

The Southeast



This iconic region, synonymous with sun, sand and binge eating, is rightly popular with the hundreds of thousands of visitors who make the southeast the economic engine of the tourism industry in the DR. Sprawling resort developments, some like city-states unto themselves, line much of the beachfront from Punta Cana to Bávaro. However, the result is less like the high-rise congestion of Cancun or Miami and more like low-slung retirement communities, albeit ones populated by families, young and old, and couples and singles of all ages looking for a hassle-free holiday in the Caribbean.

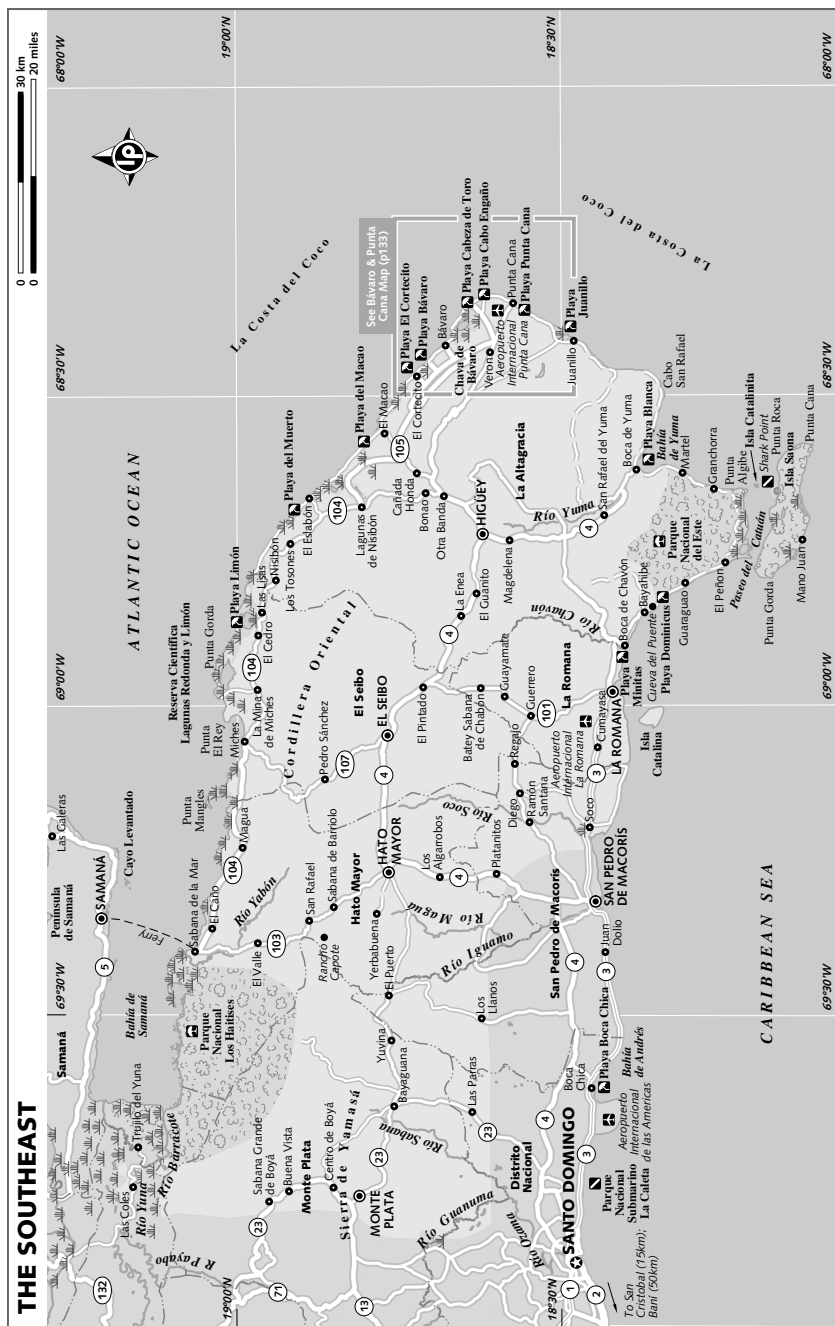
Beyond the gated luxury enclaves, there's a vast landscape of sugar plantations dotted with *bateyes*, the small communities where many of the workers live. La Romana, a bustling city hugging the Río Chavón, anchors the sugar economy, but for travelers it's the nearby fishing village of Bayahibe that is of interest. Besides being the departure point for trips to the nearby islands in the Parque Nacional del Este, Bayahibe's seaside restaurants and bars feed a close-knit community of Dominicans and loyal expats.

Only a few miles north of Bávaro, the resorts thin out and the road leads inland past plantations and through small villages where horses are the preferred mode of transportation. Further up the coast, down a rutted and rough road is Playa Limón, an isolated stretch of beach backed by palm trees but also, more unusually, a lagoon and several mountain peaks. Those committed to carrying on west to Sabana de la Mar are rewarded with the Parque Nacional Los Haitises, a protected maze of caves and mangroves.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Stroll along the seemingly endless soft white beaches around **Bávaro** and **Punta Cana** (p131)
- Glide in a kayak through the mangrove forests of **Parque Nacional Los Haitises** (p140)
- Sit at the helm of a local fishing boat cruising the coastline near **Bayahibe** (p123)
- Escape the all-inclusive places by heading to **Playa Limón** (p137), a deserted beach paradise next to a protected lagoon
- Plunge into crystal-clear waters on a snorkeling or diving trip in the waters around **Parque Nacional del Este** (p124)





HISTORY

Before sugar, it was cattle ranching and the cutting and exporting of hardwoods that drove the region's economy. But Cuban planters, fleeing war in their country, began to arrive in the southeast in the 1870s and established sugar mills with the Dominican government's assistance (this migration also explains baseball's popularity and importance in the region). Rail lines were built and La Romana and San Pedro de Macoris, formerly sleepy backwaters, began to prosper as busy ports almost immediately as world sugar prices soared. Hundreds of families from the interior migrated to the area in search of jobs. In 1920, after peasants were dispossessed of their land during the US occupation, many fought a guerilla war against the marines in the area around Hato Mayor and El Seibo. Until the 1960s, the economy in the southeast was still strictly driven by sugar despite fluctuations in the world market and agriculture in general. However, when the US company Gulf & Western Industries bought La Romana's sugar mill, invested heavily in the cattle and cement industries and, perhaps most importantly, built the Casa de Campo resort, tourism became the financial engine of the southeast, and remains so to this day.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

The majority of international visitors to this region fly directly to the airport in Punta Cana (see p136) and then are whisked away in private vehicles to their respective resorts. Otherwise, it's anywhere from a 2½- to four-hour drive, depending on your destination, from Las Americas airport in Santo Domingo (see p100). La Romana has an airport as well, though it mostly handles charter flights (see p123).

Traffic between the resort centers can be surprisingly heavy and it's difficult to navigate much of the road system, which is being revamped and expanded. Though the distances aren't great, travel in the region, especially along the coast north of Bávaro all the way to Sabana de la Mar, can be slow and unreliable because of the poor condition of the roads. It's now possible to fly between Punta Cana and the Península de Samaná (see p144).

LA ROMANA TO HIGÜEY

LA ROMANA

pop 230,000

This traffic-congested and bustling city is a convenient stop for those traveling between Santo Domingo, 131km to the east, and the beach resorts further west. Surrounded by vast sugar plantations, the industry that bolsters its economy and the enormous Casa de Campo resort a few kilometers to the east, La Romana feels slightly more prosperous than neighboring cities. Modeled after the George Washington monument in Washington, DC, **El Obelisco** (The Obelisk; Av Libertad btwn Calles Márquez & Ducoudrey) is a much smaller version, painted on all four sides with contemporary and historical depictions of Dominican life.

Orientation

The coastal highway, which separates and changes names numerous times on the way from Santo Domingo, is named Hwy 3 when it reaches La Romana. Entering town, you'll see the baseball stadium for the local team, Toros del Este, on your left, and shortly thereafter the highway splits – the left (northern) fork is Av Padre Abreu, while the right (southern) fork is Av Gregorio Luperón. Take the left fork if you're driving and just passing through, but veer onto Luperón if you want to reach downtown La Romana. La Romana has a main town square (Parque Central) from which you can easily walk to most hotels, restaurants, internet cafés, post office and more. Aeropuerto La Romana/Casa de Campo is located 8km east of town.

Information

CULTURAL CENTERS

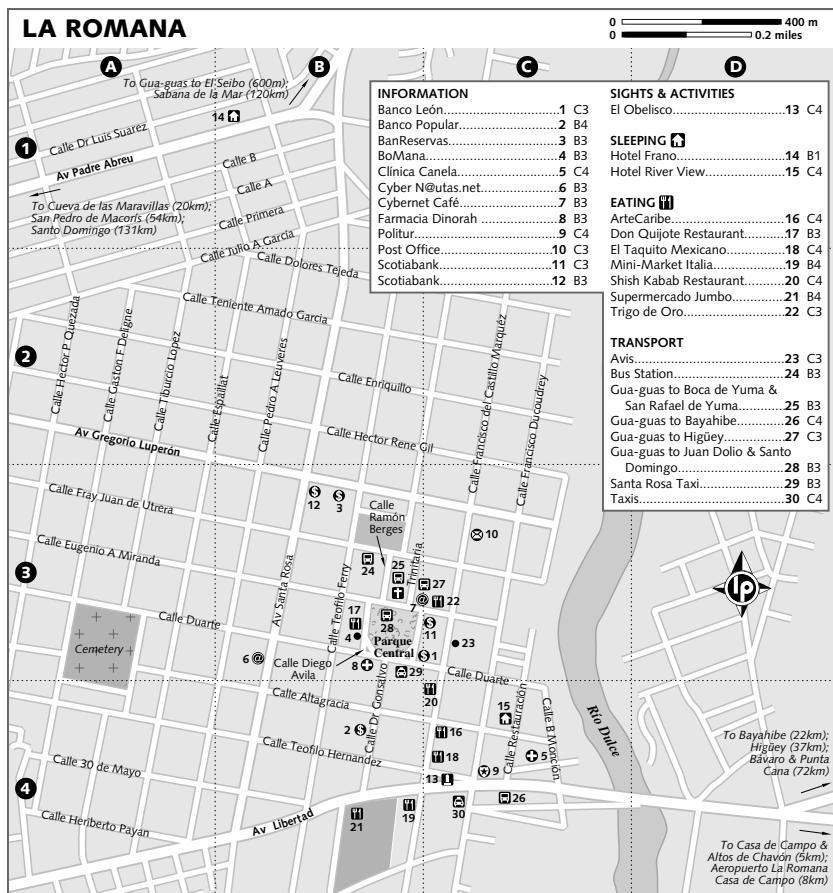
BoMana (☎ 809-757-6195; bomana@gmail.com; Calle Diego Avila 42; voluntary donation; ☎ 9am-7pm) A cultural center/art gallery/small theatre space; traditional Dominican dances for groups of tourists twice weekly. Shows are at 3pm on Tuesday and Sunday.

EMERGENCY

Politur (tourist police; ☎ 809-550-7112; cnr Calle Francisco Ducoudrey & Av Libertad; ☎ 24hr)

INTERNET ACCESS

Both internet cafés also operate as telephone centers for national and international calls.
Cyber N@utas.net (Av Santa Rosa; per hr US\$1; ☎ 9am-11pm)



Cybernet Café (Calle Eugenio A Miranda; per hr US\$1.50; ☎ 8:30am-10pm)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Clinica Canela (☎ 809-556-3135; www.clinicacanela.com; cnr Av Libertad 44 & Restauración) A private 70-bed hospital with 24-hour pharmacy and emergency room.
Farmacia Dinorah (☎ 809-556-3231; Calle Duarte; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-noon Sun) Free delivery available.

MONEY

Ban Reservas (Av Gregorio Luperón)
Banco León (Calle Duarte; ☎ 8:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Located at southeast corner of the main park.
Banco Popular (Calle Dr Gonsalvo)

Scotiabank (cnr Av Gregorio Luperón & Santa Rosa; ☎ 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat)

Scotiabank (Calle Eugenio A Miranda; ☎ 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat)

POST

Post Office (Calle Francisco del Castillo Marquéz near Av Gregorio Luperón; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri)

Sights & Activities

CUEVA DE LAS MARAVILLAS

More than 500 pictographs and petroglyphs can be seen on a tour of **Cueva de las Maravillas** (Cave of Wonders; ☎ 809-951-9009; cueva.maravillas@medioambiente.gov.do; adult/child US\$6/1.50; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun), an enormous cavern complex on the

highway some 20km west between San Pedro de Macoris and La Romana. Extending for 840m between Río Cumayasa and Río Soco, this massive underground museum is lighted and well marked. The entrance fee includes a 45-minute guided tour (some English is spoken) so there's little reason to wander around on your own. Coming from San Pedro de Macoris, look for the easy-to-spot entrance on your left not far past the Bahía Principe La Romana Resort. Best way to get here is to take your own car, though taxi is also an option.

ALTOS DE CHAVÓN

While a trip to a faux 15th-century southern Italian/Spanish village created by a Paramount movie set designer won't exactly give you a window onto Dominican culture, **Altos de Chavón** (☎ 809-523-3333) has some redeeming qualities, especially the excellent views of the Río Chavón (a scene from the film *Apocalypse Now* was filmed here). A visit to this little slice of the Old World created in the 1970s is de rigeur for many tourists, who arrive by the busload packing the cobblestone streets, restaurants, galleries and shops – it's more Times Square than a Roman piazza. There's a handsome church, an impressive pre-Columbian museum and a 5000-seat amphitheater, which attracts big-name performers – Frank Sinatra did the inaugural gig here.

Part of the Casa de Campo resort complex (see p122), Altos de Chavón is equally difficult to visit for nonguests, at least ones that are traveling independently. You'll have to arrange at least a day in advance and pay a US\$5 entrance fee. Most people visit in the morning and early afternoon as part of a group tour from resorts around Bayahibe and Bávaro/Punta Cana.

Motoconchos (motorcycle taxis) are prohibited from entering the area. If you're driving from La Romana, take the main road past the gated entrance to Casa de Campo and continue for 5km until the turnoff on your right, marked with a small 'Altos de Chavón' sign. A cab from La Romana costs around US\$7 one way, or US\$18 round-trip with an hour's wait. Others arrive at the end of a group tour to Isla Catalina; the 250 steps from the pier to the top of the bluff can be challenging for some.

ISLA CATALINA

In the 15th century pirates, including Francis Drake, would lurk around Isla Catalina wait-

PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN

The purported remains – mostly pieces of cannons, anchors and wood – of the *Quedagh Merchant*, which belonged to the Scottish privateer Captain William Kidd, were found in the waters off Isla Catalina near the shores of the Casa de Campo resort. The ship was scuttled and set on fire after Kidd returned to England to face charges of piracy. Despite the fact that he was often acting under the authority of the English navy, he was convicted of piracy and hanged in London in 1699.

ing to pounce on Spanish ships on their way to and from Santo Domingo. Today, this island ringed by fine coral reefs teeming with fish in shallow water is a popular destination for groups from nearby Casa de Campo; the resort has frequent shuttles making the 2km trip, as do large cruise ships. Combine this traffic with the bar and restaurant and you won't feel like you've found paradise lost. Most groups spend a couple hours for snorkeling and lunch, and divers head to a steep drop-off called 'The Wall.' With enough people or cash it's possible to charter a boat (most tour companies in the area, from Bayahibe to Romana to Punta Cana and Bávaro, would probably be open to this for the right price) to an infrequently visited beach on the far side of the island. In order to camp on the island you must gain permission from the Parque Nacional del Este office in Bayahibe (see p124) – Isla Catalina is officially part of the park protected area.

GOLFING

Within the grounds of the Casa de Campo (p122) are four Pete Dye-designed **golf courses**, including 'The Teeth of the Dog' (greens fees US\$196), open since 1971, which has seven seaside holes. 'Dye Fore' (greens fees US\$175) and 'Links' (greens fees US\$140) are also highly recommended. All of the courses are open to guests and nonguests alike, but you should make reservations as far in advance as possible. Tee times can be reserved by email (t.times@ccampo.com.do) or fax (☎ 809-523-8800) only; phone reservations are not accepted.

Sleeping

Hotel River View (☎ 809-556-1181; hotelriverview@gmail.com; Calle Restauración 17; r US\$35; ☎ ☎ ☎)

The only hotel in La Romana proper that has a pleasant enough location, this multistory hotel is perched a block from the Río Dulce. You can have a coffee in the tiny patio area out back overlooking the parking lot – not exactly taking full advantage of its ‘river view.’ The rooms are clean and have modern amenities like cable TV and free wi-fi internet access, though some feel dark and forlorn; ask to look at several with windows.

Hotel Frano (☎ 809-550-4744; Av Padre Abreu 9; s/d US\$36/45; 📍 🚗) Far from the beach and located on an extremely busy and loud thoroughfare, the Hotel Frano is popular with Dominican businessmen, but hardly a logical choice for tourists. On the 1st floor, the bustling restaurant (mains US\$4 to US\$7; open from 7am to 3pm and again from 6pm till 10pm) serving Dominican dishes and good seafood keeps the atmosphere lively, which is a plus, as the rooms themselves, though fairly modern, tend to be dark and drab, with or without windows.

Casa de Campo (☎ 800-877-3643; www.casadecampo.com.do; Av Libertad; r US\$178-375, all-inclusive per person US\$216-386; 📍 🚗 🚗 🚗) Known as much for its celebrity guests and villa owners as for its facilities and wealth of activities, this enormous, sprawling complex truly resembles a city-state, albeit one with the security paranoia of a G8 conference ringed by anarchist protesters. Casa de Campo is an all-inclusive super-sized place, and while there’s a wealth of accommodation options – from tropical-themed hotel rooms with mahogany furnishings and views of the Caribbean to luxurious villas complete with private gardens, a pool, a housekeeper and a cook – the decentralized nature of the resort makes navigation confusing and the service less reliable than you should expect at this price. All-inclusive rates, in addition to the standard food and drink, include unlimited horseback riding, tennis, one round of skeet/trap shooting and non-motorized water sports at the beach. Other available activities include horseback riding trips with dinner (per person US\$74), kayak trips down the Río Chavón (per person US\$35) and afternoon cycling tours (per person US\$15). Four Pete Dye–designed golf courses (see p121) and Altos de Chavón (p121), a Tuscan-style ‘village’ and a Mediterranean-style piazza overlooking a massive marina round out the resort’s offerings.

Day passes (US\$40) are available for non-guests and can be purchased at the information

office on the right before the entrance gates. Whether this is good value is debatable: you are allowed to enter the property, access the beach (towel included) and have a meal (alcohol extra) at the beachside restaurant. El Tour pass (US\$20) includes a visit to Altos de Chavón and the marina – no lunch or beach access.

Most guests arrive at the resort by air, either at the private landing strip or the airport that serves La Romana, and are then driven onto the property. If arriving by private vehicle, follow Av Libertad east across the river, and stay in the right lane for 4km until you see the entrance on your right.

Eating

Our pick **Trigo de Oro** (☎ 809-550-5650; Calle Eugenio A Miranda 9; mains US\$1-4; 📍 🚗 7am-9pm Mon-Sat, 7am-1pm Sun) There’s no better oasis from the heat, exhaust fumes and backfiring *motoconchos* than the charming, shaded courtyard of this French café and bakery – hours can slip away sipping one of the specialty coffee drinks. The bakery has freshly made pastries like flan (US\$3) and cheesecake, and a good selection of wines. You can choose from sandwiches, baguettes and other light eats from the café menu.

ArteCaribe (☎ 809-556-3436; cnr Calles Altigracia 15 & Francisco del Castillo Márquez; mains US\$1-8; 📍 🚗 lunch & dinner) From cheap and tasty snacks like chicken and beef empanadas (US\$1.25) to sandwiches, salads and more-filling meat and vegetarian dishes (US\$6), this casual postage stamp-sized café is an ideal place to get your bearings when walking through town. A fan-cooled garden dining area is attached and it gets a strong wi-fi signal no less.

El Taquito Mexicano (☎ 809-556-3851; Calle Francisco del Castillo Márquez 13; mains US\$3; 📍 🚗 lunch & dinner) Cheap Mexican combo meals are served up fast-food style at this centrally located eatery with pleasant outdoor seating. Get a burrito, nachos and drink all for only US\$5.50.

Shish Kabab Restaurant (☎ 809-556-2737; Calle Francisco del Castillo Márquez 32; mains US\$5-18; 📍 🚗 lunch & dinner, closed Mon) An entire wall is covered with photos of famous guests, including baseball players Pedro Martínez and George Bell, attesting to the popularity of this local institution. Middle Eastern dishes like hummus and baba ganoush round out an eclectic menu that also includes fish (US\$8), grilled meats (US\$8) and pizza (US\$8). The modern dining area is open to the street and the service is prompt and professional.

Don Quijote Restaurant (☎ 809-556-2827; Calle Diego Avila 44; mains US\$6-18; 📍 🚗 lunch & dinner, closed Mon) A modern and elegant restaurant – silverware, white tablecloths, soft lighting – on Parque Central, Don Quijote is where to go for fine dining in La Romana. Menu items like goat with pepper sauce (US\$6), sea bass (US\$9) and filet mignon (US\$11) are served up in one of the few completely enclosed air-con dining areas in town.

Occupying a full city block, the **Supermercado Jumbo** (Av Libertad; 📍 🚗 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 9am-7pm Sun) is a massive grocery selling everything imaginable; there are several fast-food outlets and an office of American Airlines inside. Nearby **Mini-Market Italia** (Av Libertad) carries high-end European brands and fresh meat and cheeses.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Aeropuerto La Romana/Casa de Campo (☎ 809-556-5565) is 8km east of town. There are a few regularly scheduled flights, but most of the traffic here is chartered. Carriers include **American Airlines** (☎ 809-813-9080), with flights from Miami; **USA 3000 Airlines** (☎ 809-221-6626; www.usa3000airlines.com), with direct flights from Baltimore, Maryland; and charter flights arranged by **IAS** (☎ 809-813-9114) and **Swissport** (☎ 809-813-9080).

BUS

Gua-guas (small buses) to Bayahibe (US\$1, 20 minutes, every 20 minutes from 6am to 7pm) depart from a stop on Av Libertad at Restauración. **Gua-guas** for other destinations leave from stops near or on Parque Central.

Boca de Yuma (US\$2.75, 1 hour, every 20 minutes from 7am to 6pm)

Higüey (*caliente/expreso* US\$2/3, 1¼ hours, every 20 minutes from 5:30am to 10pm)

Juan Dolio (US\$2, 1 hour, every 10 minutes from 5am to 9pm)

San Rafael de Yuma (US\$2, 45 minutes, every 20 minutes from 7am to 6pm)

Santo Domingo (*caliente/expreso* US\$3/4, 1½ hours, *caliente* every 10 minutes, *expreso* every 20 minutes, from 5am to 9pm)

Getting Around

Motoconchos and taxis are typically found near the southeast corner of Parque Central. *Motoconcho* rides within the city cost US\$1

to US\$3; taxis cost between US\$3 and US\$6. You can call **Santa Rosa Taxi** (☎ 809-556-5313; Calle Duarte) or **Sichtotaxi** (☎ 809-550-2222) for a pickup, or wait for the latter at a stop across the street from El Obelisco on Av Libertad. A taxi to or from the airport costs about US\$8.

To rent a car, try **Avis** (☎ 809-550-0600; cnr Calles Francisco del Castillo Márquez & Duarte).

BAYAHIBE

pop 2000

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

A short drive from Bayahibe is *Dominicus Americanus*, an upscale Potemkin village of resorts, hotels and a few shops and services centered around a terrific public beach. Listings for *Dominicus Americanus* appear along with those for Bayahibe – be sure to double-check the address of the listings you’re interested in.

Orientation

A single road not more than 2km long connects the coastal highway with the town of Bayahibe, 22km east of La Romana. The road splits about 1km south: the right fork heads to the village of Bayahibe, the left is a well-paved road that takes you to *Dominicus Americanus*.

Headed towards Bayahibe, the road eventually forks again: the right fork heads into a large parking lot next to the ocean, where the national park office is located and where fleets of tour buses are parked during the day; the left turns to dirt and continues east into the center of town past a few hotels and restaurants. Several small, winding sand roads lead from here to villagers’ homes.

Dominicus Americanus itself contains only a handful of streets that are laid out in

a grid, making it easy to negotiate. The Viva Wyndham Dominican Beach resort lies at the center of the complex; access to the public beach is at the far eastern end.

Information

At the time of our research there were no internet facilities in town. Some of the listings below are in Dominican Americanus.

Agencia de Cambio Sánchez (☎ 809-833-0201;

Bayahibe; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, 8am-6pm Sun)

Moneychanger next to the Hotel Llave del Mar. Traveler's checks, cash dollars and euros accepted.

Banco Popular (Dominican Americanus; ☎ 24hr) Has an ATM located just outside the Viva Wyndham Dominican Beach Hotel.

BanReservas (Bayahibe) Next to Hotel Bayahibe. Small hole-in-the-wall branch of the bank; no ATM as yet.

El Mundo de la Hispaniola (Dominican Americanus;

☎ 8am-1pm & 2:30-8pm) Day-old editions of the *New York Times* and *Miami Herald*, plus souvenirs, basic groceries and snacks.

Farmacia Job (☎ 809-833-0453; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 8am-10pm Sun) Pharmacy across from Restaurant La Bahia.

Western Union (Bayahibe; ☎ 8am-6pm) Has telephone services; also changes cash dollars and euros.

Sights & Activities

One advantage of staying in Bayahibe is that virtually every water-related activity is right out your front door, so you avoid the long commute that most travelers make here daily from resorts further east.

BEACHES

Much of **Playa Bayahibe**, the town beach to the right of the parking lot, is occupied by dozens of motorboats waiting to ferry tourists to Isla Saona. There's a relatively small, uninviting and narrow stretch of sand between the last of these and the start of the all-inclusive Sandscape Casa del Mar – the beach here is restricted to guests of the resort.

The advantage of staying in Dominican Americanus is being able to walk to **Playa Dominicanus**, a beautiful stretch of thick, nearly-white sand, and good water for swimming. It does tend to get crowded, especially because there's easy public access via a parking lot (free parking) at the far eastern end of the enclave, which means no cutting through hotels or restaurants to get to the beach. You can rent beach chairs for US\$3 or eat at one of various food stands or restaurants.

SNORKELING & DIVING

Bayahibe is arguably the best place in the country to dive or snorkel, featuring warm, clear Caribbean water, healthy reefs and plenty of fish and other sea life. The diving tends to be 'easier' (and therefore ideal for beginners) than it is on the DR's north coast, where the underwater terrain is less flat, the water cooler and the visibility somewhat diminished. There are about 20 open-water dive sites; some favorites include **Catalina Wall** and an impressive 85m ship in 41m to 44m of water, known as **St Georges Wreck** after Hurricane Georges. Deep in the national park, **Padre Nuestro** is a weaving 290m tunnel flooded with freshwater that can be dived, but only by those with advanced cave diving training. See Tours, opposite, for details. In town you can also snorkel in the waters around La Punta.

PARQUE NACIONAL DEL ESTE

More than simply Isla Saona, which is all that most people see on a group tour, the Parque Nacional del Este includes eight emerged reef terraces, 400 or so caverns, some with pictographs and ceramic remains, and Islas Catalinita and Catalina, in addition to Saona. Designated a national park in 1975, it stretches for over 310 sq km of territory, the majority of which is semihumid forest.

The park is also home to 539 species of flora, 55 of which are endemic. There is also a good variety of fauna: 112 species of birds, 250 types of insects and arachnids, and 120 species of fish. There are occasional sightings of West Indian manatees and bottlenose dolphins, and the much rarer Haitian solenodon (p37), a small bony animal with a long snout and tiny eyes.

There's a **park office** in the parking lot in Bayahibe. One entrance is at Guaraguao, a ranger post 5km past Dominican Americanus. The other entrance is in the town of Boca de Yuma (p128), on the eastern side of the park. There is a ranger station there but no formal services. A road leads along the coast for several kilometers and has a number of nice vista points.

Isla Saona

There's a reason why boatloads of tourists descend upon this island daily. The powdery, white-sand beach doesn't seem real

from afar, and a dip in the aquamarine surf is a gentle restorative, like the waters of the most luxurious spa; palm trees provide a natural awning from the intense sun. All of this would be perfect if it weren't for the fact that ear-splitting dance music is blasted from competing sound systems and vendors wander the beach in search of buyers in need of hair braiding, shells and other knick-knacks. There isn't much coral to speak of, much of it damaged by heavy boat traffic and inexperienced snorkelers. Much of this 12km x 5km island is taken over by various companies and all-inclusive resorts who have set up lounge chairs, small dance floors, bars and buffets. **Mano Juan** (population 500) is the only established community on this island separated from the mainland by the narrow Catuano Passage.

The majority of visitors are ferried to Bayahibe early in the morning from resorts further east expecting a booze cruise-like experience, and they usually aren't disappointed. Most trips include a catamaran ride out to the island and then a speedier motorboat trip back or vice versa. A stop at the **piscina natural**, a shallow sandbank that extends far from the shore and has crystal-clear water, often includes young Dominican men and women wading through the water serving up glasses of rum and soda to tourists in need of a drink. The buffet lunch tends to be large and quite good. Unless you specifically request a trip that avoids the standard stops, don't expect a peaceful paradise, much less a protected national park. The dive shops in Bayahibe tend to offer more-rewarding trips that stop for lunch at Isla Saona, but only after visiting other spots for hiking, snorkeling or both (see right). Every hotel, restaurant and shop advertises Saona trips with little variation in quality and price (US\$75).

Isla Catalinita

This tiny uninhabited island on the eastern edge of the park is a common stop on snorkeling and diving tours. Arriving on the island's western (leeward) side, it's about a half-hour hike to the other side, where a lookout affords dramatic views of the powerful open-ocean waves crashing on shore. There is a coral reef in about 2m of water that makes for great snorkeling, and a good dive site called 'Shark Point,' where sharks are in fact often seen.

Cueva del Puente

The park also has over 400 caves, many of which contain Taíno pictographs (cave paintings) and petroglyphs (rock carvings). Archaeologists have found several structures and artifacts inside and around the caves, including what appears to be the remains of a large Taíno city (perhaps the largest) and the site of a notorious massacre of indigenous people by Spanish soldiers.

Only one of the caves that contain Taíno pictograms, **Cueva del Puente**, can be easily visited. Cueva del Puente is partially collapsed, but has a modest number of Taíno pictures, mostly depicting animals and humanlike figures that may represent people or deities. The cave also has some impressive stalagmites and stalactites.

To visit Cueva del Puente, you must first drive to the national park entrance at Guaraguao, a well-marked ranger post about 5km past Dominican Americanus. There you will pay the US\$3.50 entrance fee and the guard will guide you to the cave – it's a little over 3km, about a 40-minute walk; you'll need a flashlight and good shoes. South of here is **Cueva Penon Gordo**, a smaller cave but with more pictograms.

LA PUNTA DE BAYAHIBE

This short, pleasant walk (10 minutes) follows a path beginning just past the Bamboo Beach Bar. It passes by the attractive Iglesia de Bayahibe, a small green, wooden structure, and signs in both English and Spanish outline interesting facts about the town's history and flora and fauna.

Tours

Virtually every hotel in Dominican Americanus offers a wide variety of tours. Most are more expensive than those arranged through one of the two dive shops in Bayahibe or from **Captain Pat Tours** (☎ 809-609-2793; www.captain-pat-excursions.new.fr), a tour company based in town; locals can also arrange things for independent travelers. Both of the dive shops listed here have multilingual guides and instructors, with Spanish, English, German, French and Italian spoken, and can accommodate mixed groups (that is, both snorkelers and divers).

Swiss-run **Casa Daniel** (☎ 809-833-0050; www.casa-daniel.de; ☎ 8am-6pm), 100m from center across from Mare Nostrum, offers one-tank dives with/without equipment rental for US\$39/33. Packages of six dives are US\$210/182, 10-dive

packages are US\$325/292. Full-day snorkel and beach trips to Isla Catalinita and Isla Saona are US\$68, including brief stops at Cueva Penon Gordo and a swing through the mangrove forest. Isla Catalina trips with snorkeling, lunch on the beach and a stop at Altos de Chavón are US\$59. PADI certification courses are available. Ask about accommodation packages.

In operation for over nine years and located on the main strip in the middle of town is **Scubafun** (☎ 809-833-0003; www.scubafun.info; Calle Principal 28; ☎ 7:30am-6pm). This PADI dive center offers two-tank dives in nearby reefs (US\$65) and dive/day trips to Isla Catalina (US\$110) and Isla Saona (US\$125). Full equipment rentals are an additional US\$5. Beginner and advanced PADI courses are also offered.

One of the more enjoyable ways of spending a few hours exploring the coastline is to take a **sail** on a local's fishing boat. No doubt you wouldn't have to ask many people before finding a taker; one particularly nice man who can read the winds like a soothsayer is **Hector Julio Brito** (☎ 829-210-2437), who charges US\$60 for one to four people for a two-hour trip. A longer outing, from 9am to 4pm to the piscina natural, will run around US\$100.

A de facto mayor and general man about town that knows just about everyone and can help arrange any tour or trip with a local is **Rafael Antonio** (☎ 829-0740-4624). Ask for him at Restaurant La Bahia.

Festivals & Events

Every year on the Saturday of Semana Santa (late March/early April), Bayahibe hosts a **regatta** of handmade fishing boats. The race runs from the town cove to Catalina Island and back.

Sleeping

Bayahibe proper has several good budget hotels all within walking distance of one another; locals can point you in the direction of a family willing to take on temporary boarders. A stay here affords you excellent eating options and the chance to experience the rhythms of the town away from the masses. The enclave of Dominicus Americanus has several midrange and top-end options – the advantage here is that it's a short walk to an excellent beach.

BUDGET

All of the places listed here are in Bayahibe proper.

Hotel Bayahibe (☎ 809-833-0159; www.hotelbayahibe.com; r incl breakfast US\$35; (P) (S) (A)) The Bayahibe has the best budget rooms in town. This three-story modern building is easily noticeable, since it's the biggest around. Large comfortable rooms with cable TV and balconies, some with good views, surround an inner atrium. Breakfast is served in a 3rd-floor dining area and there's a computer in the lobby with internet access, the only such access in town, that's free for guests.

Cabañas Trip Town (☎ 809-833-0082; fax 809-833-0088; cabins with/without air-con US\$28/21; (P) (S) (A)) and **Cabañas Francisca** (☎ 809-556-2742; r with/without air-con US\$28/21; (P) (S) (A)) are comparable budget choices located across the dirt road from one another near the center of action in town. Pop your head into both before making a decision. Both have simple rooms with old furnishings, small porches and private bathrooms with hot water. Some have cable TV.

MIDRANGE

The first listing here is in Bayahibe proper and the rest are in Dominicus Americanus.

Villa Iguana (☎ 809-833-0203; www.villaiguana.de; Calle 8; r with/without air-con US\$39/29, 1-bedroom apt US\$69-150, penthouse US\$120) If the Hotel Bayahibe is booked, or if you prefer a more homey atmosphere, walk on over to the Villa Iguana – it's only a few blocks away. This friendly German-owned hotel has seven well-kept rooms, though there's little character and the mattresses are soft in the middle (and no TV in standard rooms). A simple complimentary breakfast is served in a covered-over indoor patio area. The apartments are nicer and more deserving of a long-term stay, as is the penthouse, with its own small rooftop pool.

Hotel Bocayate (☎ 809-920-7966; hbocayate@verizon.net.do; Av Eladia, Dominicus Americanus; r US\$50) The Bocayate won't win any awards for service and there are few amenities. What it does have, though, is a certain unkempt charm. Seven attractive two-story bungalows surround a palm-shaded inner courtyard – guests will have to fight for the single burlap hammock. Find it across from the Viva Wyndham Dominicus Palace; the beach is a short walk down the road.

Cabaña Elke (☎ 809-689-8249; www.vivi.it, in Italian; Av Eladia, Dominicus Americanus; r US\$55; (P) (S) (A)) Sandwiched between the road and a high wall marking the boundary of the Viva Wyndham

Dominicus Beach (below) property, Elke's rooms are arranged in two long narrow rows. Rooms are airy, especially the split-level apartments with kitchenettes, however the furnishings are aging. There's a nice pool area with lounge chairs, but unfortunately no view.

Hotel Eden (☎ 809-688-1856; www.santodomingovillage.com; Av La Laguna 10, Dominicus Americanus; r US\$65; (P) (S) (A) (S)) This addition to the enclave is a good choice for those seeking hotel-style comfort, amenities and service. Because it's located on the access road to the resort area, you might confuse the Eden for a hotel somewhere in Arizona or Florida, just not necessarily on a Caribbean beach. The pool area and grounds are attractive and a good restaurant (see right) is attached.

TOP END

There is a string of all-inclusive resorts in Dominicus Americanus and along the road between there and Bayahibe; only Sunscape Casa del Mar is within walking distance of town.

Sunscape Casa del Mar (☎ 809-221-8880; www.sunscaperesorts.com; r US\$135; (S) (A) (S)) This all-inclusive place is a good compromise for those who want to be within walking distance of Bayahibe but don't want to give up their creature comforts. Contiguous with the town beach, Sunscape's own isn't as nice as the one at Dominicus Americanus, but the low-slung complex includes two above-average pools and enthusiastic and friendly staff. Many of the rooms have seen better days and are in need of a paint job and update.

Iberostar Hacienda Dominicus (☎ 809-688-3600; www.iberostar.com; Playa Dominicus; r from US\$150; (P) (S) (A) (S)) An impeccably maintained resort popular with European travelers, the Iberostar Hacienda Dominicus has beautifully landscaped grounds – most of the buildings surround quiet interior courtyards and some have ocean views. It fronts a beautiful beach with OK snorkeling just offshore. Four specialty restaurants receive better-than-average reviews from guests.

Viva Wyndham Dominicus Beach (☎ 809-686-5658; www.vivaresorts.com; Playa Dominicus; r from US\$190; (P) (S) (A) (S)) This resort, the centerpiece of the enclave 5km east of Bayahibe, commands excellent beachfront property lined with thick, soft sand. Rooms with ocean views are pricier but well worth it – all have balconies. It's a typically sprawling property with several

pools, bars, a theater and a disco. There's a variety of specialty restaurants to choose from, even if the quality of the food gets mixed reviews. Next door is the sister resort, the Viva Wyndham Dominicus Palace (with the same contact and pricing details as Dominicus Beach), a step up in terms of room and food quality and the overall maintenance of the property. Pay attention to the location of your room since several buildings are located on the opposite side of the access road to the beach and may feel more like a stay at a retirement home community than a Caribbean beach holiday.

Eating

Bayahibe has a surprising number of good restaurants for a town of its size. Most offer relaxing waterfront seating and fresh seafood. Dominicus Americanus has a number of modern tourist-ready restaurants serving a mix of international standards and fish, though none has views.

Esperanza Grill (Bayahibe; mains US\$5-12; ☎ lunch & dinner) Nothing more than a charcoal oven and a few plastic tables, this restaurant nevertheless is a charming place for a meal. The friendly owner/chef/waitress grills up tasty meat and seafood dishes – surprisingly, it's best to make reservations for dinner.

Cafecito de la Cubana (Playa Bayahibe; mains US\$5-15; ☎ 9am-3pm & 6-11pm, closed Tue) One of several little kiosks set up around the parking lot and beach area in town, la Cubana is particularly charming and serves coffee and fruit drinks, sandwiches (US\$3.25) and more-substantial meat and fish mains (US\$8).

Restaurant El Eden (Dominicus Americanus; mains US\$6-15; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Attached to the Hotel Eden on the entrance road to the enclave, with nice outdoor dining area, wine selection, Caesar salad (US\$6), pasta, meat and fish dishes.

our pick **Mare Nostrum** (☎ 809-833-0055; Bayahibe; mains US\$9-25; ☎ lunch & dinner, closed Mon) A sophisticated and elegant restaurant, the Mare Nostrum's 2nd-floor location affords it beautiful nighttime views of the darkening water. Lanterns and tablecloths add a romantic ambience and the food is equal, offering excellent Italian dishes. Pastas are all homemade and the chef offers delicious daily specials – the shellfish is super fresh and the risotto just melts in your mouth. A good selection of wines is also offered.

Bamboo Beach Bar Restaurant & Grill (Bayahibe; mains US\$7-18; ☺ lunch & dinner), **La Bahía** (☎ 809-352-5098; Bayahibe; mains US\$8-18; ☺ lunch & dinner) and **La Punta** (☎ 809-833-0080; Bayahibe; mains US\$10-25; ☺ lunch & dinner) are three more excellent open-air eateries near the beach in town, serving freshly caught fish and shellfish.

Drinking

Our pick Barco Bar (☺ closed Thu) The aptly named boat-shaped bar can be found near the southern end of the dirt road that leads through Bayahibe proper. It generally opens in the afternoons, the best time for sunset views from the homemade tree house.

Big Sur (☺ nightly) Swiss-owned open-air disco located on the beach in Bayahibe proper. Friday nights, when the locals visit, are the best.

Super Colmado Bayahibe (☺ 7:30am-10pm Mon-Sat, 7:30am-7pm Sun) Town square, town bar and town grocery rolled into one, this *colmado* is where locals gather to talk, drink and listen to music all day long. Foreigners are welcome to pull up a stool and down a bottle or two of Presidente.

Getting There & Away

Gua-guas are the only means of public transportation to and from Bayahibe. **Servicio de Transporte Romana-Bayahibe** (☎ 809-833-0206) *gua-guas* leave from a stand of trees across from Super Colmado Bayahibe in the center of town, a block north of the Hotel Bayahibe near Super Colmado Bayahibe. Services run to La Romana (US\$1.50, 25 minutes, every 20 minutes from 6am to 7pm) and Higüey (US\$2, 40 minutes, irregular hours).

Sichotuhared (☎ 809-833-0059) is the local taxi union, with a stop in front of Viva Wyndham Dominican Beach. Rates are for one to five people and are for return trips: La Romana airport (US\$55), Casa de Campo (US\$60), Higüey (US\$65), and Bávaro resorts (US\$90). Be sure to agree upon a price before you get in the car.

To rent a car, look for the aptly named office for **Rent-A-Car** (☎ 809-258-9340) across from the Hotel Eden in Dominicanus Americanus.

BOCA DE YUMA

pop 2300

Off the beaten track in terms of mass tourism, Boca de Yuma is a ramshackle little town with rough, unpaved roads and half-finished

buildings, but also a quiet seaside promontory where waves crash dramatically into the rocky shore. At the far end of the ocean road the Río Yuma serves as the town border; several kilometers in the other direction is a cave with Taino paintings and further on the same road is an entrance to Parque Nacional del Este, the start of a good nature walk. Other than several restaurants, a hotel and a gas station just outside town, there are no services in Boca de Yuma.

Sights & Activities

Several kilometers west of town on the way toward the entrance of the national park is **Cueva de Berna** (☺ 7am-6pm; adult/child US\$3/0.75), a large cave with scattered Taino pictograms (and graffiti) and stalactite and stalagmite formations. A caretaker usually sits outside the entrance and will gladly accompany you up the rickety ladder and deep into the cave (a small gratuity is appreciated). To find the cave, follow the paved road that runs along the ocean wall west (away from the mouth of the river); you need no more than 15 minutes inside.

A few kilometers further west down the same road, past several ranches with grazing cows and horses, is the eastern entrance of **Parque Nacional del Este** (admission US\$3). A park ranger sleeps at the small cabin just past the gate, and should be around for much of the day, but there's little formality or information as few people enter here. A long easy-to-follow road hugs the coast for many kilometers and involves some hiking up a moderately steep slope to make it to the top of the rugged bluffs with beautiful views of the ocean. There is good bird-watching here if you're out early enough.

While **Playa Blanca** is a pretty, mostly deserted beach about 2km east of town on the other side of the river, the hassles of getting here may not make the trip worth it. The easiest and most expensive option is to hire a boat from one of the boatmen congregated at the mouth of the river at the east side of town (round-trip US\$40). One alternative is to have them ferry you to the other side of the river and walk to the beach; however, the path is hard to find and follow and the sharp rocks are a hazard. In theory it's possible to drive, with an SUV, but the nearest bridge is well upriver and the route also difficult to navigate.

A COUNTRY RETREAT IS KIND OF LIKE A FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH...

Outside the small town of San Rafael de Yuma, just east of the two-lane highway linking Higüey to Boca de Yuma, is a fine rural Dominican town surrounded by fields in all directions, with dirt roads. Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de León had a second residence built in the countryside near San Rafael del Yuma during the time he governed Higüey for the Spanish crown. Still standing nearly 500 years later, **Casa Ponce de León** (Ponce de León House; admission US\$1.40; ☺ 7am-5pm) is now a museum to this notorious character of the Spanish conquest.

Born in 1460, Ponce de León accompanied Christopher Columbus on his second voyage to the New World in 1494. In 1508 he conquered Boriquén (present-day Puerto Rico) and served as governor there from 1510 to 1512. While there, he heard rumors of an island north of Cuba called Bimini, which had a spring whose waters could reverse the aging process – the fabled fountain of youth. Setting off from Puerto Rico, Ponce de León reached the eastern coast of present-day Florida on 2 April 1513, Palm Sunday, and named it Pascua Florida (literally 'Flowery Easter'). He tried to sail around the peninsula, believing it to be an island, but after realizing his mistake he returned to Puerto Rico. When he resumed his quest eight years later, landing on Florida's western coast, he and his party were attacked by Indians. Wounded by an arrow, Ponce de León withdrew to Cuba, where he died shortly after landing.

The residence-turned-museum contains many original items belonging to Ponce de León, including his armor and much of his furniture. Also original are the candelabra and his bed; his coat of arms is carved into the headboard. Signs are in Spanish only.

There are no signs to the museum, oddly enough. If you have a car and are entering from the north, you'll encounter a fork in the road right past the police station. Bear left and then turn left onto a dirt road just before the cemetery (it's surrounded by a tall white wall). After almost 2km you'll see a long access road on your right with a boxy stone building at the end, which is the museum.

Sleeping & Eating

El Viejo Pirata (☎ 809-804-3151; nancy.felix@hotmail.com; Calle Duarte 1; r US\$18; ☺ ☎ ☎) Can a place be both forlorn and inviting at the same time? Somehow El Viejo Pirata, an Italian-owned hotel with eight clean modern rooms and the equal of many all-inclusive places, produces these contradictory feelings. Off the tourist trail, Boca del Yuma receives few overnight visitors, hence the sometimes low occupancy rate here, but the well-maintained pool and patio with good ocean views makes it feel like a well-kept secret.

Almost a dozen restaurants are lined up along the road overlooking the ocean. Two of the better ones, both with wonderful views, are **Restaurant La Bahía** (mains US\$6), owned and operated by a friendly Dominican family, and the Italian-owned **El Arponero** (☎ 809-292-9797; mains US\$5-8; ☺ lunch & dinner) in the center of town. The latter has pizza (US\$5) and pasta (US\$6) in addition to the grilled fish and seafood.

HIGÜEY

pop 151,000

Famous throughout the country for its giant concrete basilica, Higüey, which is

surrounded by a sea of sugarcane fields, is best visited as a day trip or as a stop along the way to points further north and south – in fact you're bound to end up here at some point traveling around the southeast. Thousands of Dominicans who work in the resorts around Bávaro and Punta Cana commute to this busy, concrete, traffic-clogged city daily.

Information

All of the internet places listed here operate as call centers as well.

Banco León (cnr Av Duarte & La Altagracia) Has an ATM.

Banco Popular (Calle Cleto Villavicencio) Has an ATM.

Cyber Station Internet (Av La Altagracia; per hr US\$1; ☺ 8am-10pm) Internet access.

Internet Center (Av La Altagracia; per hr US\$1.25;

☺ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun) Internet access.

Part of Plaza Barcelona, next to the Esso gas station.

Scotiabank (Calle Cleto Villavicencio) Has an ATM.

Spider Cíber Café (☎ 809-554-9903; Av La Altagracia; per hr US\$1; ☺ 9am-noon & 2-10:30pm) Internet access.

Sights

From the outside, the **Basilica de Nuestra Señora de la Altagracia** (☺ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8am-8pm Sun) is

a strange mixture of the sacred and profane. A utilitarian concrete façade, not far removed from a military bunker, is topped by an elongated arch reaching high into the sky. But it's one of the most famous cathedrals in the country because of the glass-encased image of the Virgin of Altigracia housed inside. According to the story, a sick child in Higüey was healed when an old man thought to be an Apostle asked for a meal and shelter at the city's original church, the **Iglesia San Dionisio** (cnr Calle Agustín Guerrero & T Reyes; ☎ varies). On departing the following day, he left a small print of Our Lady of Grace in a modest frame. Since that day the 16th-century image has been revered by countless devotees, upon whom the Virgin is said to have bestowed miraculous cures. Originally housed in the handsome Iglesia San Dionisio, the image of the Virgin has been venerated in the basilica since the mid-1950s. Designed by Frenchmen Pierre Dupré and Dovnoyer de Segonzac, and completed in 1956, the long interior walls consist mostly of bare concrete and approach each other as they rise, connecting at a rounded point directly over the center aisle. The entire wall opposite the front door consists of stained glass and is quite beautiful, especially in the late afternoon when the sunshine casts honey-colored shadows across the floor.

Festivals & Events

Thousands of people travel to Basilica de Nuestra Señora de la Altigracia in a moving and intense homage to the Virgin every January 21. Pilgrims, dressed in their finest, file past the Virgin's image, seeking miracles and giving thanks. The church's bells chime loudly throughout the day.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Don Carlos (☎ 809-554-2344; cnr Calle Juan Ponce de León at Sánchez; r old/new bldg US\$28/35; P ♿) Only a block west from the basilica, Don Carlos is a maze of rooms. It's friendly and professional, but deserving of only a night when passing through. Ask to stay in the newer annex, whose rooms are clean, large and modern; rooms in the older building are cramped and dark. A restaurant (mains US\$5 to US\$8; open for breakfast, lunch and dinner) is attached, serving large portions of Dominican dishes.

Restaurant Doña Esmerelda (☎ 809-554-7432; Av La Altigracia; mains US\$5-15; ☎ lunch & dinner) Unlike the

causal snack shacks and bars lining the median, this open-air restaurant has an elegant ambience, with tablecloths and silverware and uniformed wait staff. Lobster (US\$15), paella (US\$18) and less-expensive fare like pasta (US\$5) and fish (US\$7) are on the menu.

El Meson de Cervantes (☎ 809-554-2506; Av Labuna Llana; mains US\$8-15; ☎ lunch & dinner) Spanish themed to the hilt, El Meson de Cervantes has the brick walls, vaulted doorways and bullfighting posters expected in every Madrid knock-off. One of the nicer places to eat in town despite only ordinary Dominican and international dishes, this restaurant was also a piano bar in its glory days – an unused electronic keyboard still sits forlornly in the corner.

Blue Rain Restaurant (☎ 809-554-3016; 2nd fl, Plaza Barcelona, Av La Altigracia; mains US\$6-20; ☎ lunch & dinner) Higüey and sushi aren't often used in the same sentence, but Blue Rain delivers. On the 2nd floor of a mini plaza a few blocks from the cathedral, this modern restaurant does Japanese specials, including a wide variety of sushi rolls (US\$6) and sashimi (US\$5). An even larger number of international and Dominican dishes like pasta al mare (US\$7), baby back ribs (US\$18) and a New York strip steak (US\$16) are on the menu.

Mercado Municipal (Av de la Libertad btwn Guerrero del Rosario & Las Carreras; ☎ 7am-3pm) is a crowded market, packed to the gills with people and vendors selling mostly fresh fruits and vegetables.

There is also a number of snack shacks and bars with tables on the first several blocks of Av La Altigracia's leafy median, east of the basilica. You can get sandwiches, empanadas and other light fare, plus beer, soda or juices. Great place for a drink.

Getting There & Away

Gua-guas to Santo Domingo (US\$4.25, 2½ hours, every 15 minutes from 4:30am to 7:30pm) leave from a large busy terminal on Av Laguna Llana at Colón.

For Samaná take a *gua-gua* to Hato Mayor (US\$4, 2½ hours, every hour from 4:40am to 8pm) or El Seibo (US\$1.75, one hour, every 20 minutes from 4:30am to 8pm) and transfer to the bus for Sabana de la Mar, where there are ferries across the bay. Buses for Hato Mayor and El Seibo use the same stop on Av La Altigracia at Av Laguna Llana. Be sure to tell the driver that you are planning to connect to another bus, as they will often drop you right at the next terminal.

Gua-guas to Bávaro and Punta Cana (US\$2, 1½ hours, every 15 minutes from 4:55am to 10pm; express air-con service US\$3, 1¼ hours, every hour at the top of the hour) and Miches (US\$2.75, 2½ hours, every 30 minutes from 5am to 6:20pm) leave from two side-by-side terminals on Av de la Libertad past Calle Luperón.

PUNTA CANA TO SABANA DE LA MAR

BÁVARO & PUNTA CANA

Ground zero of DR tourism. The epicenter of the all-inclusive resort. Where buffet items seem to outnumber grains of sand. If you were to tell a Dominican anywhere in the world that you visited their country, this is where they would assume you came. Deservedly popular because its beaches do rival those anywhere else in the Caribbean, both in terms of their soft, white texture and their warm aquamarine waters, a trip here nevertheless involves as much a love for swim-up pool bars and rubbing suntanned elbows with likeminded people. Over 24,000 hotel rooms from Punta Cana to El Macao, with more on the way, are crowding out the impressively tall coconut trees that fringe the shoreline. Punta Cana, shorthand for the region as a whole, is actually somewhat of a misnomer. The majority of resorts are scattered around the beaches of Bávaro, really nothing more than a series of small commercial plazas, and Cortecito, a short strip of shops along a 'town beach.' Punta Cana (Grey-Haired Point), the easternmost tip of the country and where the airport is located, has some of the more luxurious resorts and Caribbean-hugging golf courses.

Orientation

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

The area known as Plaza Bávaro is the largest, an open-air square surrounded with shops selling the same cheap Haitian paintings and kitschy souvenirs, several high-end cigar and jewelry shops, money exchanges

and a Banco Popular. In addition there are one or two bars/snack shops in the middle.

West of Plaza Bávaro you'll come across two more small commercial centers – Plaza Las Brisas with a bank, gym and two good restaurants, and Plaza Riviera/Estrella – before reaching an intersection with a gas station and the main bus terminal and police station.

Punta Cana actually refers to the area just east and south of the airport. It's much more isolated than Bávaro as there is really only one coastal road, which eventually peters out further south and doesn't connect with the highway to Higüey. There are few services here and no towns in the immediate area. At the time of research there were several new roads being paved, which may make this area more accessible or at least ease the traffic between Punta Cana and Bávaro.

Information

EMERGENCY

Politur (tourist police; ☎ 809-686-8227) There are 24-hour stations next to the bus terminal in Bávaro and at Plaza Bolera in Punta Cana.

INTERNET & TELEPHONE

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

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

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

LAUNDRY

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

MEDICAL SERVICES

All-inclusive hotels have small on-site clinics and medical staff, who can provide first aid and basic care. Head to one of several good private hospitals in the area for more serious issues.

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

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

Farmacia El Manglar (☎ 809-552-1533; Plaza Punta Cana, Bávaro; ☎ 8am-midnight) Offers free delivery service to local hotels (until 10pm).

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

Hospitén Bávaro (☎ 809-686-1414; bavaro@hospiten.com; btwn airport & turnoff to Bávaro) Best private hospital in Punta Cana, with English-, French- and German-speaking doctors and a 24-hour emergency room. The hospital is located on the road to Punta Cana, 500m from the turnoff to Bávaro.

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

MONEY

Almost every major Dominican bank has at least one branch in the Bávaro area. All of the following have ATMs.

Banco BHD (Plaza Caney 1, Bávaro)

Banco Popular (Plaza Bávaro, Bávaro; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri)

Banco Progreso El Cortecito (inside El Cortecito supermarket; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat; Plaza Bolera, Punta Cana (☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri)

Scotiabank (Plaza Las Brisas, Bávaro; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat)

Sights

BEACHES

Superlatives describing the beaches here are banded about like free drinks at a pool bar, but they're mostly deserved; keep in mind, however, that the best pieces of property have been claimed by developers and are either already occupied by all-inclusives and condos or will be in the near future. This means you will not be alone. In fact, you will be part of a beach-lounging crowd.

Public access is ingrained in the law, so you can stroll from less-exclusive parts like **Playa El Cortecito**, which tends to be crowded with vendors, to nicer spots in front of resorts – but without the proper color wrist bracelet you won't be able to get a towel or chair. Playa El Cortecito is a good place to **parasail** (12-15min US\$40), though, or to find a boat operator to take you fishing or snorkeling.

North of El Cortecito is **Playa Arena Gorda**, lined with all-inclusive resorts and their guests, many topless, riding around on banana boats, parasailing or just soaking in the sun. A further 9km north of here is **Playa del Macao**, a gorgeous stretch of beach best reached by car. It's also a stop-off for a slew of ATV (All-Terrain Vehicle)

tours that tear up and down the beach every day – there's less noise at the far northern end of the beach. Roco Ki, a massive new resort development in the area, is scheduled to open in winter or spring 2009.

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

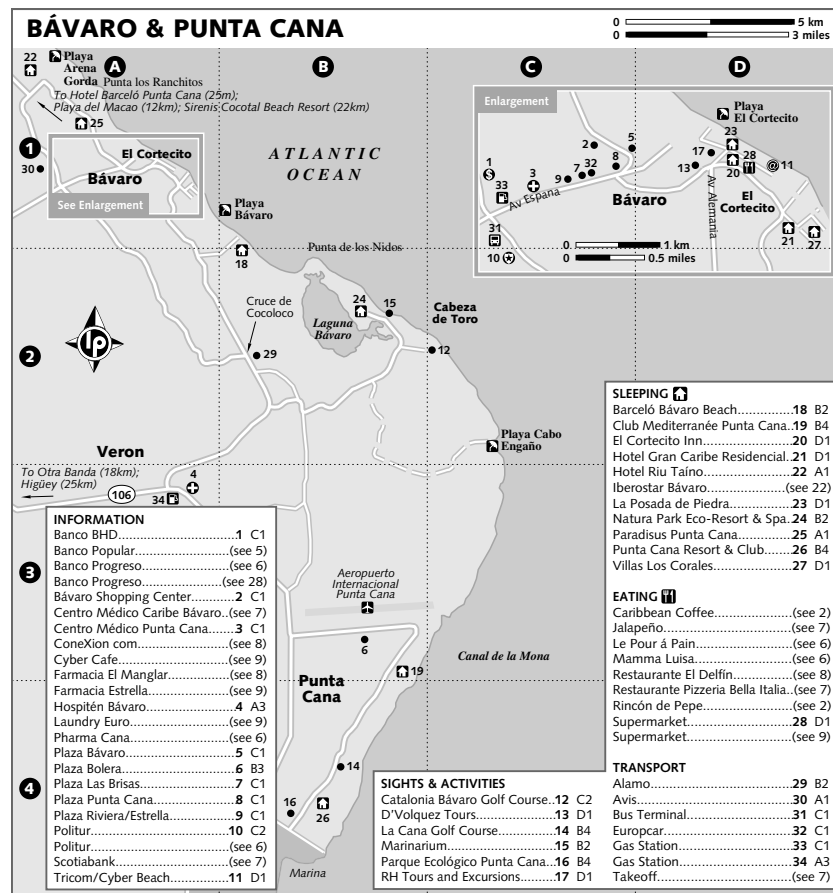
PUNTA CANA ECOLOGICAL PARK

Though development may eventually cover every inch of the Dominican coastline, for now there are still large areas of pristine coastal plains and mangrove forests. A half-kilometer south of Punta Cana Resort and Club, the **Punta Cana Ecological Park** (☎ 809-959-8483; www.puntacana.org; ☎ 8am-4pm) covers almost 8 sq km of protected coastal and inland habitat and is home to some 80 bird species, 160 insect species and 500 plant species. Visitors can take very worthwhile 90-minute **guided tours** (adult/child US\$10/5) taken in English, French, German or Spanish through a lush 18-hectare portion of the reserve known as Parque Ojos Indígenas (Indigenous Eyes Park), so named for its 11 freshwater lagoons all fed by an underground river that flows into the ocean. The tour also includes a visit to the park's botanical and fruit gardens, iguana farm (part of a breeding program) and a farm-animal petting zoo. The visitor center has a great collection of insects that was compiled by entomology students from Harvard, and interesting maps and photos of the area. One or two-hour **horseback riding tours** (US\$20/30) through the park and along the coast can also be arranged with advance notice. The park is operated by the Punta Cana Ecological Foundation, a nonprofit foundation created in 1994 that works to protect the area's ecosystems – including 8km of coral reef along the reserve's shoreline – and to promote sustainable tourism and hotel practices. Nearly 4 hectares of the reserve are dedicated to the Cornell biodiversity laboratory, a joint project with other American universities to inventory and study native plants, birds and insects. Unfortunately, there is no hotel pickup service; a cab here will cost around US\$25 each way from Bávaro or El Cortecito.

Activities

WATERSPORTS

Virtually every water activity is available but some involve a long commute to the actual



site. Every hotel has a tour desk offering snorkeling, diving and boat trips to destinations such as Isla Saona. Parasailing is done from the beach all over Punta Cana and Bávaro. A popular family outing is a snorkeling trip to the **Marinarium** (www.marinarium.com; adult/2-12yr US\$72/36), a natural offshore pool near Cabeza de Toro, which is arguably more ecofriendly than other excursions. Rays, nurse sharks, tropical fish and patches of coral are all on hand.

GOLF

La Cana Golf Course (☎ 809-959-2262; www.puntacana.com; Punta Cana Resort & Club, Punta Cana; ☎ 7:30am-6pm) is Punta Cana's top golf course and is located at the area's top resort. The 18-hole course,

designed by Pete Dye, has several long par fives and stunning ocean views. Green fees are guest/nonguest US\$115/156 for 18 holes or guest/nonguest US\$71/96 for nine, including a golf cart. Club rental is US\$30 for 18 holes or US\$18 for nine, and golf cart costs US\$40 per round. A new Tom Fazio–designed course is scheduled to open in summer 2008.

Nearby **Cap Cana** (☎ 809-955-9501; www.capcana.com; Punta Cana), the site of an enormous development project in the works, has three Jack Nicklaus Signature golf courses already complete and open for play (greens fees June to October US\$220, November to May US\$320).

If you'd like to get in a round but La Cana is too upmarket, the **Catalonia Bávaro Resort** (☎ 809-412-0000; Cabeza de Toro; ☎ 8:30am-5pm) has a

DOWN UNDER IN THE DR

For something down'n'dirty, check out **Cueva Fun Fun** (☎ 809-553-2812; www.cuevafunfun.com; Rancho Capote, Calle Duarte 12, Barrio Puerto Rico, Hato Mayor; adult/child US\$106/55), which runs spelunking trips to one of the largest cave systems in the entire Caribbean. The day includes a horseback ride, a walk through a lush forest, a 20m abseil and 2km walk through the cave, which involves a good deal of splashing and splashing in the underground river. Breakfast is provided, as is the equipment, including boots, harness, crash helmet and colorful jumper outfits – the overall effect is of a group of disposable extras for a James Bond baddie in a missile silo. Trips are generally booked as groups from hotels in the Bávaro/Punta Cana area, a 2½-hour drive away, but singles or small groups can piggyback on with enough advance notice.

decent nine-hole par-three course that costs US\$45 for one round and US\$60 for two. Carts are US\$25 for 18 holes and US\$20 for nine, and club rental just US\$10.

Tours

Every resort has a separate tour desk that can arrange all variety of trips, from snorkeling and deep-sea fishing to the popular Isla Soana trip. A handful of locals set up on El Cortecito beach offer 2½-hour **snorkel trips** (per person US\$20-25) and 2-hour **glass-bottom boat rides** (per person US\$25-30) to a nearby reef. Most also offer **deep-sea fishing trips** (min 4 people, per person US\$80-90) for marlin, tuna, wahoo and barracuda. There are a few kiosks near the north end of the beach, although the odds are that you'll be approached by touts as soon as you set foot in town and on the beach.

If you're looking to explore the region, **D'Volquez Tours** (☎ 809-552-1861, 809-776-3823; www.dvolquez.com; El Cortecito) and **RH Tours & Excursions** (☎ 809-552-1425; www.rhtours.com; El Cortecito; ☎ 9am-7pm) both offer a number of decent day trips for tourists. Popular excursions include exploring Parque Nacional Los Haitises (US\$88), boat trips to Isla Saona (US\$79) and tours of Santo Domingo's Zona Colonial (US\$58). Most trips include lunch and drinks. English, German and French are spoken.

Bávaro Runners (☎ 809-466-1122; www.bavaro.runners.com; adult/children US\$85/43) offers all-day trips taking in a sugarcane plantation, cigar museum, beach and horseback riding (price includes lunch and drinks).

For a bird's-eye view of the area, **Helidosa** (☎ 809-732-8809; www.helidosa.com; Aeropuerto Internacional La Isabela) offers sightseeing trips from 10 minutes (per person US\$74) to 40 minutes (per person US\$289).

Sleeping

For resorts in the area, walk-in-guests are about as common as snowstorms; if you can convince the suspicious security guards that your intentions are innocent and make it to the front desk, you'll be quoted rates that absolutely nobody staying at the resort is paying. Book all-inclusive vacations online or through a travel agent, as they can offer discounts of up to 50% off rack rates. Bear in mind that most resorts cater to a particular niche, whether it's families, honeymooners, golfers or the spring break crowd. For help on your decision, see p244.

BÁVARO

Hotel Barceló Punta Cana (☎ 809-476-7777; www.barcelopuntacana.com; Playa Arena Gorda; r from US\$150; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Ideally located at the end of a strip of all-inclusive places, but only a short drive from the commercial plazas of Bávaro, this resort, also known as Barceló Premium, is a good choice considering the reasonable rates. Catering to a mix of young families and singles, the Premium exudes a Club Med-like atmosphere – 'activity specialists' glide around on Segways and lead get-to-know-one-another games on the beach. There's a climbing wall, trapeze and tennis courts for the active, plus a big casino complex was in the works when we were there. Some of the bathrooms of this huge complex could stand an update, but the rooms are comfortable nevertheless – each has a balcony. Wireless internet access is US\$10 per day. Don't confuse this place with the several other Barceló resorts in the area. Note also that it's not in Punta Cana, despite the name.

Natura Park Eco-Resort & Spa (☎ 809-221-2626; www.blau-hotels.com; Cabeza de Toro; d per person US\$150; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Located midway between Bávaro and Punta Cana, Natura Park has a

narrow beach outside the village of Cabeza de Toro. This is an isolated area nowhere near as busy as El Cortecito and Bávaro, so not the best choice for people looking to hop in and out of different resort clubs at night. Egrets and flamingos wander the property, which has won awards for its efforts to reduce its environmental impact. Large glass doors open out onto balconies or terraces. The pool is a bit small, but the beach quite nice.

Several other recommended resorts include the **Paradisus Punta Cana** (☎ 809-687-9923; www.solmelia.com; Playa de Bávaro; d US\$275; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎), which attracts singles as well as families – topless sunbathing is not uncommon and there's an 'action park' with batting cages, archery and a climbing wall for kids. A sister golf and country club is only a few minutes away. The **Iberostar Bávaro** (☎ 809-221-6500; www.iberostar.com; Playa Bávaro; d US\$195; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) is a large complex popular with Europeans. While the nightly entertainment is reminiscent of high-school musical productions, there's no denying the beauty of the crystal-clear water and immaculate grounds. For those who truly crave size and choice in terms of food, try the **Barceló Bávaro Beach** (☎ 809-686-5797; www.barcelobavaro.beach.com; Playa Bávaro; d per person US\$110; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎), part of a complex of five all-inclusive resorts with more than a dozen restaurants and grills, 18 bars, a casino and two dance clubs. The Barceló Bávaro Beach has a party vibe, which for some may excuse its relatively small and ordinary rooms.

While the rooms at the **Hotel Rio Taíno** (☎ 809-221-2290; www.riu.com; Punta Arena Gorda; d per person US\$120-180; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) are showing their age and the buffet food is less than stellar, the grounds themselves and the beach are top quality. Same goes for the **Sirenis Cocotal Beach Resort** (☎ 809-688-6490; www.sirenishotels.com; Playa de Uvero Alto; d from US\$150; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎), which tends to have a windier beach than others and, while not exactly unusual for all-inclusives, only early risers get beach chairs here.

PUNTA CANA

Even though it's commonly used as shorthand for the vacation area of the southeast, Punta Cana only has a few resorts, though all of them are upscale. Keep in mind that if you stay here, you are definitely not within walking distance of much else.

Club Mediterranée Punta Cana (☎ 809-686-5500; www.clubmed.com; Punta Cana; d per person US\$125-240;

☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) The Club Med brand is identifiable the world over. You get young, enthusiastic international staff and activities galore; it's especially good for parents looking to outsource care for their kids and teenagers. The Ramp is a new two-story lounge area for 14- to 17-year olds, with foosball, skateboarding, inline skating – a hangout where parents aren't allowed. Parents can snorkel, kayak, windsurf, waterski, play tennis etc. Neither the rooms nor the food is spectacular – and pay attention to room location, since it's a big property and you can feel stranded in some parts.

Punta Cana Resort & Club (☎ 809-959-2262; www.puntacana.com; Punta Cana; d incl breakfast US\$140; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Famous for its part-time residents like Julio Iglesias, Oscar de la Renta and Mikhail Baryshnikov, this resort is also notable for its environmental efforts, especially the associated ecological park across the street from the entrance to the resort. Newly opened Tortuga Bay, an enclave of 15 luxurious villas, is part of the main resort property of 60 sq km and 400 rooms. Three-story buildings line a beautiful beach and there are nine restaurants to choose from, though unlike the typical resort lunch, dinner and drinks aren't included in rates. It's a low-key resort for people happier to read a book on the beach rather than do aqua-aerobics to loud disco music in the pool.

RESORT ALTERNATIVES

La Posada de Piedra (☎ 809-221-0754; www.laposadade.piedra.com; El Cortecito; r with/without bathroom US\$45/25) The only budget accommodation with a beachfront location, this privately owned stone house is smack in the middle of busy Cortecito. Those with only primitive needs will be happy in one of the two primitive beachfront cabanas – expect little quiet during the day and a fairly dark room at night. Inside the owner's home are two comfortable rooms with private bathrooms and a shared balcony with views of the ocean. There's no common space inside, as the first floor is basically a souvenir shop and office. Breakfast, drinks and sandwiches are served at a few small tables set up on the street in front of the house.

Hotel Gran Caribe Residencial (☎ 809-552-1039; www.grancaribe.it, in Italian; Playa Bávaro; s/d incl breakfast from US\$45/90; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Advertised as a boutique hotel, the Gran Caribe boasts none of the luxury or attention to detail implicit in

that description. The small rooms are plain if comfortable and the modest pool area is pleasant enough. It's a good choice for those seeking some quiet. Guests can use the facilities at a local beach club just 150m away free of charge

El Cortecito Inn (☎ 809-552-0639; cortecitoinn@codetel.net.do; s/d incl breakfast US\$55/60; (P) (♿) (♿)) A forlorn, lonely looking complex across the street from the beach in El Cortecito, this hotel nevertheless is one of the few independent, reasonably priced choices in the area. There are some loyalists who apparently aren't bothered by the service without a smile, the aging furniture or the unlandscaped concrete pool area. The complimentary buffet breakfast is rather uninspiring.

Villas Los Corales (☎ 809-221-0801; www.los-corales-villas.com; Playa Bávaro; r US\$115; (P) (♿) (♿)) This small Italian-owned development has none of the grandiose ambitions of the nearby all-inclusives to be all things to all people. For those seeking more modest surroundings and a community feel, Los Corales will do. Of the 30 or so apartments, all have small private patios and balconies, and private kitchenettes; some have ocean-front views. There's an Italian restaurant, bar and small swimming pool, and it has its own 'beach club' – basically another restaurant and bar. Weekly and monthly rates are available.

Eating & Drinking

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

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

Mamma Luisa (☎ 809-959-2013; Punta Cana Shopping Mall; mains US\$8-15; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Though the setting resembles any mini-mall USA, this friendly restaurant serves up excellent Italian meat, fish and pasta dishes – the paella for two (US\$35) is recommended. Checkerboard tablecloths, formally clad waiters and an extensive wine collection allow Mamma's to rise above its location a half-kilometer west of the airport.

For light and casual fare like salads, wraps and crepes try **Caribbean Coffee** (Bávaro Shopping Center, Bávaro; mains US\$9-14; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner). Around the corner is **Rincón de Pepe** (☎ 809-552-0603; Bávaro Shopping Center, Bávaro; mains US\$8-15; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat), for tasty Spanish dishes – the paella (US\$23 for two) comes in seafood, rabbit, beef and chicken varieties. **Restaurante El Delfín** (Plaza Punta Cana, Bávaro; mains US\$5-10; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) is popular with Dominicans and serves fish, chicken and meat dishes with rice, beans and a side of loud music. For ersatz Mexican cuisine à la Tex-Mex and interpretations of fajitas and enchiladas head to **Jalapeño** (☎ 809-552-1033; Plaza Las Brisas, Bávaro; mains US\$8-12; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) and its open-air dining area. **Restaurante Pizzeria Bella Italia** (☎ 809-552-0493; Plaza Las Brisas, Bávaro; mains US\$5-15; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner, closed Tue) definitely cooks up better pies than you'll find at your hotel's buffet.

The two best supermarkets are in plazas right next to each other: Plaza Riviera and Plaza Estrella. There's another supermarket, open from 9am to 9pm, in El Cortecito.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Several massive thatched-roof huts make up the complex of the Aeropuerto Internacional Punta Cana, located on the road to Punta Cana about 9km east of the turnoff to Bávaro. The arrival process, including immigration, purchase of a tourist card (US\$10), baggage claim and customs, moves briskly.

American Airlines (☎ 809-959-2420), **Air France** (☎ 809-959-3002) and **LAN** (☎ 809-959-0144) all have offices at the airport. Other airlines serving the Punta Cana airport include US Airways, Air Canada, Air France, Continental, Northwest, Corsair, LTU, Iberworld and USA3000. See the Transportation chapter (p352) for airlines information.

For domestic air connections, the airline/travel agency **Takeoff** (☎ 809-552-1333; www.takeoffweb.com; Plaza Las Brisas; ☎ 6am-8pm) has daily direct flights on 10- and 19-seat planes between Punta Cana and Santo Domingo (8:45am, one way \$115), El Portillo (Samaná; 8:45am, one way \$115) and La Romana (one way \$23). It also serves Puerto Plata via Romana (one way \$170) and El Catey (Samaná; one way \$170) via Santo Domingo.

There is a Banco Progreso ATM located in the arrivals area, as well as a **Codetel Centro de Comunicaciones** (☎ 809-688-1153; internet per hr US\$2;

☎ 8am-6pm). None of the international rental car agencies have booths here; a representative will pick you up upon arrival if reservations are made in advance – otherwise you may have a long wait.

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

BUS

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

Expreso Santo Domingo Bávaro (☎ 809-552-1678); Santo Domingo (Map p77; ☎ 809-682-9670; cnr Juan Sánchez Ruiz & Máximo Gómez) has direct first-class service between Bávaro and the capital (US\$9, four hours), with a stop in La Romana. Departure times in both directions are 7am, 10am, 2pm and 4pm.

Also at the same terminal is Expreso Romana, with departures to La Romana at 8am and 4pm (US\$4.75). To all other destinations, take a local bus (marked Sitrabapu) to Higüey and transfer there. (You can also get to/from Santo Domingo this way, but it's much slower than the direct bus.) *Caliente* buses to Higüey leave Bávaro's main terminal (US\$2.50, 1½ hours, every 20 minutes from 5am to 9pm), as does the express service (US\$3, 1¼ hours, every hour from 3am to 9pm).

If you have questions, keep in mind that the terminal office is only open from 6:30am to 4pm (and is closed noon to 1pm for lunch).

Getting Around

Local buses start at the main bus terminal, passing all the outdoor malls on the way to El Cortecito, then turn down the coastal road past the large hotels to Cruce de Cocoloco, where they turn around and return the same way. Buses have the drivers' union acronym – Sitrabapu – printed in front and cost US\$0.75. They are supposed to pass every 15 to 30 minutes, but can sometimes take up to an hour.

Daytime traffic is sometimes gridlocked between the resorts clustered just north of Bávaro and El Cortecito. Despite the stop-and-go pace of driving, renting a car for a day or two is recommended if you prefer to see the surrounding area independently. Consider

paying more for extra insurance coverage, especially if you'll be driving north toward Playa Limón, Miches and Sabana de la Mar. Some agencies allow you to drop off the car in Santo Domingo, usually for an extra charge, but check in advance. Rental agencies include **Avis** (☎ 809-688-1354; Plaza Caney, Carr Arena Gorda), **Europcar** (☎ 809-686-2861; near Plaza Punta Cana, Bávaro) and **Alamo** (☎ 809-466-1083; Carr Bávaro Km 5).

Otherwise, there are numerous taxis in the area – look for stands at El Cortecito, Plaza Bávaro and at the entrance of most all-inclusive places. You can also call a cab – try **Sitratatural taxi** (☎ 809-221-2741) or **Arena Gorda taxi** (☎ 809-552-0786). Fares vary depending on distance, but are typically from US\$5 (pretty much minimum charge on a short trip within Bávaro) to US\$35 (to the airport). Water taxis also can be found on El Cortecito beach and cost between US\$10 and US\$50 per ride. *Motoconchos* congregate around Plaza Punta Cana in Bávaro and along the beach road in El Cortecito, and you can generally find one or two parked in front of the entrance to most resorts. Fares, while negotiable (US\$2 to US\$4 from El Cortecito to Bávaro), are always cheaper than taxis but the ride can be uncomfortable over long distances and at night.

PLAYA LIMÓN

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

The rugged area surrounding Playa Limón has two important wetland areas, including **Laguna Limón**, a serene freshwater body of water surrounded by grassy wetlands and coastal mangroves. The lagoon feeds into the ocean on the eastern end of Playa Limón and is known for bird-watching; tours are organized by Rancho La Cueva (p138). The other lagoon – Laguna Redonda – is just 5km away, but is more commonly visited from Punta El Rey.

Sleeping & Eating

Our pick **Rancho La Cueva** (☎ 809-470-0876; www.lacuevalimon.com; r US\$30; (P) (Q)) Horses roam this rural property surrounded by a lush palm-tree forest and a short walk from an isolated beach. But despite its out-of-the-way feel, this hotel 3km down a dirt road at the eastern end of El Cedro, doesn't lack in terms of modern convenience – it even has a strong wi-fi signal throughout. The eight large spick-and-span rooms are sparsely furnished and what furniture there is tends to be fairly fragile (beds excluded). An open-air restaurant hosts daily tour groups for a seafood buffet, but breakfast and dinner are more simple affairs – guests need to check in advance to see what's available. The hotel can arrange a trip that includes a visit to a cockfighting *gallera*, a coffee plantation, a ride in the mountains, seafood buffet and a boat ride across the lagoon for US\$60 per person.

Harley's Heaven (☎ 809-476-8682; www.lagunalimon.com; r US\$30, 2-/4-person apt US\$40/50; (P) (Q)) Located directly above and behind Rancho La Cueva, this is another excellent option. Harley's friendly German owner is a good host and will arrange meals for groups with advance notice; otherwise there's no regular dining area as yet. One of the buildings is perched on a hill with a makeshift outdoor gym – well, three pieces of equipment – and great views of the area, and the other has a bar. All of the rooms, whether the hotel style ones or apartments with basic kitchenettes (refrigerator, hotplate, dining table) are immaculate, well kept and have satellite TV.

Getting There & Away

The road to Playa Limón, though severely potholed in parts, is empty and passes through beautiful scenery. From Higuëy or other parts south, take Hwy 104 until you reach the very eastern edge of El Cedro. Head north on a rough dirt road (an SUV is recommended, especially after a heavy rain) – look for the sign reading 'Ecoturismo Playa Laguna de Limón' and painted with a beach scene. The hotels are about 3km down this road and the beach only another half-kilometer.

Keep in mind that the only gas station between Otra Banda (the start of Hwy 104) and Miches is in the town of Lagunas de Nisibón. From Playa Limón it's only 27km to Miches, about a 35-minute drive in your own vehicle.

Gua-guas running between Higuëy (US\$2, two hours) and Miches (US\$1, 30 minutes) also stop in El Cedro every 30 minutes from 5:30am to 6pm. If arriving, be sure to let the driver know that you want to get off in El Cedro; it's easy to miss.

A *motoconcho* from town should cost around US\$1.50, though this is far from comfortable, especially if you're carrying luggage.

PUNTA EL REY

Robinson Crusoe would feel at home here. The beach follows the curve of a large round bay east of Miches and a grassy point at the eastern end is Punta El Rey proper. Around the corner is a basic nipa-palm hut where tour groups visiting Laguna Redondo stop for lunch and a break usually between 10:30am and 3:30pm.

Punta El Rey, a worthwhile detour between Playa Limón and Miches, isn't the easiest to find. To get here from El Cedro, continue driving east on Hwy 104 towards Miches. Look for a sign on the right reading 'Playa Costa Esmerelda' just before the eastern edge of the small barrio La Mina de Miches. Take this turnoff and continue for 2km until you reach a fork; go left and after 3km more there's an intersection, where you take a right. After another 4km of very rough road, past a ranch with signposts cautioning you not to continue because you're on private property (if there is a guard on hand he'll be happy to wave you through), you finally reach Punta El Rey.

MICHES

pop 9200

From the surrounding hills, Miches, on the southern shore of the Bahía de Samaná, is fairly picturesque. A slim 50m-high radio tower marks the geographic center of what appear to be well-ordered streets, and Playa Miches, just east of the town proper, looks inviting. Upon closer inspection, however, it's a fairly tumbledown place and the beach, though long and wide, is not very attractive. The water isn't good for swimming, mainly because the Río Yaguada empties into the ocean here. Miches sometimes makes national headlines as the launching point for Dominicans hoping to enter the USA illegally, via the Mona Passage to Puerto Rico.

Orientation

From Playa Limón, Hwy 104 descends to a bayside basin floor where it crosses a short

bridge. On the other side of the bridge is *la bomba* – literally 'the pump.' This is the local gas station and the terminal for *gua-guas* heading to and from Higuëy. If you're driving, take the next right and an immediate left to get onto the main west-bound street; at the end is the terminal for *gua-guas* to and from Sabana de la Mar. Shortly past here is a sign and turnoff for El Seibo, San Pedro de Macoris and Santo Domingo; at the top of the hill the rutted roadway turns into smooth blacktop. If you continue past this turnoff there is a sign indicating the road to Hotel La Loma on the left. Ignoring both turnoffs and continuing west out of town will take you to Sabana de la Mar – the mostly dirt road is in extremely poor condition. SUV is highly recommended.

Information

BanReservas (cnr Calle Fernando Deligne & Gral Santana; ☎ 9:30am-3pm Mon-Fri) is at the western end of town, one block south of Calle Mella; there's an ATM accessible 24 hours. **Banco Agrícola** (☎ 8:30am-4pm), a fairly primitive affair, is two blocks north of Calle Mella and can change cash and traveler's checks in a pinch.

International calls can be made from **Codetel Centro de Comunicaciones** (Calle Mella; ☎ 8am-7pm).

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel La Loma (☎ 809-553-5562; fax 809-553-5564; Miches; s/d US\$40/50; (P) (Q) (R)) Perched atop a hill at the end of an incredibly steep driveway, Hotel La Loma has commanding views of the city and bay below. It's a convenient place to stop for the night on your way to Sabana de la Mar, and it's certainly the best place to stay in town. Room furnishings are simple and old (wicker chairs, a single piece of Haitian art) but they're large and have equally spectacular views. There's a small pool, though it's buffeted by strong winds. Open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, the restaurant (mains US\$4 to US\$10) serves very mediocre food, not to mention weak coffee, but you can get a workman-like interpretation of spaghetti, steak or fish.

Getting There & Away

Gua-guas to Higuëy (US\$4, 2½ hours, every 30 minutes from 5am to 5:30pm) leave from a terminal at the Isla gas station at the east end of town just before the bridge. The terminal for *gua-guas* going to and from Sabana de la Mar (US\$2.50, 1¼ hours, every 25 minutes

from 6:55am to 6pm) is at the western edge of town.

If you are simply passing through town, whether from Sabana de la Mar to Higuëy or vice versa, let the driver know you want to catch an onward bus and he will most likely drop you at the next terminal, saving you a *motoconcho* or taxi ride between the two.

An SUV is absolutely necessary to continue west to Sabana de la Mar in your own vehicle.

SABANA DE LA MAR

pop 14,800

The literal and figurative end of the road, this small, ramshackle and largely forgotten town is the gateway to Parque Nacional Los Haitises. However, until the roadways in the area are improved, especially Hwy 104 east to Miches, Sabana will continue to miss out on sharing a slice of the economic pie from the growing number of tourists visiting the bay for whale-watching and Los Haitises tours. Sabana is the departure point for the passenger ferry across the bay to Samaná, as well as for the dangerous Mona passage crossing to Puerto Rico, the first stop for many Dominicans hoping to make their way to the US.

Orientation

Hwy 103 from Hato Mayor descends from the hills straight into Sabana de la Mar, turning into Calle Duarte, the main street, and eventually bumping right into the pier where the Samaná ferry leaves and arrives. The road from Miches intersects with the Higuëy highway just outside (south) of town. *Gua-guas* to Miches, Hato Mayor, El Seibo, Higuëy and Santo Domingo all congregate at or near that intersection. The turnoff to Caño Hondo and Parque Nacional Los Haitises is a short distance north of the Miches intersection – look for a large sign pointing west. There's a gas station 2km south of town on the road to Hato Mayor.

Information

Sabana de la Mar is a small town with relatively few services. **BanReservas** (Calle Duarte; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) is three blocks south of the ferry pier and has an ATM. **Codetel Centro de Comunicaciones** (Calle Duarte; ☎ 8am-10pm), two blocks south of the southernmost roundabout in town, offers international telephone service.

Tours

Brigado Verde (☎ 809-232-8121; bvsabana@yahoo.com) is a guide association that runs boat and walking tours of Parque Nacional Los Haitises that typically last 3½ hours and include sailing around land formations and through mangroves, exploring Taino caves and relaxing on the beach. The cost per person is US\$35 for four or more people, or US\$45 per person for smaller groups. **Whale-watching** trips also are offered between January 15 and March 15 (see boxed text, p148). The cost per person is US\$60 for a group of four or more, and US\$80 per person for smaller groups. English and French are spoken.

Paraíso Caño Hondo (☎ 809-248-5995; www.paraísocanohondo.com), a highly recommend hotel 9km west of town and 1km past the park entrance, offers good tours inside Parque Los Haitises as well. Boat excursions range between US\$50 and US\$85 for groups of two to four depending on the extent of the tour, and **hiking trips** (per guide US\$18) through the park's Bosque Humedo (humid forest) also can be arranged. During the humpback season, Paraíso organizes whale-watching tours (per person US\$56) in the waters near Samaná.

At the entrance to Los Haitises, town **boatmen** also offer to take visitors on tours of the park (per person US\$17). While the excursions are similar to those offered by the tour operators, background information on the sights is often less detailed.

Sleeping & Eating

Our pick **Paraíso Caño Hondo** (☎ 809-248-5995; www.paraísocanohondo.com, in Spanish; r incl breakfast US\$48) This is one of the more special places to stay anywhere in the DR, even though a stay here couldn't be farther from the typical beach resort experience. Coming upon Paraíso Caño Hondo so far out of the way after a long and rough road feels like an epiphany. The Río Jivales, which runs through the property, has been channeled into 10 magical waterfall-fed pools, perfect for a soak any time of the day. Rooms are large and rustic, made mostly of wood, though extremely comfortable. Bathroom ceilings are made of dried palm fronds and energy-saving light fixtures are used throughout. Easily unique, the most interesting room is the one in the upper building with a small balcony with hammocks and a sitting area perched on top of a large rock. The restaurant here is the best place to eat in

the area any time of day; try the shrimp creole-style (US\$12) or delicious steak (US\$7). Signs from the center of Sabana de la Mar direct you to the turnoff for the hotel – the same one as for the entrance to Parque Los Haitises. Weekends are often packed with student groups, so best plan a midweek visit.

A block north of the *gua-gua* station is the **Hotel Riverside** (☎ 809-556-7465; r with/without air-con US\$15/10; 🚻), a place to lay your head for the night; a family rents out several rooms on the second floor of their home.

Getting There & Away

Gua-guas are the only means of public transportation out of town. They leave from the entrance of town, at the crossroads of Hwy 104 and Hwy 103. *Gua-guas* headed to Santo Domingo (US\$4, 3½ hours, every 30 minutes from 6am to 4pm) stop along the way in Hato Mayor (US\$1.40, one hour) and San Pedro de Macorís (US\$2.50, two hours). *Gua-guas* also provide service to Miches (US\$1.25, 1¼ hours, every 25 minutes from 6:45am to 6pm).

Transporte Marítimo (☎ 809-556-7000) provides a passenger ferry service across the Bahía de Samaná to Samaná (US\$4.25, 1¼ hours, 9am, 11am, 3pm and 5pm). From there you can catch *gua-guas* to Las Galeras, Las Terrenas or puddle-jump to other destinations on the north coast. Bad weather means rough seas and frequent cancellations, and some of the boats are rickety, making even a voyage under sunny skies a potentially seasickening experience for those with sensitive stomachs. The ticket office is on the pier.

PARQUE NACIONAL LOS HAITISES

Eight kilometers west of Sabana de la Mar, **Parque Nacional Los Haitises** (admission US\$3.50; 🕒 7am-8pm) is certainly the best reason to visit this small bayside town. Its name meaning 'land of the mountains,' this 1375-sq-km park at the southwestern end of the Bahía de Samaná contains scores of lush hills jutting some 30m to 50m from the water and coastal wetlands. The knolls were formed one to two million years ago, when tectonic drift buckled the thick limestone shelf that had formed underwater. The turnoff to the park is near the crossroads of Hwys 104 and 103, at the south end of town (near the bus stop). The road is partially paved but still rough in parts.

The area receives a tremendous amount of rainfall, creating perfect conditions for

subtropical humid forest plants such as bamboo, ferns and bromeliads. In fact, Los Haitises contains over 700 species of flora, including four types of mangrove, making it one of the most highly biodiverse regions in the Caribbean.

Los Haitises also is home to 110 species of birds, 13 of which are endemic to the island. Those seen most frequently include the brown pelican, the American frigate bird, the blue heron, the roseate tern and the northern jacana. If you're lucky, you may even spot the rare Hispaniolan parakeet, notable for its light-green and red feathers.

The park also contains a series of limestone caves, some of which contain intriguing Taino

pictographs. Drawn by the native inhabitants of Hispaniola using mangrove shoots, the pictures depict faces, hunting scenes, whales and other animals. Several petroglyphs (images carved into the stone) can also be seen at the entrance of some caves and are thought to represent divine guardians. Las Cuevas de la Arena, La Cueva del Templo and La Cueva de San Gabriel are three of the more interesting caves and shouldn't be missed.

Land and boat excursions inside the park leave from Sabana de la Mar (see opposite) and Samaná across the bay (see p147). Las Terrenas (see p158), also on the Península de Samaná, has the largest number of tour companies arranging trips here.

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