to US\$32) is an undeniably romantic spot.

TOP END

Sosúa boasts two all-inclusive resorts. Both are on the beach, a short stroll into town – the best of both worlds.

Sosúa Bay Resort & Victorian House (☎ 809-571-4000; www.sosubayresort.com; Calle Pedro Clisante; s US\$95-130, d US\$130-210; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Set on a bluff jutting out into the ocean, the Sosúa Bay Resort is directly in the middle of town, at the end of Calle Pedro Clisante. Two adjacent buildings offer distinctly different grades of accommodation – the Victorian House half sports boutique rooms at boutique prices. The reception area greets you with sweeping vistas of the ocean. A casino was opened here in early 2008.

Casa Marina Beach Resort (☎ 809-562-7475; www.amhsamarina.com; Calle Dr Alejo Martínez; s US\$150-165, d US\$200-220; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Where the Sosúa Bay Resort has little in the way of grounds, the Casa Marina is a huge leafy complex with three pools, five restaurants and almost 400 rooms arranged in three-story buildings. The rooms are classic all-inclusive: clean and comfortable but not memorable in any way, with cable TV and a balcony, and most looking onto the pool. The hotel has direct access to Playa Alicia and a more rustic beach about 150m to the east.

Eating

Sosúa has a good selection of top-notch restaurants, and several quite acceptable mid-range eateries.

Gaviota (☎ 809-603-4611; Calle Duarte; set meals US\$4; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) If you're after a typical Dominican meal, this is the place to go – meals come with rice, savory beans, a good portion of chicken and a half-hearted attempt at a salad. There is a menu but order from it at your peril – readers are recommended to order the plate of the day, except perhaps at breakfast time.

Rocky's Rock & Blues Bar Hotel (☎ 809-571-2951; www.rockysbar.com; Calle Dr Rosen 22; mains US\$4-15; 🍷 7am-late; 🍷) Rocky's is a Sosúa institution. The sign outside says 'World Famous Ribs,'

WHERE EVERYBODY KNOWS YOUR NAME

Nearly 200 restaurants, bars and gift shops line the shady Sosúa beach promenade. One has drawn quite a following. The **Scandinavian Beach Bar and Restaurant** (☎ 809-399-8321; Playa Sosúa 152; 🍷 9:30am-6pm) is famous for its great burgers, cold beers, and, more importantly, the cleanest bathroom on the beach.

Then disaster struck – in 2006 a fire gutted the restaurant. The owner, Tom Nilsson, thinks it may have been arson. He sustained more than US\$100,000 in losses, and was preparing to return to Norway when a miracle happened.

Sosúa's many repeat visitors told him they wouldn't let him leave. Customers flew down from New York with suitcases full of plates and cups and knives and forks. A DJ donated a laptop; another customer bought the hardwood picnic tables. In total he received donations upwards of US\$50,000.

These days you'll find Nilsson grilling burgers to English rock music and joking with his customers. And the bathroom? Still the cleanest on the beach.

but that's just the beginning – the breakfasts are great value, the steaks are Dominican beef (not imported), and the beers some of the cheapest in town. The music, like the name suggests, is pure rock and blues.

Oh La Vache (☎ 829-860-8317; Calle Pedro Clisante; pizzas US\$8-15; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Decorated whimsically in a cow theme, this pizza joint makes some of the best crispy-crust pizzas on the north coast. Owned by a French couple, this is also a pleasant place to while away the early evening with a beer.

Bailey's (☎ 809-571-3085; Calle Dr Alejo Martínez; mains US\$8-20; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) A favorite among expats, this Austrian-owned restaurant is set around a large, horseshoe-shaped bar, and its specialties include chili burgers (US\$9) and enormous schnitzel sandwiches (US\$11). The decor includes lots of rattan furniture, and there's a small play area with a slide and jungle gym to keep the kids amused.

Marua Mai (☎ 809-571-3682, cnr Calle Clisante & Arzeno; mains US\$8-25; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Right smack in the middle of things, this two-level, tropical-themed restaurant is a solid, midrange choice. Its burgers are great, but it also does lobster by the kilo and sometimes has seafood specials. There's a pleasant bar to sit for a quiet drink before or after. Good breakfasts, too.

On the Waterfront (☎ 809-571-3024; Hotel Waterfront; Calle Dr Rosen 1; mains US\$10-30; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Set on a bluff overlooking Playa Alicia – and with waiters who wear big red fireman's suspenders – what's not to like about the Waterfront? It does great seafood options – like almond-brandy grouper – and

the steaks are recommended. Come at sunset for an aperitif.

La Finca (☎ 809-571-3925; www.restaurantelafinca.net; mains US\$12-50; 🍷 lunch & dinner) If you're after the very best money can buy in Sosúa, then La Finca is a must visit. Steak and seafood are the rock stars here – there's chateaubriand (US\$18), surf and turf (US\$24), and a mixed seafood platter for two (US\$50). It has an amazing cocktail list, and the menu is in five languages, including Russian.

our pick **Josef's Grill & Grape** (☎ 809-571-3222; cnr Calles B Phillips & David Stern; mains US\$35-40; 🍷 dinner Thu-Sat) Set in the grounds of Sosúa by the Sea (see opposite) with the ocean waves crashing just meters from your table, Josef's offers a different menu every week from its gourmet chef – expect creative variations on the usual steak-and-seafood theme, and tasty, tropical-influenced desserts.

Playero Supermarket (☎ 809-571-1821; 🍷 8am-10pm), on the main highway, offers a good selection of local produce and imported, hard-to-find delicacies. **Super Super Liquor Store** (☎ 809-571-3862; cnr Calles Pedro Clisante & Ayuntamiento; 🍷 8am-8pm Mon-Sat) is where you can pimp your vice at a rock-bottom price. It has a good selection of cigars, too.

Drinking

Sosúa's nightlife is packed with bars and clubs catering to prostitutes and their customers. If this is not your scene, the following may be decent options.

Britannia Pub (☎ 809-571-1959; britanniasosua@yahoo.com; Calle Pedro Clisante; 🍷 10am-late) Popular with the many expats who live in town, this pleasant retreat is a reliable spot for a quiet

drink. There's a good book exchange at the back, and the bar food ain't bad, either – go for the US\$3 burger and wings specials after 4pm.

Rose & Thistle (☎ 809-935-9203; Beachway Plaza; ☎ 9am-late) Owned by an expat English couple, this small bar is in the narrow alleyway that leads down to Ruby Lounge. It does an excellent all-day English breakfast, and mouthwatering homemade sausage rolls and pork pies. The owner cures his own ham and bacon – worth asking about, if you're in town for a while.

Ruby Lounge (cnr Calles Pedro Clisante & Arzeno; ☎ 1pm-late) Just outside the entrance to the Sosúa Bay Resort, this hip Canadian-owned bar has happy hours every day from 1pm to 8:30pm, live shows and music every Friday, and karaoke on Sunday. The bar and tiny stage area are downstairs (where the party sometimes spills onto the sidewalks) and there's a mellow lounge area upstairs.

Entertainment

There are two casinos in town.

Casino Playa Chiquita (☎ 809-571-2591; Calle Dr Alejo Martínez; ☎ 8pm-4am Mon-Thu, 4pm-4am Fri-Sun) If you're up for a little Texas hold 'em or just want to try your luck on the slot machines, then this casino is a decent place to spend an evening. Located about a kilometer from town, at the eastern end of Calle Dr Alejo Martínez, it's best to take a cab there and back. Free drinks for all players.

Sosúa Bay Grand Casino (☎ 809-571-4000; www.sosuabayresort.com; end of Calle Pedro Clisante) Part of the Sosúa Bay Resort, this new casino is right in the center of town. It was still under construction when we passed through, but will be one of the largest casinos on the coast when finished, and should be open when you get there.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Sosúa is much closer to the **Aeropuerto Internacional Gregorio Luperón** (☎ 809-586-0107) than Puerto Plata, although it's commonly referred to as 'Puerto Plata airport.' We're guilty of the same bias – see the Puerto Plata section (p173) for more info. A taxi from the airport to Sosúa is US\$15. You can also walk 500m from the terminal to the highway and flag down a passing *gua-gua* (US\$0.30, 10 minutes).

BUS

Caribe Tours (☎ 809-571-3808; Carretera a Puerto Plata) has a bus depot on the highway at the edge of Las Charamicos neighborhood, 1km southwest of the city center. It offers hourly service, on the hour, from Sosúa to Santo Domingo (US\$8.50, five hours, hourly from 6am to 7pm).

If your final destination is Sosúa, you'll find **Metro Tours** (☎ 809-571-3480; Av Luperón) much more convenient – its depot is right in the middle of town. It runs services to Puerto Plata, Santiago, and onwards to Santo Domingo, at 8:20am, 10:20am, 1:20pm and 5:50pm. Buy tickets at the pharmacy in the Texaco gas station in the middle of Sosúa.

El Canario (☎ 809-291-5594) is a Puerto Plata-based bus that leaves daily to Samaná (US\$5.20, 2½ to three hours) at 7am from the main *parada* (bus stop). This is your only option, as neither Metro nor Caribe Tours has direct service there. Be sure to call the day before to reserve your seat.

For destinations along the coast, go to the highway and flag down any passing *gua-gua*. They pass every 15 minutes or so, with services to Puerto Plata (US\$0.60, 30 minutes), Cabarete (US\$0.30, 20 minutes) and Río San Juan (US\$2.10, 1½ hours).

Getting Around

You can walk just about everywhere in Sosúa, except the hotels east of the center, which are better reached by *motoconcho* or taxi. The former are easy to find around town, while shared taxis for intercity travel along the coast can be located at a **taxi stand** (☎ 809-571-3027) on the corner of Calles Pedro Clisante and Dr Rosen.

To rent a car, make your way to the airport (8km away).

CABARETE

pop 17,000

Cities gentrify; surf towns grow up. So it has been 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).

Cabarete is an ideal spot to base yourself for exploring the north coast – you're within

two hours' drive of the best that the coast has to offer, and if you want to go surfing, or windsurfing, or kitesurfing, heck, you don't even need to leave town.

You'll hear a babble of five or six languages as you walk Cabarete's single street. So strong is the foreign flavor that Dominicans from the capital come here on weekends just to tourist-watch – tourists themselves become a tourist attraction.

Orientation

Cabarete is a one-street town, built up around the highway, which 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.

To the southeast of town lies the Pro Cab neighborhood, where a number of budget hotels congregate. To the southwest, a single street leads through the principally Dominican neighborhood of Callejón de la Loma, and dead-ends at the Caves of Cabarete (right).

Information

Banco Progreso is located right in the center of town, while Scotiabank is at the eastern end of town; there are exchange offices that accept major currencies and traveler's checks on the main drag. There is no post office in Cabarete, but hotels often post mail for guests. At the time of research, there were also no travel agencies; for plane tickets and other services, try Melissa Tours in Sosúa (p180).

Active Cabarete (www.activecabarete.com) A website with a range of information including activities and events, weather, and 'special stuff.'

All City (☎ 809-571-0112; per hr US\$1; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun) One of the best internet cafés on the north coast, with fast connection and headphones for VOIP calls. There's also a small bank of phones for domestic and international calls.

Family Lavandería (per kg US\$2; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat) This laundry is at the eastern end of town, opposite Janet's Supermarket.

Fujifilm Digital (☎ 809-571-9536; fujifilm02@hotmail.com; per hr US\$1) Next to No Work Team, this photo shop has a fast internet connection and headphones.

Politur (tourist police; ☎ 809-571-0713) At the eastern entrance to town.

Servi-Med (☎ 809-571-0964; ☎ 24hr) Four MDs, one dentist and a chiropractor. Highly recommended by expats and travelers alike, this is one of the best medical centers on the coast. The foreign-trained practitioners speak English, German, and Spanish, and do house calls.

Sights

BEACHES

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 kiteboarders who don't yet know how to tack up wind and so wash up on Bozo's shore. There are more kiteboarders 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 kiteboarders 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 Yásica, 7km east of town, is an ideal spot for wakeboarding – more than 2km of straight, flat river water to practice your latest trick.

CAVES OF CABARETE

Part of **Parque Nacional El Choco**, the caves are walking distance from town, 1.3km from the entrance to Callejón de la Loma. Here you can take a two-hour **tour** (US\$15; ☎ 9am-3:30pm) of a number of privately managed caves. Bring a swimsuit – you can swim in a small pool in a crystal-stalactite cave 25m below the surface. The current tour operator was making plans to move abroad when we were there, and it was unclear what will happen to the caves after that. The caves are padlocked by management and cannot be visited independently.

Activities

More information on all of these activities can be found in the Outdoors chapter (p59).

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. The waves break both right and left and are known by names like El Canal, Encuentro, La Barca and Preciosa. 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 cost 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 (opposite). Frequent shuttle service from Cabarete to Encuentro for surfers.

Buena Onda (☎ 829-877-0768; www.cabaretebuenaonda.com) On Playa Encuentro.

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.

WAKEBOARDING

Kitesurfers swear that this is a great way to develop your board skills, and on windless days you'll find more than a few out at La Boca going out for a tow or two. The river mouth at La Boca has more than 2km of flat, smooth water to play with, and attracts devoted wakeboarders from around the world.

Cabwake School (☎ 829-866-3929; www.cabwake.com; ☎ 9am-6pm), 6km east of town, is the only operator licensed to tow on the river. A 20-minute tow will set you back US\$35, and week-long 'wake camps' – 10 to 15 tows in a week – are available at significant discount.

HORSEBACK RIDING

The fully equipped **Gipsy Ranch** (☎ 809-571-1373) riding stables are situated right near Playa Encuentro. Gipsy Ranch charges US\$16 per person for an hour's ride on the beach, or US\$52 for a longer, half-day ride. It can also organize longer excursions along the beach and in the nearby hills. The French owner is trilingual. From the entrance to Encuentro, continue down toward the beach and turn left. You'll find the stables opposite the Coconut Palms Resort.

DIVING

The well-respected Sosúa-based dive shop **Northern Coast Diving** (☎ 809-571-1028; www.northerncoastdiving.com) has a representative in the offices of Iguana Mama (see below), 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 (see p180).

MASSAGE

Michelle Bourdeau (☎ 809-851-9399; www.cabaretemassage.com; massages per hr US\$60; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat) is a highly recommended Canadian massage therapist. Perfect for those après-surf aches and pains. By appointment only.

Courses

Dance teacher **Tony Vargas** (☎ 809-916-4551; www.a-bailar.net; lessons per hr US\$14) offers salsa, merengue and *bachata* (popular guitar music based on bolero rhythms) lessons in the dance studio in his home.

Tours

our pick Iguana Mama (☎ 809-571-0908; www.iguana.com), the leading adventure-sports tour operator on the north coast, is in a class of its own. 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 has pioneered a new cascading tour to Ciguapa Falls, which only Iguana Mama offers. There's also a variety of hiking trips, including a half-day walk (US\$45) into the hills behind Cabarete (Parque Nacional El Choco), and a full-day trip to Mount Isabel de Torres (US\$80), just outside Puerto Plata. Its Pico Duarte trek is expensive, but handy if you want transportation to and from Cabarete (per person US\$450). Iguana Mama can also arrange a number of half-day and full-day canyoning opportunities in the area (US\$90 to US\$125). Action and adventure junkies should ask about the one-week 'Mama Knows Best' tour – seven days of nonstop adrenaline.

The owner of **Fun Tours** (☎ 809-571-0250), next door to Iguana Mama, will happily concede that with his tours, you get less than Iguana Mama, but he also charges you a lot less. Pay less, get less – your call. It offers the usual range of package tours, including a day trip to Cayo Arena (US\$55), and an abridged

version of the Damajagua Falls tour (you only go as far as the seventh waterfall).

If strapping a GPS and a machete to your bike and going out bush is your idea of a good time, hook up with **Max 'Maximo' Martinez** (☎ 809-882-5634; maxofthem@yahoo.es), an intense, creative mountain-bike guide.

Festivals & Events

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

Also in 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 a beer tent are set up at the western end of the beach, and the players trumpet jazz into the night.

Sleeping

Cabarete's hotel rooms are slowly being condo-ized. In low season, you can pick up great deals on long-term rentals, but in high season – when condo owners return – hotel rooms can be hard to find. Book well in advance.

L'Agence (☎ 809-571-0999; www.agencerd.com; in Ocean Dream) Located in monster condo development Ocean Dream, L'Agence can help you find a condo rental.

BUDGET

Caribica Sanssouci Aparthotels (☎ 809-571-0755; www.caribica.com; r per person US\$12-20; (P) (☎)) The Sans Souci empire spans seven hotels and 75 apartments along the Cabarete strip. They're all clean and acceptable, if somewhat uninspired, but at this price, who cares? All have a small kitchenette, cable TV and a safe. The **Sans Souci Beach** property at the eastern end of the beach is the nicest. Ask for an ocean view.

our pick Ali's Surf Camp (☎ 809-571-0733; alissurfcamp.com; s US\$29-44, d US\$33-66, apt US\$75-120; (P) (☎) (☎) (☎)) 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.' (Even if you're not a guest,

it's worth the short walk here for dinner.) 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.

Hotel Alegria (☎ 809-571-0455; www.hotel-alegria.com; Callejón 2; r US\$35, with ocean view US\$55, studio/ apt US\$55/120; (P) (☎)) Hidden down one of Cabarete's few side streets, the Alegria may not have beach access, but from the wooden deck that towers from the top of the hotel you have an unrivalled view out over the beach and ocean. There's a small gym with treadmill and weights, and the studios and apartment each have kitchens.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Kaoba (☎ 809-571-0300; www.kaoba.com; s US\$37-40, d US\$47-52, ste US\$65-85; (P) (☎) (☎) (☎)) The Kaoba has 25 charming bungalows set on lush grounds away from the main drag. Most rooms have kitchenettes; all have cable TV and minibars. The pool welcomes guests as they enter the complex and a restaurant/bar at the front of the hotel is often hopping. Service tends to be a bit surly, though.

Hooked Cabarete (☎ 809-935-9221; hookedcabarete.com; Playa Encuentro; s/d/tr US\$39/52/66; (P) (☎) (☎)) This small hotel feels like staying in someone's home. It offers five clean, self-contained apartments at Playa Encuentro, and is perfect for the hardcore surfer, or those wanting a bit more seclusion. It also rents scooters so you can get into town easily.

Albatros Hotel & Condos (☎ 809-571-0841; www.albatroscabarete.com; r US\$45-70, apt US\$96-145, penthouse US\$145-165; (P) (☎)) Set back from the road at the west end of town, the Albatros offers clean and cheerful rooms amid a palm-tree-laden garden. Standard rooms come with a sitting area, a ceiling fan and a fridge. Studios and apartments come in various sizes: the smallest is a regular-sized room with a kitchenette; the largest is a two-story condo. A welcoming pool is the centerpiece of the grounds.

Kite Beach Hotel (☎ 809-571-0878; www.kitebeachhotel.com; Kite Beach; s/d incl breakfast US\$60/66, studio s/d US\$70/80, apt US\$90-240, penthouse US\$450-600; (P) (☎) (☎) (☎)) 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 also included in the rate.

Aqualina Kite Resort (☎ 809-571-0787; www.aqualina.com; Kite Beach; r/studio/apt US\$70/85/150; 📍 📺 📶 🚿) 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. There's free wi-fi throughout the building.

TOP END

Hotel Villa Taina (☎ 809-571-0722; www.villataina.com; s/nd breakfast US\$109-142, d US\$119-142; 📍 📺 📶 🚿) This appealing boutique-y hotel at the western end of town has 55 tastefully decorated rooms, each with balcony or terrace, air-con, comfortable beds, in-room data ports and modern bathroom. There is a small, clean pool and a nice beach area fringed by palm trees. Suites and deluxe suites are also available.

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 marvelous eco-themed bungalows (think exposed freestone bathrooms) are right on the beach. Even if you aren't staying here, come for the day spa, one of the best on the north coast – yoga and massage on the beach are both on offer. The Chilean owners also serve excellent seafood in the on-site restaurant (mains US\$15 to US\$30). Very romantic spot.

Velero Beach Resort (☎ 809-571-9727; www.velerobeach.com; La Punta 1; s US\$146, d US\$173-185, ste US\$200-252, penthouse US\$326; 📍 📺 📶 🚿) Set out on the point just east of the main Cabarete beach, these four-star digs are easily the best in town. All the rooms have a balcony or terrace and face the ocean. Sit poolside just steps from the sand, then walk west for five minutes to sample Cabarete's many excellent dining options. A fine choice.

Viva Wyndham Tangerine (☎ 809-571-0402, 809-686-5658; www.vivawyndhamresorts.com; s/d US\$218/290; 📍 📺 📶 🚿) One of the few all-inclusives in Cabarete, the Tangerine sits just a few hundred meters west of town. Built in 2003, this small-ish resort still maintains a sense of newness – the 222 rooms are tastefully decorated, and the bathrooms are tops. There's a gym, three bars and three restaurants, but the food has a poor reputation. Still, it's walking distance

to all the great eating options in Cabarete, so who cares?

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, if you're after a quick feed and aren't in the mood for anything fancy.

Several talentless local musicians may attempt to serenade you while you're eating dinner on the beach. Be kind to your fellow diners, and ask them not to.

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

La Casita de Juana 'El Tigre' (Callejón de la Loma; set meals US\$4-8; ☎ dinner, lunch in high season, closed Tue) The irrepressibly warm owner of this Dominican restaurant makes Dominican food memorable (no small challenge). Choice of chicken, goat or fish with rice, beans and salad. The specialty of the house is *arepita de yuca* (aniseed-flavored yuca pancakes).

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-closed German eatery. Clients sit side by side at picnic tables. Other house specialties include potato pancakes with ground beef (US\$6.50) and fried Bavarian bratwurst (US\$4).

Pomodoro (☎ 809-571-0085; mains US\$7-12; ☎ lunch & dinner) Run by an Italian jazz fiend, this pizza joint makes the best crispy-crust pizza on the beach. It uses only quality toppings – including pungent, imported Italian cheese – and there's live jazz on Thursday nights.

our pick **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 and turf make an appearance, but also a goat's cheese salad and some mighty fine pizza, too. Dig your toes into the sand and relax with a beer. Now this is the life.

WHO'S YOUR MAMA – MAMAJUANA

You're on the beach, and some old guy is holding a bunch of empty bottles filled with leaves in your face asking you if you want to buy them.

A bottle full of leaves? What, are you kidding me?

Nope – it's *mamajuana*, the national hooch. Take a bottle, fill it with a variety of herbs and dried bark (the exact mixture depends on who's doing the mixing), top it up with rum, wine, and a bit of honey, and let it steep for a month or so.

Mamajuana is reputed to enhance male virility, and packs a punch. Most bars have a bottlesomewhere, and quality can range from the revolting to the eye-poppingly good.

Bliss (☎ 829-865-6444; www.activecabarete.com/bliss; Callejón de la Loma; mains US\$14-22; ☎ 4pm-midnight, closed Sun) It may not be on the beach, but sitting around the crystal-blue pool with a top-shelf cocktail in your hand, you can be forgiven for not caring. The food here is creative – think rack of lamb with thyme and bitter caramel sauce, shrimp with passionfruit sauce, or roasted duck breast with green pepper sauce.

Otra Cosa (☎ 809-571-0607; La Punta; mains US\$15-35; ☎ dinner, closed Tue) This French-Caribbean restaurant, just across from Veleró and with marvelous sea breezes at dusk, does some of the choicest food in town. The forbidden paste – foie gras (US\$20) – features prominently on the menu, and it also serves filet mignon with duck liver, morels and cognac (US\$33). Good fish, lobster and steak dishes, too.

Blue Moon Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 809-757-0614; www.bluemoonretreat.net; Los Brazos; mains US\$18; ☎ dinner; 📍) Set in the mountains a short drive from Cabarete, this bungalow-style hotel and restaurant hosts family-sized Indian dinners (minimum eight people, reserve in advance). Food is quality South Asian fare, including two different veggie dishes, a main course such as tandoori or curried chicken or fish, rice, salad, coffee, tea and dessert. The bungalows (US\$50 to US\$60 per bungalow) include breakfast in the price, and are cool and comfortable, with inventive Indian-style decor. To get here from Cabarete, head east on the highway to Sabaneta and turn right on the road to Jamao al Norte. Proceed a few kilometers and you'll pass a bridge in the town of

Los Brazos, where you should look for a sign to your left as you climb the hill.

Castle Club (☎ 809-223-0601; www.castleclubonline.com; Los Brazos; US\$35 per person plus drinks; ☎ dinner) Just 200m past the Blue Moon on your left is this rambling, eccentric home – a castle of sorts, under continuous construction (and unlikely ever to be fully finished). The owners grow much of their own food on the property, and serve this superfresh produce in their restaurant, one of the very best in the country. Expect dishes like coconut sea bass, exquisite salads and cold lemon soufflé. Their schedule can be erratic, though – book at least two days in advance. They can cater for groups from six to 100.

There are three supermarkets in Cabarete. The biggest and best is **Janet's Supermarket** (☎ 809-571-0404) at the eastern end of town.

Drinking & Entertainment

Most people start out the night at Lax, and then move onto Onno's or Bambú until closing time. Friday night's bigger than Saturday.

our pick **Lax** (lax-cabarete.com; ☎ 9am-1am) This mellow 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, and salads for US\$7. 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 that at Onno's. Bring earplugs in case of rain (so you can stand inside).

Voy Voy (☎ 809-571-0805; ☎ 6pm-late) Vela Windsurf Center by day, bar by night, this small, hip café also serves sandwiches and snacks. Monday karaoke is a mandatory part of Cabarete beach life.

Latino Lounge (Callejón de la Loma; ☎ 6pm-late) Just inside Callejón de la Loma, this new spot is the best place in Cabarete to dance merengue or *bachata* (sorry salsa lovers, you picked the wrong country).

Ocean Sands Casino (☎ 809-571-0050; disco cover charge US\$3; ☎ 4pm-very late) The on-site disco plays loud merengue and reggaeton, and doesn't begin to fill up till way past midnight.

One of your few options after the bars close. Moderate presence of sex workers.

El Rocón (☎ 809-462-9341; Antigua Calle de Canal; mains US\$10-22; ☺ lunch & dinner) This secluded restaurant-cum-driving-range is just east of Encuentro. Great for a beachside lunch, it also sometimes holds after-hours parties that go till dawn – ask any DJ if it's on. Small, thatched chill-out shacks are a great place to watch the sun rise.

Getting There & Around

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

Transportation in town is dominated by *motoconchos*, who will attempt to charge you two to three times the price you'd pay for a similar ride in Puerto Plata. Don't be surprised if you can't haggle them down. 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 a motorcycle. Expect to pay around US\$10 to US\$15 per day, less if you rent for a week or more. There are lots of scooter-rental shops along the main drag, and some hotels rent two-wheeled transport too. Be aware that helmets are pretty much nonexistent in this country, so if that's important to you consider bringing your own.

The motorcycle-shy can call a **taxi** (☎ 809-571-0767), which will cost US\$8 to Encuentro, US\$20 to the airport, and US\$35 to Puerto Plata. There's also a **taxi stand** in the middle of town.

If you want to rent a car the best place to do so is at the Puerto Plata airport when you arrive (see p174). If you're already in town, you can take a *gua-gua* (US\$0.60, 30 minutes) to the airport road (just past Sosúa), walk 500m to the terminal and shop around at the numerous car-rental agencies there.

RÍO SAN JUAN

pop 9000

So near, yet so far – this friendly, sleepy Dominican village is just an hour east of

Cabarete, yet sees far fewer visitors than it actually deserves. It's a great base to explore two of the north coast's best beaches, including stunning Playa Grande, a 15-minute *gua-gua* ride east of town, and there's good diving and snorkeling nearby (although you'll need to organize it with a dive shop in Sosúa before you come). You can also go on a one-hour boat tour of adjacent Laguna Gri-Gri.

What you shouldn't miss, however, is spending the night at the Bahía Blanca Hotel (see p194), an ordinary-enough hotel that just happens to be built directly on the rocky shorefront, so that waves crash against the building as you go to sleep. It ain't luxury, but it's something special.

Information

Banco Progreso (☎ 809-589-2393; Calle Duarte 38)

Farmacia Reyes (☎ 809-589-2234; Calle Duarte 36)

Politur (tourist police; ☎ 809-754-3241) Located on the highway, 300m west of Calle Duarte.

Post office (Calle Duarte) Between Calles Mella and Rufino Bulbuena.

Solan@.com (☎ 809-549-2498; Calle 30 de Marzo 32; internet per hr US\$1.80)

Tourist office (☎ 809-589-2831; cnr Calles Mella & 16 de Agosto) Staffers offer little information but there are plenty of maps and brochures on hand.

Sights & Activities

LAGUNA GRI-GRI

This lagoon at the northern end of Calle Duarte was once Río San Juan's claim to fame, drawing tourists from near and far for boat rides through its tangled mangrove channels. Unfortunately, overuse and the growth of Río San Juan have left the lagoon quite polluted – swimming is no longer recommended – and the water and mangroves are less picturesque than they once were. That doesn't prevent a dozen or more boatmen from offering tours of the lagoon, which typically cost US\$35 for up to seven people and last around an hour, with visits to the mangrove forests, some interesting rock formations and a cave populated by hundreds of swallows. Look for a small **shack** (☎ 809-589-2277) next to the public bathrooms down by the Laguna – you'll find it easier to join a group on weekends, when Dominicans come to take this trip.

You can also visit the lagoon on foot – there's a path from the Hotel Bahía Blanca to the water's edge, where you turn right to head into the mangroves.



PLAYA CALETÓN

Located about 1km east of town, this small bay is a peaceful and beautiful place to spend an afternoon. The tawny sand is lapped by teal waters, and almond trees interspersed with towering palms provide plenty of shade. Food stands are near the entrance. The easiest way to get here is to take a *gua-gua* (US\$0.45) or a *motoconcho* (US\$1) to the turnoff, from which it's a 200m walk down a rocky access road past a goat farm to the beach. If you have a car, you can make it all the way to the beach, but take it slow on the rough parts.

PLAYA GRANDE

Just 15km east of Río San Juan is Playa Grande, one of the most beautiful beaches in the DR. Here, the long, broad, tawny beach has aquamarine water on one side and a thick fringe of palm trees on the other, with stark white cliffs jutting out into the ocean in the distance. It's a picture postcard everywhere you look. There is a number of facilities at the entrance – food stands selling snacks and beer; vendors renting beach chairs (per day US\$2), umbrellas (per day US\$7), snorkel equipment

(half-/full day US\$12/17), body boards (hour/half-day/full-day US\$7/12/22) and surfboards (hour/half-day/full-day US\$12/22/27); plus a smattering of gift shops selling shell necklaces, bikinis and sunscreen. If you're interested in a quieter stretch of beach, walk east or west of the entrance – the beach goes on for ages and you're sure to find plenty of secluded spots.

A word about safety: Playa Grande has heavy surf and a deceptively strong undertow. Riptides – powerful currents of water flowing out to sea – do form occasionally, and tourists have drowned here in the past. Be conservative when swimming at Playa Grande, and children and less-experienced swimmers should probably not go in at all unless the surf is very low. If you do get caught in a riptide, swim parallel to the shore until you get out of the current and then swim in to shore.

The area all around Playa Grande has been bought by hotel developers, who have put a gate across the road to the beach, although it remains open to the public. If you take a *gua-gua* from town, most drivers will drive you right to the beach if you ask – it's not a detour for them as the beach road reconnects

with the highway a couple of kilometers past the beach. Sometimes the gate is closed, however, in which case it's an easy 2km walk from the highway. You can also hire a *motoconcho* (US\$2) or a taxi (US\$8) to bring you directly to the beach.

At the west end of the beach you may notice the crumbling shell of the all-inclusive resort that used to be here – it is slated for demolition, and a new, lavish development is planned.

PLAYA PRECIOSA

Off the same access road to Playa Grande but 500m east of it is a steep path leading to a narrow and solitary beach known as Playa Preciosa. This spectacular stretch of sand is pounded by serious waves and few attempt to play in the surf. Those who do – typically surfers at dawn – do so for the thrill. A great place to relax and take in the sun, as long as you don't mind the relentless sea spray.

DIVING & SNORKELING

Río San Juan has a great variety of nearby dive sites, including **Seven Hills**, a collection of huge coral heads descending from 6m to 50m, and **Crab Canyon**, with a series of natural arches and swim-throughs. Twenty minutes east of Río San Juan is **Dudu Cave**, one of the best freshwater cavern dives in the Caribbean, where the visibility is almost 50m. Most dive shops require an Advanced Diver certificate or at least 20 logged dives to do these trips.

There was no dive center in Río San Juan when we were there. Your best bet is to organize something in Sosúa (see p180), where you'll pay roughly US\$100 to US\$120 per person for a full day of diving (minimum three people). You can also organize half-day snorkeling trips here (per person US\$70 to US\$85).

GOLF

Playa Grande Golf Course (☎ 809-582-0860; www.playagrande.com; Carretera a Nagua; 9/18 holes US\$80/140; ☎ 7am-4:30pm) is a par-72 course built on a verdant cliff above Playa Grande. It is a well-tended course that boasts a spectacular ocean view from almost every hole. Caddies and carts are obligatory but not included in the rate (US\$20 extra for 18 holes). Multigame discounts are also available. There were plans afoot to make the golf course available

to resident members only, and closed to the public, so be sure to call ahead.

Tours

The small **Campo Tours** (☎ 809-589-2550; Calle Duarte) agency sells predigested package tours to guests at the local all-inclusive, including a glass-bottomed boat tour (US\$20) of the *laguna*, and a three-hour deep-sea fishing trip (US\$70).

Sleeping

Our pick **Bahía Blanca Hotel** (☎ 809-589-2563; Calle Deligne; bahia.blanca.dr@codetel.net.do; r US\$15-35) Jutting out over turquoise blue waters, the Bahía Blanca has one of the best ocean views on the north coast. Rooms are decent – clean, tile-floored and with private bathroom – but are showing their age. All but two have at least partial ocean views and wide balconies on each of the three floors provide plenty of opportunities to enjoy the beauty. Rooms on the 3rd floor are the most spacious and have small private balconies. The hotel is also flanked by two calm bays, which are great for swimming.

Hotel La Catalina (☎ 809-589-7700; www.lacatalina.com; Cabrera; s/d incl breakfast US\$78/98, apt US\$118-224; ☎ (P) ☎) Perched on a lush hill 18km east of town, La Catalina offers charming and airy rooms with modern amenities. All rooms and most common areas provide spectacular views of the sea and the palm-studded countryside. A full breakfast is included in the rate and is served in a classy, upscale restaurant. Free shuttles takes guests to and from Playa Grande.

Eating & Drinking

La Casona (☎ 809-589-2597; Calle Duarte 6; mains US\$3-7; ☎ lunch & dinner) This friendly Dominican restaurant does the best set meal in town. In the evening, the creative chef also serves up deep-fried pizza empanadas, of which he is inordinately proud.

Cheo's Café (☎ 809-589-2990; Calle Billini 6; mains US\$4-15; ☎ lunch & dinner) This friendly little café is off the main drag and has a palapa roof, wooden floor and walls, and plastic tables covered with tablecloths. The menu includes *conejo al coco* (rabbit in coconut sauce) and *parrillada de marisco* (large platter of grilled seafood, usually served for two people), in addition to the familiar beef, chicken and pasta dishes.

Le Café de Paris (☎ 809-844-4899; Calle FR Sánchez; mains US\$7-23; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Directly in front of the lagoon, this French-owned café is a good spot to have a drink and watch boats launch from the pier. The food is varied – a little bit of Italian, lots of French and some seafood – but forgettable. Stick with the beer and catch up on your postcards.

Corral del Pollo (☎ 829-963-8269; cnr Calles 16 de Agosto & FR Sánchez; mains US\$8-20; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This Spanish restaurant specializes in all things peninsular – paella, Spanish tortillas, even gazpacho. Lunch specials include salad, choice of main, drink and dessert for US\$10. Linger afterwards at the stand-up bar with coffee and cigar (strictly for digestive purposes, of course).

Getting There & Around

Caribe Tours (☎ 809-589-2644), just west of Calle Duarte, on the coastal highway just outside town, provides a bus service between Río San Juan and Santo Domingo (US\$8.20, 4½ hours) and stops along the way at Nagua (US\$2, 45 minutes) and San Francisco de Macoris (US\$3.25, 2½ hours). Buses depart at 6:30am, 8am, 9:30am, 2pm and 3:30pm.

Gua-guas come and go from the intersection of Calle Duarte and the coastal highway, known around town as simply *la parada* (the stop). West-bound *gua-guas* line up at the northwest corner of the intersection, departing every 15 minutes from 6am to 5pm for Cabarete (US\$2.25, one hour), Sosúa (US\$2.10, 1½ hours) and Puerto Plata (US\$2.45, two hours).

Eastbound *gua-guas* line up on the northeast corner of the same intersection and leave every 10 minutes from 6:30am to 6pm for Playa Caletón (US\$0.45, five minutes), Playa Grande (US\$0.90, 15 minutes) and Nagua (US\$2, 1¼ hours). From Nagua you can catch *gua-guas* to Samaná or 1st-class buses to Santo Domingo.

There's a **taxi stand** (☎ 809-589-2501) on Calle Duarte between Calles Luperón and Dr Virgilio García. The fare to Playa Caletón is US\$10 and to Playa Grande is US\$15.

NAGUA

pop 34,000

On the coastal highway 36km northwest of Sánchez and 54km southeast of Río San Juan, Nagua is a hot, dusty town whose interest to tourists is strictly as a transporta-

tion hub. It is the main transfer point for *gua-guas* heading in either direction along the coastal highway. The inland road to San Francisco de Macoris, Moca and Santiago begins here as well, meaning you can catch a *gua-gua* to just about anywhere from here.

To catch a coastal bus, simply walk to the coastal highway and wave down a *gua-gua* going in the direction you want. To catch an inland-bound bus, you must go to the intersection of the two highways and hail a bus that is turning off the coastal highway onto the inland highway. There are usually a few people waiting for the same bus there and they are usually happy to point you to the right bus. *Gua-guas* on the coastal road pass every 15 minutes, while inland buses can take up to half an hour.

Caribe Tours (☎ 809-584-4505; Calle Mella at Emilio Conde) has a dozen buses running to Santo Domingo (US\$7.60, 3½ hours) every half-hour from 7am to 10am, and again from 1pm to 4pm

WEST OF PUERTO PLATA

The coastal area west of Puerto Plata remains largely undeveloped, and sees few foreign visitors. There's a couple of good day trips – the Damajagua waterfalls and Cayo Arena are popular – but otherwise there's not much reason to head this way. History buffs might like to visit Parque Nacional La Isabela, where Columbus founded the second settlement in the New World, but the shabby museum is hardly worth the trip. Boaters will already know of Luperón – famous as a 'hurricane hole' – but landlubbers have no reason to visit. If you're on your way to Haiti, Monte Cristi might be worth a day, but the lack of tourist infrastructure makes it very difficult to visit the outlying islands, where pristine coral lurks. The twice-weekly Haitian market at Dajabón may be of interest, if only to see how strikingly different the two peoples who share this island really are.

IMBERT

pop 8100

About 22km southwest of Puerto Plata, connected by a well-maintained highway that winds through sugarcane fields and rolling cattle country, is the small community of Imbert. The only reason to come here

TWENTY-SEVEN WATERFALLS & A KENNEDY

Travelers routinely describe the tour of the waterfalls at Damajagua as ‘the coolest thing I 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 – down into the sparkling pools below.

It’s mandatory to wear a helmet and a life jacket, and guides are trained in first aid and CPR. It wasn’t always that way, however.

Flashback to 2004. A handful of unofficial guides led tours at the waterfalls. There were no safety measures, no visitors center, and the occasional minor injury. Then a young boy drowned.

Peace Corps volunteer Joe Kennedy – grandson of Robert F Kennedy and great-nephew of JFK – had just arrived. And there was nothing here. ‘It felt like you were out in the middle of nowhere having this virgin experience,’ he says. There was no visitors center, no restaurant, nothing. ‘There simply wasn’t any money for helmets or life jackets and training.’

Kennedy applied for and received grant money from both USAID (US\$50,000) and the UN Development Program (US\$30,000).

‘The challenge,’ he says, ‘wasn’t just to increase safety precautions, but also to find sustainable ways to make money from the waterfalls in a way that would benefit the community.’

The grant money was used to build the **visitors center** (☎ 809-635-1722; www.27charcos.com) and restaurant that are there now. With the help of several Puerto Plata area resorts, Kennedy raised upwards of US\$10,000 to purchase life jackets and helmets.

These days it’s mandatory to go with a guide, 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 from 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 (and cross two bridges) 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, the 27th.

US\$1 of every entrance fee goes to a community development fund. Eight people sit on the board, including the Secretary of Environment, to make sure the money gets spent wisely. Considering that an average of 3000 tourists go through the falls every month, the bank account is going well – plans are underway to build a library for the local school, fix a local church and build foot bridges over a nearby river.

And Kennedy? He finished his time in the Peace Corps and is back in Boston studying Law at Harvard. Other Peace Corps volunteers are continuing the project he began.

Any plans to go into politics?

He laughs. ‘I just want to survive law school first.’

is the **27 waterfalls of Damajagua** (see boxed text, above).

The big Texaco station at Imbert serves as a crossroad for the entire area. There is a frequent *gua-gua* service to Santiago (US\$2.50, 1½ hours), Luperón (US\$1.80, 40 minutes) and Puerto Plata (US\$1.30, 30 minutes).

LUPERÓN

pop 4500

Luperón is famous among boaters as a ‘hurricane hole’ – a safe haven from rough seas.

There are two marinas here, and a third planned, and at some times of the year there are as many as 400 pleasure craft in harbor. Unless you’re a boater, though, or a guest at the nearby all-inclusive resort, there’s no reason to come here – it’s a distant backwater with dirty, smelly, pitted streets, of no intrinsic interest.

If you do decide to come here, you’ll definitely enjoy your stay more if you have your own vehicle, as things are kinda spread out.

Orientation

The road from Imbert enters Luperón from the south. Staying to your left, the highway becomes Calle Duarte and eventually intersects with Calle 27 de Febrero, Luperón’s main east–west drag. This intersection is the commercial center of town. The town park is a few blocks east of there, the marinas a kilometer west and Parque Nacional La Isabela beyond that (see p198).

Information

BanReservas and **Politur** (tourist police; ☎ 809-581-8045) are across the street from each other on Calle Duarte at 16 de Agosto, four blocks south of town, near the *gua-gua* stop.

The **post office** (Calle Luperón) is on the east side of the park. **Farmacia Danessa** (☎ 809-571-8855; Calle Independencia) is on the west side of the park.

Sights & Activities

Luperón doesn’t have much in the way of sights and activities, but it is the nearest town to Parque Nacional La Isabela (p198).

Luperón’s beach, **Playa Grande**, is fronted by two large all-inclusive resorts, and as Dominican beaches go, is subpar – Playa La Isabela (see p198) is much prettier. The biggest drawback, though, are the sea urchins, which live in the large underwater patches of rock just offshore. Covered in spines, they are no fun to step on. There are two entrances to the beach – one is a path running beside the Luperón Beach resort and the other at the end of a well-marked dirt road off the highway another 700m further west. A *motoconcho* ride costs about US\$1.80.

Sailing is on offer at Marina Puerto Blanco, 1km east of town. There are no official tours, but have a sit and a yak at the restaurant and someone is sure to take you out. Prices vary widely depending on the captain, but expect to pay US\$40 to US\$60 for a half-day trip, or US\$70 to US\$120 for a full day.

Sleeping

La Casa del Sol (☎ 809-571-8403; www.casadelosol.de.ms; Calle 27 de Febrero; r with fan/air-con US\$24/30; 🍷) This German-run hotel, set on a leafy lot about 100m west of La Yola Bar Restaurant (right), features seven comfortable rooms, each with large firm beds and high ceilings and some with sofas or chairs and tables. The hotel is a 1.5km walk from town and 1.5km from the beach, and rents bikes and scooters to guests.

Pequeño Mundo (☎ 809-668-5043; La Rusia; d/q US\$26/35; 🍷 🍷) A friendly German-Dominican couple runs this small hotel 2km west of town. All five rooms are spacious with small fridge, cold-water bathroom, high ceilings and a small table and chairs, but only two rooms have air-con. It’s the furthest of the hotels from town, but the only one with a swimming pool.

Tropical Luperón & Luperón Beach (☎ 809-571-8303; www.besthotels.es; Carretera de las Américas; per person US\$65-110; 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷) These sister hotels facing Playa Grande share a number of the same facilities. The grounds are tidy though a bit plain, but the pool is very nice, and there’s beach access (although it’s nothing special). Like most all-inclusive places, the rooms and food service are OK but not terrific. All rooms have balconies either facing the ocean or the grounds. Windsurfing, sailing, horseback riding and scuba clinics in the pool are available.

Eating & Drinking

Captain Steve’s Place (☎ 809-452-3612; captstevensplace@yahoo.com; Calle Duarte 47; mains US\$4-12; 🍷 🍷) Honky-tonk food at honky-tonk prices, honky-tonk music – heck, the only thing missing here is a gum-snapping waitress with a chip on her shoulder. Former boater Steve makes great omelettes, burgers, even American-style onion rings, all to be washed down with his strong coffee (with added rum, if you’ve a mind). There’s free internet with your meal, and the cheapest laundry in town (per kg US\$0.80). There’s also a small pool in back you can use (per person US\$5).

La Yola Bar Restaurant (☎ 809-571-8511; Calle 27 de Febrero; mains US\$5-20; 🍷 dinner, closed Tue) This pleasant, open-sided, thatch-roofed restaurant 500m west of the center isn’t on the water yet always seems to catch a refreshing sea breeze. The most popular items here are seafood, but the goat, chicken and pork dishes are also good. Pizzas and pasta start at just US\$5.

Getting There & Away

Gua-guas to Imbert (US\$1.20, 40 minutes, every 15 minutes 5am to 6:30pm) leave from a stop on Calle Duarte at 16 de Agosto, four blocks south of Calle 27 de Febrero. From Imbert you can pick up *gua-guas* headed south to Santiago or north to Puerto Plata.

If you’re driving, pick up the turnoff near Imbert on the Puerto Plata–Santiago highway.

PARQUE NACIONAL LA ISABELA

Unesco has been invited to step in and take over this slowly crumbling **national park** (admission US\$3; ☎ 9am-5pm), which marks Columbus' second settlement on Hispaniola. On his second voyage to the New World, Columbus found the first settlement at Cap-Haïtien in Haiti destroyed, so he shifted 110km east and set up a new camp here.

These days a shabby museum marks the occasion – its cheesiness is appropriate, considering that the majority of visitors are groups of Dominican primary-school students. There's some old coins, rings and arrowheads, and a small-scale replica of Columbus' house. All the exhibits are in Spanish, and guides speak very little English. You can see it all in half an hour, tops.

Across the road from the park is the mildly impressive **Templo de las Américas** (☎ 9am-6pm; admission free). It's a loose replica – though much larger – of La Isabela's original church and was built as part of the settlement's 500th anniversary celebrations.

Also nearby is **Playa Isabela**, a broad outward-curving beach with coarse sand and beautiful, ultracalm water. There are a couple of small beach restaurants and usually at least one knick-knack stand that rents snorkeling gear (US\$4) – ask the vendor to point you in the direction of the best coral patches. When swimming or wading, be alert for sea urchins lurking in the rock patches in the shallows.

The pleasant hillside **Miamar** (☎ 809-656-0732; El Castillo; r US\$33; 📍 📍 📍) B&B has great views out over the national park. Rooms are comfortable and clean, and there are breezy chairs poolside to enjoy a sundowner. One of the owners is a French-trained chef, and if he's feeling well he might be persuaded to work some magic in the kitchen for you. Also of interest here is the private collection of Taíno artifacts, the largest of its kind, which includes some rare statuettes and a manatee-rib vomiting stick (don't ask). Miamar also has its own private Taíno cave, and the Belgian owners, who speak five languages, can take you there on weekends.

Located just outside the entrance to the national park, **Hostelería Rancho del Sol** (☎ 809-696-0325; Carretera las Américas; s/d incl breakfast with fan US\$33/42, with air-con US\$46/58; 📍 📍 📍) is an agreeable little hotel set on a large oceanfront plot. All eight rooms have a terrace with rocking chairs and ocean view, tile floor and hot water, and are big enough for a queen-sized

bed, twin bed, plus a coffee table and chairs. The decor is a bit dated, but the rooms are very clean and comfortable and there's a swimming pool for guest use. As this place was for sale when we passed through, be sure to call ahead to see what the new owner's plans may be.

From Luperón, drive 11km west until you come to a T-junction. To your right lies Playa Isabela (1km), directly ahead the museum (100m), and to the left the church (500m). Turn left and keep going for 2km and you'll come to Miamar and Rancho del Sol.

It's possible, but somewhat harder, to get to La Isabela from the main highway between Santiago and Monte Cristi. Turn off at Laguna Salada and head north 25km to Villa Isabella, passing through Los Hidalgos on the way. (The signs can be a little confusing, so ask for 'El Castillo' – the town where the park is located – as you go.) The park is 7km from Villa Isabella, but the road is dirt and you have to cross two broad rivers; ask at a *motoconcho* stand in Villa Isabella how high the water is and if the car you're driving will make it across. After crossing the second river, turn right on the main road and you'll drive past the park – look for Templo de las Américas on your right.

If you haven't got your own wheels, it's probably not worth coming here. If you're stubborn, however, a taxi from Luperón will set you back US\$30 return, and a *motoconcho* around US\$10.

PUNTA RUSIA

pop 200

This remote outpost exists solely to service the package tours coming to **Cayo Arena** (aka 'Paradise Island'). While the corals around the atoll are pristine and the snorkeling tops, the fact that you have to do so with 50 other people in the water at the same time definitely detracts from the experience.

There is no public transportation here, and the road is a muddy, rutted nightmare (25km, two hours). While the beach is pleasant enough, and you'll spot some wild orchids on a dirt track leading inland (5km west of town), the amount of effort required to get here doesn't really pay off once you arrive.

Sights & Activities

CAYO ARENA

Tour groups are shuttled by speedboat to this picturesque sandbar island about 10km north-

west of Punta Rusia. You'll spend a couple of hours on the island, sunbathing and snorkeling, before returning via a fairly humdrum mangrove plantation (where you might spot a manatee). Unlimited drinks are included on the island, and there's an uninspired buffet lunch when you get back to town.

Lots of agents sell this tour, but the actual operator is **El Paraíso Tours** (☎ 809-320-7606; www.cayoparaiso.com). Expect to pay roughly US\$50 per person, and be prepared to spend three hours each way in the back of a truck (if you're coming from the Puerto Plata region). If you're already in Punta Rusia it's US\$35 per person. If you want to avoid the package tourists, hop the service and supply boat, which leaves Punta Rusia around 8:15am. You'll have the island to yourself for more than an hour. Otherwise, go on an afternoon boat, when there are fewer people.

Be warned: there is no bathroom on the island, so go before or be prepared to, err, fertilize the ocean.

BOAT TRIPS

El Paraíso Tours (☎ 809-320-7606; www.cayoparaiso.com) also offers a 'VIP' yacht tour (maximum 30 passengers) that includes a visit to Parque Nacional La Isabela, a champagne and oyster snack on board, a lobster lunch back at Punta Rusia, and the afternoon at Cayo Arena, including snorkeling and a return trip through the mangroves. The tour is normally US\$140 per person, but those staying at Punta Rusia get it for US\$95.

DIVING

There are more than two dozen great coral dive sites off Punta Rusia. There's no dive shop, but if the local expat-German diver happens to be around, he might take you out – ask at El Paraíso Tours (☎ 809-320-7606). Your best bet, though, is to contact the dive shops in Sosúa (p180), most of which offer this trip.

Sleeping & Eating

Casita Mariposa (☎ 809-325-2378; s/d incl breakfast US\$15/24) A German-French couple runs this, the best lodging in Punta Rusia. Set on a bluff overlooking the ocean, it has great sea views, and it's just a short walk to a remote beach. Accommodation is in a handful of rustic cabins. To get there, just as you enter town look for a *gomero* (tire-repair shop) on your left, and turn right on the small road leading uphill just opposite.

El Paraíso Tours (r US\$35) has a few rooms for rent in the large apartment complex across the street from its office. The rooms are basic, with private cold-water bath, two large beds and a small terrace.

For food, you can join one of the tour-group buffets for US\$14, including drinks. There is also a number of modest **restaurants** (mains US\$3-7) and beachside fish stands that serve basic, cheap meals.

Getting There & Away

There is no regular bus service to Punta Rusia. If you have a car, there are two routes – one a 25km dirt road from Villa Isabella, which can be reached by paved roads from either Imbert or Hwy 1 (turn off at Laguna Salada). You have to ford two rivers on this route, so ask in Villa Isabella about conditions. The other, and easier, route is from Villa Elisa, 20km west of Laguna Salada on Hwy 1. From there, the road north is paved for 8km and deteriorates steadily for the next 12km, but does not require you to cross any rivers.

MONTE CRISTI

pop 17,000

Welcome to the boonies. Were Monte Cristi about three hours' drive closer to Puerto Plata, it would be full of foreign tourists and profitable local businesses. As it is, this dusty frontier town offers only a few modest attractions, and serves principally as a jumping-off point to Haiti.

The lack of tourists mean residents continue to make their living fishing and tending livestock, just as they've done for generations. Another major source of revenue is salt, which is harvested from evaporation ponds north of town and sold in the USA by Morton Salt.

Monte Cristi celebrates what is considered the most brutal Carnival in the country – participants carry bullwhips and crack each other as they walk through the streets. I can hear my mother now: 'But you could lose an eye!'

Orientation

Hwy 1 enters Monte Cristi from the east, where it turns into Calle Duarte and becomes the main east-west road through town. Main intersections include the ones with Mella (which turns into Hwy 45 south to Dajabón), Benito Monción (with a hotel, a call center and several restaurants) and San Fernando (which runs along the far side of the park and leads to the beaches and El Morro).

Information

Just about everything you'll need is on or within a block or two of Calle Duarte.

BanReservas (Calle Duarte) Next to the post office.

Hospital Padre Fantino (☎ 809-579-2401; Av 27 de Febrero; ☹ 24hr) Located two blocks north of Calle Duarte, this modest hospital has a 24-hour emergency room.

Politur (tourist police; ☎ 809-579-3980) Office on the main beach.

Post office (cnr Calle Duarte & Colón; ☹ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Free internet on the second floor.

Sights & Activities

EL MORRO

Part of the 1100-sq-km **Parque Nacional Monte Cristi** (☹ 8am-5pm, admission free) that surrounds Monte Cristi on all sides, El Morro ("The Hill") sits 5km northeast of town – follow Av San Fernando north of town to the beach and continue to your right until the road dead-ends. Opposite the ranger station, 585 wooden stairs lead to the top (239m). The stairs are in disrepair and have been closed since 2002. Uniformed types say don't go, and for absolute safety you should heed the advice. If you do scramble over the rotting planks and loose gravel, you'll be rewarded with excellent views. It's about an hour return.

BEACHES

The main public beach is **Playa Juan de Boloños**, a kilometer north of town. **Playa Detras del Morro**, tucked behind the hill in the national park, is the prettiest beach in the area, a long slow curve of tan sand backed by a towering precipice. The beach is just past the ranger station.

PARQUE CENTRAL

Monte Cristi's **city park** (cnr Calle Duarte & San Fernando) is notable for the 50m clock tower at its center. The tower was designed by French engineer Alexandre Gustave Eiffel and looks like a miniature version of the same engineer's more famous tower in Paris. It was imported from France in March 1895, reassembled and inaugurated by Monte Cristi's mayor three months later. The clock tower was allowed to deteriorate, but in 1997 the Leon Jimenez family, of Aurora cigar and Presidente beer fortune, financed the tower's restoration.

In the immediate vicinity of the park are several dilapidated Victorian homes. Some have been partially restored, in some cases enough for you to appreciate their one-time glory.

Tours

Most of the hotels in town organize snorkeling tours (per person \$50), trips to the isolated beach at **Isla Cabra** (\$30 up to four people), and boat tours to **Los Cayos de los Siete Hermanos** (\$300 up to 12 people), a collection of seven uninhabited islands inside the national park.

So few people come here, though, that it can be expensive and difficult to arrange any of these tours – your best bet is to come on weekends in the high season (November to March) and ask at your hotel. Alternatively, ask **Politur** to recommend a boatperson and haggle with them directly.

Hostal San Fernando (see below) also runs a small dive center, and charges US\$150 per person per day. **Northern Coast Diving** (see p181) in Sosúa may also be willing to take you out this way. The corals here make excellent diving, but then there are equally good corals more easily accessible elsewhere. Fortune-hunting wreck divers work this coastline, but the many wooden galleons that sank here have long since rotted away, leaving very little for the recreational diver to see.

Sleeping

Chic Hotel (☎ 809-579-2316; Benito Monción 44; s/d with fan US\$18/25, s/d/tr/q with air-con US\$27/30/33/40; ☐ ☹ ☹) 'Chic' might be wishful thinking. Perhaps the 'Undistinguished But Still Good Value Hotel' would be a better name. Still, this well-managed lodging offers 50 clean rooms right in the middle of town. The Chic empire includes neighboring bar, restaurant, ice-cream store and internet café. Check out the mango tree the hotel was built around – you'll pass the trunk in the hallway.

Hostal Montechico (☎ 809-579-2565; s/d/tw US\$24/33/43; ☐ ☹ ☹) You can't miss this one – take the road north to the beach, and you'll see a bright-yellow sign that says 'Restaurant.' There's no food, but the hotel is open. All rooms have a balcony: ask for one facing the ocean. It's about a 20-minute walk into town. Service can be lacking, however.

Hostal San Fernando (☎ 809-866-4511; www.ecomarinamontecristi.com; s/d/tr US\$25/44/60; ☹ ☹ ☹) A drop of rain turns these otherwise pleasant bungalows into a mosquito-filled nightmare. In the dry season, though, it's the most pleasant accommodation in town. The rooms have high, sloped ceilings, whitewashed walls, firm beds, clean bathrooms and tile floors. From here it's a short walk to both the beach and

El Morro. There's a restaurant on site, but it's nothing special.

Eating & Drinking

Comedor Adela (☎ 809-579-2254; Alvarez 41; set meals US\$5) This family-owned joint has a menu, but ignore it, and go for the day's special – rice and beans, salad, and some very tasty *chivo* (goat).

Ocean (☎ 809-579-3643; Calle Benito Monción 1; mains US\$8-17; ☹ 9am-midnight) Four blocks south of Calle Duarte – look for the prominent red stairway – this restaurant and discotheque offers the diner loads of choices, from chicken dishes to lobster. The open-sided, fan-cooled dining area is situated under a large thatched roof, while the adjacent disco is a concrete structure that's packed with Dominicans on Friday and Saturday nights (free admission).

Super Fria Nina (Calle Duarte at Colón) and **Terraza Fedora** (Calle San Fernando), five blocks north of Duarte, are large beer gardens that get incredibly packed almost every evening, but especially on weekends. Also check out **New York New York** (opposite Parque 14 de Julio), where the cool kids go to bump and grind the night away.

Getting There & Away

Caribe Tours (☎ 809-579-2129; cnr Mella & Carmargo) has a depot a block north of Calle Duarte. Buses to Santo Domingo (US\$8.50, four hours) leave at 7am, 9am, 1:45pm, 2:45pm and 4pm, with a stop in Santiago (US\$3.65, two hours).

Monte Cristi's *gua-gua* terminal is on Calle Duarte near 27 de Febrero. There are *gua-guas* to Dajabón (US\$1.50, 50 minutes, every 20 minutes from 7:30am to 10pm); for Puerto Plata, take any Santiago-bound *gua-gua* and get off at the junction in Navarrete (\$3.70, 1½ hours, every 20 minutes), where you can

change for a Puerto Plata *gua-gua* (\$1.80, one hour, every 20 minutes).

If you're driving, it's hard to get lost – Calle Duarte becomes Hwy Duarte to Santiago, while Av Mella becomes Hwy 45 to Dajabón. Avoid driving the Monte Cristi–Dajabón road at night, as assaults on cars have occurred in the past.

Getting Around

Most of Monte Cristi is navigable by foot. The exception is El Morro and the beach behind it – for those a car or a *motoconcho* is best.

DAJABÓN

pop 16,500

Most foreigners here are on their way to or from Haiti. Reaching the border is simple; coming from Monte Cristi on Hwy 45, as most people do, you'll come to a huge arch (the formal entrance to town) and a short distance afterwards the Parque Central on the east side of the street. Just past the park is Calle Presidente Henriquez; turn right (west) and the border is six blocks ahead. If you're arriving by Caribe Tours bus, the bus station is on Calle Presidente Henriquez. Just walk west from the bus station five blocks to get to the border.

If you're planning an early-morning border crossing, try the **Hotel Juan Calvo** (☎ 809-579-8285; Calle Presidente Henriquez 46; d/tw with fan US\$12/15, with air-con US\$15/20; ☹ ☹). Next to Parque Central, this hotel ('Bald John') is the best one in town, with 44 clean and comfortable rooms, and located just six blocks from the border.

For a bite to eat, there's lots of vendors selling grilled corn and hot dogs on the main park, and a few undistinguished eateries on the main road coming into town.

THE DAJABÓN MARKET – WHERE TWO NATIONS MEET

Crowds pushing and shoving, a sea of black faces, crates of eggs piled high on women's heads, wheelbarrows – so many wheelbarrows! – and your hands pressed hopelessly at your sides, trying to escape the crush of people.

This is the **Haitian market** at Dajabón, where Dominicans and Haitians come to trade. On Mondays and Fridays the border bridge opens, and Haitians pour across to buy fruit and vegetables from the DR and sell just about everything else.

Cursing at each other in Creole, the successful buyers attempt to return across the narrow bridge, the road clogged with people, advancing an inch per minute, motorcycles burrowing through the crowds – stand aside or get a handlebar in your gut.

Hands will grope your bottom now and then, but don't worry, they're not copping a feel – they're just trying to steal your wallet.

Caribe Tours (☎ 809-579-8554; cnr Calles Carrasco & Henríquez) has a depot five blocks from the border. Buses to Santo Domingo (US\$8.50, five hours), with stops in Monte Cristi and Santiago, leave at 6:45am, 8:30am, 10:15am, 1pm, 2:25pm and 3:15pm

Gua-guas will also take you to Monte Cristi (US\$1.50, 50 minutes). The terminal is just beyond the arch at the entrance to town on

the east side of the road. The *gua-gua* station is just beyond it, also on the eastern side of the road.

There are taxis and *motoconchos* near the crossing point every day until the time the border closes. After that, taxis and *motoconchos* may still be found on the main road.

For information on crossing the border, see p256.