

Santo Domingo



This is a deeply Dominican city – an obvious statement but no less true. It's where the rhythms of the country are on superdrive, where the sounds of life – domino pieces slapped on tables, backfiring mufflers and horns from chaotic traffic, merengue and *bachata* blasting from corner *colmados* – are most intense. Santo Domingo (population 2.9 million), or 'La Capital' as it's typically called, is to Dominicans what New York is to Americans, a collage of cultures and neighborhoods, or what Havana is to Cubans, a vibrant beating heart that fuels the entire country.

At the heart of the city is the Zona Colonial. And at the heart of the Zona Colonial is Parque Colón. And across from the park is one of the oldest churches in the New World. And a block from the church is one of the oldest streets in the New World. And on this street is the oldest surviving European fortress. And so on and so on. Amid the cobblestone streets reminiscent of the French Quarter in New Orleans, it would be easy to forget Santo Domingo is in the Caribbean – if it weren't for the heat and humidity.

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

HIGHLIGHTS

- Wander the 500-year-old cobblestone **backstreets of the Zona Colonial** (p78)
- Enter the **Catedral Primada de América** (p79) – the first church in the New World – and imagine how 16th-century residents felt
- Root for the home team at raucous **Estadio Quisqueya** (p98), one of the premier places to watch a baseball game in the Dominican Republic
- Let the night slip away after a late dinner along romantic **Calle la Atarazana** (p94) off Plaza España
- Merengue, bachata or salsa** (p97), or just plain-old grind down, at one of the capital's vibrant nightclubs



HISTORY

In a way it can be said that the founding of Santo Domingo was an act of desperation. Columbus' first settlement, Villa La Navidad in present-day Haiti, was burned to the ground and all settlers killed within a year. His second settlement, La Isabela, west of present-day Puerto Plata, lasted only five years and was beset from the beginning by disease and disaster. Columbus' brother Bartholomew, left in charge of La Isabela and facing rebellion from its disgruntled residents, pulled up stakes and moved clear around to the other side of the island. He founded Nueva Isabela on the east bank of the Río Ozama. The third time, evidently, was the charm as the city he founded, though moved to the west bank and renamed Santo Domingo, has remained the capital to this day.

That's not to say the city hasn't had its fair share of troubles. In 1586 the English buccaneer Sir Francis Drake captured the city and collected a ransom for its return to Spanish control. And in 1655 an English fleet commanded by William Penn attempted to take Santo Domingo but retreated after encountering heavy resistance. A century and a half later a brazen ex-slave and Haitian leader by the name of François Dominique Toussaint Louverture marched into Santo Domingo. Toussaint and his troops took control of the city without any resistance at all; the city's inhabitants knew they were no match for the army of former slaves and wisely didn't try to resist. During the occupation many of the city's residents fled to Venezuela or neighboring islands. It was in Santo Domingo on February 27, 1844 that Juan Pablo Duarte – considered the father of the Dominican Republic – declared Dominican independence from Haiti, a day still celebrated today.

ORIENTATION

For travelers, the Zona Colonial – home to streets that were once strolled by Christopher Columbus and Sir Francis Drake – is the heart of Santo Domingo. This is where most of the museums, churches and other historical sites are located. It has a number of hotels and restaurants in various price ranges and offers easy access to internet cafés, ATMs, shops and more. Río Ozama marks the eastern border of the neighborhood; several sights can be found not far on the other side. Just west of the Zona Colonial is a residential area of quiet,

tree-lined streets called Gazcue, which has a number of hotels, restaurants and some services. West of Gazcue between Av Tiradentes and Av Winston Churchill is a fairly high-end area of businesses, restaurants, apartment buildings and homes. South of Gazcue is the beginning of the Malecón, a portion of Av George Washington that contains most of the city's high-rise hotels and casinos and some nightclubs. The waterfront avenue runs the length of the city but the majority of activity takes place between Cambronal and Av Abraham Lincoln. On Sundays, the Malecón is closed to vehicular traffic and is a popular place to spend the day. The shantytowns that ring much of the city are known as Zona Apache – an allusion to the forbidden territory of the Old West in the US.

Maps

Located on the 3rd floor of an aging office building, **Mapas Gaar** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-688-8004; Espaillat; ☏ 8:30am-5:30pm Mon-Fri) has the best variety and the largest number of maps in the Dominican Republic. Maps are designated by city or region (eg Santo Domingo and Environs, North, Central, South) and include a country map, as well as several city maps on the back of each. Road atlases are also sold here.

Also in the Zona Colonial, the **Instituto Geográfica** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-682-2680; Calle El Conde; ☏ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri) produces mostly commercial use maps, but does sell a handsome five-panel, 1m-by-1.5m map of the Dominican Republic for US\$35.

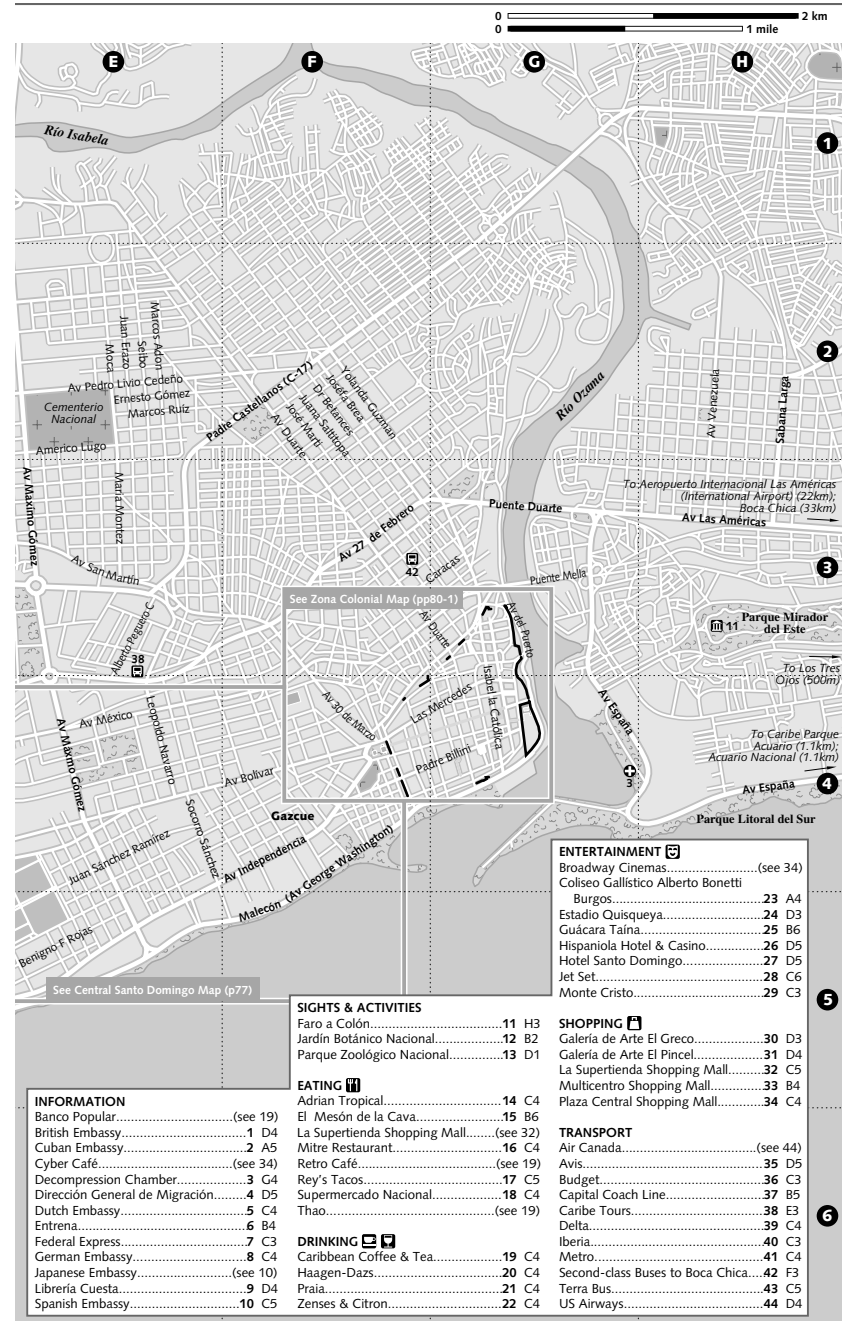
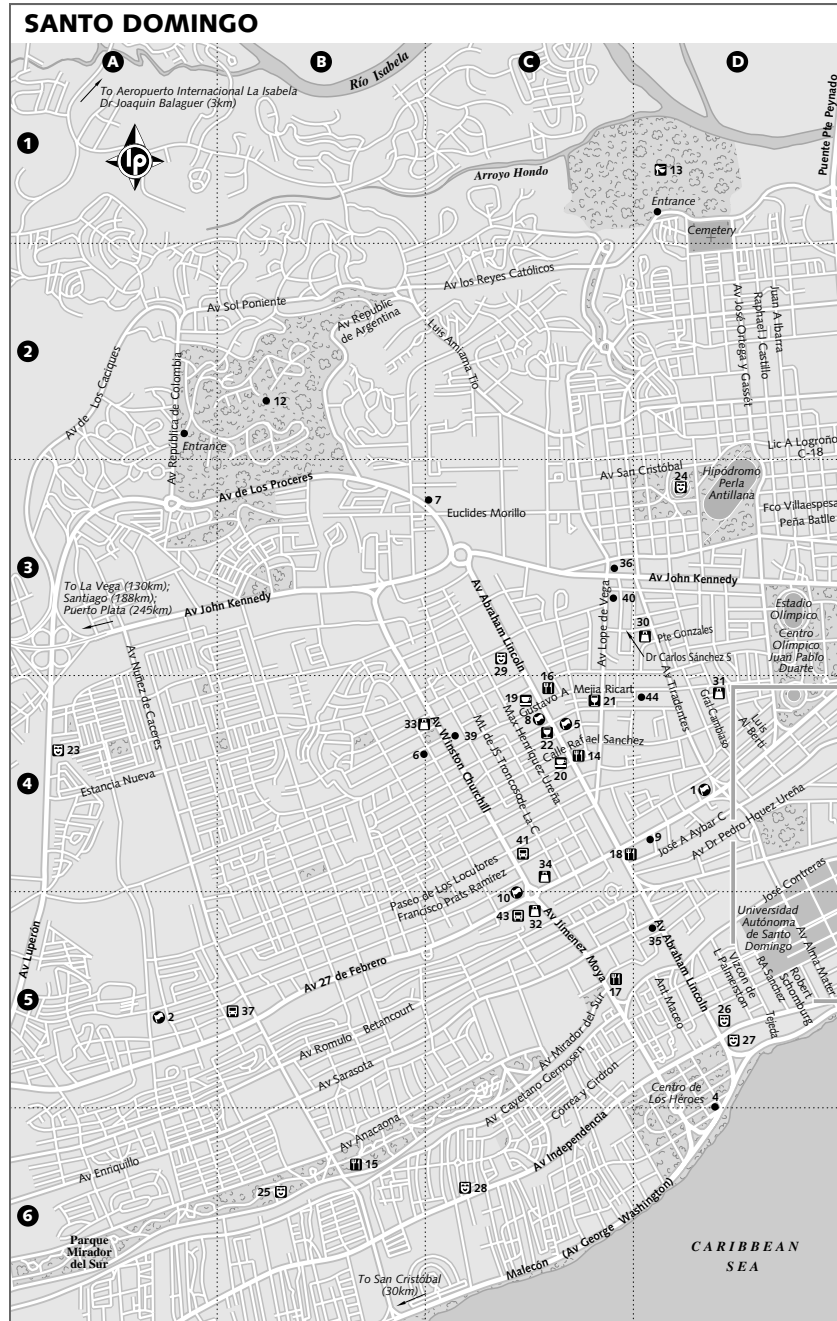
INFORMATION

Bookstores

Editorial Duarte (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-689-4832; cnr Arzobispo Meriño & Mercedes; ☏ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-6pm Sat) This dusty shop in the Zona Colonial has a good selection of Spanish-language fiction books, foreign-language dictionaries and maps.

Librería Cuesta (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-473-4020; www.cuestalibros.com; cnr Av 27 de Febrero & Abraham Lincoln; ☏ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-3pm Sun) This modern, two-story Dominican version of Barnes & Noble is easily the nicest and largest bookstore in the city.

Librería Pichardo (Map pp80-1; cnr José Reyes & Calle El Conde; ☏ 8am-7pm Mon-Thu, 8am-5:30pm Fri, 8am-1pm Sun) Some early and antique Spanish-language books, mostly on colonial history and Latin American literature and poetry, plus some curios. Bargain to get a good price.



See Central Santo Domingo Map (p77)

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

- Faro a Colón.....11 H3
- Jardín Botánico Nacional.....12 B2
- Parque Zoológico Nacional.....13 D1

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- Thao.....(see 19)
- Entrena.....6 B4
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- Zenses & Citron.....22 C4

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- Monte Cristo.....29 C3

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- Second-class Buses to Boca Chica.....42 F3
- Terra Bus.....43 C5
- US Airways.....44 D4

Post office (Map pp80-1; Isabel la Católica; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) Facing Parque Colón in the Zona Colonial.

Tourist Information

Tourist office (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-686-3858; Isabel la Católica 103; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) Located beside Parque Colón, this office has a handful of brochures and maps. English and French spoken.

Travel Agencies

Colonial Tour & Travel (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-688-5285; www.colonialtours.com.do; Arzobispo Meriño 209; ☎ 8:30am-1pm & 2:30-5:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat) A few meters north of the Calle El Conde promenade, this long-running professional outfit is good for booking flights, hotel rooms, and any and all excursions from mountain biking to rafting to whale watching. English, Italian and French spoken.

Giada Tours & Travel (Map p77; ☎ 809-686-6994, 809-264-3704; giada@verizon.net.do; Hostal Duque de Wellington, Av Independencia 304; ☎ 8:30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) Friendly professional outfit arranges domestic and international plane tickets, and also conducts area tours.

Tody Tours (☎ 809-686-0882; www.todytours.com) Former Peace Corps volunteer who specializes in tropical birding tours all over the country and at the National Botanical Gardens in Santo Domingo (three hours per person US\$10).

Turis Centro (Map p77; ☎ 809-688-6607, 809-689-2714; turiscentro@hotmail.com; Av George Washington 101; ☎ 8:30am-12:30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sun) Another reputable travel agency, located on the Malecón.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Pick-pocketing, especially on buses or in clubs, is the main concern for visitors to Santo Domingo. Being alert to the people around you and being careful with your wallet or purse (or even leaving them in the safety deposit box back at the hotel) is the best defense. Muggings are less common, especially of tourists, but they do happen occasionally. The Zona Colonial is generally very safe to walk around, day or night. The Malecón is safe as well, but be extra cautious if you've been drinking or you're leaving a club or casino especially late. Gazcue is a mellow residential area, but street lights are few and far between. If you have a long way to walk or you're unsure of the neighborhood, play it safe and call or hail a taxi.

SIGHTS

The highest concentration of sights are conveniently located within walking distance of one another in the Zona Colonial. A few sites, like the Faro a Colón and the Jardín Botánico Nacional, are in the surrounding neighborhoods.

Zona Colonial

For those fascinated by the origin of the so-called New World – a dramatic and complicated story of the first encounter between native people of the Americas and Europeans – the Zona Colonial, listed as a Unesco World Heritage site, is a great place to explore. It is 11-square blocks, a mix of cobblestoned and paved streets, on the west bank of the Río Ozama, where the deep rivers meets the Caribbean Sea.

As might be expected, many of the structures in the Zona Colonial that still have their 16th-century walls have more recently altered façades and structural additions like new floors and roofs. The western end of Arzobispo Portes is especially attractive, a quiet leafy avenue with colonial homes, stone churches and pleasant parks. Keep your eyes open for the little nooks and crannies – the small pedestrian alleys, men playing dominos at an aluminum folding table set on the street. These scenes, as much as the historical sites and buildings, make the Zona Colonial unique.

MUSEUMS

One of the more interesting museums, partly because of its history and the high quality of its exhibits, is the **Museo de las Casas Reales** (Museum of the Royal Houses; Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-682-4202; Las Damas; adult/student US\$1/0.15; ☎ 9am-5pm, closed Mon), near Plaza España. Built in the Renaissance style during the 16th century, it was the longtime seat of Spanish authority for the entire Caribbean region, housing the Governor's office and the powerful Audiencia Real (Royal Court), among others. It showcases colonial-period objects, including many treasures recovered from Spanish galleons that foundered in nearby waters. Several walls are covered with excellent maps of various voyages of European explorers and conquistadors. Each room has been restored according to its original style, and displays range from Taino artifacts to dozens of hand-blown wine bottles and period furnishings. Also on display is an impressive antique weaponry collection

acquired by dictator/president Trujillo from a Mexican general (ironically, during a 1955 world peace event); you'll see samurai swords, medieval armor, ivory-inlaid crossbows and even a pistol/sword combo.

Designed in the Gothic-Mudéjar transitional style, the **Museo Alcázar de Colón** (Museum Citadel of Columbus; Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-682-4750; Plaza España; admission US\$2; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sat, 9am-4pm Sun) was used as a residence by Columbus' son, Diego, and his wife, Doña María de Toledo, during the early 16th century. Recalled to Spain in 1523, the couple left the home to relatives who occupied the handsome building for the next hundred years. It was subsequently allowed to deteriorate, then was used as a prison and a warehouse, before it was finally abandoned. By 1775 it was a vandalized shell of its former self and served as the unofficial city dump. Less than a hundred years later, only two of its walls remained at right angles.

The magnificent building we see today is the result of three restorations: one in 1957, another in 1971 and a third in 1992. Great pains were taken to adhere to the historical authenticity of its reconstruction and decor. Today it houses many household pieces said to have belonged to the Columbus family. The building itself – if not the objects inside – is definitely worth a look.

Museo Mundo de Ambar (World of Amber Museum; Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-682-3309; www.amberworldmuseum.com; 2nd fl, Arzobispo Meriño 452; admission US\$2; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) has an impressive collection of amber samples from around the world, and excellent exhibits explaining in Spanish and English its prehistoric origins, its use throughout the ages, Dominican mining processes, and its present-day value to the science and art worlds. The collection includes fine amber jewelry and various samples containing a wide array of critters and bugs. The 1st-floor shop sells jewelry made from amber, larimar and more ordinary stones. Not nearly as impressive as its competitor is the **Museo de Ambar** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-221-1333; Calle El Conde 107, Parque Colón; admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat); it has a few decent exhibits and high-quality samples, plus an exhibit on larimar, a beautiful blue stone only found in the Dominican Republic.

A better place to learn about larimar is the **Larimar Museum** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-689-6605; www.larimarmuseum.com; 2nd fl, Isabel la Católica 54; admission free; ☎ 8:30am-6pm Mon-Sat), equal to the Museo

Mundo de Ambar in terms of the thoroughness of its exhibits. Signage is in Spanish and English. Of course, the museum is meant to inspire you to make a purchase from the strategically located jewelry store on the 1st floor.

Located in the Casa de Tostado – the beautifully restored 16th-century home of the writer Francisco Tostado – is the **Museo de la Familia Dominicana** (Museum of the Dominican Family; Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-689-5000; cnr Padre Billini & Arzobispo Meriño; admission US\$1.50; ☎ 9am-4pm, closed Sun). It's as interesting as much for its architectural features (it has a double Gothic window over the front door – the only one of its kind in the Americas), as for its exhibits displaying well-restored 19th-century furnishings and household objects. Ask to go up the spiral mahogany staircase for a rooftop view of the Zona Colonial. Tours in Spanish only.

The small **Quinta Dominica** (Map pp80-1; cnr Padre Bellini & 19 de Marzo; admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun) art gallery, located in a renovated colonial home, features ever-changing exhibits of colonial art. A shady courtyard at the back with tables and chairs provides a great place to just sit and relax. BYO snacks and drinks.

CHURCHES

Diego Columbus, son of the great explorer, set the first stone of the **Catedral Primada de América** (Primate Cathedral of America; Map pp80-1; Parque Colón; admission free; ☎ 9am-4pm) in 1514, but construction didn't begin in earnest until the arrival of the first bishop, Alejandro Geraldini, in 1521. From then until 1540, numerous architects worked on the church and adjoining buildings, which is why the vault is Gothic, the arches Romanesque and the ornamentation baroque. It's anyone's guess what the planned bell tower would have looked like: a shortage of funds curtailed construction, and the steeple, which undoubtedly would have offered a commanding view of the city, was never built.

Although Santo Domingo residents like to say their cathedral was the first in the Western hemisphere, in fact one was built in Mexico City between 1524 and 1532; it stood for four decades, until it was knocked down in 1573 and replaced by the imposing Catedral Metropolitana. It can be said that Santo Domingo's cathedral is the oldest cathedral in operation, which is something for sure, but its current interior is a far cry from

ZONA COLONIAL

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To Second-class Buses to Higüey, Puerto Plata, La Romana, Santiago, Sosúa (20m)

To Guácaro Taíno (6.5km); Coliseo Gallístico (8km)

To State Tourism Office (800m); Caribe Tours (1.5km); Estadio Quisqueya (4km); Metro (5km); Terra Bus (5.5km); Parque Zoológico Nacional (6km); Jardín Botánico Nacional (7.5km)

To Gazeo (250m); Car-Rental Agencies (2km); Malecón (2km)

the original – thanks to Drake and his crew of pirates, who used the basilica as their headquarters during their 1586 assault on the city. While there, they stole everything of value that could be carried away and extensively vandalized the church before departing.

Among the cathedral's more impressive features are its awesome vaulted ceiling and its 14 interior chapels. Signs in English and Spanish beside each chapel and other features describe their rich histories. Shorts and tank tops are strictly prohibited.

Built in 1510 by Charles V, the **Convento de la Orden de los Predicadores** (Convent of the Order of Preachers; Map pp80-1; cnr Av Duarte & Padre Billini; admission free; ☞ varies) is the first convent of the Dominican order founded in the Americas. It also is where Father Bartolomé de las Casas – the famous chronicler of Spanish atrocities committed against indigenous peoples – did most of his writing. Be sure to take a look at the vault of the chapel; it is remarkable for its stone zodiac wheel, which is carved with mythological and astrological representations. On the walls are various paintings of religious figures, including Pope Saint Pius V.

The Gothic-style **Capilla de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios** (Chapel of Our Lady of Remedies; Map pp80-1; cnr Las Damas & Las Mercedes; admission free; ☞ varies) was built during the 16th century by alderman Francisco de Avila and was intended to be a private chapel and family mausoleum. Early residents of the city are said to have attended Mass here under its barrel-vaulted ceiling. It was restored in 1884.

The **Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de las Mercedes** (Church of Our Lady of Mercy; Map pp80-1; cnr Las Mercedes & José Reyes; admission free; ☞ varies), constructed during the first half of the 16th century, was sacked by Drake and his men and reconstructed on numerous occasions following earthquakes and hurricanes. The church is remarkable for its pulpit, which is sustained by a support in the shape of a serpent demon. The intricate baroque altarpiece is carved from tropical hardwood. Of the group of buildings that pay homage to the Virgin Mary, only the cloister adjacent to the church is in original condition.

Home to the first nunnery in the New World, **Iglesia de Santa Clara** (Map pp80-1; cnr Padre Billini & Isabel la Católica; admission free; ☞ morning Sun) was built in 1552. Years after being sacked by Drake and his men (who apparently hated all things Catholic), it was rebuilt with

funds from the Spanish Crown. This simple, discreet church has a severe Renaissance-style portal with a gable containing a bust of St Claire.

The baroque **Iglesia de Santa Bárbara** (Map pp80-1; cnr Gabino Puello & Isabel la Católica; admission free; ☞ varies) was built in 1574 to honor the patron saint of the military. After being done over by Drake, however, the church was rebuilt with three arches – two are windowless and the third frames a remarkably sturdy door. These additions proved invaluable in protecting the building against pirates and hurricanes alike.

Paid for by a woman who donated her entire fortune to construct this monument for the cloistered Dominican Sisters, the **Iglesia de la Regina Angelorum** (Map pp80-1; cnr Padre Billini & José Reyes; admission free; ☞ varies) was built toward the end of the 16th century. In addition to its imposing façade, the church is known for its elaborate 18th-century baroque altar, which is crowned with the king's coat of arms.

Completed in 1650, but altered several times since, **Iglesia de San Lázaro** (Map pp80-1; cnr Santomé & Juan Isidro Pérez; admission free; ☞ varies) was erected beside a hospital that treated people with infectious diseases. The church was constructed to give the patients hope – a commodity that no doubt was in short supply for patients with tuberculosis, leprosy and other common diseases of colonial times.

Since 1596 the **Iglesia de Nuestra Señora del Carmen** (Map pp80-1; cnr Sánchez & Arzobispo Nouel; admission free; ☞ varies) has served as a hospital, a jail and an inn, but is now famous for its carved-mahogany figure of Jesus, which is worshipped every Holy Wednesday during Easter Week. The small church, originally made of stone, was set aflame by Drake in 1586 and was rebuilt using bricks. During colonial times its small square was used to stage comedies.

In 1784 Spain ordered that the **Iglesia de San Miguel** (Church of Michael the Archangel; Map pp80-1; cnr José Reyes & Juan Isidro Pérez; admission free; ☞ varies) be turned into a hospital for slaves. The decree, however, was never followed. Note the appealing juxtaposition of its rectangular stone doorway with the structure's curved exterior.

The Chapel of the Third Dominican Order, or the **Capilla de la Tercera Orden Dominica** (Map pp80-1; cnr Av Duarte & Padre Billini), was built in 1729 and is the only colonial structure in Santo Domingo to reach the present fully intact. Today the building is used by the office of the archbishop of Santo Domingo. It's not open

to the general public, but the graceful baroque façade is worth a look.

HISTORICAL SITES

Being the first colonial city in the New World, the Zona Colonial boasts several historical 'firsts,' including the first church, paved road and hospital.

Beside the Catedral Primasa de América is the historic **Parque Colón** (Map pp80-1; cnr Calle El Conde & Isabel la Católica), containing several shade trees and a large statue of Admiral Columbus himself. It's the meeting place for local residents and is alive with tourists, townsfolk, hawkers, guides, taxi drivers, shoeshine boys and tourist police all day long. El Conde Restaurant (p96), at the corner of Calle El Conde and Arzobispo Meriño, has seating inside and out and is the premier people-watching corner in the Zona Colonial.

In front of the Alcázar de Colón, the **Plaza España** (Map pp80-1) has been made over many times, most recently during the early 1990s in honor of the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' 'discovery' of the New World. The plaza is a large, open area that makes for a lovely stroll on a warm afternoon. Running along its northwest side is Calle la Atarazana, fronted by numerous restaurants and bars in buildings that served as warehouses through most of the 16th and 17th centuries. The street is occasionally closed to vehicular traffic and every afternoon much of it is lined with tables set up by the restaurants and bars. This is a popular place to have a drink around sunset and look out across the plaza to the Alcázar and beyond.

The **Fortaleza Ozama** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-686-0222; Las Damas; admission US\$1; ☞ 9am-6:30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-4pm Sun) is the oldest colonial military edifice in the New World. The site of the fort – at the meeting of the Río Ozama and the Caribbean – was selected by Fray Nicolás de Ovando. Construction of the fortification began in 1502 under the direction of master builder Gómez García Varela and continued in various stages for the next two centuries. Over the course of its history, the fort has flown the flag of Spain, England, France, Haiti, Gran Columbia, the US and the DR. Until the 1970s, when it was opened to the public, it has served as a military garrison and prison.

As soon as you walk into the site, you'll see the oldest of the buildings here – the impressive Torre del Homenaje (Tower of Homage).

Its 2m-thick walls contain dozens of rifle-men's embrasures and its roof-top lookout offers 360-degree views of the city. To its right, solid and windowless, stands El Polvorín – the Powder House – which was added in the mid-1700s; look for the statue of St Barbara over the door, the patron saint of the artillery.

Running along the riverside wall are two rows of cannons: the first dates from 1570, the second was added in the mid-1600s. Both served as the first line of defense for the city's port. The living quarters, now almost completely destroyed, were added along the city-side wall in the late 1700s. On the esplanade is a bronze statue of Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, perhaps the best-known military chronicler of the New World.

Near the door you'll find several guides, whose knowledge of the fort generally is quite impressive. Although the fee for a 20-minute tour is around US\$3.50 per person, be sure to agree on a fee before you use their services. Tours are offered in Spanish, English and French, and there is occasionally a guide who speaks German, Italian or even Japanese.

Originally constructed in 1747 as a Jesuit church, the **Panteón Nacional** (National Pantheon; Map pp80-1; Las Damas; admission free; ☞ 9am-5pm, closed Mon) was also a tobacco warehouse and a theater before dictator Trujillo restored the building in 1958 for its current usage. Today many of the country's most illustrious persons are honored here, their remains sealed behind two marble walls. The entire building, including its neoclassical façade, is built of large limestone blocks. As befits such a place, an armed soldier is ever present at the mausoleum's entrance – along with a powerful fan since it does get hot. Shorts and tank tops are discouraged.

Connecting Las Damas and Isabel la Católica, the **Plaza de María de Toledo** (Map pp80-1) was named in honor of Diego Columbus' wife and is remarkable for two arches that were once part of the Jesuits' residence in the 17th century. Note the buttresses that support the Panteón Nacional: they are original, dating back to the construction of the Jesuit church in 1747, and a likely reason the building has survived the many earthquakes and hurricanes since.

Heading north and south in front of the fortress is **Las Damas** (Calle de las Damas, the Ladies' Street; Map pp80-1), the first paved street in the Americas. Laid in 1502, the street acquired its name from the wife of Diego

Columbus and her lady friends, who made a habit of strolling the road every afternoon, weather permitting.

Across from the Museo de las Casas Reales, the **Reloj del Sol** (Sundial; Map pp80–1) was built by Governor Francisco Rubio y Peñaranda in 1753 and positioned so that officials in the Royal Houses could see the time with only a glance from their eastern windows.

The **Monasterio de San Francisco** (Map pp80–1; Calle Hostos) was the first monastery in the New World and belonged to the first order of Franciscan friars who arrived to evangelize the island. Dating from 1508, the monastery originally consisted of three connecting chapels. It was set ablaze by Drake in 1586, rebuilt, devastated by an earthquake in 1673, rebuilt, ruined by another earthquake in 1751 and rebuilt again. From 1881 until the 1930s it was used as a mental asylum until a powerful hurricane shut it down – portions of chains used to secure inmates can still be seen. The buildings were never repaired. Today the monastery is a dramatic set of ruins that is occasionally used to stage concerts and artistic performances.

Standing next to a bright, white Iglesia de la Altagracia are the **Ruinas del Hospital San Nicolás de Bari** (Map pp80–1; Calle Hostos), ruins of the New World's first hospital. They remain in place as a monument to Governor Nicolás de Ovando, who ordered the hospital built in 1503. So sturdy was the edifice that it survived Drake's invasion and centuries of earthquakes and hurricanes. It remained virtually intact until 1911, when after being devastated by a hurricane, public-works officials ordered much of it knocked down so that it wouldn't pose a threat to pedestrians. Even today visitors can still see several of its high walls and Moorish arches. Note that the hospital's floor plan follows the form of a Latin cross.

The **Puerta del Conde** (Gate of the Count; Map pp80–1; Calle El Conde) owes its name to the Count of Peñalba, Bernardo de Meneses y Bracamonte, who led the successful defense of Santo Domingo against an invading force of 13,000 British troops in 1655. The gate is the supreme symbol of Dominican patriotism because right beside it, in February 1844, a handful of brave Dominicans executed a bloodless coup against occupying Haitian forces; their actions resulted in the creation of a wholly independent Dominican Republic. It also was atop this gate that the very first Dominican flag was raised. Just west of the gate inside

Parque Independencia (Map pp80–1) look for the **Altar de la Patria** (Map pp80–1), a mausoleum that holds the remains of three national heroes: Juan Pablo Duarte, Francisco del Rosario Sánchez and Ramón Matías Mella. The park itself has a few benches but little shade.

Downhill from the Alcázar de Colón is the imposing **Puerta de San Diego** (Map pp80–1; Av del Puerto), built in 1571. For a time it was the main gate into the city. Beside it you can still see some of the original wall, which was erected to protect the city from assaults launched from the river's edge.

The Gate of Mercy, or **Puerta de la Misericordia** (Map pp80–1; Arzobispo Portes), was erected during the 16th century, and for many decades served as the main western entrance to the city. The gate obtained its name after a major earthquake in 1842, when a large tent was erected beside it to provide temporary shelter for the homeless.

Said to be not only one of the first European residences in the Americas, but also one of the first residences in the Western hemisphere with two floors, **Casa del Cordón** (House of the Cord; Map pp80–1; cnr Isabel la Católica & E Tejera; ☎ 8:15am–4pm) was briefly occupied by Diego Columbus and his wife before they moved into their stately home down the street. Named after its impressive stone façade, which is adorned with the chiseled sash-and-cord symbol of the Franciscan order, it is also believed to be the site where Santo Domingo's women lined up to hand over their jewels to Drake during the month he and his men held the city hostage. Today the structure is home to Banco Popular, and while you can go in to exchange money, visiting the house beyond the main lobby is not permitted.

The **Casa de Francia** (French House; Map pp80–1; Las Damas 42) was originally the residence of Hernán Cortés, conqueror of the Aztecs in what is today central Mexico. It was in this building that Cortés is believed to have organized his triumphant – and brutal – expedition. Built in the early 16th century and sharing many elements with the Museo de las Casas Reales, experts theorize that these buildings were designed by the same master; both have a flat façade and a double bay window in the upper and lower stories, repeating patterns of doors and windows on both floors, and top-notch stone rubblework masonry around the windows, doors and corner shorings.

Although the Casa de Francia served as a residence for nearly three centuries, it has

had several incarnations since the beginning of the 19th century: a set of government offices, the Banco Nacional de Santo Domingo, a civil courthouse and the headquarters of the Dominican IRS. Today it houses the French embassy. While visitors are not permitted past the lobby, this marvel of masonry is worth a walk by, if only to check out its façade.

Originally the residence of Governor Nicolás de Ovando, **Hostal Nicolás de Ovando** (Map pp80–1; Las Damas) is a handsome building with a Gothic façade that was built in 1509. Ovando is famous for ordering Santo Domingo rebuilt on the west bank of the Río Ozama following a hurricane that leveled most of the colony. Today it houses the posh Sofitel hotel (p92).

Fuerte de Santa Bárbara (Map pp80–1; cnr Juan Parra & Av Mella), built during the 1570s, served as one of the city's main points of defense. It proved no match for Drake, however, who along with his fleet of 23 pirate-packed ships captured the fort in 1586. Today the fort lies in ruins at the end of a lonely street. There isn't much to see here anymore, mostly rooftops and occasionally a cruise ship in the distance.

Plaza de la Cultura

Near the city center, the **Plaza de la Cultura** (Map p77; Av Máximo Gómez) is a large park area with three museums, the national theater (p98) and the national library (p76). The land was once owned by the dictator Trujillo, and was 'donated' to the public after his assassination in 1961. At least two of the museums are worth visiting, though the plaza itself is mostly a sun-baked expanse and fairly unkempt; the theater and library will appeal to travelers with specific interests.

The permanent collection at the **Museo de Arte Moderno** (Map p77; admission US\$3; ☎ 10am–6pm Tue–Sun) includes paintings and a few sculptures by the DR's best-known modern artists, including Luis Desangles, Adriana Billini, Celeste Woss y Gil, José Vela Zanetti, Dario Suro and Martín Santos. The temporary exhibits tend to be fresher and more inventive – more installation and multimedia pieces. Note that the entrance is on the 2nd floor – don't miss the artwork on the bottom level, accessed by a set of stairs just past the ticket counter.

The most extensive of the museums is the **Museo del Hombre Dominicano** (Museum of the Dominican Man; Map p77; ☎ 809-689-4672; admission US\$0.75; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun). Highlights are the

impressive collection of Taino artifacts, including stone axes and intriguing urns and carvings, and the small but interesting section on Carnival, with the masks and costumes used in various cities around the country. Other sections focus on slavery and the colonial period, African influences in the DR (including a small section on Vodou) and contemporary rural Dominican life. Unfortunately, the explanations are all in Spanish and the displays very old-fashioned. English-speaking guides can be requested at the entry – the service is free, but small tips are customary.

At the time of research the **Museo Nacional de Historia y Geografía** (Map p77; ☎ 809-686-6668; admission US\$0.20; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun) was closed and an opening date was uncertain. When it reopens, expect exhibits on the battles between Haitians and Dominicans; General Ulises Heureaux, the country's most prominent dictator during the 19th century; and Trujillo, the country's most prominent dictator during the 20th century – exhibits include his personal effects such as combs, razor, wallet etc.

The Dominican seat of government, the **Palacio Nacional** (Map pp80–1; ☎ 809-687-3191; cnr Av México & Av 30 de Marzo) was designed by Italian architect Guido D'Alessandro and inaugurated in 1947. The palace is built of Samaná roseate marble in a neoclassical design and is outfitted in grand style with mahogany furniture, paintings from prominent Dominican artists, magnificent mirrors inlaid with gold, and a proportionate amount of imported crystal. Of special note is the Room of the Caryatids, in which 44 sculpted draped women rise like columns in a hall lined with French mirrors and Baccarat chandeliers.

The Palacio Nacional sits on most of a city block and is primarily used as an executive and administrative office building. It has never been used as the residence of a Dominican president, who is expected to live in a private home. Unfortunately, the palace is not regularly open to the public, but you may be able to wrangle a VIP tour; they are offered free of charge and by appointment only on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Dress appropriately – no flip-flops, shorts or T-shirts – if you are granted a tour.

Palacio de Bellas Artes (Palace of Fine Arts; Map p77; ☎ 809-687-9131; Av Máximo Gómez) was undergoing a complete and massive facelift when we stopped by. This huge neoclassical building was used infrequently in the past for exhibitions and

EIFFEL TOWER OR WHITE ELEPHANT?

The idea of commemorating Columbus' landing with a lighthouse wasn't Balaguer's: the **Faro a Colón** (see below) was suggested as early as the middle of the 18th century and later revived at the Fifth International American conference in Santiago, Chile, in 1923. The site of the memorial was always Santo Domingo. An international design competition was launched in 1929 and after sorting through hundreds of submissions from dozens of countries, the reward of US\$10,000 eventually went to J.L. Gleave, a young British architect. Trujillo finally broke ground for the project in 1948, though one that incorporated his own design plans, but financial pledges from other Latin American governments never materialized and the project was scrapped.

Balaguer took up the issue again in 1986, appointing Nicolas Lopez Rodriguez, archbishop of Santo Domingo and a friend, as head of a commission for the celebration of the centenary of the 'discovery and evangelization of America' (he had also recently provided a blessing for the inaugural test run of the Santo Domingo metro). More than 50,000 shantytown dwellers were moved from their homes and tens of millions of dollars were spent on the project (some estimate the final cost to be around US\$100 million) so that the beacon could project light visible 320km to the east in Puerto Rico – this in a city and country that at the time was often without power because of a poorly maintained electrical grid and high gas prices. The joke, not without some basis in fact, was that when the lighthouse was switched on the rest of the country went black.

Balaguer pulled the switch for the first time on October 12, 1992, with Pope John Paul II and King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia of Spain in attendance – contemporary representatives of the dual powers that initiated the historic journey over 500 years ago. When responding to critics, supporters of the project – government officials at the time and some Dominicans – compared the lighthouse to the Eiffel Tower, explaining that both are in essence function-free white elephants.

performances. Check the weekend edition of local papers for events.

Outlying Neighborhoods

Some of these sights are worthwhile as much for the taxi ride there and back, a chance to see the Santo Domingo where ordinary people live and work.

Resembling a cross between a Soviet-era apartment block and a Las Vegas version of an ancient Mayan ruin, the **Faro a Colón** (Columbus Lighthouse; Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-592-1492, ext 251; Parque Mirador del Este; admission US\$2.25; ☎ 9am-5:15pm Tue-Sun) is worth visiting for its controversial and complicated history (see boxed text, above). Located on the east side of the Río Ozama, the Faro's massive cement flanks stretch nearly a block and stand some 10 stories high forming the shape of a cross. High-power lights on the roof can project a blinding white cross in the sky, but are rarely turned on because doing so causes blackouts in surrounding neighborhoods.

At the intersection of the cross' arms is a tomb, guarded by stern white-uniformed soldiers, that purportedly contains Columbus' remains. Spain and Italy dispute that claim, however, both saying *they* have the Admiral's bones. Inside the monument a long series of

exhibition halls display documents (mostly reproductions) related to Columbus' voyages and the exploration and conquest of the Americas. The most interesting (though deeply ironic) displays are those sent by numerous Latin American countries containing photos and artifacts from their respective indigenous communities.

The lush grounds of the **Jardín Botánico Nacional** (National Botanic Garden; Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-385-2611; Av República de Colombia; admission US\$1.25; ☎ 9am-6pm, ticket booth 9am-5pm) span 2 sq km and include vast areas devoted to aquatic plants, orchids, bromeliads, ferns, endemic plants, palm trees, a Japanese garden and much more. Great care is taken to keep the grounds spotless and the plants well tended, and it's easy to forget you're in the middle of a city of over two million people. In fact, birders can contact Tody Tours (see p78) for an expert eye on the many species found here. The garden hosts a variety of events, including an orchid exhibition and competition in March and a bonsai exhibition in April. The on-site **Ecological Museum** (Map pp74-5; admission US\$0.35; ☎ 9am-4pm, ticket booth 9am-5pm) exhibits and explains the major ecosystems found in the DR, including mangroves and cloud forests, plus a special display on Parque Nacional

Los Haitises (p140). Once inside you can stay until 6pm. An **open-air trolley** (admission US\$1.25; ☎ every 30min until 4:30pm) takes passengers on a pleasant half-hour turn about the park and is especially enjoyable for children. A taxi from the Zona Colonial costs around US\$4.

One of the larger zoos in all Latin America, the **Parque Zoológico Nacional** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-562-3149; Av los Reyes Católicos; admission US\$5; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) is a dismal collection of cramped, bare enclosures that will leave you fearing for the future of the natural world. The collection of animals is extensive: rhinos and chimps, flamingos and the endangered solenodon, an extremely rare, rat-like creature endemic to the island. Located in a somewhat seedy neighborhood in the northwest corner of the city (the makeshift homes of the slum perched just above the zoo appear as if they're likely to collapse onto the property at any moment), it's a bit hard to find. A taxi here from the Zona Colonial costs around US\$6; definitely be sure to arrange a return trip with the driver, as you won't find many taxis out here.

A long tree-filled corridor atop an enormous limestone ridge, **Parque Mirador Del Sur** (Southern Lookout Park; Map pp74-5; Av Mirador del Sur) is riddled with caves, some as big as airplane hangars. One of the caves has been converted into a restaurant (p95), another into a dance club (p97). The park's seemingly endless paths are a popular jogging spot for 30-something professionals, many of whom live in the middle- and upper-class neighborhoods north of the park. Av Mirador del Sur is closed to traffic from 6am to 9am and 4pm to 8pm daily, when it fills with men and women jogging, rollerblading and bicycling up and down the broad avenue, and mobile juice bars and snack stands for anyone who's hungry.

Consisting of three very humid caverns with still, dark lagoons inside and connected by stalactite-filled passages, **Los Tres Ojos** (The Three Eyes; Map pp74-5; Parque Mirador del Este; admission US\$1.75; ☎ 9am-5pm) is a mildly interesting site frequented by organized tours. The caves are limestone sinkholes, carved by water erosion over thousands of years. The entrance is a long stairway down a narrow tunnel in the rock; once at the bottom, cement paths lead you through the caves or you can visit them by boat for another US\$0.35. Unfortunately, the tranquility of the setting is usually upset by vendors aggressively hawking their postcards and jewelry to tourists at the entrance.

WALKING TOURS

Even if there weren't a number of interesting historical sites, some of the firsts in the New World, the cobblestone streets of the Zona Colonial are a pleasure to wander around in their own right.

Walk One

Start by visiting beautiful **Catedral Primada de América** (1; p79), the oldest working church in the New World. From the southeastern corner of the park take Alfau, a small pedestrian street, one block to the entrance to the **Fortaleza Ozama** (2; p83), the oldest military structure in the New World. If you have kids, stop in the **Museo Infantil Trampolín** (3; p89). Continuing north on Calle Las Damas, check out the lovely façades of the **Hostal Nicolás de Ovando** (4; p85) and the **Casa de Francia** (5; p84). If it's a Sunday, stop at the great **antiques flea market** (6; p100) at the Plaza de Maria de Toledo. Further down Calle Las Damas, you'll pass the **Capilla de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios** (7; p82) and the **Panteón Nacional** (8; p83). Next you'll come upon the interesting **Museo de las Casas Reales** (9; p78) before reaching Plaza España (10; p83), a large stone-paved plaza overlooking the Río Ozama, with the **Museo Alcázar de Colón** (11; p79) on one side. Head to one of the restaurants lining the northwestern edge of the plaza for a well-earned drink.

Walk Two

Start by visiting beautiful **Catedral Primada de América** (1; p79), the oldest working church in the New World. From there, turn south on Isabel la Católica – within a block you'll see the **Larimer Museum** (2; p79) and a short distance further the simple **Iglesia de Santa Clara** (3; p82). Turn west on Padre Billini and walk a block to the **Museo de la Familia Dominicana** (4; p79), with its famous Gothic window. Turn left (south) onto Arzobispo Meriño and you'll pass **Casa de Teatro** (5; p76), where you can check out an art exhibit or find out about upcoming performances.

Continue south to the corner of Arzobispo Portes, where you'll bump into the **Centro Cultural Español** (6; p76), which also has exhibits and a full calendar of events. Head west on Arzobispo Portes, one of the Zona Colonial's prettiest streets, with tidy colonial homes and plenty of shade trees. Turn right onto Av Duarte, which down here has cobblestones and is for pedestrians only. Av Duarte opens

well taken care of water park. It's a lot of concrete and safety probably isn't the best but...

Restaurants in general are probably more relaxed and kid-friendly than elsewhere, but Adrian Tropical (see p95) is especially good for loud youngsters. Hotels with pools, all those along the Malecón (see p93), are especially recommended and will allow you and the kids to take a break from the sightseeing for several relaxing hours.

TOURS

Interesting and informative walking tours of the Zona Colonial are offered on a daily basis by a number of official guides – look for men dressed in khakis and light-blue dress shirts, but always ask to see their official state tourism license. Tours cover the most important buildings in the zone and can be tailored to your specific interests. Walks typically last 2½ hours and cost US\$20 to US\$30 depending on the language that the tour is given in (ie Spanish and English are less expensive). To find a guide, head to **Parque Colón** (Map pp80-1; cnr Calle El Conde & Isabel la Católica) – you'll find a number of them hanging out under the trees. Also be sure to agree upon a fee before setting out.

If you want to hook up with a bus tour that may include outlying sights in addition to the Zona Colonial, try one of the local agencies that provide city tours to guests of all-inclusive resorts. A few popular ones include **Omni Tours** (☎ 809-565-6591; Roberto Pastoriza 204), **Prieto Tours** (☎ 809-685-0102; Av Francia 125) and **Turinter** (☎ 809-226-5342; Plaza Las Bromelias, Av Duarte). This isn't a bad option if you're short on time.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

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

Latin Music Festival Held at the Estadio Olímpico (Olympic Stadium; Map pp74-5) every October, this huge three-day event attracts the top names in Latin music – jazz, salsa, merengue and *bachata* (popular guitar music based on bolero rhythms). Jennifer Lopez and Marc Anthony have performed in the past.

Merengue Festival The largest in the country, a two-week celebration of the DR's favorite music held yearly at the

end of July and beginning of August. Most of the activity is on the Malecón, but there are related events across the city.

SLEEPING

The Zona Colonial is the most distinctive part of the city and therefore where most travelers prefer to stay. All of the sights and restaurants are within walking distance and there's an excellent choice of midrange and top-end hotels to choose from, some in attractive restored colonial-era buildings. Budget travelers have fewer options. Gazcue, a quiet residential area southwest of Parque Independencia, has several hotels in the midrange category, though there are far fewer eating options and you're likely to have to rely on taxis, especially at night. The high-rise hotels on the Malecón are best if you're looking for resort-style amenities like swimming pools, health clubs and tennis courts, and on-site entertainment like nightclubs and casinos.

Zona Colonial

BUDGET

Bettye's Exclusive Guest House (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-688-7649; bettyemarshall@hotmail.com; Isabel la Católica 163; dm per person US\$22, r US\$44; 🏠 📺 📺) Look for the nondescript iron doorway opening onto Plaza de María de Toledo around the corner from Isabel la Católica. Don't be discouraged by the messy gallery space overflowing with paintings and souvenirs; there's some method to the madness. The owner, originally from Tennessee, hopes to attract travelers who appreciate the eclectic, laid-back vibe. There are several dorm rooms (one only has a fan) with five to six beds, and while the spaces seem hectic, a mash of antiques with colorful modern art, they get good light and there's access to a common kitchen and bathroom. For those seeking privacy but not quiet, there's a private room with similar decor that opens directly onto Isabel la Católica – the bathroom is extremely small. During the low season the owner occasionally rents the whole dorm room out to pairs. Reservations are definitely recommended at other times. Wi-fi is available throughout, though the strength of the signal varies.

Hotel Freeman (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-688-4263; www.hostalfreeman.com; Isabel la Católica 155; s/d US\$30/40; 🏠 📺) Only half a block from Parque Colón, it's difficult to spot the entrance to the Freeman, and once you do you might want to turn around. The lobby desk does double service as a small

car-rental agency and the stairwell has all the ambience of a police station. The six rooms themselves are spare and clean and have cable TV, and there's a 2nd-floor sitting area looking out over the street – the value here is location, location, location.

MIDRANGE

Hostal La Colonia (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-221-0084; hostal.lacolonia@yahoo.com; Isabel la Católica 110-A; s/d US\$50/60; 🏠 📺) Ideally located just around the corner from Parque Colón, newly opened La Colonia is a good choice. In addition to shiny, polished floors and large rooms with cable TV and refrigerator, each of the three floors has its own spacious street-side sitting area and balcony with armchairs. It's a lively and noisy block but the rooms are mostly shielded from the noise.

our pick El Beaterio Guest House (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-687-8657; http://elbeaterio.fr; Av Duarte 8; s/d US\$50/60, with air-con US\$60/70; 🏠 📺 📺) Take thee to this nunnery – if you're looking for austere elegance. It's easy to imagine the former function of this 16th-century building, the heavy stone façade, the dark and vaulted front room – now a beautiful reading room and dining area – giving way to a lush and sunny inner courtyard, all inspiring peace and tranquility. Each of the 11 large rooms is sparsely furnished, but the wood-beamed ceilings and stone floors are truly special; the bathrooms are modern and well maintained. Breakfast is included in the rate, and wi-fi is available.

Hotel Atarazana (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-688-3693; www.hotel-atarazana.com; Calle Vicente Celestino Duarte 19; s/d with fan US\$50/70, with air-con US\$70/90; 🏠 📺 📺) A newly opened boutique hotel for the design conscious only a few meters away from Plaza España. Housed in a beautifully renovated building from the 1860s, all six rooms sport custom-made furniture from native materials along with high-concept fixtures and textiles you'd find in a magazine. Each of the light and airy rooms has a balcony. Complimentary breakfast buffet is served in a secret garden-like patio shaded by lush vegetation; there's even a small Jacuzzi to relax in. Another option is the rooftop, which has fabulous views of the Zona Colonial and river. High-spend internet access in rooms.

Hotel Conde de Peñalba (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-688-7121; www.condepenalba.com; cnr Calle El Conde & Arzobispo Meriño; s/d US\$60/70; 🏠 📺) There's no more desirable location in Santo Domingo. Rooms in

this 20-room hotel overlook the Parque Colón, some with balconies with chairs and potted flowers, making for a perfect spot to watch the bustle down below; the downside is that noise can be an issue, especially from the ever-popular hotel restaurant on street level. Rooms have high ceilings and cable TV, but the furnishings have seen better days. Look for the entrance on Arzobispo Meriño and take the flight of stairs up to the 2nd-floor lobby. Internet access is via an old stand-alone computer.

Antiguo Hotel Europa (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-285-0005; www.antiguohoteleuropa.com; cnr Arzobispo Meriño & Emiliano Tejera; r US\$65; 🏠 📺 📺) Considering the impressive-looking façade of this hotel only two blocks west of Plaza España, the rooms are a letdown. Entering the spacious lobby, checking in at the professionally staffed front desk and having your luggage carried by uniformed bellboys, you'd expect the rooms to be more luxurious and modern. Other than the tile floors, the rooms are ordinary and aging. Ask for one with a balcony to ensure your room receives light. Continental breakfast is included in the rate and is served in a classy rooftop restaurant with a spectacular view of the Zona Colonial.

TOP END

Coco Boutique Hotel (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-685-8467; www.cocoboutiquehotel.com; Arzobispo Portes 7; s/d US\$70/90; 🏠 📺 📺) There's little traffic on this block in the southeastern corner of the Zona Colonial, which makes this hotel, four rooms in a renovated home, a particularly peaceful refuge. It doesn't have the old-world character of some of the other renovated hotels, but the owners have designed each room individually with particular color schemes and themes; the black-vanilla room is probably the nicest. All have beautifully polished wood floors and wi-fi access. The real draw is the rooftop lounge with a Balinese-style bed.

Hotel Doña Elvira (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-221-7415; www.dona-elvira.com; Padre Billini 209; loft US\$70, r US\$85-95, ste US\$105; 🏠 📺 📺 📺) Tucked away on a quiet block far from the bustle around Parque Colón, the Doña Elvira is housed in a renovated colonial building, which is a plus. Unfortunately, much of the character seems to have been renovated out as well; the cramped loft room especially is in bad shape with peeling paint and a curtain serving as a bathroom door. There are 13 rooms, most are fairly modern looking, though the exposed stone walls

and tile floors in the suite are attractive. It's a friendly place and geared toward travelers; you can hang out in the inner courtyard, take a dip in the pool (it's too small for swimming), lounge on the rooftop solarium or read in the lobby/dining area. Full breakfast is included.

Hotel Palacio (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-682-4730; www.hotel-palacio.com; Av Duarte 106; s US\$78-88, d US\$88-98; 📶 📺 📺 📺) Cross colonial with a little touch of medieval and you have the Palacio, a maze-like hotel occupying a 17th-century mansion only a block north of the Calle El Conde pedestrian mall. Service is exceptional and you'll need it to find your way past the charming nooks and crannies, which include reading areas, a small bar, a lush interior courtyard and stone-walled walkways. Room design is strictly German conquistador minimalist with a few large imposing pieces of furniture – a heavy wrought-iron chandelier looks like a cage. Bathrooms are modern and comfortable. A stand-alone computer with internet access sits in the lobby and rooms have cable hook-up. An additional wing and a rooftop pool were under construction at the time of research.

Hodelpa Caribe Colonial (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-688-7799; www.hodelpa.com; Isabel la Católica 159; r US\$85; 📶 📺 📺) A new boutique-style hotel only a block from Parque Colón, the Hodelpa Caribe is a convenient choice for those seeking modern comforts without the colonial ambience. There are some interesting design touches, from the blue fluorescent tube lighting to the blue drapery dropping from the 4th floor to the lobby, but the rooms themselves are attractive. White flowing drapes surround the beds, which are especially comfortable, and service is excellent. A rooftop solarium has several lounge chairs and good views, though daytime temperatures make it feel like a sauna. Wi-fi access is available in the lobby and there's a stand-alone computer for guests' use. An excellent breakfast buffet is included in room rates.

Sofitel Francés (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-685-9331; www.acorhotels.com; cnr Las Mercedes & Arzobispo Meriño; s/d US\$150/170; 📶 📺 📺) It's hard living up to family expectations. Of course, the Francés suffers by comparison to its sister property, the Nicolás de Ovando, but what hotel wouldn't? Taken on its own merits, the Francés is a charming throwback to the same era. Housed in a colonial mansion only a few blocks away, rooms with high ceilings, stucco walls and tasteful decor surround a handsome stone

patio. Some of the rooms are larger and quieter than others, so ask for layout specifics. Guests can access the pool at the Ovando, and a Continental breakfast is included. A nice bar and restaurant are on site.

Sofitel Nicolás de Ovando (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-685-9955; www.sofitel.com; Las Damas; s US\$220-336, d US\$238-354; 📶 📺 📺 📺) Even heads of state must thrill when they learn they're sleeping in the former home of the first Governor of the Americas. Oozing character, Old World charm and a historic pedigree tough to beat, the Nicolás de Ovando is as far from a chain hotel as you can get. Indisputably one of the nicest hotels in the city, if not the nicest, the 107 rooms are definitely 21st century – flat-screen TVs, recessed Jacuzzi, internet cable hookup, luxurious boutique-style fixtures and linens. However, all this modernity is offset by beautifully crafted wood and stone interiors, cobblestone walkways, lushly shaded courtyards and a commanding view of the Río Ozama – the fabulous pool probably didn't exist during the governor's time. An excellent buffet breakfast is included in the rate; La Residence, the hotel's superb and elegant restaurant (mains US\$17 to US\$35), has a separate entrance down the street and opens for lunch and dinner.

Gazcue

Hotel La Danae (Map p77; ☎ 809-238-5609; www.hotel.danae.com; Calle Danae 18; r US\$24-30; 📶) Dominican-owned La Danae is the best of a number of similar small hotels located on this quiet residential street. Choose from the older, cheaper rooms in the front building and the newer, more modern ones in the back annex. The former have higher ceilings, but are subject to street noise. All have cable TV, and there's a kitchen area for common use.

Hotel Residence (Map p77; ☎ 809-412-7298; www.hotelresidencia.com; Calle Danae 62; r with fan US\$25-30, with air-con \$30-40; 📶) This family-run hotel, not to be confused with the Residencia Venezia, compensates for slightly cheesy room decor with its friendly enthusiasm. All rooms have cable TV and ceiling fan, and a 2nd-floor balcony for relaxing; rates drop for extended stays.

Hotel Residencia Venezia (Map p77; ☎ 809-682-5108; www.residencia-venezia.com; Av Independencia 45; s/d US\$45/58; 📶 📺 📺) Within walking distance of the Zona Colonial and the Malecón, the Venezia is a logical and good-value option if you choose to stay in Gazcue. While the interior decorator may have gone a little crazy

with the color green, rooms are immaculate and have large bathrooms; a couple of suites come with balcony and kitchenette, and obviously get more sunlight than the somewhat dim standard rooms. A pleasant surprise is a tiny bistro-bar off the 1st-floor lobby, good for a coffee and snack. Two internet-ready computers are available for guests.

Hostal Duque de Wellington (Map p77; ☎ 809-682-4525; www.hotelduque.com; Av Independencia 304; s/d US\$45/90; 📶 📺 📺) With such an old-fashioned name, it's not surprising this hotel isn't fashionably modern. In fact, it's downright conservative, with room furnishings and decor that try terribly to be tasteful but are in the end fairly dowdy. Rooms on the 2nd floor have higher ceilings, and more expensive ones have balconies that provide more light. Guests can access the internet (per hour US\$2) from an old computer in the lobby, and there's a travel agency on the 1st floor. It's a short walk to the Malecón.

Malecón

Less appealing than you might otherwise expect considering its waterfront Caribbean setting, Santo Domingo's Malecón, a long expanse of baking concrete, has several high-rise hotels. The upside is that many rooms have views, all have pools and health clubs, and most have casinos and nightclubs. The downside is you'll have to take a taxi almost everywhere you go – you'll sweat just walking from the street to the hotel entrance – and the accommodation is very much bland international-chain style, with nothing particularly Dominican about it. The Malecón is closed to cars every Sunday, when it fills with locals, tourists, vendors and general revelry.

Meliá Santo Domingo Hotel (Map p77; ☎ 809-221-6666; www.solmelia.com; Av George Washington 365; r from US\$75; 📶 📺 📺 📺) The curiously designed and cavernous lobby at the Meliá doesn't inspire confidence, but this hotel does have the nicest pool area on the Malecón. Rooms are about as comfortable as the average chain hotel but no more.

Renaissance Jaragua Hotel (Map p77; ☎ 809-221-2222; www.renaissancehotels.com; Av George Washington 367; r from US\$90; 📶 📺 📺 📺) A middle of the road hotel, from its floral-print and wicker-furniture design scheme to its very ordinary restaurants, the Jaragua does have a popular nightclub and resort-style facilities and amenities.

Hotel InterContinental (Map p77; ☎ 809-221-0000; www.intercontinental.com/santodomingo; Av George Washington 218; r from US\$120; 📶 📺 📺 📺) Other than the Hilton, the InterContinental has the plushest lobby of the hotels on the Malecón and an even more hip bar-lounge area. Like all the big hotels on the waterfront, the hotel also has a pool, spa, tennis courts and casino, popular both with tourists and Dominicans on weekends.

Hilton Hotel (Map p77; ☎ 809-685-0000; www.hiltoncaribbean.com/santodomingo; Av George Washington 500; r from US\$130; 📶 📺 📺 📺) Easily the nicest of the luxury hotels on the Malecón, the Hilton is part of a huge complex, including a casino, movie theaters and several restaurants (however, much of it still remains vacant). The highest of the high-rises, it's a long elevator ride in the atrium to the top. Rooms are nicer and newer than its nearby competitors, and there's a bar and restaurant with stunning ocean views.

EATING

Unsurprisingly, Santo Domingo is the culinary capital of the country. It offers the full range of Dominican cuisine, from *pastelitos* (pastries with meat, vegetable or seafood fillings) sold from the back of street-vendors' carts to extravagantly prepared meals in picturesque colonial-era buildings. The Zona Colonial has some of the best restaurants and is most convenient for the majority of travelers. Pick any block and you're bound to find several to choose from. Seafood is always recommended, from the most ordinary *comedor* (informal restaurant) to top-end gourmet kitchens. Gazcue, only a short walk from the Malecón, has a number of good choices; the area west of Gazcue, between Av Tiradentes and Av Winston Churchill, is another fine area for dining with a good number of restaurants, many catering to a business crowd.

Zona Colonial

BUDGET

El Taquito (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-687-1958; Emiliano Tejera 105; mains US\$1.25-2.75; ☎ 9am-1am Mon-Thu, 9am-3am Fri & Sat, 5pm-1am Sun) Tired of the same menu of 'international standards' – cooked from the same kitchen? Head over to this stamp-sized restaurant, really a stall, for tacos, burgers or sandwiches. It's especially good for a late-night snack.

La Cafetera Colonial (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-682-7122; Calle El Conde; mains US\$2-5; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Everyone knows everyone else's name here. That can seem intimidating at first, especially because the narrow entranceway means new customers can't pull up a stool at the long lunch counter unnoticed. It's a classic greasy-spoon menu: eggs and toast, simple sandwiches and super-strong espresso.

Restaurant Mariscos (Map pp80-1; Calle El Conde; mains US\$2.50-5; ☺ lunch & dinner) Literally a hole-in-the-wall. There's only room for a few cramped tables, but there's no better lunchtime deal around. A plate of rice with your choice of seafood goes for only US\$2.50. More substantial meals like grilled shrimp are slightly more expensive.

Expreso Pekín (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-688-0499; cnr Calle El Conde & 19 de Marzo; mains US\$3) Fast, cheap and good Cantonese-style Chinese food. Even delivers, which might be a good idea since the fluorescent lighting makes you feel like you're in an incubator.

MIDRANGE

El Mesón de Lu (Map pp80-1; Calle Hostos; mains US\$5-13; ☺ lunch & dinner) This simple and unpretentious restaurant is a downscale version of Mesón D'Barí across the street. Mostly loyal locals line up at the small bar or in the open-air dining room for filling plates of seafood and meat. Even though service isn't with a smile, it's a good choice, especially at dinnertime when it's not uncommon for a trio of musicians to serenade your table.

Mesón D'Barí (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-687-4091; cnr Calle Hostos & Salomé Ureña; mains US\$6-12; ☺ lunch & dinner) A Zona Colonial institution popular with tourists and sophisticated *capitalinos* on weekends, Mesón D'Barí occupies a charmingly decaying colonial home covered with bright, large paintings by local artists. The menu has Dominican and international standards, different versions of grilled meats and fish; the long attractive bar is equally appealing. Live music on some weekend nights.

Dajao Restaurant & Bar (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-686-0712; Arzobispo Nouel 51; mains US\$9-20; ☺ lunch & dinner) There are two Dajaos: a sleek, small, modern side, resembling a European café, and an older, basic side, much like an ordinary *comedor*. The former outshines the latter, not only in terms of style but in menu, too: it has specials like conch-meat croquettes (US\$10), shrimp crepes (US\$9) and grilled octopus (US\$10).

Psatiempo (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-689-4823; Isabel la Católica 206; mains US\$10-15; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) This small Italian bistro boasts a preservative- and additive-free menu and handmade pastas. The dining room is a little cramped but it's a pleasant and romantic restaurant on a quiet block of the Zona Colonial. Especially recommended is risotto with seafood (US\$15) and osso buco (US\$13).

TOP END

A handful of restaurants share a corner of Plaza España. It's gets especially happening on weekends, but it's always a fun scene despite the high price tag.

Mesón del Jamón (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-688-9644; Calle la Atarazana; mains US\$10-20; ☺ lunch & dinner) Part of Plaza España's restaurant row, Mesón del Jamón is distinctive for its elegant 2nd-floor balcony. Only four or so tables for two fit out here, but they provide wonderful views of the goings on below – it's hard to give up the spot even after several hours. Along with grilled sirloin (US\$17), pasta dishes (US\$10) and fish (US\$13), Jamón has an extensive menu of hot and cold tapas, like cured ham (US\$12) and mussels in vinaigrette sauce (US\$9).

Pat'e Palo (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-687-8089; Calle la Atarazana 25; mains US\$12-22; ☺ 4:30pm-late Mon-Thu, 1:30pm-late Fri-Sun) Another of Plaza España's eateries, Pat'e Palo is for gourmets and anyone tired of the same old bland pasta and chicken. Everything here is special but two personal recommendations are the grilled angus rib eye with rocket and parmesan with potato fricassee, mushrooms and bacon, and the Chilean sea bass served over Spanish sausage risotto in a creamy beer sauce.

our pick La Bricola (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-688-5055; Arzobispo Meriño 152; mains US\$13-22; ☺ lunch & dinner) La Bricola embodies romance. From the candlelit open-air patio to the soft melodic piano, a meal here is the perfect place to pop the question. While the setting in a restored colonial-era palace can't help but trump the food, the international- and Italian-inspired mains, including fresh fish specials, won't disappoint.

Café Bellini (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-686-3387; Plazoleta Padre Bellini; mains US\$12-30; ☺ noon-3am, closed Sun) This stunning restaurant off Plaza España Padre Bellini (look for the statue of Don Francisco X Bellini) serves haute cuisine – interpretations of Italian meat, seafood and pasta with Dominican flourishes – like you'd find in the

toniest restaurants in Paris or New York. A beautiful interior courtyard leads into an elegant and modern dining room that is designed to the hilt.

El Grand Charolais Steak House & Grill (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-221-2052; Calle Hostos 151; mains US\$15-22; ☺ noon-midnight) El Grand Charolais has all the hallmarks of a classic steakhouse – red checkerboard tablecloths, chalkboard specials, huge slabs of meat – and is a popular spot for long business lunches. The rib eye (US\$21) is especially juicy and there are nonmeat options, like the fettuccine del mar (US\$15).

GROCERIES

La Despensa (Map pp80-1; cnr Calle El Conde & Av Duarte) Largest grocery store in the Zona Colonial, which means lines can be long especially around closing time. Load up on cheap water, soda, alcohol and juice.

Gazcue, Malecón & Outlying Neighborhoods

BUDGET

Hermanos Villar (Map p77; ☎ 809-682-1433; cnr Av Independencia & Av Pasteur; mains US\$2-9; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This bustling Dominican-style diner serves cafeteria food up front and deli/groceries at the back. The hot, grilled baguettes with a variety of fillings are popular. It's tough to find an empty table during the heavy lunchtime traffic, so getting things to go is always an option.

Ananda (Map p77; ☎ 809-682-7153; Casimiro de Moya 7; mains US\$3-10; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, lunch Sun) Hard-core vegetarians will want to try out this cafeteria-style restaurant-cum-yoga center run by the 'International Society of Divine Realization.' They may not find the offerings enlightening but more the equivalent of a downward facing dog. Dominican dishes like brown rice and roast beans outnumber the Indian offerings.

MIDRANGE

Adrian Tropical (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-566-8373; Av Abraham Lincoln; mains US\$5-8; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A huge sign of a smiling boy (Adrian?) announces this popular chain's kid-friendly credentials. However, from the road the lush jungle landscaping and waterfalls obscure its function – to serve as many hungry families as possible. Waiters scurry throughout the two floors and outdoor dining area doling out Dominican specialties like yucca or plantain

mofongo (mashed yucca or plantains with pork rinds; US\$5) and standard meat dishes (US\$8). An inexpensive buffet (US\$6) is another option and the fruit drinks (US\$1.50) hit the spot. There are three other outposts in Santo Domingo.

L'Osteria de Charly y Christian (Map p77; ☎ 809-333-6701; Av George Washington 47; mains US\$6-12; ☺ noon-midnight) A favorite hangout for local expats and Dominicans alike, L'Osteria is a casual open-air restaurant on the Malecón. Aging albeit with character, it's as much a good place for a drink as a serving of homemade pasta or other Italian and French standards.

El Navarero Restaurant & Bar (Map p77; ☎ 809-689-3888; Av Independencia 302; mains US\$7-15; ☺ lunch & dinner) This restaurant suffers a bit from a split personality. The dining room is richly and elegantly appointed, but much of the menu is mediocre bar food like hamburgers (US\$4.75) and wraps (US\$6). Higher-end items such as grilled meats and lobster thermidor (US\$18 per lb) are available as well.

Restaurant Train Steak House (Map p77; ☎ 809-686-5961; Av Pasteur 100; mains US\$12; ☺ 11:30am-midnight Tue-Sun) Not quite a chop house, not quite a sports bar, this restaurant combines a little of both. In the front bar there are several TVs tuned to international sporting events, while uniformed waiters and the enthusiastic owner hustle about the brick-walled dining room serving delicious cuts of meat as well as grilled seafood and tapas.

TOP END

Mitre Restaurant (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-472-1787; Av Abraham Lincoln 1005; ☺ lunch & dinner) This sleek restaurant, located in a nondescript building in an upscale business and residential district, serves a creative fusion of Asian, Italian and Dominican cuisines. The results are satisfying to both the eye and stomach; an outdoor patio and 2nd-floor lounge are more casual than the white-tablecloth dining room.

Restaurant Vesuvio (Map p77; ☎ 809-221-1954; Av George Washington 52; mains US\$12-17; ☺ lunch & dinner) An upscale Italian restaurant on the Malecón, Vesuvio is a Santo Domingo institution that unfortunately has seen better days. The old-fashioned decor is fading and the wheeled cart displays of food are looking a little tired, but the Neapolitan owner still prides himself on serving the freshest seafood and homemade pasta dishes. Next door is a more casual pizzeria under the same ownership.

El Mesón de la Cava (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-533-2818; Av Mirador del Sur; mains US\$10-20; ☎ noon-1am) This is where Batman would take a date – this craggy stalactite-filled limestone cave is home to a unique and romantic restaurant. However, the formally clad waiters and soft merengue and salsa music don't entirely make up for only average food, primarily grilled meats and fish.

GROCERIES

La Cadena (Map p77; cnr Calle Cervantes & Casimiro de Moya; ☎ 7:30am-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2:30pm Sun) In Gazcue, La Cadena is within walking distance of hotels in the neighborhood and carries produce, meats and everything you should need.

La Supertienda Shopping Mall (Map pp74-5; cnr Av Jiménez Moya & Av 27 de Febrero) and **Supermercado Nacional** (Map pp74-5; Av 27 de Febrero) live up to their names, the latter (an enormous megastore occupying several city blocks) especially so; it's located at one of the busiest intersections in the city. There's another branch in Gazcue.

DRINKING

Santo Domingo has a lively bar and club scene, much of it located conveniently in the Zona Colonial. Otherwise many of the nicer bars are in strip malls around the city, and whatever neighborhood you're in you can always strap on a few *Presidentes* at the *colmado* (combination corner store, grocery store and bar).

Cafés

ourpick El Conde Restaurant (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-688-7121; Hotel Conde de Peñalba, cnr Calle El Conde & Arzobispo Meriño; mains US\$3-16; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Hands down, the place for an afternoon drink. As much a restaurant as a café, El Conde's appeal isn't its large varied menu of decent food, but its commanding location at the busiest corner in the Zona Colonial. Crowded with tourists and locals alike, it seems like all of Santo Domingo passes by here. Nothing hits the spot more than a *morir soñando* (literally 'to die dreaming'), a combination of orange juice, milk, sugar and chopped ice.

Segafredo Zanetti Espresso (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-685-9569; Calle El Conde 54; ☎ 9am-1am Mon-Thu, 9am-3am Fri & Sat) One of a number of cafés lining this cobblestoned alleyway, Segafredo stands out because of its cool indoor bar, which wouldn't be out of place in a trendy neighborhood of New York or Paris. You can lounge around with a mixed drink (US\$4.50) on one of the

day beds or retreat to a nook in the back. Crepes, paninis and other morsels are also served inside and out.

Caribbean Coffee & Tea (Map pp74-5; Av Gustavo A Mejía Ricart; ☎ 8.30am-midnight) Tucked into Plaza Andalucía, a small strip mall, this café is popular with a young upscale crowd from the surrounding Los Angeles-like neighborhood. While there's nothing to see other than a busy intersection, sitting at one of the outdoor tables sipping a cappuccino (US\$2) or tea (US\$1.50) is a pleasant way to while away an afternoon. Wraps (US\$10), paninis (US\$7) and salads (US\$6) are also available.

Haagen-Dazs (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-566-4950; Av Abraham Lincoln; ☎ 11am-11pm) We know it's a Haagen-Dazs, but this modern, sleek and most importantly air-conditioned place is an oasis for those foolhardy enough to walk along this sun-baked stretch of asphalt. Shakes (\$5), ice-cream sodas (\$4), ice coffees (\$3) and, of course, plain old ice cream are available.

Bars

1492 (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-686-6009; Arzobispo Meriño 105; ☎ Tue-Sat) The horseshoe-shaped wood bar is conducive for conversation; the dim lighting is flattering and the barkeep-owner is friendly; located on a quiet street in the Zona Colonial, appropriately enough, 1492 feels like a discovery.

Double's Bar (Map pp80-1; Arzobispo Meriño; ☎ 6pm to late) Good-looking 20-somethings grind away to loud pop and Latin music at Double's. Others lounge around in groups downing bottles of Presidente, while the classic long wood bar is better for conversation.

La Parada Cervecera (Map p77; Av George Washington 402; ☎ 8am-midnight) This classic Dominican joint, a combination carwash-bar, isn't exactly a good advertisement against drinking and driving. It's an open-air place directly on a busy intersection of the Malecón; the loud music barely drains out the backfiring and honking traffic.

Los Tres Mosqueteros (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-689-1114; Calle El Conde 56; ☎ lunch-late) This bar-café is one of several lining a cobblestone alleyway a few steps from Parque Colón. In addition to outdoor seating, it has an elegant indoor space with high ceilings and overhead fans. For those looking to make an afternoon of it, there's free wi-fi and a full menu.

Praia (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-540-8753; Gustavo A Mejía Ricart 74; ☎ 10pm-2am) A bar and wine lounge à la

Soho – either NYC or London – Praia attracts a well-heeled Dominican clientele. The drinks are expensive, and the music, suitable for the modern minimalist decor, is electronica.

Zenses & Citron (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-542-1111; Av Abraham Lincoln 958; ☎ noon-1am Sun-Thu, noon-3am Fri & Sat) The draw at this sophisticated bar and lounge, besides the extensive drink and food menu and occasional live music, is the attractive outdoor deck perfect for a sundowner.

Bicideta Café Bar & Restaurant (Map pp80-1; cnr Arzobispo Nouel & Av Duarte; ☎ Mon-Thu 4pm-1am, Fri & Sat 4pm-3am, Sun 12:30pm-1am) Basically a step up from a corner *colmado*, this bar is a good place to rub shoulders with locals and sample Dominican drinks at reasonable prices.

ENTERTAINMENT

Santo Domingo has the country's best entertainment scene, from glitzy hotel nightclubs and casinos to small bars and dance spots. And lest you scoff, hotel nightclubs are hugely popular, especially among Santo Domingo's rich, young and restless. Merengue and *bachata* are omnipresent, but house, techno, and American and Latin rock are popular as well. A number of clubs in town cater to gays and lesbians, or at least offer a welcoming mixed atmosphere. *Ocio* and *Aquí* magazines both have listings of bars and restaurants of all sorts – the former is definitely cooler, but both are useful. Look for them at the tourist office or shops in the Zona Colonial. Newspapers are another good place to find out about upcoming concerts and shows, and if your Spanish is good, radio stations hype the capital's big events.

Live Music & Nightclubs

Nightclubs come and go, change names and ownership; however, those in hotels on the Malecón tend to have longer life spans. Most of the clubs have both live music some nights and DJs others. Some of the venues attract the wealthiest and hippest in Santo Domingo, but wherever you go, expect people to be dressed to the nines, so definitely no T-shirts, runners or sandals. Admission is up to US\$5 when there's a DJ (most nights) and US\$10 when there's a band.

Guácara Taína (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-533-2151; Av Mirador del Sur 655; admission US\$9; ☎ 9pm-3am Thu-Sun) A somewhat legendary nightclub, now maybe at least as popular with cruise-ship passengers as Dominicans, Guácara Taína is still an in-

teresting place to party. Located inside a huge underground cave in the Parque Mirado del Sur, this club hosts everything from raves to live merengue and hip-hop acts.

Jubilee (Map p77; Renaissance Jaragua Hotel, Av George Washington 367; ☎ 9pm-4am Tue-Sat) A long-standing hot spot, this nightclub in the Jaragua Hotel continues to draw in good-looking, well-heeled and well-dressed hordes looking to get down to live merengue music; most nights it doesn't get hopping until around midnight. Drink bills can be pretty steep at the end of a long evening.

El Napolitano (Map p77; ☎ 809-687-1131; www.hotelnapolitano.net; Av George Washington 101; admission US\$3.50; ☎ 9pm-4am Thu-Sun) A smaller and less glamorous version of the Jubilee is the nightclub at this fairly run-down hotel. But because of its proximity to the Zona Colonial and its more reasonable drink prices, it still gets packed on weekends.

Atarazana 9 (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-688-0969; Atarazana 9; admission free, open bar Thu US\$7; ☎ 8pm-3am) Just off Plaza España on a cobblestone alleyway, Atarazana 9 feels like a cool neighborhood bar where regulars get served their favorite beers without asking; tourists wandering in after a meal in the Zona Colonial are equally welcome. There's a stage as well, where live music is sometimes performed.

Nowhere (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-877-6258; Calle Hostos 205; admission free; ☎ 9pm-4am Wed-Sat) This club, just steps from Parque Colón, has had a long shelf life for the here today-gone tomorrow world of Santo Domingo nightspots. Once past the doorman, a maze of bars and dance floors are scattered over two floors. It doesn't get busy till later; ladies' night on Thursday.

Monte Cristo (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-542-5000; Av Jose Armado Soler; ☎ 6pm-5am) This sophisticated club doubles as a cigar lounge with good wine and mixed drinks thrown in as well. There's a dance floor for merengue and salsa and live music on Wednesday. Weekends tend to be a hodge-podge of salsa, merengue, reggaeton and Latin rock.

Jet Set (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-535-4145; Av Independencia 2253; admission US\$7; ☎ 9pm-late) A trendy, good-looking crowd flocks to this 7th-floor disco. Besides offering great views of the city, there's live music – salsa, merengue – most nights of the week and *bachata* on Mondays. Happy hour from 5pm to 9pm.

Thao (Map pp74-5; Plaza Andalucía) and **Retro Café** (Map pp74-5; Plaza Andalucía) are across from one another

in the same strip mall in a business/residential neighborhood west of the city center. Thao is at the higher end of the two, reflected by its drink prices, but both have reggaeton and merengue, and sometimes techno.

Gay & Lesbian Venues

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

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

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

Esedeku (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-869-6322; Las Mercedes 341; ☎ Tue-Sun 8pm-late) Only a block from Calle El Conde, Esedeku is an intimate bar, with a huge selection of cocktails; not for hustlers.

Jay-Dee's (☎ 809-333-5905; José Reyes 10; admission US\$4; ☎ Thu-Sat) Tourists aren't unusual at this raucous club, which gets crowded on weekends when there are drag shows and strippers. Admission buys you a drink as well.

Cinemas

Recent Hollywood movies are screened at **Broadway Cinemas** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-872-0171; Plaza Central Shopping Mall; tickets Mon-Thu US\$2, Fri-Sun US\$2.50), **Malecón Center Cinemas** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-685-2898; Av George Washington 500; tickets Tue & Wed US\$1.75) and **Hollywood Diamond** (☎ 809-565-2898; Diamond Mall; tickets Mon-Wed US\$3, Thu-Sun US\$4.50), among others.

Centro Cultural Español (Spanish Cultural Center; Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-686-8212; www.ccesd.org, in Spanish; cnr Arzobispo Meriño & Arzobispo Portes; admission free; ☎ 10am-9pm Mon-Sat) There are no cinemas in the Zona Colonial, although this cultural center periodically showcases alternative films, mostly by Spanish and Dominican filmmakers. The theatre is actually a gallery with a big white wall where DVDs are projected – unfortunately the acoustics aren't the best. Stop by for a current schedule.

Theaters

Teatro Nacional (National Theater; Map p77; ☎ 809-687-3191; Plaza de la Cultura; tickets US\$4-15) Hosts opera, ballet and symphonic performances. Tickets for performances at this 1600-seat theater can be purchased in advance at the box office from 9:30am to 12:30pm and 3:30pm to 6:30pm daily. For show dates and

times, call or check the weekend editions of local newspapers.

Casinos

After baseball and cockfighting, gambling is one of the DR's favorite pastimes. All of the large hotels on the Malecón have casinos, including the **Hilton Hotel** (Map p77; ☎ 809-685-0000; www.hiltoncaribbean.com/santodomingo; Av George Washington 500), **Hotel InterContinental** (Map p77; ☎ 809-221-0000; www.intercontinental.com/santodomingo; Av George Washington 218), **Hotel Santo Domingo** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-221-1511; cnr Av Independencia & Av Abraham Lincoln) and **Hispaniola Hotel & Casino** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-221-7111; cnr Av Independencia & Av Abraham Lincoln). They generally open at 4pm and close at 4am. Bets may be placed in Dominican pesos or US dollars. Las Vegas odds and rules generally apply, though there are some variations; it doesn't hurt to ask the dealer what differences he or she is aware of before you start laying down money. All of the dealers at these casinos speak Spanish and English.

Sports

BASEBALL

The boys of summer play in the winter here, in this *béisbol*-mad city. Soon after the US major-league season ends in October, the 48-game Dominican season kicks off. From mid-November until early February the top players from the DR with a handful of major and minor leaguers from the US compete all over the country.

There is also a Liga del Verano (Summer League) if you're in the DR outside of regular season. Various major-league franchises – the San Francisco Giants, the Toronto Blue Jays, Arizona Diamondbacks, NY Yankees, to name a few – maintain farm teams in the DR, and summer league play is a semiformal tournament between these teams. Games are held at smaller stadiums around town.

Estadio Quisqueya (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-540-5772; cnr Av Tiradentes & San Cristóbal; tickets US\$2-18; ☎ games 5pm Sun, 8pm Tue, Wed, Fri & Sat) One of the better places to see a game and experience the madness is at the home field for two of the DR's six professional teams, Licey (www.licey.com) and Escogido (www.escogido). You can get tickets to most games by arriving at the stadium shortly before the first inning; games between rivals Licey and Escogido or Licey and the Águilas sell out more quickly. Asking for the best seats available at the box office is likely

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

COCKFIGHTING

Coliseo Gallístico Alberto Bonetti Burgos (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-565-3844; Av Luperón; admission US\$7-17.50; ☎ matches 6.30pm Wed & Fri, 3pm Sat) The Madison Square Garden of the Dominican cockfighting world, this is where the best and the fiercest roosters are brought to fight. If you have any interest in experiencing this traditional Dominican spectator sport (for more about cockfighting see the Culture chapter, p54), this *gallera* (cockfighting ring) is a good choice. Its largest events draw rooster handlers from as far away as Colombia, Brazil, Panama and Peru. Matches are held from November to June, but December to April is the busiest season (the roosters' plumage is fullest then) and a match could have 30 or 40 fights and last into the wee hours. Handler entry fees are higher on Saturdays, so the roosters tend to be better and the stakes higher. Betting on cockfights is an intense and complex art – experts bet with dozens of people at high speed using only hand signals – but a good place to start is simply betting the guy next to you which rooster will win. Opposing cocks are designated blue or white – colored tape is used to indicate which is which. There is always a favorite, so bets involve odds that can change even as the fight is in progress. Above all, there is a powerful honor system that allows huge amounts of money to change hands peacefully with no oversight whatsoever. Those who renege on bets can be barred for life from the ring. Fights are to the death – some are quick, others are torturous bloody affairs that can last up to 15 minutes (the official limit before a fight is called off) and so obviously aren't appropriate for everyone.

SHOPPING

More than anywhere else in the country, shopping in Santo Domingo runs the gamut from cheap tourist kitsch to high-end quality collectibles. The easiest – and best – neighborhood to shop in is the Zona Colonial where you'll find rows of shops offering locally made products at decent prices. Large, American-style malls scattered around the city have good selections of clothing, music and shoe stores.

Amber & Larimar

If you're considering buying something in amber or larimar, shop around since these stones, considered national treasures, are virtually ubiquitous in Santo Domingo. Typically they're presented as jewelry, but occasionally you'll find figurines, rosaries and other small objects. For help on choosing amber, see boxed text (p173). Quality and price vary greatly and fakes aren't uncommon. For a sure thing, try the Museo de Ambar (p79) or Larimar Museum (p79), or one of the following shops.

Swiss Mine (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-221-1897; Calle El Conde 101; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat) English, French, Italian and German are all spoken at this shop, which is notable for its high-quality design work; it now also has an excellent selection of artwork by contemporary Dominican painters.

Flor Ambar Gift Shop (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-687-3793; Las Damas 44; ☎ 9am-6pm) Amid cheap souvenirs, Flor Ambar offers a nice selection of amber and larimar jewelry.

Art

Walking around Santo Domingo you'll see sidewalk displays of simple, colorful canvases of rural life and landscapes. This so-called Haitian or 'primitive art' is so prevalent that it's understandable if you mistake it for the country's de facto wallpaper. Most of what you see on the street is mass-produced, low-quality amateur pieces with little value. For unique and interesting Dominican pieces, there are a number of more formal galleries in Santo Domingo.

The best resource on Dominican art and artists is still the authoritative *Enciclopedia de las Artes Plásticas Dominicanas* (Encyclopedia of Dominican Visual Arts) by Cándido Gerón. Illustrations and Spanish text are followed by English translations; look for copies at used bookstores in the Zona Colonial.

Bettye's Galería (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-688-7649; Plaza de María de Toledo; Isabel la Católica 163; ☎ 9am-6pm, closed Tue) Browse through this gallery, connected to the guesthouse of the same name, if you like antiques, jewelry, and quirky souvenirs and paintings.

De Soto Galería (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-689-6109; Calle Hostos 215; ☎ 9am-5:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) This is a small gallery specializing in Dominican and Haitian painters. A rambling array of antiques is also for sale.

Galería de Arte María del Carmen (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-682-7609; Arzobispo Meriño 207; ☹ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun) In business for over two decades, this place has been selling art long enough to attract a wide range of talented Dominican painters.

Outside of the Zona Colonial are dozens of other galleries that feature Haitian and Dominican art. **Galería de Arte El Greco** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-562-5921; Av Tiradentes 16; ☹ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) and **Galería de Arte El Pincel** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-544-4295; Av Gustavo Mejía Ricart 24; ☹ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) are good options.

Cigars

Dominican cigars are widely respected by aficionados around the world, so much so that the DR is one of the leading exporters. To try one for yourself, stop into one of the many cigar stores around Santo Domingo – you'll see several just strolling down Calle El Conde. Typically, prices vary from US\$2 to US\$6 per cigar and boxes can run as high as US\$110.

La Leyenda del Cigarro (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-686-5489; Calle Hostos 402) This small shop several blocks north of Parque Colón has a good selection of premium cigars, but equally importantly, the helpful staff are more than willing to answer the naive questions of cigar novices.

If you want to see *tobacos* being rolled, drop by the **Boutique del Fumador** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-685-6425; Calle El Conde 109; ☹ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-3:30pm Sun) or the **Museo del Tabaco** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-689-7665; Calle El Conde 101; ☹ 9:30am-8pm); both are located on Parque Colón and are owned by the same tobacco company – Monte Cristi de Tabacos. At either one you can watch as one or two workers roll cigars in the shop window – a sampling of the 45 workers who roll away the day on the 2nd floor of the Boutique del Fumador. Montecristo, Cohiba and Caoba brand cigars are sold at both shops.

Handicrafts

Felipe & Co (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-689-5812; Calle El Conde 105; ☹ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun) This shop on Parque Colón is stocked with charming high-quality handicrafts, like ceramics, jewelry and handbags, with also a good selection of paintings. Some of the best finds are stocked away in the back of this deep shop, easily one of the best in the Zona Colonial.

Muñecas Elisa (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-682-9653; Arzobispo Nouel 54; ☹ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Specializing

in Dominican faceless dolls, this spacious shop sells the highest-quality figurines in town. Dolls are handcrafted in-house and are made of porcelain; all are also dressed in late-18th-century garb. Prices vary widely according to the size and detail of each and run from US\$10 to US\$550.

Markets

Mercado Modelo (Map pp80-1; Av Mella; ☹ 9am-5pm) Housed in an aging two-story building just north of the Zona Colonial near a neighborhood of Chinese restaurants and stores, bargain hard at this local market, which sells everything from love potions to woodcarvings and jewelry. The more you look like a tourist, the higher the asking price. It's best not to dress too sharply or wear any fine jewelry yourself, in part to get a fair deal and in part because this isn't the best neighborhood to wander around, especially after dark.

Pulga de Antigüedades (Map pp80-1; Plaza de María de Toledo, Calle General Luperón; ☹ 9am-4pm Sun) Poke around the clothes, shoes, handicrafts and antiques at this open-air flea market, held every Sunday on a small plaza a block north of Parque Colón.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Santo Domingo has two airports: the main one, **Aeropuerto Internacional Las Américas** (SDQ; off Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-549-0081), is 22km east of the city. The smaller **Aeropuerto Internacional La Isabela Dr Joaquín Balaguer** (JBQ, aka Higüero; off Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-567-3900), north of the city, handles mostly domestic carriers and air taxi companies. **Aerodomca** (☎ 809-826-4141/4242), **Caribair** (☎ 809-542-6688) and **Take Off** (☎ 809-552-1333; www.takeoffweb.com) service both airports.

Most international flights come into and depart from Las Américas. The major carriers: **Air Canada** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-541-2929; Av Gustavo Mejía Ricart 54)

Air France Central Santo Domingo (Map p77; ☎ 809-686-8432; Plaza El Faro, Av Máximo Gómez 15); Airport (☎ 809-549-0311) The city branch shares its office with KLM.

American Airlines Zona Colonial (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-542-5151; Calle El Conde); Airport (☎ 809-549-0043)

Continental Airlines Airport (☎ 809-549-0757); Central Santo Domingo (Map p77; ☎ 809-221-2222; www.renaissancehotels.com; Renaissance Jaragua Hotel, Av George Washington 367)

Copa (☎ reservations 809-549-2672, airport 809-472-2672)

FIRST-CLASS BUSES FROM SANTO DOMINGO

Destination	Fare (US\$)	Duration (hr)	Distance (km)	Frequency (per day)
Ázua	4.00	1¼	120	8
Barahona	6.70	3½	200	4
Castillo	5.50	1½	150	11
Dajabón	8.50	5	305	4
Jarabacoa	5.40	3	155	4
La Vega	4.50	1½	125	every 30min, 6am-8pm
Las Matas de Santa Cruz	7.50	2½	250	4
Monte Cristi	8.50	4	270	6
Nagua	7.60	3½	180	11
Puerto Plata	8.20	4	215	hourly 6am-7pm
Río San Juan	8.20	4½	215	5
Samaná	7.50	4	245	6
San Francisco de Macorís	6.70	2½	135	every 30-60min, 7am-6pm
San Juan de la Maguana	6.70	2½	163	4
Sánchez	7.50	4	211	6
Santiago	6.70	2½	155	every 30min, 6am-8pm
Sosúa	8.50	5	240	hourly 6am-7pm

Delta (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-200-9191; Plaza Comercial Acropolis Center, cnr Av Winston Churchill & Andres Julio Aybar)

Iberia Santo Domingo (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-686-9191; Av Lope de Vega 63); Airport (☎ 809-549-0205)

Jet Blue (☎ 809-549-1793) Located at the airport.

LanChile (Map p77; ☎ 809-689-2221; Av George Washington 353)

Lufthansa/Condor (Map p77; ☎ 809-689-9625; Av George Washington 353)

US Airways Santo Domingo (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-540-0505; Av Gustavo Mejía Ricart 54); Airport (☎ 809-549-0165)

For more details on international air travel to and from the Santo Domingo area, see p255.

Boat

The DR's only international ferry service, **Ferries del Caribe** (Map pp80-1; ☎ in Santo Domingo 809-688-4400, in Santiago 809-724-8771, in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico 787-832-4400, in San Juan, Puerto Rico 787-725-2643), connects Santo Domingo with Mayagüez, Puerto Rico. The ticket office and boarding area are on Av del Puerto opposite Fortaleza Ozama in the Zona Colonial. The ferry departs Santo Domingo at 8pm on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday and returns from Mayagüez at 8pm on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. The trip takes 12 hours and costs around US\$129/189 one way/return in an airplane-style seat, or around US\$182/311 (single/double) one way per person or US\$295/474 (single/double) return in a private cabin with an exterior window.

Bus

Santo Domingo has no central bus terminal. Instead, the country's two main bus companies – **Caribe Tours** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-221-4422; www.caribetours.com.do; cnr Av 27 de Febrero & Av Leopoldo Navarro) and **Metro** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-227-0101; www.metroservidoristicos.com; Calle Francisco Prats Ramírez) – have individual depots west of the Zona Colonial. Caribe Tours has the most departures, and covers more of the smaller towns than Metro does.

Both lines use large, comfortable and fairly modern passenger buses; some even have TVs and screen movies. Air-conditioning on both lines is sometimes turned up to uncomfortable levels. In any case, all but a few destinations are less than four hours from Santo Domingo.

It's a good idea to call ahead to confirm the schedule and ticket price, and always arrive at least 30 minutes before the stated departure time. Both bus lines also publish brochures (available at all terminals) with up-to-date schedules and fares, plus the address and telephone number of their terminals throughout the country – handy if you'll be taking the bus often.

Expreso Santo Domingo Bávaro (Map p77; ☎ in Santo Domingo 809-682-9670, in Bávaro 809-552-0771; cnr Juan Sánchez Ruiz & Av Máximo Gómez) has a direct 1st-class service between the capital and Bávaro, with a stop in La Romana. Departure times in both directions are 7am, 10am, 2pm and 4pm (US\$9, four hours).

There also are four 2nd-class bus depots near Parque Enriquillo in the Zona Colonial. All buses make numerous stops en route. Because the buses tend to be small, there can be a scrum for seats, especially for destinations with one to a few departures a day. *Caliente*, literally 'hot' buses, refer to those generally without air-con; *expreso* buses stop less often. Destinations include the following:

Baní (US\$2.75, 1½ hours, every 15 minutes, 5am to 10pm)

Boca Chica (caliente/expreso US\$1/1.25, 45 minutes, caliente every 15 minutes, expreso hourly, 6am to 8pm)

Higüey (caliente/expreso US\$4.25/5, 2½ hours, caliente every 20 minutes, expreso hourly, 6am to 7pm)

Juan Dolio (US\$2.10, one hour, every 30 minutes, 6am to 9:30pm)

La Romana (caliente/expreso US\$2.75/4, two hours, caliente every 20 minutes, expreso hourly, 5am to 9pm)

Las Galeras (US\$8, six hours, daily between 11:30am and 12:30pm depending on when bus arrives from Las Galeras)

Puerto Plata (US\$5.25, 4½ hours, take any Sosúa bus)

San Cristóbal (US\$1.40, 45 minutes, every 15 to 30 minutes, 6am to 10pm)

San Pedro de Macorís (US\$2.30, one hour, every 30 minutes, 6am to 9:30pm)

Santiago (US\$2.80, 2½ hours, take any Sosúa bus)

Sosúa (US\$5.65, five hours, nine departures from 6:30am to 3:30pm)

To get to Haiti, **Capital Coach Line** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-530-8266; www.capitalcoachline.com; Av 27 de Febrero 455), Caribe Tours (p101) and **Terra Bus** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-531-0383; Plaza Lama, cnr Av 27 de Febrero & Av Winston Churchill) offer daily bus services to Port-au-Prince. Capital Coach Line has one departure daily at 10am, and Caribe and Terra at 11am and 11:30am respectively. All three use comfortable, air-con buses, and the trip takes from six to nine hours and costs US\$40; that said, Capital and Caribe are more reliable and recommended. If possible, reserve at least two days in advance as the buses are frequently full.

Car

Numerous international and domestic car-rental companies have more than one office in Santo Domingo proper and at Las Américas International Airport – the majority have a booth in a small building just across the street from the arrivals exit. All are open daily roughly from 7am to 6pm in Santo Domingo (sometimes later) and from 7am to 11:30pm at the airport. For more information about costs, rental requirements etc, see p259.

Recommend car-rental companies:

Advantage Rent-a-Car (☎ 809-549-0536; Las Américas International Airport)

Avis Central Santo Domingo (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-535-7191; cnr Av Abraham Lincoln & Av Sarasota); Airport (☎ 809-549-0468)

Budget Santo Domingo (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-566-6666; cnr Av John F Kennedy & Av Lope de Vega); Airport (☎ 809-549-0351)

Dollar Central Santo Domingo (Map p77; ☎ 809-221-7368; Av Independencia 366); Airport (☎ 809-549-0738)

Europcar Central Santo Domingo (Map p77; ☎ 809-688-2121; Av Independencia 354); Airport (☎ 809-549-0942)

Hertz Central Santo Domingo (Map p77; ☎ 809-221-5333; Av José Ma Heredia 1); Airport (☎ 809-549-0454)

National/Alamo Central Santo Domingo (Map p77; ☎ 809-221-0805; Av Independencia at Máximo Gómez); Airport (☎ 809-549-8303)

Nelly Rent-a-Car (☎ 809-549-0505; Las Américas International Airport)

Thrifty (☎ 809-549-0930; Las Américas International Airport)

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

There are no buses that connect directly to either of Santo Domingo's airports. From Las Américas, a taxi into the city costs US\$25 to US\$35, with only a little room for negotiation. The trip is a solid half-hour. If there are any other travelers arriving when you do, try sharing a ride. Taxis are available at the airport 24 hours a day. Many taxis, including Apolo Taxi, may be willing to take you from the city to the airport for much less.

The fare from La Isabela is more reasonable at US\$10 to US\$15. There's no permanent taxi stand there, but at least one or two taxis meet every flight. If, for whatever reason, there are no taxis around when you arrive, call one of the companies mentioned in the Taxi section (opposite).

Car

Driving can be difficult in Santo Domingo due to heavy traffic and aggressive drivers, especially taxis and buses. Drive with caution and whenever possible have a passenger help you navigate the streets. Finding parking is not typically a problem, though if you are leaving your car out overnight, ask around for a parking lot. Many midrange and top-end hotels have parking with 24-hour guards. In any case, be sure not to leave any valuables inside your car.

ISLAND METRO

'Centro de Héroes to Mamá Tingó.' Not exactly the same ring as 'Times Square to Broadway,' but functional nevertheless. Caribbean islands and underground metros usually don't appear to go together. But Santo Domingo is joining San Juan, Puerto Rico, as the second city in the region to have a commuter train system. By the time this book goes to print, Dominicans will be riding to work on the 14km track from the northern suburbs to downtown (16 stops, 10 underground). Whether this will have any impact on the city's disastrous traffic is another matter. And whether this is a misguided and even cynical project that will only benefit politicians and contractors, a white elephant on par with the Faro a Colón, or whether it's a much needed modernization of Santo Domingo's failing transportation system is up for debate.

Ask any taxi driver in the city what they think of the project and they're likely to respond skeptically, doubtful that it will ever actually start running. After all, it's opening date keeps getting pushed back, and at US\$700 million it's US\$230 million over the initial cost estimate. Many will question whether this is a good use of public funds in a country with substandard education and health care. And the big dig certainly isn't doing anything to help traffic in the meantime. Pop culture has weighed in on the debate: 'Now we have a Metro' is the sarcastic refrain for a song about the country's failures by the Dominican rap group La Crema.

Keeping his promise that he would ride the train by Independence Day 2008, President Leonel Fernandez boarded one of the French-manufactured three car trains – air-con, CCTV, sorry, no wi-fi – for a nonstop trip on elevated Line 1, which runs from Villa Mella in the north to La Feria. The fact that stations are named after well-known Dominicans (and foreigners like John F Kennedy and Abraham Lincoln) rather than streets may be inconvenient, but it may also lead some to brush up on their history. The Santo Domingo metro: convenient and educational.

Public Transportation

The city's bus system is simple to use and very cheap – the cost of a bus ride from one end of the city to the other is around US\$0.25. Official public buses started using fixed bus stops in 1998, when a fleet of Brazilian-made buses was inaugurated and the president himself took the bus to work. Most stops are marked with a sign and the word *parada* (stop), but it took several years and a major public service campaign to get locals to actually use them. The routes tend to follow major thoroughfares – in the Zona Colonial, Parque Independencia is where Av Bolívar (the main westbound avenue) begins and Av Independencia (the main eastbound avenue) ends. If you're trying to get across town, just look at a map and note the major intersections along the way and plan your transfers accordingly.

Even more numerous than buses are the *públicos* – mostly beaten-up minivans and private cars that follow the same main routes but stop wherever someone flags them down. They are supposed to have *público* on their license plates, but drivers will beep and wave at you long before you can make out the writing. Any sort of hand waving will get the driver to stop, though the preferred gesture is to hold

out your arm and point down at the curb in front of you. The fare is US\$0.35 – pay when you get in. Speaking of getting in, be prepared for a tight squeeze – drivers will cram seven or even eight passengers into an ordinary two-door car.

Taxi

Taxis in Santo Domingo don't have meters, so you should always agree on the price before climbing in. The standard fare is a low US\$3.50, even to the other side of the city. Within the Zona Colonial it should be even cheaper. Taxi drivers don't typically cruise the streets looking for rides; they park at various major points and wait for customers to come to them. In the Zona Colonial, Parque Colón and Parque Duarte are the best spots.

You can also call for a taxi or ask the receptionist at your hotel to do so. Service is usually quick, the fare is the same, and you don't have to lug your bags anywhere. Many of the top hotels have taxis waiting at the ready outside, but expect to pay more for those. Reputable taxi agencies with 24-hour dispatches include **Aero-Taxi** (☎ 809-685-1212), **Apolo Taxi** (☎ 809-537-7771), **Super Taxi** (☎ 809-536-7014) and **Taxi Cacique** (☎ 809-532-3132).

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